Block teaching in art and design: Pedagogy and the student experience

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Abstract

This article contextualizes and evaluates the pedagogical efficacy of a ‘block’ curriculum structure at Level 4 of a UK art and design degree course. The year has a distinctive, unique structure compared to its HEI’s central model of three concurrent twenty-credit modules. The article considers the block approach unfolding from the contextual changes at national and institutional levels that provided complex, multiple shifts and challenges. This article evaluates block pedagogy through considering course data, students’ critical reflections of their experience and external examiner comments. The evidence suggests that block pedagogy supports students – of which a significantly higher proportion are from lower-privileged backgrounds – and their outcomes, whilst improving retention, progression and overall satisfaction rates.

Keywords

Pedagogy, block, art and design, photography, Solent University, teaching, curriculum, experience

Introduction

This article considers the context and development of a ‘block’ module structure for Level 4 of an art and design undergraduate degree course at a small university in the south of England. The year’s module design is distinct from the university’s central framework of concurrent semester-long modules by consisting of sequential six-week module ‘blocks’, and we will explore the module design as a specific pedagogic response to multiple, entangled transformations across the higher education (HE) sector, the university and the art and design subject area. As such, this case study is a reflective account of the development of block teaching and learning in a specific art and design HE context. This article will firstly explore the issues that prompted an alternative pedagogic response, then consider the wider research context of block module design to inform this approach before finally evaluating the course-specific effects of reorganizing the student

learning experience. As such, this article will contribute towards redressing what Orr and Shreeve identify as a ‘scarcity of research in art and design higher education pedagogy’ (2018: 3) by focusing upon learning structure – something which is perhaps an even scarcer pedagogical subcategory.

Shifting orientations: Reflections

The development of a block module structure in Level 4 was a consequence of an emerging set of complex issues and dialogues with students. As Brown argues, ‘students and staff [need] to be fully involved in the process of change’ (2011: 196). A block module approach was conceived in response to increasing feedback from students that studying three concurrent modules, especially in Year 1, was overwhelming, fragmenting and causing anxiety. Students indicated that the transition to university life (‘upheaval’ in their words) was already sufficiently difficult without the academic challenge of immediately managing multiple concurrent modules. The course team had independently observed that greater proportions of students struggled to work as expected and perhaps only began doing so in proximity to winter summative assessment deadlines. Students also increasingly disengaged from existing pedagogic strategies of structuring their learning journey, such as through mid-semester formative feedback waypoints (such as the formal ‘group crit’). For example, not only were students struggling to produce the work, but those who had were increasingly anxious about presenting it. The quite common and traditional teaching methods employed by the course had not changed, but the students’ responses to them had.

There are perhaps various interconnected national and institutional factors that produced a generation of students with different pedagogic needs. However, course teams are still guided by the same critical and creative requirements and outcomes for students, as identified by HE subject quality frameworks. HE in the United Kingdom has been in profound transformation; it continues to witness turbulence and uncertainty created from various factors (see Journeaux et al. 2017). Significant changes involve, for example, double the amount of students in HE between 1992 and 2016 (Dixon and O’Gorman 2020). That increase included a greater overall proportion of 18-year-olds: in 2020, 40.5 per cent were enrolled into HE. As a Higher Education Statistics Agency study (HESA 2020a, 2020b) on widening participation shows, the university received a significantly higher proportion of state-educated students, from under-represented backgrounds, including families without prior HE experience and ‘low participation neighbourhoods’. As O’Shea (2015) shows, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) statistics show a strong correlation between low university participation rates and lower parental educational levels, making ‘first-in-family’ (or ‘first generation’) university students statistically significant. O’Shea argues that students belonging to this demographic require increased support. The contexts behind a course’s students are important in identifying and considering pedagogic strategies, as we shall see.

