"We Don't Need Those Learning Outcomes": assessing creativity and creative assessment

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BACKGROUND

In 2016, Leeds College of Art (renamed Leeds Arts University in September 2017) decided that the opportunity to apply for Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP) offered an opportunity to undertake a fundamental review of its learning, teaching and assessment strategies. Before TDAP, the college's programmes were validated by one of the largest universities in the UK, and there were concerns that the university's assessment framework was not 'fit for creative purpose'. The primary concerns were :

- an 'opaqueness in the assessment model' re: clarity of learning outcomes and assessment criteria;
- generic assessment criteria and learning outcomes were complex and difficult for students (and some staff) to understand;
- significant variances in student assessment workloads within and across undergraduate programmes;
- an unacceptable level of confusion & dissatisfaction surrounding assessment.

The college brought in an external, independent assessment consultant to work with a senior member of staff to develop a new approach to assessment.

APPROACH

First, a survey of the teaching staff and management was undertaken, utilising the assessment toolkit developed by the Higher Education Academy (Ball, et al., 2013). The findings revealed that the proposed re-design of assessment would fall upon fertile ground. The consultant and the member of staff, both of whom had considerable experience of arts pedagogy and practice, undertook an iterative design approach to the project (Lawson, 1980). A prototype assessment methodology was designed and was 'road-tested' intensively with teaching staff from the fourteen undergraduate programmes in the College's portfolio. It was re-worked based on the feedback received, and then re-tested.

In addition to the 'road-testing' with teaching staff, there were four important meetings that took place: one at the beginning, and three towards the end of the project. The first one was a meeting with the Senior Management Team at which an outline of the new scheme was presented, and which gave the green light to the move away from learning outcomes. It was also agreed, in line with the recommendations from the Higher Education Academy report (2015), to 'map' the proposed

system to both the current honours grading system (0% - 100%) and the Grade Point Average (GPA) system.

The other three meetings, which occurred once the main shape and elements of the new system had been designed, were with the heads of finance and the institution's registry, the student union, and the directors of the four schools within the College. In all cases, despite some testing questions – particularly from the school directors - was a general welcoming of the proposed scheme, particularly (and surprisingly) from those in charge of the institution's finance and administrative operations.

One of the primary reference points for the project was the negotiated approach to assessing creative practices developed by Kleiman (2008). A key feature of that approach is the use of six assessment fields or lenses, which can be weighted accordingly, through which to assess creative:

1. **Presentation** (the finished article/product/performance);
2. **Process** (the student's learning/working journey);
3. **Idea** (the informing/underpinning ideas and thinking);
4. **Technical** (the application of technical skills);
5. **Documentation** (in its widest sense e.g. notebooks, sketchbooks, portfolios, research);
6. **Interview** (the student's ability to articulate their learning and their understanding of what they have done and achieved).

Other reference points included the HEA's *A Marked Improvement* (Ball, et al., 2013) and various critiques of the use of learning outcomes (e.g. Biggs, 1996; Scott, 2011, Bennett & Brady, 2012; Furedi, 2012; Gibbs, 2015). The work and research around Amabile's Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT) was also a considerable influence (Amabile, 1982; Baer & McKool, 2009). Though not without its caveats (Jeffries, 2015) CAT, with its relatively high inter-rater reliability, is considered one of the benchmarks for creativity assessment. One of its key tenets, supported by a considerable body of evidence, is that "the most valid assessment of the creativity of an idea or creation in any field is the collective judgment of recognized experts in that field" (Baer & McKool, 2009, p. 2).

The work on the new assessment system was based on a set of principles which included:

- assessment for learning, not a 'bolt-on';
- aligning assessment with the College's mission, values and the discourses and practices of the disciplines involved;
- assessment had to 'work' - for everyone (students, staff, the institution)
- the assessment burden should be minimised – for students and staff;
- assessment must be fair, valid and equitable, and that there must be clarity, coherence and consistency across the all the College's programmes;
- the uncertainties and anxieties associated with creative practice can be mitigated - though not removed entirely.

