DRS
CUMULUS
Oslo 2013

Design Learning for Tomorrow

Design Education from Kindergarten to PhD

*Proceedings from
the 2nd International Conference
for Design Education Researchers,
14-17 May 2013, Oslo, Norway*

Vol. 1-4

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Mind the Gap: an evaluation of joint development practice between FE and HE tutors within art and design

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Abstract: An English art and design college was the setting for this project which aimed to improve the transition of Access students into design Higher Education (HE). The Access course is made up of non-traditional, mature students who may have no previous formal qualifications. They come from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities; often overcoming barriers to education in order to fulfil their ambitions to study on a design degree. Previous research had discovered that Access students were susceptible to dropping out during the first year of their degrees. In order to improve the critical thinking and resilience of Access students staff from both sectors worked together to develop the pedagogy of studio critiques. This project was based on two theoretical principles. The first was assessment for learning where formative assessment can be a very effective teaching strategy. The second was joint practice development (JPD) which is an approach to course improvement through cross-sector collaborative activities. The research used a case study methodology to identify and evaluate JPD activities across the two sectors that were both effective and sustainable. This project is situated within the changing context of Further Education (FE) where technical-managerial models potentially conflict with democratic and professional values.

Keywords: Research informed designed education - Design education informing research, Assessment

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Introduction

The *Learning and Skills Improvement Service* (LSIS), a sector-owned body which develops excellent and sustainable FE provision, awarded the art and design college a grant which enabled a range of cross-sector activities to occur. The motivation was to improve the experience of Access students when they progressed from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE). Previous research had indicated that this could be done by building resilience and confidence in students in order to prepare them to cope with the demands of HE. It was found that although Access students performed well at HE they were vulnerable to dropping out, (Broadhead and Garland 2012). There were many possible reasons for this including a loss of confidence due to age and cultural differences between ex-Access students and the rest of the HE cohort. These perceived differences influenced the students' self-belief and their critical thinking when participating in critiques and assessments. In order to continue and develop this line of research it was decided to explore and to improve the Access delivery of studio critiques, as this would improve student confidence and critical rigour. During recent years the HE provision at the college had been expanded, at the same time the delivery of FE and HE courses had been polarised onto two separate sites, so as well as wanting to develop critical rigour it was also thought to be a good idea to initiate a dialogue with HE tutors to improve the pedagogical experience of transition. This formed the reason for undertaking activities such as Access staff observing a variety of studio critiques that occurred in art and design HE programmes. In particular the practices of BA Art and Design Interdisciplinary, BA Fine Art and BA Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern were observed and discussed. In February 2011 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) identified the use of structured group critiques for studio work as a feature of good practice within the college's HE provision, (QAA 2011). The critique can be a dynamic process where student work is selected, discussed and evaluated. Often the studio critique can be seen as an end in its own right, however, it can also be a teaching strategy that:

> ...favours process over product, the means over the end, and arguably a belief in a necessary fluidity between the artist, the creative act and the possibilities of a final product. (Buster and Crawford 2000, p.ix).

This is an area where shared understandings between FE and HE staff about the nature of the critique would be beneficial to students. Access students were also able to talk to HE students about their work. This was very valuable to the Access to HE course, both staff and students, because previously a research project had recommended a dialogue with HE tutors to ensure the Access to HE course kept up to date with changes in HE, (Broadhead and Garland 2012). The research had also pointed out that critical rigour was seen by students as an area that could be developed on the Access course; so concentrating on the studio critique would be a means of exploring this issue in more depth. This would help the course best prepare Access students for HE study as well as ensure they applied to the best course for them.