The university also has approximately twice the proportion of students with Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications compared to the sector average of 26% in 2015. This number itself was a rise from just 14% only seven years earlier in 2008 (Wiggins 2016). Banerjee's 2018 analysis of HESA data identified that BTEC students leave university with a smaller proportion of 'good' degrees than A-level students – even to the extent that a BTEC student with three distinctions is likely to be less academically successful at degree level than an A-level student with three Cs. The greatest proportion of students not progressing from Level 4 to Level 5 are precisely those with BTECs, with 24% of students nationally failing to progress. Banerjee proposes that BTEC students are less academically prepared for the 'culture' of HE and that their pedagogic experience should be distinctly tailored to better support progression and outcomes. We must be mindful, therefore, that student profiles can be profoundly different across HE institutions (HEIs), within subject areas, and in specific courses. Students from different backgrounds may have significantly different support needs and require different pedagogic approaches.

The university therefore received significantly higher proportions of students from alternative or 'non-traditional' backgrounds – broadly defined by state-educated, under-represented areas, first-generation and/or with BTEC qualifications – than the national average. Indeed, the degree course's own specific proportion of such students was even greater than its already high university average. For example, in the academic year 2019–20, 27.4% of the course's Level 4 students were from both 'first-generation' and 'low-participation neighbourhoods'. This is clearly a much higher proportion than the university's average of 19.7%, which itself far exceeded the national sector average of 11.4%. This provides an important, if broad, context for contextualizing the position from which the degree course team considered effective forms of pedagogy for its students.

Students and support

One element of first-year redesign was the inclusion of pastoral events into the taught timetable. 'Well-being' tutorials were scheduled at strategic points within the semester alongside regular academic tutorials and 'office hours'. It has become increasingly difficult to separate academic performance from student well-being; the academic tutor's role has perhaps expanded to include understanding something of the student's 'lifeworld' – even if that broadened pastoral role is often a hidden aspect of workload. Indeed, the general increase in students with different, increased mental health and emotional needs has received national coverage by mainstream media (Anon. 2019; Raddi 2019). The curriculum within the block structure therefore sought to enable greater balance of student well-being with academic demands, partly also through greater consistency of student–staff contact and relationships. Our experience was that increasing numbers of students required greater personal support

whilst having difficulty in focusing upon three concurrent modules. As mentioned, sequential modules appeared to better support interrelated academic and well-being challenges at this demanding, transitional moment in the life of a new undergraduate student. We will consider specific student reflections upon this later in the article.

Broglia et al. (2018) identify an increased demand and severity of student mental health alongside institutional challenges in providing support and counselling. Bridgette Bewick et al.'s (2008 and 2010) studies argued that students' psychological distress rose upon entering their degree and did not necessary recede; one-third of students experienced clinical psychological distress (see Broglia et al. 2018: 441). However, with the closure of many student counselling services in further education (FE) resulting from 'squeezed' government funding (Caleb 2014), they also argue that the success of a consequent increase of 'eTherapies', to deal with the scale of the problem, is inconclusive (2018: 442). Broglia et al. also refer to several studies reporting a connection between the new student debt regime to 'poorer psychological functioning' (2018: 442). The Conservative government, following the Browne Review (2009–10), dramatically increased student fees to £9000 in 2012 alongside rises in student loan interest rates. This is a significant moment that provides another important context for student mental well-being, particularly for such a widening participation university given the greater proportion of students from alternative backgrounds and the different support and pedagogic needs they may have. Broglia et al. reference a Department for Business Innovation & Skills report in 2013 that highlighted 'increased reports of student mental ill-health in response to more students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE' (2018: 442). Interestingly, the same report shows that just 7 per cent of students, in this case study's university's city, who were entitled to 'Free School Meals' would later enter HE – compared to a national average of 20 per cent. To briefly reiterate, as mentioned above, the degree course recruits a significantly higher proportion of students from non-traditional and widening participation routes; the block approach was a pedagogic adaption through which the course team sought to manage initial, various academic pressures upon students whilst integrating student well-being into a more holistic approach to pedagogy. As we shall consider later, with reference to Jacques Rancière, effective pedagogy must proceed from the position in which students are situated. Consideration of these shifts is important when reconfiguring learning experiences to support changing pedagogic demands and enable a new generation of students.

