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Research methods curriculum for practice-based postgraduate courses (UK)

Case Study

MA Research (by project) – Introductory module

Number of students 24

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This case study focuses on the development of an effective research methods curriculum for postgraduate Art, Media and Design students on practice-based awards. The module that forms the basis for this case study was developed as part of a new ‘MA Research (by project)’ award validated by the University of the West of England, Bristol.

1.2 The development and piloting of the proposed curriculum is based on the experience of working with MA students in a number of different institutions across a range of subject disciplines that include: Communication Media (Graphic Design and Digital Media), Interactive Media, Animation, Print and Fine Art. The MA Research Programme in which this research methods module (Introduction to Practice as Research 1) is being piloted is open to students from a broad range of undergraduate backgrounds who wish to pursue the development of their practice through the identification of a negotiated programme of study – ‘the project’. In developing the award, the course team acknowledged the current debates surrounding practice-based research and the accompanying methodologies.

2.0 Rationale

2.1 In formulating this module, a range of factors have been taken into consideration:

• the experience of adapting methodologies based on accepted antecedents (most notably from humanities and social science)
• the status of ‘practice’ as research within the institution
• the previous experience of the student
• the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

2.2 the adaptation of methodologies based on accepted antecedents

2.2.1 Research in the accepted sense of the word is relatively new to Art, Media and Design. Humanities/social science research, having a longer and better-established tradition than Art, Media and Design, has offered models for the
teaching of research methods that have been incorporated into many AMD curricula. The anxiety of the sector to prove itself academically credible together with the implementation of academic frameworks developed for other disciplines have impacted on the structuring and organisation of Art, Media and Design postgraduate degrees.

2.2.2 Having seen many students battle to incorporate inappropriate research methods into their work and suffering the consequences, we set out to create a module that would encourage students to begin their programmes by ‘contextualising’ rather than ‘theorizing’ their practice. This distinction is critical to understanding the driving principles of the proposed module. The module sets out a series of assignments that allow students to identify a contextual and critical framework for the formulation of a practice-based project. Perhaps most importantly this approach acknowledges the relatively short timescale in which students study for their Masters awards (often as little as 48 weeks) and considers what is appropriate and achievable given the previous experience of the students (see 2.1.3). This module, whilst accepting the effectiveness of existing methodologies, promotes an approach that builds directly on the experiences and interests of the students.

2.2.3 This process of contextualisation has the effect of ‘problematizing’ the work as part of a process that is sympathetic to the subject discipline. Throughout the module, the needs of individual practitioners determine the construction of a critical and contextual framework.

2.3 -the status of practice as research

2.3.1 Different institutions adopt very different approaches to the validation and organisation of academic awards. Some institutions take a more mechanistic approach to the implementation of standard frameworks than others with the result that ‘research methods’ modules may owe more to the demands of the validating institution than the needs of the subject discipline. Faculties of Art, Media and Design working within the New University sector, as opposed to the specialist institutions, may be more likely to suffer from the imposition of research practices developed for other disciplines. Whilst some have developed frameworks intended as supportive ‘catch alls’ for a diverse and disparate range of disciplines others focus more specifically on the needs of discrete subjects.

2.3.2 The validation of MA Research at UWE acknowledges the demands of the discipline at the same time as encouraging course teams to analyse the needs of their postgraduate students.

2.4 -the needs and experience of the student

2.4.1 The needs and experiences of the student are sometimes under represented in the design and delivery of postgraduate courses. The experience and expertise of tutors is often more critical to the development of postgraduate curricula than the experience of students. Experience has shown that the notion of
reappraising practice from an accepted theoretical position can lead to chaos and confusion in the mind and practice of students for whom this approach is unfamiliar. The confusion engendered by such approaches is often impossible to redress within the short space of a year to eighteen months (the duration of the MA programme). Over a period of three years, we carefully monitored, through admission interviews, the educational profiles of students entering the MA programmes. This profiling included a study of previous experience and student expectations of the programmes to which they were applying.

