'Tell Us About It'
Student Voices in Creative Practice

Nº 3

Introduction

At the University of the Arts London, we are dedicated to a community which is enriched by people of diverse backgrounds, respectful of difference and enlivened by open dialogue; a community which is caring and just toward others, and committed to widening participation.

Within Creative Learning in Practice Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CLIP CETL) we have a commitment to celebrate diversity and create a supportive environment for students and staff in line with the University's Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy and Diversity Strategy.

The 'Tell Us About It' project was a collaboration between CLIP CETL and the UAL Diversity Team to research into the positive learning experiences of students from a wide variety of backgrounds.

We were keen to learn from the diverse student experiences to enhance teaching and learning for all and extend the range of institutional strategies to support students effectively in their learning and progression.

Terry Finnigan, Coordinator
Creative Learning in Practice Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

A note from the Diversity Adviser

Exploring student experiences through the window of diversity and equality can bring to light a number of positive, challenging and difficult experiences. Reflecting on how this information can improve our services to students requires the reader to feel positive about the good messages and solution conscious about the problems. This programme is one important small step to supporting our own understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning in a diverse environment.

Respecting the voices of our students and acting upon them appropriately, confirms a commitment to personal and professional development. I hope this publication and the future continuation of the programme, in some shape or form, helps individuals and institutions with their diversity aims.

Amit Popat, Diversity Adviser
University of the Arts London, Diversity Team

V is for Voice

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Some Background To The Research Project
What makes this project different?

The whole learning experience
We wanted to capture the students' total learning experience, giving them the opportunity to explore both the institutional and personal factors that contributed to their success. We were interested in building a bank of positive case studies that could be shared with staff and students to inform and enhance learning and teaching across the institution.

Open brief on how to respond
The students were free to respond in any way and means they wanted. This produced a rich variety of work which included reflective written pieces, photo books, sketchbooks, mind maps, artefacts and video clips. Some examples of what they produced are included in this publication.

Diverse student voices in art & design

The students who took part were from the following groups:

> first generation graduates
> from a black or minority ethnic background
> in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance
> from outside the UK

Their voices, which are expressed through written and visual media, are powerful and speak for themselves. We decided, in the first instance, not to produce a report of the findings but curate an exhibition of their work for students and staff to experience. One of the students involved in the project curated the exhibition, which was launched at the university's Learning & Teaching day in January 2008.

Research outcomes
> Exhibition
> Publication
> Archive
> Staff/student workshops
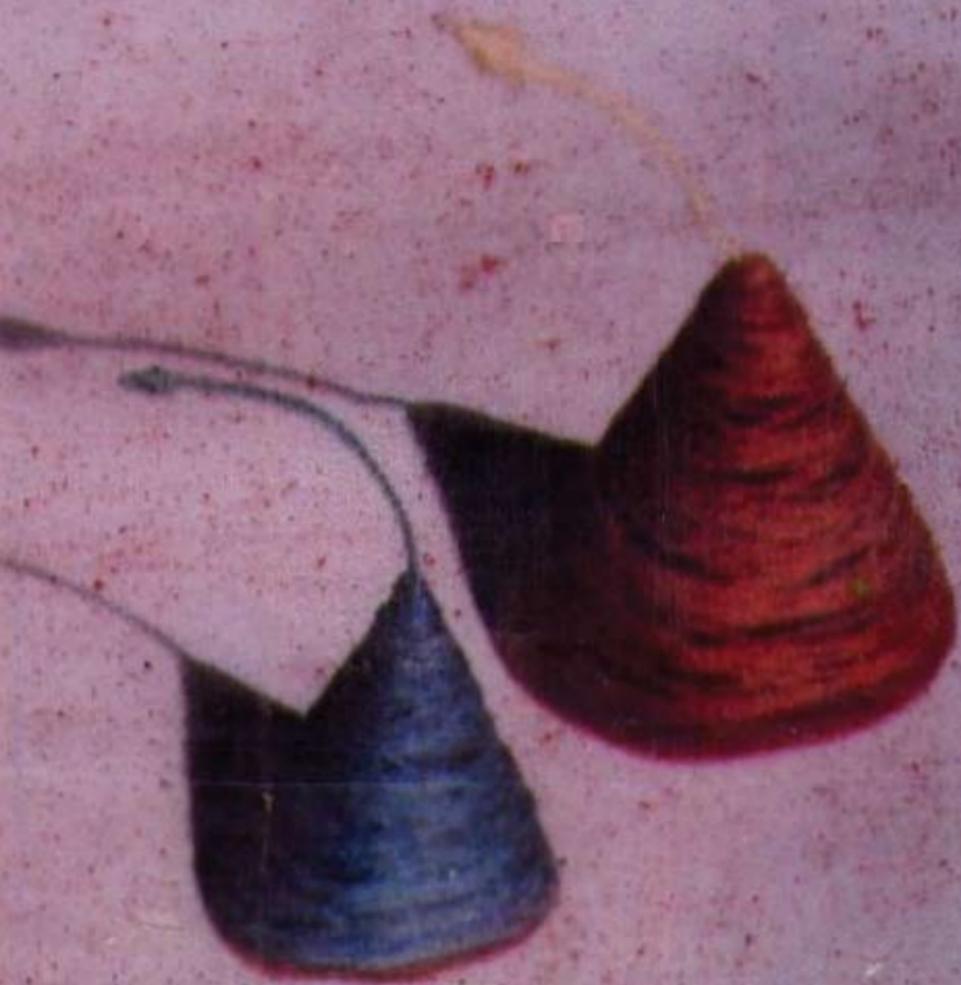
The Research Focus...