Context

In England Access provision lies within the remit of FE rather than HE. During the last twenty years the FE sector has increasingly been subjected to a high rate of change driven by political agendas. This has been enforced by the various bodies that audit, validate and inspect FE providers. In the late 1990s this form of managerialism and its

effects were identified in the art school context (Brighton in Hetherington 1994, p.34). Biesta (2007) has shown how a technical-managerial approach to quality assurance has replaced a professional and democratic form of accountability. The implications of this are that tutors and senior managers respond to ideologies where market values dominate educational practices and structures (Coffield and Williamson 2011, p.10). Similar changes happened in HE but this sector retained a relatively greater degree of professional autonomy (Deem 1998, p.48). Biesta has argued that educators should take responsibility for their practices rather than continually responding to the agendas of others (regulators, government departments, funding bodies). They should not be afraid to make professional judgements based on wisdom and experience. The wider political context has contributed to the growing division between the FE and HE sectors in the art college where this project was undertaken.

The college has two main campuses. It runs a range of specialist and general art and design FE courses at one site that is mostly self-contained and separate from the other site where a range of specialist degree and foundation degrees are taught. The majority of tutors work mainly on one site, perhaps meeting all together a couple of times a year during staff development weeks or briefing days.

The college delivers the Access to HE Diploma (art and design) as a full time day course and in a part-time mode on an evening. It is aimed at mature students who have not been in conventional education for at least a year. What constitutes a mature student has become increasingly vague, students can be as young as nineteen, but may find the pace of an Access course more suitable to their needs than a Pre-BA Foundation course or A levels, which are seen as the more traditional route to degrees in art and design (Hudson 2009, p.25). However, there is usually a wide range of students whose ages range from nineteen to over seventy. Often these students have had a diverse set of experiences and come from a variety of backgrounds. The aim of the Access to HE Diploma is to prepare students for a degree or foundation degree in art and design. Not only is this done by accreditation at level three but also by the preparation of a portfolio of work which is used at interviews as part of the application process.

The students are taught the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed on their higher level course; these skills include visual studies, drawing, responding to set and self-directed briefs, technical skills in specialist workshops like photography, ceramics or printmaking, contextual studies, academic skills of researching, presenting and essay writing.

The full-time and part-time Access provision is successful in getting people onto the higher education course of their choice. Students progress to a range of design degrees (including some highly competitive courses) both locally and nationally, (*Further Education: student achievements and career routes* 2011, pp.28-33). About ten to eighteen students a year progress internally. Students who are successful in achieving a place generally take up that place up in the following September.

The underpinning theoretical context

The main theoretical framework for this study was based on joint practice development (JPD), a concept that critiques the cascade model of staff development.
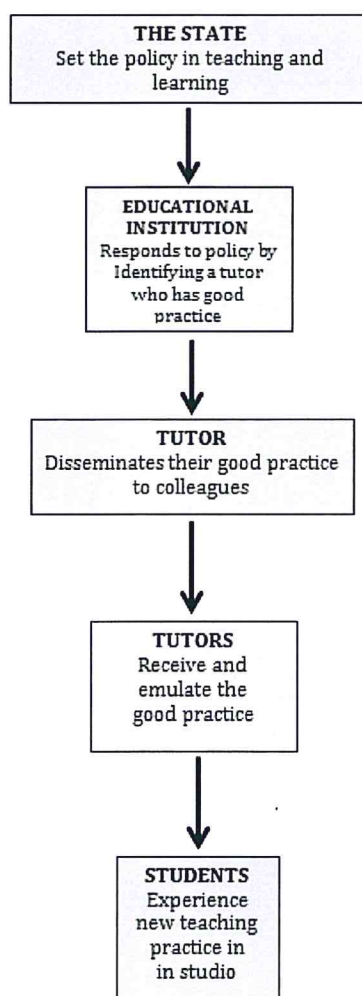
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Figure 1. Diagram showing the cascade model of staff development