2.4.2 The findings of this modest survey demonstrated that the large majority of students entering ‘taught’ postgraduate awards do so to enhance their career potential. It is increasingly the case that having experienced and engaged with a broad range of activities in their undergraduate degree, students viewed postgraduate study as an opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills in order to increase their employment potential. The postgraduate cohorts I am currently working with comprise largely of the following:

- Recent graduates, usually returning after one to two years out of college – the experience of undergraduate education together with some work experience often leads this group to believe that further ‘training’ will enhance their employment potential;
- FE staff from regional Further education colleges – this group wish to improve their skills and knowledge either to support academic development within their home institutions and/or to enhance their career potential;
- Mature returnees either looking to develop/update skills, knowledge and understanding – this group have already been a part of the workforce for several years but feel that only through further study can a positive change in their financial or professional circumstances be affected;

2.4.3 Practice based students expect that their practice will develop – that their portfolios will be stronger, that they will be more likely to get jobs, exhibitions etc than they are prior to completion of their Masters. It is therefore important that the research methodology acknowledges these aspirations and builds on the student’s previous experience. The majority of students entering postgraduate Art, Media and Design awards will have written a dissertation at some stage in their careers but this may not have been for some considerable time. Only a relatively small percentage of students applying for Masters programmes whether ‘taught’ or ‘by project’ articulated any ambition to pursue careers in academia or research.

2.4.4 The majority of overseas (international) students coming to study at this level do so with a very specific career plan in mind. Often sponsored by their government, employer or family, the expectation is that their ability to operate effectively in the workplace will be enhanced through further study.

Postgraduate courses in which practice is heavily theorized often seek to place the practice of, for example the graphic designer, into a social science
construct that whilst increasing a certain type of knowledge contributes very little to the development of the student’s practice. International students, who form an increasing percentage of the UK AMD postgraduate population, struggle with such methodologies that are often very eurocentric and contradict cultural experience and expectation.

N.B. it is worth noting that initial research suggests that the desire to study at a higher level (PhD) only occurs once students are enrolled and well established within their postgraduate programmes – research interest is rarely the motivation for initial contact. The MA at UWE allows students to apply to the second year of PhD study after the successful completion of 120 credits. Any students wishing to transfer have to pass the first year PhD exam.

2.5 The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

In determining the description for a qualification at Masters (M) level, the QAA states:

Masters degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i) a systematic understanding of knowledge and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice;
ii) a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
iii) originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline;
iv) conceptual understanding that enables the student:
   a) to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline;
   and
   b) to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques to them and where appropriate to propose new hypotheses

3.0 Aims of the programme of study- MA by Project/Research

3.1 The stated aims of the programme of study are as follows:

- to provide opportunities for graduates to define a contextual framework within which to develop creative Art, Media and Design practice at Masters level;
- to create links between undergraduate study and postgraduate research for graduates whose practice may form the basis for future research;
• to create a flexible structure which maximizes the range of postgraduate learning opportunities;
• to create a programme that encourages talented undergraduate students to contribute to the development of specialist research projects within the Faculty.

3.2 Learning Outcomes – Introduction to Practice as Research 1

By the end of this module students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of what constitutes ‘practice-led’ research. They do so by demonstrating their fulfillment of the following learning outcomes- i.e. their ability to:

3.2.1 Knowledge and Understanding
• understand the ‘validating’ context within which their project will be understood and assessed;
• identify and analyse the relationship between their practice and the bodies of knowledge relevant to research in their chosen field;

3.2.2 Intellectual Skills
• critically evaluate artworks, artefacts and texts appropriate to the chosen field of Art, Media and Design study;
• evaluate and apply appropriate methodologies to the development of individual creative practice;

3.2.3 Subject/Practical skills
• carry our ‘literature’ and other appropriate surveys in relation to directed and self-directed tasks;
• access and utilise a range of facilities and resources as appropriate to directed and self-directed tasks;

3.2.4 Transferable/key skills
• deploy and adapt skills to meet a range of demands;
• analyse and present information clearly and coherently;
• identify issues and apply appropriate strategies to inform actions.

4.0 Rationale for learning teaching and assessment strategies used

Course structure

4.1.1 The programme of study promotes the relationship of contextual knowledge and understanding with the development of creative practice. The methodology encourages students to research, develop and record an historical, critical, cultural and/or professional framework pertinent to the development of their practical work. It is intended that the initial research will lead to a re-evaluation of the potential of their practice early on in the course
and determine areas of study that will support their creative intentions and ambitions.