In 2007 we asked final year tutors to help us identify high achieving graduates from diverse backgrounds who had to overcome particular difficulties to succeed on their courses. Fifteen students, each receiving a small bursary, then took part in addressing three key questions:

> What were the challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?
> What helped you learn?
> Can you share any tips or strategies for other students?

What Were The Challenges You Faced?
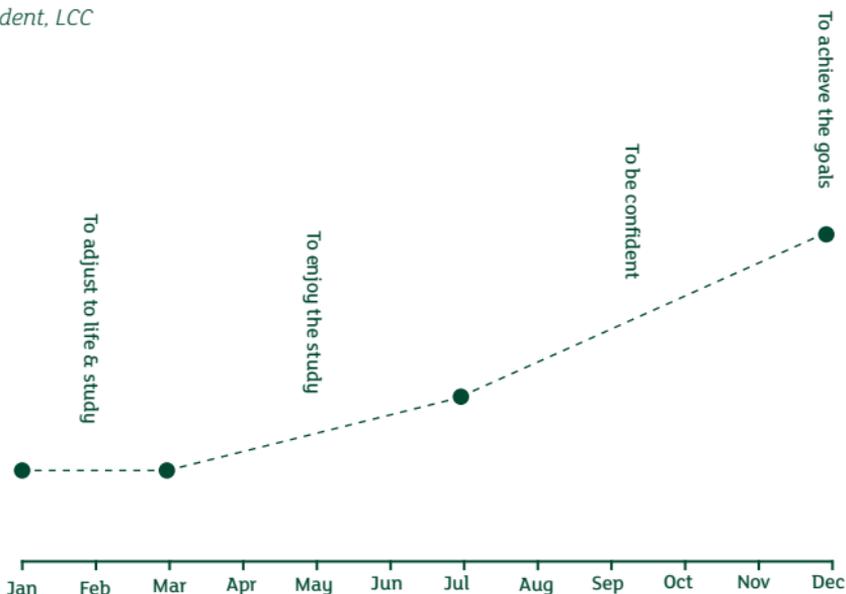This is what students told us...

> The first three months can be a challenge
> Homesickness and loneliness
> Different ways of teaching Art & Design
> Exploring personal identity in the creative process
> No spaces to discuss diversity in the group
> Feeling under confident
> The assumptions made by tutors about students' backgrounds
> Finances
> Language skills

Many of the challenges that the students faced were experienced at an early stage of their course. International students in particular had real problems when they first arrived adjusting to the different environment and teaching. This was a period of transition that is illustrated by one student very graphically below:

The first three months are hard...

A Year at UAL
Student, LCC

To adjust to life & study

To enjoy the study

To be confident

To achieve the goals

Jan   Feb   Mar   Apr   May   Jun   Jul   Aug   Sep   Oct   Nov   Dec

Homesickness and loneliness

I missed you. I missed my cat. I missed Beirut… And for the next three months, I sat in front of the television that served only five channels and ate crisps and chocolate muffins…. I hardly worked on my project because my mind was a complete blank, which naturally, with time backfired on me…

Student, Camberwell

Different ways of teaching Art & Design

It was hard coming from a purely design background to a completely art world. I wasn't used to sitting around in class and just discussing how a reflection of light becomes art… grasping the whole idea of art was difficult to begin with.

