

One amongst many: Employing peer learning and teaching to successfully support first year creative arts students' individual creative development in large class environments

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

Learning and teaching in higher creative arts education is traditionally based around a master-apprenticeship model where students develop their individual creativity, skills and critical thinking in small class environments. The creative arts educator (master) guides each individual student (apprentice) on a journey of learning and exploration towards his/her individual creative development to become a designer, musician, illustrator or digital artist (McCoy, 1998; Zehner et al., 2009). Teaching and learning often takes the form of one-to-one consultation with class sizes being usually small (20 students or less) (Zehner, 2009). Increasing enrolment numbers in many Australian universities have recently challenged this traditional approach to learning and teaching in the creative arts (Zehner et al, 2009). Enrolment numbers in the Bachelor of New Media Arts degree at James Cook University have increased in the first year subject *Introduction to Graphic Design* (which introduces the basic elements of design, effective visualisation and communication) from 50 students in 2007 to over 120 since 2011. Another first year subject *Digital Toolbox* (in which students are exposed to both the theory and practice of a range of digital media workflows as applied to contemporary media arts practice) has also developed high enrolment numbers with over 70 students enrolled each year since it was first introduced in 2011. Consequently the School of Creative Arts has moved from working in small groups to educating students in large lecture theatres and in workshop groups of 40-60 students.

Having taught creative arts students for over 14 years in traditionally small class environments, I was challenged when I first started coordinating and teaching these large classes. While increasing enrolment numbers are overall a positive development, it clearly required rethinking my teaching approach, which was built on guiding each student individually through an iterative work and learning process based on action and reflection (Schön, 1987; STP, 2009). I welcomed the challenge to create learning opportunities that focus on the individual student and his/her development regardless of class size. I realised that the large class size would lead to more opportunities for peer interaction and peer learning. I also considered that both subjects are first semester in first year classes. Research on the first year student experience has shown that students can be challenged when transitioning into university life (e.g. Kift, 2009). Additionally creative arts students can feel especially vulnerable when being exposed to constructive criticism involving their creative work in first semester. Students need repeated encouragement to continue to develop their creativity. Students also often enter first semester with diverse skill levels and talent, which require individual support for each student to foster intellectual and creative growth. Inspired by literature on teaching in a large class environments (e.g. Butchart, Handfield & Bigelow, 2007), discussions with colleagues and based on my experience as creative arts educator, I set out to develop a learning experience which guides each student in his/her development as a creative individual. Such an approach motivates each student to become an active learner regardless of being one amongst many students in a large class environment. I incorporate a mix of learning and teaching strategies in both subjects:

- to acknowledge the diversity of individual learners, I create learning tasks suited for diverse skill level of students and engage students in peer teaching and peer-assisted learning;
- to acknowledge and inspire the individual learner in the large group learning environment, I introduce students to peer-led reflection, peer assessment and peer instruction;
- to inspire students to become active learners, I employ Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities which reflect the foundation level of the WIL framework integrated in the Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts.

I underpin my teaching with enthusiasm and incorporating a range of social media platforms in innovative ways. I am driven by the vision that 'creativity is central to Australia's economic and social success' (Australian Government, 2013). My key goal in preparing students is to ensure that each student has freedom to develop his/her creativity and creative skills throughout their studies to enable them to play a central role in innovation, driving sustainability and prosperity in Australia.

ASSESSMENT CRITERION 1: APPROACHES TO THE SUPPORT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING THAT INFLUENCE, MOTIVATE AND INSPIRE STUDENTS TO LEARN

Acknowledging the diversity of individual creative learners in large class environments by providing learning opportunities that support growing confidence and individual creativity

First year students have diverse talents, different levels of openness to engage in unknown areas and different views on being challenged. Acknowledging these differences has motivated me to develop and provide a wide range of learning opportunities in *Introduction to Graphic Design* and *Digital Toolbox*, including creating learning tasks for different skill levels to allow each individual student to reach his/her full creative potential in their 'own time'. Especially during the first weeks, I offer in both subjects,

workshops and self-directed learning tasks which are classified 'basic' and 'advanced' therefore allowing each student the opportunity to engage at his/her level. That means for some students not being overwhelmed and for others not being 'bored' in the large group. It also helps build each student's confidence in his/her creative abilities. Students reflected on this workshop structure as follows:

The best aspects of the subject were practical classes and teachings. Really appeals to all people of different design levels (Student feedback, 2013).