The government's introduction of higher tuition fees, catalysing the marketization of HE, arguably caused a proportion of students to increasingly adopt consumer behaviours. Dixon and O'Gorman discuss increased student passivity, expectations around provision of answers and decreased independence. They reference studies even prior to the 2010s that evidenced an increasing 'lack of engagement and requisite rejection of deep and active learning […] [based upon] prior educational experience' (2020: 584). Consequently, they highlight an increased gap between HE and the position from which students are entering it, exacerbated by governmental education policy and increased funding pressures upon schools and FE. They argue this has resulted in 'surface style learning' (2020: 584) and an over-concern for performance directly

linked to marks, thereby ‘lack[ing] the kind of key skills, such as critical thinking and independent learning, needed to succeed’ (2020: 584). I have personally witnessed a variety of courses, in different HEIs, making pedagogic adaptations to remedy a perceived ‘deficit’ of foundational critical thinking skills. Whilst a proper evaluation of an undoubtedly complex transformation in student abilities lies outside this article, we might broadly agree with Dixon and O’Gorman’s proposal (also see Davies 2006) that it is crucial for HE pedagogy to respond by adopting innovative and flexible teaching styles (2020: 584).

One specific example of the above, for the degree course, is a clear shift in the decline of students entering the course with a prior one-year art and design foundation diploma. We noted Banerjee’s finding that prior qualification type and student background have important consequences upon HE academic success. Student preparedness for degree-level study can clearly be quite different. Previous subject-specific education experienced in FE can also have variable quality largely premised upon staffing and resources. However, the course team recognized that students with foundation experience were generally better prepared and equipped for the transition to degree-level study. Historically, the degree course had strongly recommended the diploma as a condition of admission. This experience was beneficial to students’ conceptual, critical and technical skills in readiness for the demands of degree study. However, applicant behaviours also changed in relation to universities’ recruitment strategies following the government’s policy of removing student number ‘caps’ in 2015–16. The undergraduate degree, for example, could no longer recommend a prior foundation diploma as a condition of acceptance when other ‘competitor’ courses did not require this. Within a decade, the role of the foundation diploma began to increasingly function instead as a qualification to bolster an applicant’s low number of UCAS points to meet course entry requirements. Therefore, recruitment competition among universities and significant growth of regional ‘competitor’ courses had the consequences of removing the need for a foundation diploma and therefore the skills, experience and development it provided in enabling students to transition and participate more easily into HE.

(Re)orientation

Orr and Shreeve refer to Rancière’s proposition that learning should proceed from the students’ starting position: ‘To find the place where the students know and to support them from that place to new learning’ (2018: 65). Teaching should also ‘follow rather than lead’ (2018: 118). It is crucial that pedagogy understands, and is responsive to, changes in student positions. The undergraduate degree’s students entering Level 4 were changing in terms of background, well-being and mental health needs, lowered course admission tariffs and type of prior qualifications – including reduced experience of foundation study. These shifts provided different navigational starting points from which students began an art and design degree.

Rancière suggested that teachers unlock learning experiences rather than instructing from positions of institutional authority. Buss (2008), like Rancière, has frequent recourse to the 'learning journey' metaphor, whereby student creativity should not follow a path but leave a trail. We might also conceive of students being followed by the very path they thought they were treading. Orr (2018) speaks of being lost whilst still having a 'map' from which to embrace the creative freedoms and possibilities that lie in a 'pedagogy of ambiguity' that is essential in art and design. Of course, there is great excitement and learning from being 'lost' and 'not knowing', but perhaps only if one is able to embrace the possibilities from a centred position of self-confidence. Indeed, anxiety is another symptom of being lost. Students lacking confidence, in varying degrees and different ways, are perhaps precisely those who might more negatively experience ambiguity and unpredictability. Orr and Shreeve acknowledge this very problem: 'For one student the curriculum may be viewed as a wonderful set of opportunities, whilst for another it is experienced as a chaotic mess' (2018: 8). With the course having a high proportion of students with non-traditional, alternative backgrounds, the focus of Level 4 had to be reorientating students from increasing positions of anxiety to one of opportunity.