Student, Camberwell

Another key challenge that students experienced was the lack of space within the course to share and celebrate their prior experiences and backgrounds, often leaving them feeling invisible and out of place.

Exploring personal identity in the creative process

I relied on and drew from my cultural experience (South African)... at least I did until my course director strongly recommended a steering away from the African... I spiralled into a sense of confusion... it (my work) didn't belong to me and I didn't belong to it – as in the case of displacement, it felt as though my work and I were sitting in that area between space and place, where relationships between objects had not yet been formed.

Student, Wimbledon

No spaces to discuss diversity in the group

...although mature students are encouraged to attend University, all of the student functions, support groups, activity groups etc were for younger people. I was unaware of anything aimed at older people. I felt a part of Byam Shaw, but never really part of Central St Martins, or the University of Arts London. I don't think the answer is an oldies group! Maybe it is something as simple as ensuring there are older faces in publicity material. They could include more black faces too.

Student, CSM

Other students talked about how at first they felt very under-confident on the course and that their work was never good enough.

Feeling under confident

The feedback I was getting from my lecturers was frustrating. They wanted me to change the type of pencil I was using for drawing because it was too light. I used a 2H because I did not have the confidence to draw and show my drawings. I needed to be able to rub out, start again and change in order to perfect my drawings, which were never good enough (in my eyes)...

Student, LCC

What Helped You Learn?
This is what students told us...

> Inspiring and supportive tutors and technicians
> Access to good support systems
> Support from family and friends
> Support from other students in the group
> Individual determination
> Clear expectations explained and understood
> Challenging and interesting projects
> Opportunities to discuss ideas in the group
  and listen to other students
> Encouragement to take risks and experiment
> Work placements, competitions and exchanges
> Working across different subject areas

Students talked about the support and inspiration they received from the staff who taught them, the ones who accepted their differences and encouraged them to explore their identity through their work.

Inspiring and supportive tutors and technicians

I had a fantastic pathway leader and tutor who encouraged me to embrace what I know and to explore my culture, to investigate why certain images (such as those of townships) kept rearing their head...it was refreshing to have a tutor who was adept at the art of listening and who acknowledged subtler cultural differences - who didn't only recognise glaringly obvious indicators of difference like a person's physiognomy, but was prepared to scratch below the surface.

Student, Wimbledon

With time I entered the art world - as much as I could with the help of my tutors. They recommended the books that I should read, the places I should go, the sites I should visit and the approach I should take. And I think what allowed me to take into consideration what they were advising was the patience and tolerance they showed...

Student, Camberwell

I started to make a mess! I used a tampon in one piece of artwork! I stopped worrying about the result, to suspend judgement. I made the shift from illustration to fine art! There was a lot of encouragement to think outside the box.

Student, CSM

The key role of support networks
Support was seen as a key factor in their success. Some of the students accessed the support systems available and experienced their tutorials as an important part of their learning.

Tutor support

I took my tutorials very seriously, I used them to speak to my tutors, listen to their advice and bounce ideas around.

Student, LCC

Every well-respected university should own a **David. David** is a 100% reliable, user-friendly tech wizard. He is a source for all the latest technological information. He puts on a pretty good show too.

D is for David

Access to good support systems

The disability passport has proved an invaluable tool for me during my studies, as I have had occasional bouts of illness near to a project or essay hand-in date and have once or twice been unable to hand in my work on time. With the disability passport I found that the worry was instantly lifted, as I knew that I could have extra time.

Student, LCF

It was the first time I felt like I fitted in. I got along with everyone. It was then found out that I had dyslexia and I felt relieved...I started to get the support from teachers I needed and teachers started to notice my potential.

Student, Chelsea

Others found support from friends and family members.

Support from family and friends

Throughout the creation of my degree my mum was a constant supporter, super mum.

She allowed me to take over the house, supported me financially, helped me sew...I have to credit my mum for an awful lot...she told me to follow my heart...

Student , CSM

Other students talked a great deal about their own individual determination. This student below, who faced a number of personal challenges throughout her course which she shared in her reflective piece, made a decision to keep all these problems to herself and never shared any of them with her tutor.