It was decided early on to place the notion of '**performance**' – as a learner, artist, maker, performer, thinker, producer, researcher, team member, etc. – at the centre of the approach. That 'performance' would then be assessed through five lenses: **Presentation, Process, Idea**, **Technical,**

Documentation (Fig 1.). In the first implementation of the scheme, and due to the size of the student cohorts involved, the **Interview** that was present in Kleiman's original design was excluded. It was recognised that this omission compromised – to some extent – the notion of assessment as a negotiated or dialogic process, and it highlighted the common conflict between good pedagogy and higher education logistics. It is hoped that it will be included at some stage, particularly for major or final projects.
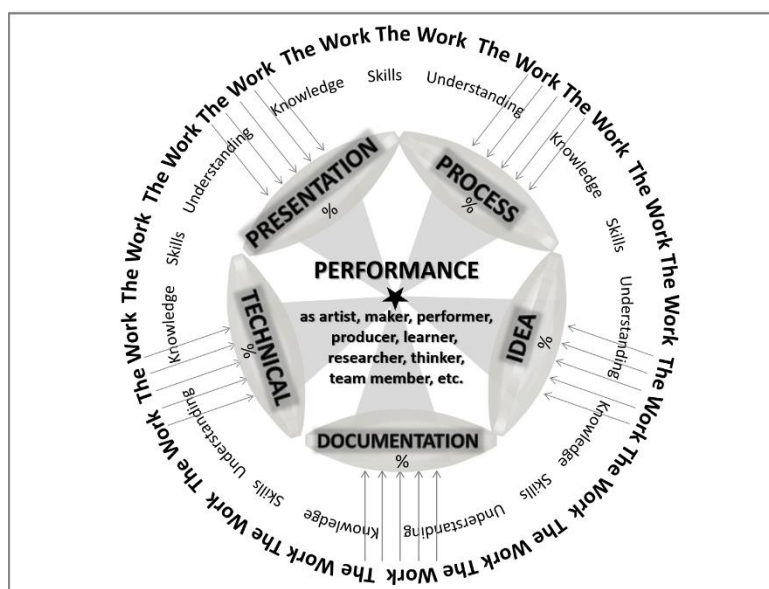

Figure 1: The Five Assessment Fields: Presentation, Process, Idea, Technical, Documentation

The new approach to assessing creative practices also involved a significant move away from learning outcomes – described during the testing phase as a 'conceptual shift' – and replacing them with clear and high expectations. Evidence from the literature (e.g. Scott, 2011; Furedi, 2012; Gibbs, 2015) was provided to support that shift. For example, the

> *"growing realisation that it is very difficult for anyone to understand what*
> *learning outcomes and criteria actually mean, or for two people to understand*
> *the same thing – including teachers and markers….the big, complex and*
> *important goals teachers care about can come to be replaced by small, simple*
> *and trivial goals that seem easier to specify"*

(Gibbs, 2015).

Another key text was provided by Chickering and Gamson:

> *"Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for*
> *everyone - for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and*
> *for the bright and well-motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a*
> *self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations of*
> *themselves and make extra efforts."*

(Chickering & Gamson, 1987, pp. 5-6)

The 'conceptual shift' away from learning outcomes involves cutting, or significantly loosening, the tightly-coupled link between a particular learning outcome and its assessment. Importantly, what is described, and the language used to describe it, need not necessarily change e.g. *"Select, consider and experimentally apply source material to inform your own creative development"* (Fine Art learning outcome, LCA). The shift consists in now considering that learning outcome as an expectation, located amongst a group of expectations (former learning outcomes) in a 'pool of expectations'. Those expectations are contained – each to a greater or lesser extent – within a single 'meta' expectation, the significance of which is communicated clearly to and understood clearly by students (and staff).
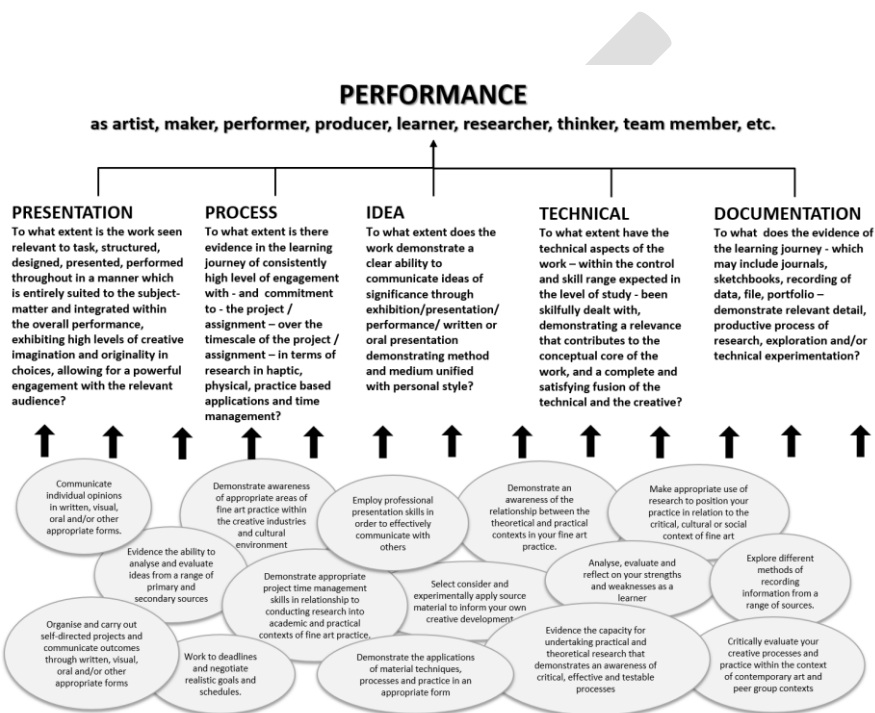

