

# **Exhibiting maturities: An evaluation of the Access Art and Design curriculum**

Samantha Broadhead  
Leeds College of Art

sam.broadhead@leeds-art.ac.uk

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**The author continues to refine and develop this submission.**

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## Introduction

The Futurists, a group of Italian artists, proclaimed in their manifesto,

*When we are forty let younger and stronger men than we throw us in the waste paper basket like useless manuscripts! (Marinetti, 1909)*

This extreme statement shows an attitude that only the young and the male have anything important to contribute to art and design culture. However the mature students from Access courses in FE colleges have aspirations to be taken as seriously as artists, designers, photographers, film makers and craftspeople.

The aim of this research project is discover how well Access students are prepared for HE level study in art and design in an FE college in the north of England. The reasons for this investigation are firstly to find out how the Access course helped the students and what needs improvement. This has conventionally been done using quality processes used in self -assessment reporting. However, this approach has been very focused on the students' experience *before* they leave FE. Progression figures from such evaluations are used to inform quality judgments but these do not tell us how well the Access Course meets its core purpose giving the students the knowledge, skills and strategies necessary for surviving and flourishing on their degree courses.

A second reason for this study is to make sure that the course is continuously improved to give students the best chance of gaining future places at HE in an environment which is becoming increasingly competitive.

Thirdly, the project will give an opportunity to identify any successes of Access students at degree level. These can be demonstrated to a range of interested parties such as new students, Access staff and our partners in HE who work on the courses our students want to go on to do.

Fourthly, the project may lead to a dialogue with HE course leaders. Responsibility for the transition from FE to HE cannot be laid solely on the shoulders of Access tutors. The findings of the project will be shared with HE staff where issues of curriculum design and pedagogy can be worked on together in the spirit of Joint Practice Development (JPD) Fielding (2005).

In order to understand the issues that lie behind the figures 18 ex-Access students on various degrees and in various year groups were asked to share their experiences with the researchers. Ages of the students in the sample ranged from early twenties to late fifties. There was a gender bias as only 2 men took part, within the Access course and the college in general there tends to be more women than men.

## **Methodology**

This study has been strongly informed by two key ideas central to current educational research. Firstly that of capturing *student voices*, through a range of methods including focus groups, interviews and reflective writing (Ward and Edwards, 2002)(Coffield, 2009) (Hudson, 2009). The second is the idea of *trustworthiness* in educational research, a concept developed by Bassey in relation to case study research (1999, pp. 118). He identified 8 tests for trustworthiness (*Appendix 1*).

The ex-Access students from the previous five years who were still at the college were emailed using their college email account; they were told about the project and invited to take part. Those who agreed took part in focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Any themes that came from activities were confirmed results of these were confirmed by a final focus group discussion. The participants were then given a written account of the findings and asked to comment on them. The questions used to drive the discussions and interviews were:

**In what ways does being a degree student differ from being an Access student?**

**In what ways did Access prepare you well for your degree course?**

**In what ways did Access not prepare you well for your degree course?**

**What could we change to improve Access or what should we definitely keep?**

In addition to the interviews eight ex-Access students who were in their first term of their degree during the project were each given five postcards pre-addressed to the Access to HE course Leaders. Each student was asked on an individual basis to jot down any comments or drawings about their experiences during their first term and informed that these could be sent through internal post. Of the eight students, three sent a total of eight cards back. These written and drawn comments were analysed alongside the other types of data collected in the project.

All the data from the project was collated and stored digitally in a special space on the college staff intranet, which had restricted access to the project team. All written notes, post cards and post-its notes were kept together in a research file. This was to provide an audit trail to support the notion of trustworthiness (Bassey, 1999, p118). Pseudonyms of student names were put on the interview notes or on the focus group minutes/post-it notes to protect student identities.