4.1.2 The ‘Introduction to Practice as Research 1’ module is the first module taken on the MA programme, is worth 20-credits and forms the basis for the structure and delivery of the complete MA programme. See the diagram below.
4.2 Teaching, learning and assessment strategies

4.2.1 ‘Introduction to Practice as research 1’ is delivered as a series of seminars, workshops, practical exercises and assignments designed to promote ‘reflexive’ practice at the same time as building on the existing experience of the student. Throughout the module students are required to keep a critical journal in which they record the sources researched, references explored, collections visited etc. The development of the journal runs in parallel with the completion of a series of assignments that form the basis for assessment (see Appendix 1).

4.2.2 This module is explicitly intended to consolidate and extend existing research skills and to introduce students to core skills with which they may not be familiar. These skills include:

- ‘search skills’ – the ability to carry out surveys of images, texts and/or other cultural artefacts in order to find those relevant to a particular area of research. This requires an understanding of the means by which students identify and access the resources available to them – for example libraries, image banks, sound archives, collections, museums, galleries and all web-based information pertinent to the field of research. These skills are introduced through practical demonstrations, workshops and exercises;

- writing skills – since students are required to give written evaluation reports on the work being undertaken, the module promotes the revision and updating of skills related to the structuring and referencing of essays, reports, dissertations etc. The module is presented as a series of short assignments that culminate in the presentation of an essay. The shorter assignments invite students to develop, critique and engage with writing as part of a reflexive process;

- workshop skills including health and safety introductions – students are given inductions to those workshop areas they will need to access depending on the scope and orientation of their practice. All students receive IT training related to the presentation of material and the practice of web-based search skills and techniques;

- presentation skills – the module consists of a series of student presentations related to the practical assignments outlined in Appendix One. Students are given guidelines on making presentations and are given opportunities to make regular group presentations on which they receive feedback. Students from other MA programmes are also invited to make presentations to the group. Normally these will be MA students who are approximately one year in advance of the existing cohort;
• **analytical skills** – the ability to undertake:

- textual analysis – this requires students learning to ‘read’ visual, audio or written images and texts in such a way as to be able to communicate their understanding of the intentions of the originator of the work. Consequently, developing skill in textual analysis involves the ability to read, to find out, to develop and apply appropriate vocabulary and to present ideas coherently;

- contextual analysis and interpretation – the ability to assess the contextual status of an artefact or text so as to situate it within its wider contexts of production and reception. For example, to answer questions about the status, purpose and history of the artwork, artefact or text in question;

- visual research – the ability to gather and analyse visual material. The ability to identify, record and then utilise material appropriate to the chosen field of study. Visual research is taught through practical workshops and assignments.

• **Qualitative and quantitative research skills** – the ability to collect, record and analyse and synthesis information gathered through surveys, observation, experiments and the reading of existing documents, texts, artworks and artefacts.

• **The development of a Critical journal/logbook** – the purpose of the journal is for students to keep an ongoing account of the circumstances relevant to the development of their practice. As a practitioner studying at this level students are expected to be able to explain what their work is about, the issue(s) they are engaged with, the influences that are informing the development of the work and the impact of their professional ambitions. i.e. students must be able to contextualise their work. The logbook enables students to demonstrate and map their knowledge and understanding of the domain in which they propose to study. All students are participate in an introductory seminar and are given ‘notes for guidance’ on strategies for beginning and sustaining a critical journal.

### 5.0 Syllabus

#### 5.1 The module is delivered as 12 x 2-hour taught sessions alongside which students have to complete five assignments and keep a critical journal. The module is worth 20 credits out of the 180 credits required to complete the award. The ten sessions are presented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week and topic</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week one</strong></td>
<td>Each student gives a ten minute presentation of their previous work/experience to their peer group and staff. Induction includes an introduction to the module and</td>
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</table>
the viewing of sample critical logbooks and journals.