Figure 2: Example, from fine art, of the pool of expectations (bottom) and the meta-assessment questions.

Each of the five assessment fields was focused on a single 'meta' assessment questions e.g:

> *PRESENTATION: Your work is expected to be relevant to task, structured, designed, presented, performed throughout in a manner which is entirely suited to the subject-matter and integrated within the overall performance, exhibiting high levels of creative imagination and originality in choices, allowing for a powerful engagement with the relevant audience?*

The assessment takes the form of asking 'To what extent has the student's work met the expectations?'. This involves using a specially designed (in Excel) marking sheet (Fig 3) in which the normal numeric grades (0%-100%) are replaced with ten alpha-numeric grades with corresponding descriptors:

A1 (Exceptional – excellent in ALL respects)	D (Threshold pass / just adequate)
A2 (Outstanding – excellent in ALMOST ALL respects)	E (Marginal fail / not quite adequate)
A3 (Excellent in MOST respects)	F1 (Weak/to some extent/some but insufficient effort and/or achievement)
B (Good/Very Good, to a significant extent)	F2 (Poor/to a minimal extent/minimum effort and/or achievement)
C (Satisfactory/Competent)	F3 (Very poor/Non-existent)

Table 1: Grading bands and general descriptors

Assessors enter the agreed grade into the appropriate column, alongside the pre-determined weightings, and an algorithm fills in the corresponding information in the other categories.

OUTCOMES

Though still in its early stages at the time of writing, identified outcomes of the project include:

- an holistic assessment methodology applicable across the institution, across all programmes;
- a streamlined, online mark and feedback sheet that provides clear information and guidance (Fig 3);
- an acknowledgment by teaching and administration staff that the new system 'works': *"The new assessment model is much more suitable for the BA (Hons) fine art course. Through being involved in the process, it seems to be a more credible and useful system of assessment for both staff and students, and should allow tutors to build a sound picture of whether or not students are progressing in a more holistic sense."* (Course Leader). *"Because I can understand it, they (the students) will."* (Subject Leader).

Module Assessment Feedback

Student Name: A.N. Other	Student ID: 000000
Programme: BA Hons xxxxxxx	Level: 6
Module Code: LAU0000	Module Title: xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx
Brief Title: xxxxxxx xxxxxxx	

					MODULE MARKS
FIELD	WEIGHTING	GRADE	UNWEIGHTED MARK	WEIGHTED MARK	SPECIFIC MARKING CRITERIA
Presentation	40%	A2	85	34	Excellent in ALMOST all respects - outstanding but not exceptional
Process	20%	B	65	13	Good/Very Good - to a large extent
Idea	20%	C	55	11	Satisfactory/Competent
Technical	10%	D	45	4.5	Threshold Pass/just adequate
Documentation	10%	F1	25	2.5	Weak/to a minimal extent/some but insufficient effort/achievement
			MODULE GRADE	B	Good/Very Good - to a large extent
			TOTAL MODULE MARK	65	
			GRADE POINT AVERAGE	3.5	

TUTOR COMMENT/FEEDBACK - To be used for targeted developmental feedback and feedforward recommendations

What You Did Well

What You Can Do To Improve

Figure 3: New marking and feedback sheet.

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