Rancière's description of Jacotot's 'anti'-teaching in fact shows very prescribed instructions and clear outcomes; the process of emancipation is derived from learning in-between those points. Students must be entirely willing to accept the task given, 'the order to pass through a forest' (1991: 9), that is premised upon a clear starting point and direction through which students' intelligence reveals itself. Although Rancière's illustration of Jacotot's method for emancipatory learning arose from highly privileged students seeking out Jacotot, thereby demonstrating their motivation, commitment and resources, Rancière proclaimed that the pedagogy of emancipation could be for both rich and poor. However, that premise was dependent upon students having sufficient 'will' to learn. Indeed, there is privilege associated with the notion of 'will' and the opportunities to exercise one's will – for example, not needing to balance full-time study with other employment, care responsibilities, and mental health and well-being conditions. Nevertheless, Jacotot's understanding of students' starting position and destination was fundamental in creating appropriate learning experiences. His students were sufficiently able to begin decoding a dual-language version of the Télémaque – a project-based exercise, set by a 'master', appropriate to the student's knowledge and where learning is generated through creative work. In that sense, there are clear resemblances to an art and design HE ethos. To support students from a range of backgrounds to begin such creative work, the degree course placed greater focus upon establishing self-enabling 'wayfinding' skills – that is, foundational research methods, contextual, creative and critical thinking – into the Level 4 curriculum. Establishing a framework for praxis would enable students to increasingly fold conceptual and critical ideas into independent visual practice; as with Jacotot's students, they could begin deriving learning from the creative process of decoding one thing into another – ideas into practice.

From a UK HE context, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) describes the 'destination' of art and design study as 'extensive independent practice, creativity, innovation, and in-depth

understanding’ (2019: 14). Pedagogy therefore required reorientation to enable all undergraduate students to reach that destination, regardless of background. Structured learning experiences must therefore allow different students to forge different routes and outcomes from clear initial positions. Aspiring towards pedagogies of ambiguity first requires a degree of student confidence in themselves, and their tutor, through clarification of the terrain, position and route from which they might begin to explore along with strategies for coping with uncertain territories. Those students lacking confidence, for multiple reasons, require ‘permission’ to get ‘lost’, to embrace uncertain lines of flight, and understand that mistakes do not signify error but are instead symptomatic of learning. A map must therefore be appropriate to the starting position of its traveller. Enabling an uncertain or hesitant student, particularly given the propensity for being overwhelmed at the very start of a journey, can clearly be supported by experienced guides (tutors), supportive fellow travellers (peer groups) and clear, appropriately challenging, checkpoints (formative/summative assessment) that Rancière identifies in his term ‘verification’.

Following the above, Meehan and Howells (2019) argue that student–tutor relationships are a crucial factor in student retention and academic performance (see also O’Keefe 2013 and Burke et al. 2016). Thomas (2012) also highlights the key role of academic staff in establishing ‘belonging’ by providing opportunities for peer relationships and supportive attitudes. He notes the importance of regular contact in cultivating ‘belonging’. Jones references a number of studies researching students’ transition into HE, concluding that ‘[a]cademic staff have an important role in facilitating this transition both formally, in how they approach teaching and learning, and informally, in how they interact with students’ (2018: 1046). The undergraduate course reorientated itself at Level 4 to focus not only upon embedding independent wayfinding skills but also providing stability and consistency in staff relationships, with the same two lecturers now delivering five out of six modules. This provided greater holistic awareness of students’ positions and their journeys whilst allowing student–staff relationships to develop meaningfully.

Block module design

The learning ‘map’ was reorientated; the block framework organized students’ learning through focus upon one ‘practice’ project separately whilst thematically folding the continuous semester-long ‘theory’ module into their practice. The block structure provides a mid-semester summative deadline, at week six, rather than end-of-semester weeks twelve or thirteen, with the consequence of focusing student engagement. In contrast to the prior student experience of undertaking three-semester-long concurrent modules, delivered by different lecturers, students now saw the same staff in sequential practice modules. Previously, lecturers had planned their modules longitudinally, over the course of a semester, which conceptualized student learning

through a weekly development. The shift to a block structure directed the course team to specifically consider daily student learning experiences through 'micro' and 'macro' cycles: if each module was only six weeks, then students' daily learning experiences had to be considered more closely as developmental stepping stones for weekly waypoints that then enabled students to achieve summative submission in six-week cycles. Essentially, the shift from semester-long to block modules encouraged the course team to further consider pedagogy from the students' daily experience: each individual session is experienced within the structure of the week, and each week within the structure of the block.