Health and Safety inductions to workshop areas according to individual student needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week two</th>
<th>Introduction to Information Technology 1</th>
<th>Workshop demonstrating how to set up files, store information, create index systems etc. Practical exercises.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td></td>
<td>Invited practitioner demonstrates how the relationship and understanding of a particular set of circumstances/interests has informed the development of their practice.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Week three</th>
<th>Introduction to Information Technology 2</th>
<th>Using the internet as means of research. Practical demonstrations and exercises.</th>
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<tr>
<th>Week four</th>
<th>Student Presentations</th>
<th>Students present a selected practitioner and discuss the motive for their selection and the relevance to their current practical research. (see Appendix One)</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week five</th>
<th>Student Presentations</th>
<th>Students present a selected practitioner and discuss the motive for their selection and the relevance to their current practical research. (see Appendix One)</th>
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<tr>
<th>Week six</th>
<th>Visual Analysis and Visual Research</th>
<th>Textual analysis of selected of selected Artworks, artefacts, texts, buildings etc. Developing vocabulary and critical awareness Practical exercises</th>
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<tr>
<th>Week seven</th>
<th>Managing Research</th>
<th>What is meant by methodology? Planning and organising research. Writing, referencing and illustrating texts. Introduction to qualitative and quantitative research methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(see Appendix One)

(see Appendix One)

(submission of Assignment 2)
Week eight
Regional Research Resources
Presentation

Case Study
Selected practitioner describes how research and writing has informed the development of a body of work. Presentation places emphasis on research and methodology.

Week nine
Student seminars
Student presentations of Assignment 3
(see Appendix One, Assignment 3)

Week ten, eleven
Student presentations of Assignment 5
(see Appendix One)

Week twelve
Feedback seminar
Submission of Assignment 4

6.0 Assessment strategies

6.1 Students are assessed on the completion of the assignments outlined in Appendix 1 and the presentation of a learning journal. At this stage, the critical logbook is the vehicle for recording the development of practical work.

6.2 Students are assessed according to their fulfillment of the learning outcomes in respect of the following criteria:

- the ability to analyse ideas, identify problems and find appropriate means by which to solve those problems;

  *the assignment demonstrates that the student can plan and carry out a piece of research in a systematic and reflexive manner, identifying and explaining methodological approaches and the relationship of the research to the development of their practice;*

- the depth and breadth of research demonstrated in relation to both practical work and essay (to include consideration of the range of sources accessed and bibliographies cited);

  *the assignment demonstrates that the student can reference an extensive range of relevant texts and utilise these in the development, analysis and discussion of ideas;*

  *the logbook demonstrates that the student has an awareness of the significance of relevant contextual factors (e.g. personal, historical,
professional, theoretical etc) influencing the area of study and are able to critically engage with the contextual significance;*

- the range of knowledge and understanding of key concepts, movements and ideas relevant to your chosen field of study;

  the work demonstrates that the student can use and organise relevant ideas and concepts and in addition can critically analyse and/or evaluate those ideas and perspectives showing the ability to synthesise and/or transform ideas in the process of developing knowledge;*

- the levels of exploration, curiosity and ambition demonstrated in the work;

  the assignments demonstrate that the student is inquisitive and ambitious in setting challenging targets and exploring a range of alternative approaches to their work;*

- the level of independence and organisation demonstrated in relation to the programme of study;

  the student is able to organise and progress their work independently and has the necessary skills and abilities to research and develop their practice within the remit of an identified contextual framework.*

N.B. The italicised statements describe the threshold achievement demanded of the student in relation to the assessment criteria.

7.0 Conclusions

7.1 The structure of the module incrementally introduces skills at the same time as promoting the acquisition of knowledge and understanding relevant to individual student projects. This process of learning through practice, presentation and peer group feedback has been important in helping the students, as a group, to understand the nature of the MA programme. In this sense the Introduction has also acted as a process of ‘induction’ into postgraduate study.

7.2 The main problem encountered at the start of the module was the reluctance of the students to engage with ‘writing’ as part of the research process. At the start of the module writing was seen as an activity unlikely to support the development of practice. By the end of the module, students understood how contextual understanding and the recording and researching of such knowledge is in fact essential to the development of practice. In this sense the time spent working through the module with the students has been invaluable in laying the ground for the remainder of the course.
7.3 The group of students who formed the basis for this pilot are predominantly mature returners for whom systematic ‘research’ is a relatively new experience. MA Research brings together students from a diverse range of backgrounds and this has, at times, made it difficult to find points of common interest. It has been suggested that an adapted version of this module could be used in the ‘taught’ postgraduate awards. In this case it will be much simpler to orchestrate a series of case studies that reflect the underlying themes and interests of the group.