Thanks to Katja I have learnt a lot about how to work with design but also to be more confident (Student feedback, 2012).

Making students responsible for their learning, each student is asked to teach a mini tutorial of 2-3 minutes explaining an aspect of software to peers. This kind of peer teaching gives students the opportunity to teach and learn from each other (e.g. Sampson, et al., 1999; Capstick & Fleming, 2004) keeping each student engaged and active in workshops regardless of individual skill level.

A student highlighted in a comment that despite being in a large group learning environment:

I found I was always kept busy and included in the subject workshops and lectures. I wasn't ever distracted because there was always something I could be doing or learning (Student feedback, 2012).

Helping each student learn to reflect on his/her individual creative progress in large class environments

Becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987) hence building the ability in each student to reflect on the quality of their creative output and that of others, is a key goal of creative arts education. In smaller classes individual conversations between educator and student initiates and guides such a reflection process. To re-create this experience in workshop groups of 40-50 students, I introduced peer-led reflection. In workshops, each student is asked to show and discuss their work with peers (e.g. Sampson, et al 1999; Capstick & Fleming, 2004). I monitor and join these conversations and provide feedback to groups and/or individual students. Peer-led reflection is also a good way for each student to learn that there is often not 'one right answer' to a problem in the creative arts. Students reflect positively on the peer-led reflection process in support of their individual creative development:

It is great, you can exchange ideas with people next to you and that they help me generate ideas (Student feedback, 2013).

The best aspect of this subject was, the way that it stimulates the creativity, and makes the students understand that there isn't one way. Everyone sees an assignment different, and that's what makes creativity cool (Student feedback, 2013).

The freedom of design, and the accommodation of most if not all artistic styles considered towards gradable content (Student feedback, 2012).

To make peer-led reflection more useful I assist students to provide constructive feedback by engaging them in peer assessing group presentations as part of a research assignment. Many students need to learn to move beyond comments such as 'that's cool' or 'I don't like it'. As a supportive scaffold to providing feedback, each student is required to complete a Web 2.0 electronic marking rubric for each group presentation. In addition to assessing various aspects of the quality of presentation (content knowledge, coherence and organisation, etc.), each student is required to comment on two aspects that were positive about the presentation providing a supporting justification and also mention two aspects that would need improvement (if any), why they need improvement and also suggest how they can be improved. This way each student has to write twenty constructive evaluations and each group receives feedback and suggestions from 40 peers. The Director of Learning and Teaching of the Griffith Sciences Group commented in an evaluation:

Katja's approach provides a rare opportunity for personal development and confidence building that will enhance the graduate profile immensely. ...By getting students to engage with marking rubrics, ensuring that they understood what each of the criteria looked like and encouraging them to engage with judgment and analysis in this way ensures higher order learning outcomes as they can answer not only the 'what' but also the 'why' about what is a quality product or process (Dr. S. Drew, Griffith University, 2014).