'Block teaching' has been used in broad terms and developed over the last few decades. It is subject to numerous definitions but generally refers to a form of compacted curriculum delivery. The terms 'block' but also 'intensive', 'compressed' and 'flexible' are used sometimes interchangeably and are also subject-specific and open to interpretation. For clarification therefore, I use the term 'block' to specifically mean a compressed and sequential module design rather than semester-long and concurrent. Figure 1 demonstrates a standard example of three simultaneous semester-long modules. Figure 2 illustrates the Level 4 course structure that divides the semester into two consecutive six-week 'practice' modules operating alongside one twelve-week 'theory' module that folds into the weekly practice thematic. Therefore, in any given week, students study just one practice module alongside an interconnected 'theory' day; from a students' holistic perspective, they are engaging with one weekly 'theme' across their three taught days. This directly contrasted with the prior organization of students' learning into three separate modules, on different days, with different tutors, symptomatic of the traditional module framework illustrated in Figure 1.

Importantly, in the block design (Figure 2), taught hours and timetabled days are precisely equivalent: the students' overall learning experience is premised around reorganization, not reduction. Indeed, 'intensive mode delivery' (IMD) or 'compressed' delivery may intensify learning to reduce taught delivery. Instead, this semester design features two practice modules in sequential blocks whereby delivery of each consists of two days per week across six weeks each. This approach to block teaching reflects Dixon and O'Gorman's position concerning an equal number of teaching hours but redeployed over a shorter period, with modules experienced sequentially to foster a more focused student learning experience (2020: 585). However, Dixon and O'Gorman's own block structure on a tourism management degree indicates compressed, sequential modules for two six-hour days over three weeks, which itself highlights an important issue of subject specificity: a three-week period may not be appropriate for art and design students to sufficiently develop the experimentation and critical reflection required. Art and design, as all subjects, has particular pedagogic sensitivities and demands. Students' developments in thinking, navigating and making have a necessary temporality that could be undermined through any further compression of a six-week block. However, for reasons mentioned, the course team prioritized the advantages of six-week modules at Level 4 to adapt to shifts in students' starting positions whilst preserving other intellectual and critical developments possible through the extended temporalities of semester-long modules for Levels

5 and 6. Although further discussion of this lies outside of this article, some reflections emerge in students' thoughts in the final section.

In Figure 2, the one-semester-long module (blue) is very specific; it is a contextual studies 'theory' module that envelops the weekly 'theme' in continuity with the practice module. As mentioned, this is possible because students are engaging in one practice module; this enables theory and practice to become structural extensions of the other. However, this ethos can become challenged and fractured through the demands of timetabling, staffing and prioritizing learning outcomes for three different concurrent modules. Although this article does not focus upon theory–practice pedagogy, it is nevertheless central to the course ethos and therefore fundamental to the structure of students' learning experience. The block design enables a continuum between theory and practice from a student position: creative practice, technical workshops, formative feedback and theoretical-critical contextualization are mutually enfolding.

Existing research in block pedagogy

Orr and Shreeve (2018) identified a lacuna of research in creative arts pedagogy. This article presents original research in addressing this, although it does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, the pedagogy of block module design has been researched more extensively in other subject areas and/or countries, albeit without focus on art and design. However, a brief review of this research is instructive by providing a context for how and why educators developed such pedagogic adaptations as well as useful transferable findings. It developed in places such as Colorado College (United States) in the 1970s and then Australian HE (see Dixon and O'Gorman 2020; Davies 2006; Burton and Nesbit 2008). However, it has recently attracted increasing mainstream attention within British educational media, reporting on the international 'successes' of block pedagogy. For example, the 2018 Times Higher Education article '"Block teaching" model rolled out as pass rates soar' (Ross 2018) presented the argument that it (i) halved failure rate and raised pass rates; (ii) first year retention increased from 80 to 89 per cent; and (iii) was at least a 'cost-neutral exercise', whilst at best it increased revenue through higher student retention rates. Malmö University, Sweden, describes their courses as sequential and divided into five or ten weeks. Victoria University, Australia, implemented block teaching across all years of its degree course between 2018 and 2020, claiming that academic performance and retention rates were higher when students focus on one subject:

> Victoria University is the first Australian university to use a 'block' model of learning, where you study one unit at a time rather than juggling several at once. The VU Block Model is focussed on making your transition to university easier and your chances of study success greater.
>
> (Victoria University n.d.)