## **Analysis of results**

Generally students reported that they felt really happy with their Access course, as this quotation from the interviews says

Jenny: I felt well prepared even though completely out of comfort zone. The tasks done on Access did prepare me well for example mark-making at start of course. The sound project on Access was good preparation it gets you thinking. (November 2010)

#### Theme 1: Familiarity with Context

One common theme that came up in many of the interviews, focus groups and postcards was the idea of familiarity. Students reported that they were happy that they had already worked with art and design briefs, practiced putting a presentation together and had worked in the various workshops using a variety of techniques and materials. In particular, one of the first things mentioned when responding to the question: - **In what ways did Access prepare you well for your degree course?** was how happy former students were that they had had experience in responding to briefs and they recognised the brief format. Art and Design education conventionally uses the brief to drive its delivery. It promotes experiential learning, problem-solving, self-directed research. The brief states aims and objectives and sets constraints with which the student has to work within. From the next three responses it seems that the actual layout of the brief helps understanding and promotes confidence:-

Carrie: Briefs, both in terms of content and format, although they are written in a complicated way on the degree, I understand how to deconstruct them. (November 2010)

As the brief is thing that drives what the student does on their course, and it is their response to the brief that will be graded, it is not surprising that students would see this as an area of importance. Perhaps the researchers have taken this for granted, it could be that other students coming from other feeder institutions do not use briefs in the same way to deliver art and design subjects. This also links to the idea of scaffolding where the brief provides a structure, which can be practiced with support at Access level, then on the HE Course the scaffold of the brief remains, but students are able to work more independently and with more complexity

Also having the confidence to go into and use workshops was also something that was seen as something that was very helpful to the ex-Access students. Again, perhaps the researchers took this for granted, however, many students would come from institutions which do not have specialist workshops and to go into this situation for the first time could be intimidating. In order to use

workshops effectively students need to manage their time effectively, be health and safety aware and also have good working relationships with workshop technicians and other workshop users.

*Carrie: Having been in workshops and college and done workshop techniques was good preparation I was able to build on skills from Access. (November 2010)*

When the idea of familiarity was revisited with the final focus group (December 2010) an interesting point was made. This was that there is a feeling of excitement and anticipation when doing something new. If things are too familiar then the thrill of doing something new can be lessened, and students who progress internally may feel they actually missing out on something.

These areas of familiarity, the brief and the experience of workshops, can be seen in terms of the student developing skills on which they can build and develop when they progress. However, it could be argued that they also function in a symbolic manner; in particular the similar brief tells the student that they belong. Elements that are familiar are comforting but also reinforce to the student that they have chosen the right course in the right institution for them. Access students may have given up a lot to do the their HE course, financial security or a previous career to do their course, so something as simple as familiarity may be import to mature students. This has the potential to cause a tension with the HE staff values that encourage a break with past learning as described by Hudson (2009 p95-96) and Robins (2003 in Addison, and Burgess, 2003, p45). Within the period of transition it may be good to have signifiers of past for reassurance, a more radical rethinking of student assumptions and belief could be encouraged when students are settled and feel happy on their new course.

## **Theme 2: Critical rigor**

A second theme that was identified by the ex-Access students was that of critical rigor. There was a difference in the critical feedback students got at the degree level to that on their Access course. This is an important area to get right, Access tutors aim to build confidence and encourage students through positive feedback. However this may mean that when students are not prepared for the intensity and depth of critical analysis that they will receive on their degree course. Also, the feedback may be quite negative and students need to be able to deal with this without losing motivation and self-belief.

Part of art and design pedagogical practice is based on the crit. where work is displayed and discussed, often in a group in the studio. Students may receive formative feedback from peers or

members of staff. The visible and public nature of this format is different from feedback that may be received in a tutorial or written at the end of an assignment which is more private format. The researchers had memories of the anxiety and tension of their own first crits. at art school. When John responded to the question **How did Access not prepare you for Higher Education?** he was very critical of the way crits. were conducted on Access.