The JPD argument says that good practice cannot be easily passed on from one group of practitioners to another for two main reasons. Firstly cascading good practice can be seen to be divisive because it promotes the idea that one group of people has good practice and another does not thus creating an unequal and perhaps resentful working relationship, (Fielding et al 2005). Secondly, the context in which practice is performed is not deeply considered; what is good practice in one area may not be suitable in another. It could be argued that all practices need to be modified to fit a new context. Rather than passing or cascading practices to colleagues a more sustainable process would be to develop relationships and trust between groups of professionals where ideas can be explored together over time, (Fielding et al 2005). Other aspects that need consideration are; teacher and institutional identity in practice transfer; learner engagement; and an understanding of the time needed to successfully engage with JPD, (Fielding et al 2005). Coffield and Williamson (2011, p.72) propose that JPD could be seen as a move towards the ideal of democratic-professionalism which proposes co-operation between teachers and other partners in education as an alternative way forward to the market model of education.
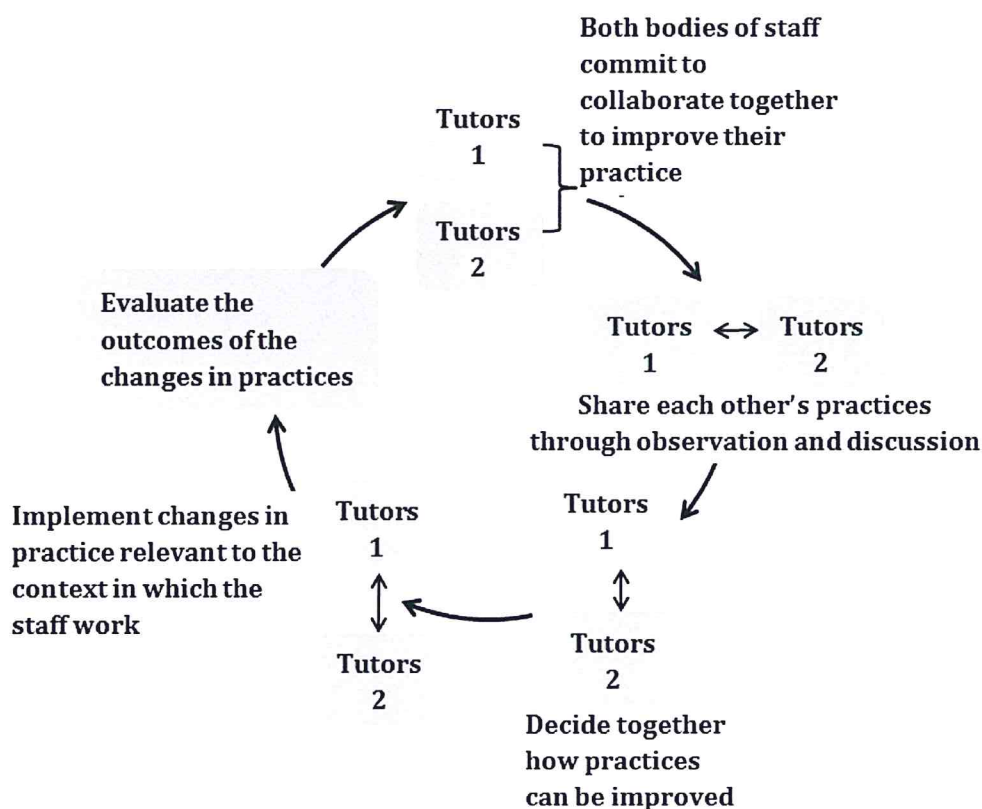
Both bodies of staff commit to collaborate together to improve their practice

Tutors 1

Tutors 2

Tutors 1 ⟷ Tutors 2

Share each other's practices through observation and discussion

Evaluate the outcomes of the changes in practices

Implement changes in practice relevant to the context in which the staff work

Tutors 1

Tutors 2

Tutors 1

Tutors 2

Decide together how practices can be improved

Figure 2. *Diagram showing the joint practice development (JPD) process*

As the project developed it was seen that one key issue was the studio critique and the way it could be used as a formative assessment tool. This was because it addressed both the need to develop critical rigor and student confidence when presenting their work. The importance of students' active participation in formative assessment has been highlighted by Shirley Clarke:

