

Fine Art Reflections

Graduate Attribute: Critical Self-awareness and Personal Literacy

How is critical self-awareness and personal literacy promoted?

In the undergraduate Fine Art programme, students learn to be analytical, reflective and critical of their own practice through 'Feedback Forums'.

What triggered this?

The Head of Department of the Arts, Alison Honour, explains that critical self-awareness and personal literacy have always been considered important skills for creative individuals because art is a discursive subject, requiring the ability to talk about ideas as well as to communicate them visually. It requires dialogue to challenge narrow criteria, to be analytical, reflective and critical of one's own practice. This is simply part of the process of assessing the success of artwork and the creative process.

The Fine Art programme includes a work placement module, Placement in the Creative and Cultural Industries (U65565), which builds on established links with industry, community groups, arts organisations, museums and galleries. For example, students from Oxford Brookes University have worked at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, and at the University Museum. They have also worked for large organisations like UK Art Fairs, and for organisations like ArtPoint.

Alison explains that:

"One of the things we hear from employers (is that) they really value the .. attributes of fine art graduates, particularly their ability to have critical self-awareness and. . . this prepares them well in creative industries. It helps with alternative and creative problem solving... and to be internally resourceful."

How is critical self-awareness and personal literacy . . . taught . . .

Throughout the Fine Art programme, staff encourage dialogue and discussion through group seminars, one-to-one tutorials and in lectures. These attributes are enabled through presentations to peers and through the evaluative statements, which students have to write and discuss.

practised . . .

Staff also hold 'Feedback Forums', which are used to create a 'virtuous circle'. It is not enough just to be self-critical but for others to be critical of you, and for you to comment on others as well. You can be critical. It sounds negative, but it identifies strengths and areas to be developed, not weaknesses.

All students have to attend the Feedback Forums, not only to present their own work but also to contribute to others'. Alison explains:

"Its is not just about engaging them but it's also about considering how learning takes place - that it's not just a traditional teacher/student relationship."

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What happened here?

How do you enable the development of the fundamental artistic skill of critical self-awareness and personal literacy?

Critical Self-awareness and Personal Literacy pervade the curriculum of the Fine Art undergraduate programme and are also highlighted as skills that can enhance employability. There are particular elements within most of the modules which signpost and require critical self-awareness to be part of the students' learning and assessment, and employers have commented on the need for this attribute within creative industries.

*Alison Honour
Head of Department of Arts*

. . . and assessed?

A range of assessment methods are used in the degree. An example is contained in the Research and Development module (U65570) in the third year. In this module students follow a personal line of enquiry to develop a body of work for their degree show. It represents their statement as an artist as they enter the professional world. The research involves a deep understanding of the subject matter and much critical evaluation. They submit a body of research which can be in the form of sketchbooks, studies, models, speculative drawings, plans and field research. They also submit a critical evaluation of their research, indicating the methodologies used, what they discovered and how they are using that research to develop a body of work. Alongside this work they are also planning their degree show and developing their business skills.

What's the value to students?

Staff inform students of the importance of developing the skill of critical reflection – that it will be important when they go for interview, when they need to pitch for an idea or make a grant application. Tutors try to make it relevant and identify situations where specific skills would be needed.

Alison has met up with an alumnus who had recently been part of a TV series. He was selected as one of eight young graduates in the UK in Fine Art for the School of Saatchi TV programme. This student acknowledged that the really important part of the course for him had been the Feedback Forums and the skills that were developed because he had used them ever since. He recently completed a project in India and at the London Art Fair and had to present and pitch his ideas, write an artist's statement and provide a critical evaluation of his work. He was also required to write a press release and to have interviews with the TV and press. He was quoted in catalogues and had a discussion session in front of a panel, a common occurrence for artists and designers, and felt sufficiently confident to do all these.

A strong focus on the employability relevance of critical self-awareness and personal literacy are recognised by current and former students. For example, at a conference in October 2010, staff invited alumni from the Foundation Art and Design programme and asked them specifically about the benefits they had gained. Many were now well-known designers and artists. A number noted that they had found the 'critiques' helpful and felt that the opportunity, albeit in a slightly forced situation, to have to justify one's work was really important in getting jobs and securing commissions.

What's the value to employers?

Students have good communication skills, are trained in communicating and pitching ideas – all important skills in the workplace. They can communicate constructively and work as part of a team. This has been confirmed by the conversations Alison has had with galleries, graphic design companies and events management organisations, who also suggest students are good at time management and have broader organisation skills. Part of critical self-awareness is in relation to personal responsibility:

"It's very important to take ownership over the things that need to be done, their own work, their work schedule."

Alison's recent work on University's Art Strategy Group brought her into contact with a former student who is now working for ArtPoint, an agency that coordinates and links up artists with public art projects. Alison found her to be very confident, adept at putting forward ideas and very organised in her thinking.

"Lots of businesses say our Fine Arts graduates are always willing to learn new things, have always got their hands up for professional development, always want to move forward. They don't stagnate."

What next?

The concern was expressed that in the future the team will need to be more aware of diversity and individual learning needs, and to acknowledge that critical self-awareness and personal literacy can be quite a challenge. Some may need more time and a less challenging approach. It is recognised that speaking aloud to a group is a skill that is not natural to all students and staff are concerned

to use empathy, awareness and a sensitivity to individual student needs. The key is knowing the students and ascertaining their level of skill and ability before the process starts.

Similarly, in group work, staff are aware that not all students will have initial confidence. It is important that tutors manage this and ensure that all students are drawn into conversations since some might be marginalised.

It is recognised within the department that, in future, there will be a need for staff development. The Feedback Forum is a relatively new approach and very different from the experience that most colleagues will have had. New members of staff will be shadowed and mentored: I've mentored young lecturers for about 10 years and I think it is important that we don't just throw new staff in at deep end, particularly when it's a process we've developed that is particular to us. That is really important.