*John: Access should show people that you couldn't wander away from a crit. This is about mutual respect. Crits. can be too demoralizing. Parameters for crits. should be set e.g. no wandering off. (November, 2010)*

From John's comments it seems that the crit. is a more informal process on Access where as on a degree they are more disciplined and controlled. How to give and receive critical feedback is as much a skill that needs to be developed as the practical and academic skills like workshops and presentations. It could be that Access is too supportive and nurturing? Phrases like more lenient and more laid back were used to describe Access, this approach has benefits and dangers as this student reported:-

*Marie: Access tutors were more lenient which generally works well for mature students, but they could have difficulties adjusting in the future, although this wasn't an issue for this me. (November 2010)*

This could be an example of how staff values can be very different, (Casey et al 2006 p28). Access staff value supportiveness where as HE staff value setting challenging goals and getting students to be independent.

### Theme 3: Group Profile and Student Identity

The post-it notes from the first focus group included these responses to the question: - **How well, and in what way, did Access prepare you for your degree course?**

*To mix with other students all with very different backgrounds, not necessarily in art.*

*Varied ages – knowledge/ Experience.*

*Showed you how to integrate with the other students in collaboration projects. (October 2010)*

The varied group profile of the Access to HE course seemed to be valued by ex-Access students and this theme came up again and again throughout the interviews and the final focus group. The researchers did not expect this to be such an important issue, as it was assumed that Higher Education courses would have some level of diversity in the student body. Within the context of this project it seems that the student body of Higher Education is actually less diverse than expected.

This could be understood in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and race. However the aspect which the ex- Access students picked up was that of age.

During the one-to-one interviews students commented on how they were not prepared for being in a minority and feeling the differences between themselves and other students in terms of age. This difference effected cultural and social interaction and increased the time students took to feel they belonged to their new course. This was not just felt by students in their forties and fifties but also by students in their mid-twenties and early-thirties. This is demonstrated by one student when she says in response to the question: **-In what ways does being a degree student differ from being an Access student?**

*Julie: How you are spoken to is a big difference, like when the tutor is talking to 18/19 year olds. Being part of a group of young students being shouted at to be quiet which feels alien when you are 30. I was good to have Emily and Nicola around, so we could work in a kind of in a bubble and forget that most students were 10 years younger. (November, 2010)*

Another student, Adrian who had been in his late twenties and actually the youngest on his Access course, said he felt really strange being the oldest in group, this effected how he settled into the new course. Socially he did not connect with the interests of the rest of the group who were mostly Eighteen year olds. He said that all they wanted to do was to play games and he had already been through that phase and he wasn't interested in that any more. This student felt alienated from his younger peers (Adrian, November 2010). But what Julie points out is the importance of having other mature students on the course. The support they receive from each other can help students through this transitional time.

This was confirmed by comments made by another two students who took part in the final focus group. There were three mature students on their course and they were glad that they could all be in college together during the first term.

There were positive aspects to being an older student as Carrie says:-

*Carrie: The mix of people is very different. Some aspects of the degree seem geared to younger students, although hasn't impacted on my work. I enjoy being in the 'mentor' position for younger students. I like to help students who are struggling. I feel Access prepared me well. (November 2010)*

Older students can enjoy helping younger students; this can improve the self-esteem of both parties. The inclusion of students with more life experience can be a positive influence on group dynamics. However, during the final focus group one student felt that group discussions were more difficult on

degree because younger students were reluctant to debate issues or challenge the ideas put forward by the tutors. Discussions on the Access to HE course were seen as a strength, which mature students enjoyed. This passive role that younger students exhibited was also remarked upon in one of the interviews, when they were asked: - **In what ways did Access not prepare you well for your degree course?**

Marie: I was not prepared for lack of open-mindedness amongst fellow students. There seems less academic/intellectual vigour – students are sticking more to what they are told to do. (November 2010)

It seems that the Access students enjoy the social aspects of learning art and design practice. They engage with the community of the studio and welcome opportunities for debate and discussion, this is how they develop skills in critical thinking. They also enjoy thinking for themselves and taking ownership of their own creative space.

A mature student who always answers the tutors' questions when others are silent may feel even more different from the rest of the group, in that they are visibly behaving in a different way. Yet there may be few other opportunities for the dialogue that these students enjoy.