> The dominance of a constructive pupil dialogic talk in the classroom is a key identifier of a formative assessment culture in which pupils are actively involved in thinking; effective pupil talk paying a central role in the philosophy of citizenship, personalisation and lifelong learning. (Clarke 2008, p.35)

Clarke was working within the different contexts of primary and secondary education. However, student engagement would also be central to good design practice at FE and HE level as it promotes meaningful student reflection on their own work and that of their peers. Dylan Williams has talked extensively about the role assessment has in the learning process:

> Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purpose of accountability or ranking. (Dylan 2009, p.8)

This also describes the nature of the studio critique whereby students critically reflect on their own work and that of their peers. Critical thinking can then be

promoted in a way that is not necessarily driven or led by the tutor or the tutors' assessment agenda.

The values and identities of different groups of practitioners are also important concepts to consider when reflecting on cross-sector partnerships. An insight into other professionals' positions within an institution brings to light differences in what is seen as important within the education process. This exposure to other points of view through observation and discussion will influence teacher identities through the stories and communications professionals tell each other. Expressions of cultural values, norms, and structures are also passed on through narratives in discussion:- (Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, and McEachen, 2002 in Beijaard et al 2004, p.123). The exchange of ideas with other design educators will lead to a deeper understanding of the issues students face when they progress from FE to HE with particular reference to the studio critique.

Methodology

The research was based on a case study approach. Bassey (1999) argued that this approach was very suitable for research in educational settings due to the complex nature of the context and interactions of people within that context. He stressed the importance of constructing a case study method that is underpinned by trustworthiness and respect of the person. The outcomes of case study research can be described as 'fuzzy' generalisations' in that rather than seeking to find an absolute truth or law, the research aims to say this happens within this context and it could happen within another one. In other words, claims refer to what is possible, likely or unlikely (Bassey 1999, p.12). The constructing of a detailed and rich description of the context is important, (Bassey 1999, p.88) as is providing a coherent and chronological narrative account, (Bassey 1999, p.33).

In this case a complex set of issues had been identified in previous research that needed analysis within a well-defined context, that of the art college (Broadhead and Garland 2012). It examined what for students and tutors are everyday activities within the particular environment of the studio. There may be no generalisations made on the basis of these findings that could be reliably applied to a different context. However, it did describe in depth what happened to this particular set of students at this particular time and in this particular institution. In terms of practitioner-led research the results were important to aid the improvement of Access student transition between sectors. The idea of *trustworthiness* was seen as a more appropriate notion than validity or reliability as this was a qualitative study (Shenton 2004, p. 63). Trustworthiness was assured by looking at the studio critique from a range of points of view (that of students, Access tutors and HE tutors) and recording the activities in detail.

Case Study

The activities described in this case study took place in the academic year 2011-2012. The Access course leaders made an appeal for HE tutors who wanted to take part in cross-sector activities during a staff development presentation addressed to the whole college. From this call for partners, three HE courses expressed an interest: - BA Interdisciplinary Art and Design, Visual Communications, and Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern. In practice it was difficult to arrange activities within the research time frame with Visual Communications. Further links with the first year Fine Art tutor were established and a meeting arranged with an Access tutor to discuss their studio critique

