

SHOW AND TELL

Unit X

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Abstract

Unit X is a 30-credit unit of study offered at each undergraduate level across three schools in the Faculty of Art and Design (Art, Design and Media). The unit ran for the first time in 2012, with 450 students taking part from ten Art and Design programmes. The ambition for unit X was to share a learning experience for students from across a range of disciplines. Embedded in the unit objectives was a clear intention to explore collaborative practice in the context of art and design pedagogy, both in the way that students worked with each other, and also how they worked with external agencies. Successful completion of Unit X (at level 4) in 2012 was 98.9%, with the median mark at 63%. However, the impact of this experience on student behaviour, expectations, and future achievement at levels 5 and 6 are yet to be understood. Evaluation of the impact of this cross-programme collaborative learning and teaching model provides us with a number of research opportunities for the coming years.

Introduction

Unit X is a 30-credit unit of study provided at each undergraduate level across three schools in the Faculty of Art and Design, (Art, Design and Media). The unit ran for the first time from 5th March to 1st June 2012, with 450 students taking part from across ten different Art and Design programmes.

The ambition for unit X was to share a learning experience for students from across a range of disciplines. Embedded in the unit objectives was a clear intention to explore collaborative practice within the context of art and design pedagogy both in the way that students worked with each other, and also how they worked with external agencies. From research such as the *Creative Graduates Creative Futures* report (Ball *et al.* 2010) it is apparent that Art and Design graduates need to be flexible and capable of undertaking a range of work to succeed in the creative industries.

How have we done it?

Our ambition was to future-proof the curriculum by embedding collaboration for both staff and students. The EQAL project allowed us to develop this type of practice as the unit matrices of art and design programmes could be lined up. This allowed programme teams to work together to share best practice and utilise expertise beyond the traditional boundaries of programmes and embed their research and practice into the curriculum.

Students worked in small groups on projects related to the theme 'Interrogating Manchester'. They explored varied ideas from identifying hidden and forgotten places within the Northern Quarter as venues for work and exhibition to working in response to existing architectural spaces such as the Hulme Hippodrome and the Royal Exchange Theatre. Others worked directly with existing cultural venues as such as MOSI, The Peoples History Museum, and the John Rylands Library. Some negotiated access to, and populated, privately owned venues for work such as Blank Space in Hulme and 20/22 in the Northern Quarter. Hotspur House, a former print works, was also utilised as a studio base and creative hub, exhibition and events space throughout.

Unit X lasted for ten weeks. Weeks 1-3 focussed on inspiring and informing, bringing all students into contact with external experts and city-wide locations as well as individual introductions to group working and the use of BLOGs as

an online system for reflective practice. Weeks 4 – 8 saw them develop their ideas into proposals that were, for some presented to other student groups, and for others to members of the City Council, as their ambitions needed authority permissions! Work undertaken was submitted and assessed as a digital learning document, which served as both a reflective journal and a digital portfolio, with learning outcomes focussed on group work, contextual awareness, development of proposals for an external audience and communication.

Because programmes worked together it became possible to resource this unit in a different way to the traditional, smaller programme based units. Front-end keynote speakers delivered to large audiences on topics related to the Manchester theme, collaborative working in professional practice, or on topics relating to urbanism and digital futures. The Ultimate Holding Company, a Manchester Art/Design co-operative resident at Hotspur House, offered workshops in teamwork, interdisciplinary practice and project management.

Who's interested?

Unit X has been noticed. We have developed existing relationships with partners in the city and fostered new links with design and art organisations, design companies and cultural organisations. Importantly, the principles and ambitions of 'X' have been recognised in the form of the Sir Misha Black Award for Innovation in Design Education, awarded to Professor David Crow on behalf of the School of Art in March this year.

What next?

Unit X is a three-year model. X at level 5 will focus on professional practice with students selecting a pathway related to identifiable future employment, such as design consultant, curator or educator to name a few. At level 6, students will individually negotiate a personal approach to their final unit of undergraduate study that allows them to use their skills and knowledge and to capitalise on their developed networks. They will undertake professionally directed proposals preparing them for future employment models that reflect their individual aspirations.

How will we know it works?

The successful completion of Unit X level 4 in 2012 has been 98.9%, with the overall median mark at 63%. However, the impact of this experience on student behaviour, expectations and future achievement (and our learning and teaching models) at level 5 and 6 is yet to be understood. Evaluation of the impact of this cross-programme collaborative learning and teaching model provides us with a number of research opportunities for the coming years.

Information and outcomes, festival of events and films from the unit can be seen at www.artdes.mmu.ac.uk/unitx

References

Ball, L., Pollard, E., Stanley, N. 2010. *Creative Graduates Creative Futures*. Report 471, Council for Higher Education in Art and Design, University of the Arts, London.