Their website rhetoric is clearly concerned with retention and performance whilst justifying the effectiveness of the approach through reference to ‘proven successes’ internationally.

Much of the existing research into block module design comes from Australia. Davies (2006) reviewed earlier work in this area whilst describing how Australian HE’s relationship to block design derived from sector transformation from globalization to governmental control and financial constraints. HE funding was reduced from 90 per cent in 1981 to 40 per cent in 2003, whilst concurrent policy shifts moved focus from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ participation. Davies argued that universities were consequently forced to become increasingly entrepreneurial, commercialized and market-driven, focusing on international recruitment in Asia, for example. Curriculum flexibility for different types of learners and developments in communications technology also made an impact (see also Burton and Nesbit 2008). Karaksha et al. write, ‘[i]n this environment of rapid transformation, it is not surprising that higher education institutions are changing their teaching methods, including new ways of delivering course content’ (2013: 5213). Karaksha et al. also note that all the ‘top-five’ Australian universities offer ‘intensive mode courses across different departments and schools, whilst highlighting standards in increasing student satisfaction as the key driver for such teaching modes’ (2013: 5213).

The United Kingdom has its own context within which we can situate interest in block module design. As discussed, the degree course made such adaptations in response to emerging issues concerning student learning. Dixon and O’Gorman describe block design as an increasingly common ‘adaptation’ (2020: 584) whilst also acknowledging the limited knowledge in this under-researched area. They argue that intensive delivery has been highly beneficial, in particular, for institutions with a greater proportion of non-traditional learners. Dixon and O’Gorman’s argument follows Burton and Nesbit’s claims regarding studies on intensive teaching that show ‘equivalent, or better, learning experiences on a range of measures of interaction, student commitment, and academic performance’ (2008: 6). Importantly, however, they also maintain that key markers of success are still attributable to inspiring teaching, good organization and effective assessment. Dixon and O’Gorman also make the important qualification that improved student experience through block design is contingent upon subject area; they propose that humanities and marketing-related subjects demonstrate clear positive experiences. Similarly, but in an Australian HE context, Finger and Penney (2001) highlighted the critical importance of subject specificity in pedagogic design. Clearly it is important to remember the specific terrain of the educational journey and its navigators.

Davies’s research proposed that block teaching advantages included ‘increased motivation, commitment, and concentration, diversity of teaching methods, stimulation and enthusiasm’ (2006: 14). Dixon and O’Gorman cite several studies proposing that more focused modules result in similar, or better, student performance – as defined by attainment and long-term knowledge retention. They also reference studies on module design generating greater engagement with positive consequences for ‘deep and active’ learning (2020: 586). Other

qualities included greater student planning and concentration that resulted in increased engagement (2020: 586; see also Daniel 2000; Davies 2006). Finger and Penney evaluate block design and identified potential issues related to shorter study time for summative deadlines and long-term knowledge retention. However, their study also showed students' increased focus on each module mitigated for its shortened duration with benefits of increased attendance, commitment, student–peer–teacher relationships, more varied learning experiences and an improved overall holistic learning experience. They also noted an increase in graduation rates (73–90 per cent), a dramatic fall in failure and a broader improvement in academic results. The evidence contradicted concerns surrounding longer-term knowledge retention as students claimed that their block learning afforded them more time in class to focus, exercise and embed skills. Indeed, as our own students had asked, how much 'deep' learning is possible when one is required to continuously switch between multiple modules?