practices which had been previously observed. A timetable of shadowing was then drawn up. Three Access tutors were selected to shadow and observe HE activities. Two of the research team were part-time and would usually have had less opportunity to network with colleagues in HE than course leaders and full time tutors. This project enabled them to work together with HE staff to develop their own practice and feedback observations to the Access team. The Access tutors were responsible for arranging a time when they could shadow a HE studio critique session. They then made notes about what they had seen and discussed their findings with both their HE and FE colleagues.
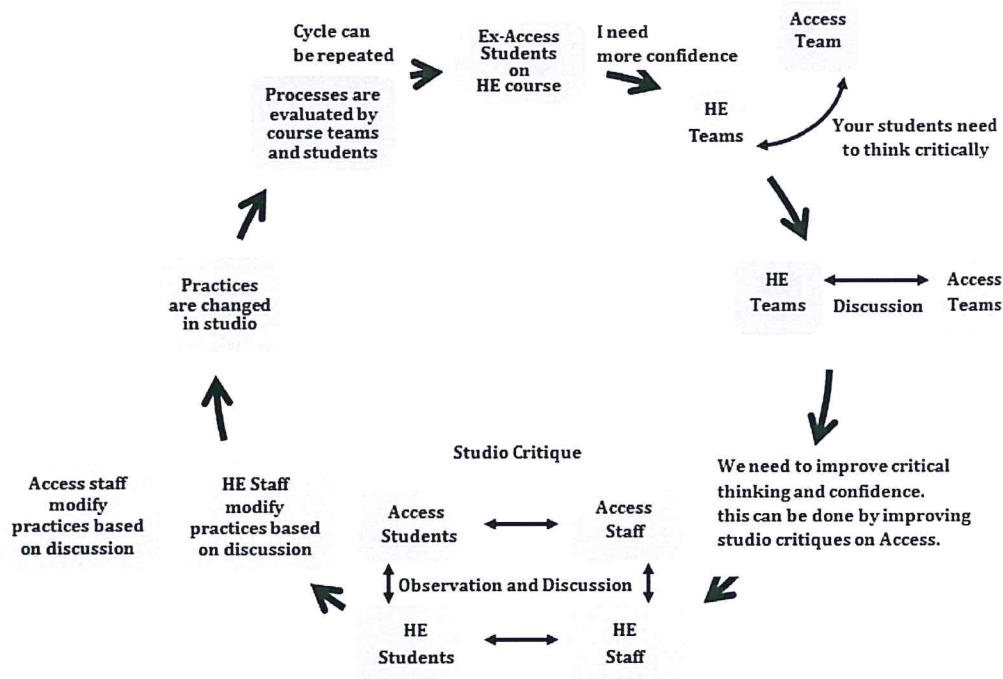
Figure 3. *Diagram showing Access and HE teams taking part in JPD process*

Two examples of teaching practice that was observed were a cross-year studio critique and another one which focused on one piece of work. They were delivered by the BA (Hons) Art & Design Interdisciplinary Course in order to promote a 'sense of ownership'. This was managed by three HE tutors and observed by two Access tutors who made reflective notes that were then shared with the rest of the Access team.

The first studio critique was part of an 'Open Studio' week where all students from the three year groups arranged current work within their individual work spaces.

Students were split into 4 groups. Each group has mix of first, second and third years. All students prepared to present work, but tutors (unknown to the students) had selected in advance one person per year per group to actually present to the rest of the group.

The Access tutor observed staff discussions before studio critiques. There was a strong focus on planning which questions to ask. There were similar questions for each student, but differentiation through the expectation of different qualities of answers depending on year group.

The style of studio critique varied throughout the academic year. This particular one was to build on an 'Open Studio' event and encourage communication between year groups. There was no formal feedback given, but students were encouraged to reflect on their critique experience over the Christmas break. The staff were looking for evaluative comments on student's own practice that weren't initiated by staff. The presentations were not linked to a particular brief but were concerned with process, rules of practice, tools of practice and links to other practitioners. It was noted that there were very strong links to critical studies.

During the studio critiques students were reminded about the weekly discussion forum that would start in the new term. Students were encouraged to put questions/themes onto the notice board, which would be the basis of a vote on the most popular topic to start off the next term's work.

The Access tutor described how the group moved around the studio to different workspaces. All students were engaged with standing and looking at work, maybe this was less intimidating for the student leading the studio critique? Most students were very quiet during the process and interestingly, most questions and comments came from past Access students.

During the studio critiques students presented and talked about just a few key pieces. Several times the HE tutors encouraged students to stop and reflect on work so far. Staff were keen for students to develop an idea more deeply rather than explore lots of ideas more superficially.