7.4 The incorporation of case study presentations into the taught components of the module has given the students viable examples on which to model their own approaches.

7.4 The feedback from staff and students working on the module has been very positive and we now intend to develop versions of this module for use with undergraduate and doctoral students. The structure of the module appears, at this stage, to bridge the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate working methodologies.

Amanda Wood//March 2003
INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICE AS RESEARCH 1 – 20 credits

ASSIGNMENT 1

i) Select an artwork, artefact or text to form the basis of a 10-minute illustrated presentation.

Preparation for the presentation will allow you to research, edit, select and present information. Although you may wish to use notes as a part of the presentation, it is not a good idea to read from a prepared text.

ASSIGNMENT 2

i) Make five statements, which you feel describe your work and the means by which it is made. Try to ensure that the statements are not repetitive and that the sum of the five gives an overall picture of your practice, which is not encapsulated within any one.

ii) By deleting any specific references to your own practice, turn the five statements into a set of more general criteria (set of descriptors) which, when applied, could describe your area of work.

EXAMPLE

• I am interested in the way in which the fabric of buildings gives clues as to their particular histories

   (the work is concerned with the different means by which different environments contain clues as to their past histories)

• The process of montage and collage allows me to create a series of layers which both represent and re-interpret my readings of a particular surface or collection of surfaces

   (the artist uses a wide range of processes and techniques which reinforce the creative intention of the work)

iii) Using the criteria you have drawn up, create a long list of at least 20 practitioner’s whose work meets at least three of your criteria. It is very important at this stage that you think laterally in the application of the criteria and the selection of the longlist. Try to include practitioners from many different areas e.g. at least one architect, fashion designer, writer, film director etc.

iv) Having selected the longlist, make a short list of five practitioners whose work is of most interest in terms of the criteria identified under ii). Again, try not to choose the obvious but look at people who may unexpectedly meet your criteria.

v) Make five statements about the work of each of the practitioners you have chosen.
ASSIGNMENT 3

i) Choose either a location, gallery or museum collection that is of particular interest to you. You may choose to access your chosen site via:

- The Internet
- The Library
- Catalogue(s)
- Visit

ii) Why have you chosen this particular venue? Which artworks, artefacts, texts are of specific interest to you and what relationship do they have to the development of your practical work? What visual information do you need?

iii) Make a series of drawings, photographs, recordings or pieces of writing that record the information you need

ASSIGNMENT 4 - 1,500 word illustrated essay

Select one of the following:

i) Based on the work undertaken in Assignment 2, make a revised set of criteria by which to select practitioners and/or genres of work that are of particular interest to you. Make a critical analysis of two people whose practice is very different but nevertheless could be said to fit your criteria.

Essay to include: Introduction outlining the criteria
Textual analysis of practitioner 1
Textual analysis of practitioner 2
Conclusion in which you describe the main themes, issues or methodologies that connects these practitioners

ii) Select a particular process or technique and describe how it has been used/employed in the work of at least three different practitioners. (It is important that the discussion of process is linked to the conceptual intention of the practitioner and is not merely a description of the way in which they use the process)

How has your chosen process been used to reinforce the creative intention of the practitioner?

iii) Select a school or movement or practitioners from the early half of the 20th Century and through the discussion of selected artworks or texts, develop a set of criteria (not more than 5) which you feel could be used to categorise their work. Select one contemporary practitioner whose work you feel could be included in this school according to your defined criteria.

All assignments to be illustrated and accompanied by a bibliography

N.B. The purpose of these essays is to demonstrate how you have used research to increase your range of personal contextual reference points. Do not therefore only refer to those examples already well known and well articulated at the start of the module.
ASSIGNMENT 5

You are required to make a 10-minute illustrated presentation of your practice to your peer group and members of staff. In this presentation you should discuss practitioners, artists, artefacts, artworks and texts that are of particular relevance to the themes, issues and approaches you are taking in the development of your practice.

These five assignments, together with your Critical Logbook, form the basis for the assessment of this module.