Individual determination

A single mother and poorly paid note taker, a mature learner and one of only two black students on the 2006 LCC MA Screenwriting course: life conditions rather than problems, challenges rather than obstacles to learning... I have no doubt that the single most important factor in securing my success on this course has been the deep rooted and dogged determination I inherited from my father.

Student, LCC

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I was lucky to be offered a place on the basis of my portfolio. I was the first person in my family to go to university and I felt this was the last chance to achieve something in education...

Student, LCC

What Tips And Strategies Do You Want To Share With New Students?

This is what students told us...

> Find ways to bring part of your identity into your work
> Find out about support and use it
> Get a group of friends in the group to work with
> Attend class regularly
> Get to know your tutor and attend the tutorials
> Making mistakes is important - you need to experiment to learn
> Listen to other students' ideas - you can learn from them
> Be curious about other students in the group
> Get organised - plan your week/days to study

> Discuss your ideas with other students on
  different courses - gives a whole new view
> Sometimes work seems overwhelming -
  turn it into bite size chunks - much
  more manageable
> Take control - if not happy take things up
  with your tutor or Students Union

Find ways to bring your identity into your work

*I changed the topic of my work to one that
I know I would love to work on and would
enjoy - one that would satisfy my need to go
back home. But instead of going back home,
I set out to find traces of home in London...I
poured myself into my project.*

Student, Camberwell

Get a group of friends to work with

*When starting your course at the University
of the Arts, it's important to get to know your
classmates, as people are very friendly and it is
important to have a small close unit of friends
to help support each other.*

Student, LCF

Get to know your tutor and attend the tutorials

It's good to get to know and talk to your tutors, they are the most important people in giving you knowledge and pointing you on the right track in order to complete your course successfully - and they really aren't as frightening as they may at first seem.

Student, LCF

Get organised

Post it notes and a pen. These two items were my essential kit any time I was reading a book. I would just make sure I always had some in my bag.

Student, LCC

doing something
at each 'spare'
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Managing
my first
assignments

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me, and fitting it in with my full-time job. The deadline of my first assignment coincided with the Milan Furniture Fair which due to my job, I

needed to go to. I hadn't finished my assignment and took my laptop with me, thinking I could finish them while I was there.

...ching and ...g seemed to ... naturally ...e, but I ... had mental ...s when it ...e to writing ... assignments.

I don't feel confident as a writer and I have difficulties communicating my thoughts on paper. On some of the days that

I had dedicated to writing, I would get frustrated when I found myself staring at a blank page, unable to find

...Masters ...e. But at ...same time, ...t ask for ...with one ...e first ...ments I ...itted —

research methodology — I struggled with the word count and the content. I remember being unhappy with the grade,

but puzzled as to what I should have done to improve it.

... at times ...udy

I was keen to do something

Issues For The Institution

Through asking just three questions within this research we have received a wealth of responses, which were honest, creative and compelling.

They have much to tell us about what works well and how students learn effectively. Most importantly, they demonstrate that learning is an emotional experience.

They leave us with questions to address...

> How can we design our curriculum to be more inclusive and build on the students' experience?

> How can we manage/facilitate the student group to be a resource for each other?

> What measures can we put in place to ensure that we support and motivate all our students regardless of age, race, class and disability?

> How can tutors/lecturers ensure that students are made aware of all the university resources available to them - equipment, services etc, from the beginning of their course?

> How do we ensure we are responsive to student feedback throughout the course and make the necessary ongoing changes to course design and delivery?

> How can the information from this project connect with other important agendas within the University, for example Training & Development and Equality Impact Assessments?

Further References

African and Asian Visual Arts Archive
http://www.aavaa.org.uk/

Arts and Humanities Data Service
Visual Arts
http://ahds.ac.uk/visualarts/

Untold London
The History of London's Diverse Communities
http://www.untoldlondon.org.uk/

Learning To Read The World
Through Other Eyes
http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk

The National Newsmagazine
on Race and Politics
www.colorlines.com

Art and Design
Enabling Part Time Tutors
www.adeptt.ac.uk

**Sketchbook and Reflective
Writing Practices Website**
www.arts.ac.uk/cetl/visual-directions

**UAL Equal Opportunities
and Diversity Policy**
www.arts.ac.uk/hr-policies-plans.htm

CLIP CETL Diversity Statement
www.arts.ac.uk/clipcetl-diversity.htm

National Arts Learning Network
www.naln.ac.uk

Notes