Making lectures the place to inspire students in large class environments: Building a dialogue between individual students, educator and amongst students

The lecture theatre, in which both classes are held, is a lecturer-centred learning space tempting lecturers to 'talk at' students in ascending rows. My vision is to develop the lecture as a place where I can 'talk with' students and students with each other. I plan to create a lively exchange by taking advantage of the many perspectives and experiences in the lecture theatre. I started using peer instruction to break the traditional lecture format which can be often monotone (e.g. Butchart, Handfield & Bigelow, 2007). This way, regardless of class size, I give each individual student the opportunity to participate in the conversation. This can take the form of asking open-ended questions where I encourage students to exchange their views with students sitting next to them. In these situations, particularly when opposing views are presented, I

facilitate an interactive and dynamic exchange of ideas. Another form of peer instruction I use in lectures is a voting system (Butchart, Handfield & Bigelow, 2007) in which students raise their hands to vote on a matter or question (e.g. Who thinks this logo is effective in communicating trustworthiness?). To stimulate ongoing engagement with lecture content and an interest in further exploring various perspectives presented by peers, I post additional learning material on JCU's Learning Management System. Peer instruction makes each individual student voice heard in the large group. It also confronts students with diverse perspectives, which can help them to become reflective and critical thinkers. This lecture format is well received by students:

Lectures are very engaging when discussing subjects because Katja always questions. Katja is always enthusiastic every time she does a lecture and she encourages students to participate making the class atmosphere conducive to learning and fun to go to (Student feedback, 2013).

Inspiring each student to become an active learner in large class environments through implementing Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

To motivate students to learn and to inspire each other to become high achievers, I believe it is important to make learning relevant to students. Theory and practice need to be fully integrated in highly relevant situations through linking professional practice (real world) with the learning environment. Underpinned by the WIL framework formalised in the Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts (Daniel & Shircore, 2012), I apply several foundational approaches in both classes. I contextualise theory often and demonstrate how theory is applied in creative arts industries projects by showing inspiring and innovative examples of best professional practice. I explain how students can achieve such creative output and inspire them to envision their individual future careers as creative arts professionals. I explain 'professional identity' by showcasing the diversity of creative arts careers and ways of working in the industry (e.g. self-employed, embedded positions). This is often based on sharing my professional experiences as a designer. Students reflect positively on these aspects of class:

Katja is well versed in the subject material and speaks in context to where design can lead and how to apply it in life outside of the course, which is extremely beneficial. The teacher is highly motivated and imparts enthusiasm onto the students. [She] details personal experiences to help us assimilate the information by having real world understanding (Student feedback, 2012).

The WIL Coordinator for the School of Business (JCU) commented after reviewing my teaching approaches in both first year subjects:

I commend Katja's efforts to introduce students to practical applications of the subject content. First year students often struggle to envision where their degree will take them and what their chosen profession actually requires of them as graduates. The engagement with professional approaches to creative practice, reflection on the experience, and engagement in constructive evaluation of peer work provides the students with an early and invaluable introduction to what it means being a professional (WIL Coordinator, A/Prof Laurie Murphy, 2014).

Underpinning my teaching with up-to-date knowledge, innovative learning and teaching technologies and enthusiasm

New creative arts areas and professions emerge constantly (e.g. design for social change) and technology changes rapidly. I keep up with latest developments in the creative arts industries and dynamically adjust subject content and technologies used accordingly to connect each student to contemporary and future-oriented creative career opportunities. I follow and pilot latest developments in education (e.g. MOOCs, online learning tools, Web 2.0 technology). For example, I trialed social media tools for peer assisted learning (Huijser, Kimmins & Evans, 2008; Ladyshevsky & Gardner 2008) in *Introduction to Graphic Design* to encourage interaction and collaboration outside the classroom between students in Townsville and students at CATC Design School located in Melbourne. Using emerging learning technology for teaching has proven successful in creating a highly engaging learning environment with 96% (73) of first year students in the subject agreeing that they learned more in this assignment by discussing the work of students from the other region using Flickr and Skype (Web 2.0 survey, 2012). Students reflected positively on my use of innovative learning and teaching technologies:

[Using Flickr and Skype] it's not something I would usually do in class, it felt new and exciting. I found it fun and educational, in the way that we were able to observe the differences between tropical Queensland students and those of Melbourne (Web 2.0 technology survey, 2012).