Another student said:-

Eileen: I have got a completely different student identity – because of doing something full-time rather than part-time. Now it has become part of my life. (December 2010)

This change in identity is an important point, how the identity is shaped if students feel different from their student group if they feel in the minority? Adult students have often sacrificed a lot of security in order to do their degree. Their uncertainty of being on the right course and their own sense of self as a student may actually be more fragile. Lave and Wenger have discussed the nature of learning identity and social world (2009, p47-58). Here they stress the importance of belonging to and participating in a community of practice (the course/the studio) and how this is important not only to learning but the person's sense of identity. One point of interest is their conceptualisation of new comers and old timers within a social group, where old timers are experienced but not yet master of their practice and implicit in this is that the new comers will eventually replace the old-timers (Lave and Wenger, 2009 p57). Identities are in flux especially when people experiencing a time of significant change, a type of *turning point* where individuals have to 'take stock', re-evaluate, revise or re-judge their development (Strauss 1962, in Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson 1996,

p142). This re-evaluation may not be just development but also their identity as learners. In the case of Access students within this particular context they are at the same time old timers in that they are familiar with the college and art and design practice. They are at the same time newcomers in the sense that they are on a new course in a different sector at a higher level. Ex-Access students need to belong and participate in their new community of practice to stay on course and flourish.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the project discovered that in spite of high withdrawal numbers Access to HE students felt that they had been well prepared by their FE course to succeed at HE. However, there were three main themes that students felt were important. The first theme was that the familiarity of formats and procedures like the brief, the presentation and the use of workshops was very much appreciated.

The second theme was that of critical rigor, where students were not always prepared for the degree and intensity of criticism they would receive from staff. There was an implication that some Access to HE critics were too laid back or lenient and perhaps should be more formal.

The third theme that concerned ex-Access students was that of the lack of diversity of group profile. The Access students felt themselves to be in a minority within a group of much younger students who had come to college through a more traditional route (National Diploma or A levels and Pre-BA Foundation course). This was connected to the frustration ex-access students felt when in college where the younger students were reluctant to take part in studio debates.

A couple of the students like Marie and Adrian reported feeling quite isolated because their social interests were not the same as the rest of their group (fashion, gaming and drinking). On courses where there were three or more ex-Access students the transitional stage seems to have been more positive. Ex-Access students seem to stick together and support one another within the college environment.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations suggested need to be carried out by the Access to HE team, however there are some things which need to be also considered by the HE course leaders as well. As the two

sectors are on different sites and do not really have many opportunities for discussing these issues so a joint development approach that both parties are committed to is very important, and this is the first recommendation of this project.

The Access to HE course should keep the brief format, presentation skills and workshops, but keep in step with any changes that happen in HE in the future.

In order to improve the critical rigor of the Access to HE feedback to students there should be more structured crits. and more one day briefs where they can learn how to give and receive constructive criticism.

Students should be prepared for the amount of autonomy needed to flourish on their degree courses.

Students need to develop strategies for dealing with possibly being the only older person on the degree course, such as joining cross-college groups or networking with mature students on other courses or in other institutions. Developing the role as mentor within the group may help some but not all adult students. Keeping in touch with the Access course staff, so they can share their experiences may help students feel less isolated.

Access tutors need to work with HE staff to develop opportunities for group discussions within the degree course of study.

HE courses should consider recruiting at least three mature students rather than only one which could be perceived as tokenistic and alienating.

The Access team will ask the Student Union to facilitate social group aimed at mature students that reflect their interests.

HE Course leaders/experienced teachers are responsible for year one rather than year three, so that the time of transition can be monitored and managed well.

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## Appendix 1

- 1) Has there been prolonged engagement with data sources?
- 2) Has there been persistent observation of emerging issues?
- 3) Have raw data been checked with their sources?
- 4) Has there been sufficient triangulation of raw data leading to analytical statements?
- 5) Has the working hypothesis, or evaluation, or emerging story been systematically tested against analytical statements?
- 6) Has a critical friend thoroughly tried to challenge the findings?
- 7) Is the account of the research sufficiently detailed to give the reader confidence in the findings?
- 8) Does the case record provide an adequate audit trail?