The second structured studio critique was introduced by an HE tutor who presented a group of first year students with a mystery object. The group was asked to identify what it was and who made it. Two students were able to deduce that the object was a coat hanger designed by Antony Gormley, this initiated a discussion about the relationship between art and design. The Access tutor noted that this was a way of the HE tutor contributing something to the session and engaging the interest of the group. Students had been asked to select one piece of work and to think carefully how to present it. Within groups of about 6 students the work was discussed by everyone except the creator of the work. Only at the end of the process did the student say what intentions were behind the work. The Access tutor thought that the process led to focussed discussions that were not bogged down in superficial detail. The HE course leader and the Access tutor had the opportunity to share their observations after the session about studio critiques and student confidence.

A group of students from the Access course also observed the studio critique. They had opportunities to talk to HE students about what it was like on the HE course. Access students found this helped them to feel confident that they were ready to go onto higher education and to discover if this was the right course for them. HE students and recent graduates later brought their portfolios into the Access studio and discussed their own progress, which was also well received by the Access group. The impact the activities had on the Access student's progression onto their degrees was reported at a later workshop in January 2013. Enough time had elapsed for the students to experience the first term of their degree. They presented their evaluations at an event called: *Research, scholarship and pedagogy: Working with students to develop undergraduate research in Art & Design*. This was facilitated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in England. They said their confidence in giving and receiving feedback had improved and they had enjoyed their participation in the JPD process. This meant they felt well prepared for succeeding on their new course.

Discussion

After this process the Access team discussed how some of the ideas learned from the shadowing exercise could be applied to the curriculum. Access tutors did share some values with HE staff, for example the belief that studio critiques were crucial in the development of design students' practice. It was also seen there were a variety of formats that could deal with different focuses. Some critiques focus on media/materials processes whereas others focus on concept development and/or design methodologies. There were also occasions where the synergies of process, concept and realisation were considered. The insights gleaned from the discussions of the observations were added to the Access tutors' repertoire of critique strategies. These ideas needed to be considered within the context of Access provision, as not everything successfully done on an HE course would be appropriate for FE. The team drew up a range of ideas to be considered in planning the next round of critiques. These were:

- Focussing on the student's own practice rather than assessment criteria. By making a studio critique more about a student's own working methods than the physical outcomes, students are encouraged to reflect on their own practice. This could help them in preparing for degree course applications, interviews, and writing their own briefs. Students could become more aware of who they are as artists/designers/craftspeople.
- Consideration of the timing of studio critiques by timetabling them before breaks when students could be given reflective questions raised from the studio discussions to work on in sketchbook during the holidays.
- Developing a discussion forum:- it would be difficult to allocate an hour a week for an in-depth discussion, but it would be a positive use of *Moodle* (the college's virtual learning environment) and maybe a way of uniting first and second year Access students. If this engaged students it could become almost self-running.
- Introduction of more cross-year studio critiques to boost the confidence of second year students who would be talking about their work in interviews.
- Structuring studio critiques so that the student's peers comment on the work before the student talks about it. The danger of focusing on one student presenting their own work was identified in the staff guide of *Critiquing the Crit,* (Orr, Blythman and Blair 2008, p.8). When everyone is actively engaged in the critique process the students' tendency to rely on descriptive narration, when presenting their own work, can be avoided.
- Selection and presentation of work is a really important part of the HE critique, this is different in FE practice where 'work in progress' is generally viewed. This fits in with Buster and Crawford, (2007, p.ix) where they stress the selection of work by students. This means that the students are being more independent in making critical evaluations about their work.

The JPD process can benefit those students wanting to do a design degree. The changes in the studio practices of the Access course enabled students to become more confident in giving and receiving critical feedback about their work. But also the students were exposed to collaborative a model of improving practice which could be emulated when they were called upon to work in design teams on their future degrees.