RECOGNITION AND SUSTAINED IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

Over the past years my teaching has evolved into a research-informed approach underpinned by passion to engage students in learning activities that will eventually build the foundation for their future creative careers. I am highly motivated by alumni feedback such as the following:

... people are constantly singing your praises, so I also wanted to mention, how grateful I am for how relevant and helpful the things you taught us and opportunities you provided were. I can't stress enough how crazy helpful all of the assessment has been with my life since uni (Alumni via LinkedIn, 2012).

Student feedback consistently shows high levels of satisfaction with my teaching approaches in both subjects (overviewed in Table 1).

Table 1. Student feedback scores for two first year creative arts subjects, 2011-2013 (1-5 Likert scale)

Year	Digital Toolbox=CA1, Introduction to Graphic Design=CA2	2011 CA1	2011 JCU	2012 CA2	2012 CA1	2012 JCU	2013 CA2	2013 CA1
	Teacher structures activities in ways that help learning	4.47	4.32	4.24	4.52	4.39	4.38	4.40
	Teacher is available for students seeking help	4.43	4.28	4.22	4.49	4.36	4.04	4.19
	Teacher has a good understanding of the subject area	4.60	4.55	4.64	4.76	4.63	4.54	4.60
	Teacher conveys enthusiasm for subject	4.81	4.39	4.84	4.85	4.51	4.75	4.60
	Teacher makes the relevance of the subject clear	4.38	4.01	4.43	4.59	4.15	4.14	4.14
	Teacher involves/encourages active participation.	4.14	4.07	4.42	4.51	4.14	4.09	4.02
	Teacher makes good use of available ITC technology	4.35	4.17	4.22	4.47	4.26	4.07	4.28
	Teacher overall, helps you to learn successfully	4.46	4.20	4.26	4.52	4.30	4.13	4.26

I often seek feedback on my learning and teaching strategies from colleagues and also external discipline and learning and teaching experts. Two formal external reviewers of my teaching methods are presented below:

Katja has adopted a very student centred approach to her teaching, allowing students to take ownership of their learning. She takes this to another level by considering individual needs, even when working with large classes. She achieves this by using technology to enhance learning experiences, providing students the opportunity to tailor their project work to meet their personal needs. In addition this use of technology also widens horizons for students by connecting them with students from other universities to share experiences. The student feedback from this subject speaks for itself with students voicing how engaged they were with both the subject and Katja herself (A/Prof R. Lawson, OLT National Fellow and Director Learning, Teaching & Curriculum at University of Wollongong, 2014).

Your integration of the peer assisted learning into your courses is very tight and frequent. It creates a theme of operation that students can understand and engage with to good effect. Nice!...Your approach and methods are inspiring and you have executed them masterfully...Your evaluations are exceptional for the class size (Dr. S. Drew, Director of Learning and Teaching of Sciences Group at Griffith University, peer teaching/learning expert, 2014).

I enable others to enhance their approaches to learning and teaching by publishing nationally and internationally (eighteen peer reviewed publications over the past four years). Recognition of my approach to scholarship of teaching is evidenced by being awarded a cross-faculty JCU teaching development team grant (2012) to develop an online learning tool with new technologies to actively engage undergraduate students in asynchronous learning activities. A conference grant awarded by the JCU Teaching and Learning Academy allowed sharing my insight from *Introduction to Graphic Design* on how social media could be effectively used in peer groups and as an extension of face-to-face teaching creative arts in higher education at the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS) conference in 2013. The same year I was also invited to share my research on how learning is changing due to higher enrolment numbers in creative arts education at the international 'Learning in Higher Education Symposium' (LiHE) in USA, which yielded a co-authored book chapter for the LiHE Anthology 'Learning Spaces in Higher Education' (in press). The sustained success of my approach has resulted in a JCU Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in 2014.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Creativity is recognised as key to future progress, the prosperity of national life, community wellbeing and the economy (Australian Government, 2013). I embrace change and have responded to the challenge of teaching in large class environments in creative arts education to ensure students can continue to become exceptional, independent, critical and responsible and creative, ready to contribute to the growing national culture of innovation in Australia.

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