The practices that were evaluated in this project are of benefit to staff and students in both sectors. It could be expected that these cross-sector activities should come within the normal remit of curriculum planning. However, the heavy bureaucratic demands on both tutors and students that are part of the audit culture make it difficult logistically to give the time needed for collaboration (Chaney in Hetherington 1994). This demonstrates the tensions referred to by Gert Biesta between the technical-managerial model and the democratic and professional need of accountability. It is important to go beyond simply responding to the demands of managerialism to fully meet the educational needs of students. JPD is a time-consuming strategy that has outcomes which may not be immediately apparent. Therefore it is less useful to a market model which demands easily measurable outputs (O'Neill 2002, p.54). Within this project staff needed to use their imagination and professional judgement to see beyond prescribed performance indicators and decide for themselves the value of JPD. Tutors now need to take responsibility for sustaining this practice despite competing demands on their time.

Conclusion

The process worked best when there was already a good relationship between the two courses, through previous contact and good communication about student transition from FE to HE. The amount of time for developing such a relationship cannot be underestimated. Fielding et al. (2005, p.35) discussed how an understanding of the time is needed for in depth collaborative professional learning to take place. Both parties should be committed to the project and value the outcomes. Although the outcomes of the JPD process are owned by the course teams because of the time and personal investment made by the participants, it would not normally have occurred without external funding, as it opened up new spaces for relationship building and trust. It may be difficult to sustain this level of cross-sector collaboration.

The Access tutors have put some of the ideas into practice. They have begun to experiment with the shift of focus in the studio critique from the object/image/work to the creative process. The participation of different year groups in the studio critique was also used as a way of boosting confidence when talking in front of people other than their peers. One of the most effective formats was to get all students except the creator to initially critique the work, this increased student engagement and saved valuable studio time. The ideas gleaned from the shadowing experiences were useful because Access staff could imagine how they could be used within their own particular practice. The role of imagination as part of participation within a professional community is discussed by Etienne Wenger (1999, p.217) where he says imagination allows us to adopt perspectives across boundaries and time. If tutors could not imagine how new practice would fit within their particular context then it is unlikely they would be motivated to try out new possibilities.

This is an important point to make as it is what differentiates JPD process from the cascade model of improvement and pedagogical development. Practices are selected and edited to best fit a particular situation rather than adopted in an uncritical way.

The course partnership that was very successful was with the Art and Design Interdisciplinary course because the FE and HE staff some common ground. This partnership was seen as successful because the both partners openly shared their practices with each other and set aside plenty of time for in depth discussion about the issues raised from the JPD activities. The Access course had over previous years sent

many students to this degree programme who had then flourished on it. This was similar to the point:

> Long-term, prior, relationships were seen by many participants to be enabling. Many examples arose where practice transfer was seen to have been successful because it drew on existing relationships…(Fielding et al 2005, p.8)

The art and design degree staff used more open, wide-ranging briefs. The Access staff were familiar with working in this way rather than focusing on specialised assignments about, for example, fashion or interior design. This was a shared approach to pedagogy that made working together more straightforward.

The shift in focus away from the products the students produced to the processes of creativity demonstrated a difference of values between FE and HE staff. Access staff valued the production of a portfolio of artefacts that would allow entry to a degree course. When doing studio critiques Access staff had focused on how well the work produced had met the brief. However, the HE staff were more interested in helping students become confident reflective practitioners who could work professionally after their course. This meant that the studio critique was not necessarily tied to the criteria stated in the brief but could be about the students creative methodologies that were employed and how effective they had been. This difference is not a bad thing but is useful to consider when Access students progress onto their HE course. There could be ways in which both objects and processes are considered in an Access critique so encouraging critical self-reflection in the students and thus preparing them for degree courses.

Through the commitment and tenacity of the project's participants there have been some small but significant changes in pedagogical practices in studio critiques. It is challenging but important to find the time and resources to continue to develop cross-sector practices to enhance students' experiences of progression from FE to HE. At the time of writing this paper it is too soon to say if dropout rates of ex-Access students would be improved by the changes in studio critiques on the Access course. However, the students who participated felt they had improved their confidence in giving and receiving critical feedback. This research has shown that JPD is an approach worthy of more consideration as a tool for educational improvement and a means of developing democratic professionalism.

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