Van Scyoc and Gleason write that 'the same unit of time can be used with varying levels of intensity depending on the situation and the individual' (1993: 15). Their highly controlled experiment compared semester-length and three-week modules whilst maintaining all other variables such as same students, time of academic year, course cost, course content and material, lecturers, class size and start time. They found that block module students scored 10.5 per cent higher, although they also noted the two groups' long-term learning remained similar. Karaksha et al's (2013) study compared semester-long and three-week modules and noticed that whilst summative module performance was similar, block modules were more popular with previously lower-achieving students receiving slightly higher satisfaction ratings (4.63 compared to 4.33). In support of the benefits of block learning for students with lower prior academic achievement, Sheldon and Durdella's (2010) study of module length in American community college concluded that students studying in compressed formats (under eight weeks compared to 'regular' 15–18-week courses) demonstrated both increased completion and achievement rates across all departments. Elsewhere, Geltner and Logan's (2001) research showed that, with the exception of two subjects, successful course completion rates were higher for compressed-format courses.

As Dixon and O'Gorman reflect, the existing research generally indicates that subject-appropriate block module design demonstrates improved attendance and engagement, particularly amongst those students from 'diverse entry pathways' (2020: 583). Research on pedagogic design in relation to the diversification of backgrounds and academic achievements of students is relevant and significant when considering changes among students in HE and its impact upon an art and design course in a small, widening participation university. However, some questions remain; there is danger in assuming that one student's experience is true for another. Students have individual learning preferences and academic abilities; different pedagogies affect different students in different ways, and at different levels of study. As such, the following section shall focus upon different students' experiences of block module design and consider the effects at a course and individual student level.

Evaluating pedagogy

We have previously noted research that indicates block module design could offer broadly equivalent, or better, outcomes including 'interaction, student commitment, and academic performance' (Burton and Nesbit 2008: 6; see also Sheldon and Durdella 2009; Geltner and Logan 2001, among others), whereby non-traditional and more diverse students may benefit more. There are undoubtedly specific national and specific institutional factors that contextually frame any such effectiveness, such as its proportions of students from different backgrounds, diversity of ability and experience and/or different types of prior academic attainment. Therefore, in this final section, we will focus upon the undergraduate degree course specifically with consideration of its own course data, external review and student feedback to provide evidence around the impact of block module design. Broad course data is perhaps useful only in establishing a general context before we consider students' specific reflections.

Figure 3 demonstrates the percentage of students progressing between year groups from 2013–14 to 2019–20. The restructured design of Level 4 was first introduced into the academic year 2014–15. Two immediate observations arising from the table are: (i) an increase in students progressing from Level 4 to Level 5 and (ii) an overall increase in progression across all years. Whilst it would be undoubtedly beneficial to have further historic data to compare and track this trajectory, this nevertheless still indicates an almost consistent increase (if we exclude 2018–19 as a statistical outlier owing to exceptional circumstances). However, correlation is not causation and it would be disingenuous to solely attribute those figures to changes in course design; there are other important contextual factors such as the decline in course size – for example, Level 4 enrolments of approximately 60 students in 2010–11 gradually reduced to half that by 2019–20. Whilst course size could make a significant impact upon several factors, such as student–tutor relationships, this must also be understood alongside a direct reduction in course staffing. It is also useful to note the course's National Student Survey (NSS) data (Figure 4), although again it would be wrong to claim causality from correlation given the complexity of factors involved in student satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is a general, significant rise in overall student satisfaction, alongside increased progression rates, following Level 4 students first experiencing block teaching in 2014–15 that provides the horizon against which we will consider external and student feedback.

	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20
Level 4	85.40%	87%	90%	100%	100%	82%	100%
Level 5	87.95%	84.20%	98%	97%	93.80	91%	100%

Level 6	98.39%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	97%

Figure 3: Student progression rate across years from 2013–14 to 2019–20.

NSS	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20
%	62	70	74	85	76	79	79	89	89	96

Figure 4: National Student Survey (NSS) 'overall satisfaction' course percentage per year.

The course's previous external examiner reflected upon the redesign of Level 4 within the contexts we have discussed, of declining students with prior foundation diplomas whilst ensuring that students progressed at the necessary waypoints to fulfil learning outcomes: 'The teaching team are constantly reviewing and re-considering delivery and content according to student interest, group dynamic and levels of students at entry to the course'. The examiner reiterates the point that:

> The teaching team are attuned to the changing level of applicants at entry to the course […] [and] have addressed this through reviewing modules […] for students arriving with less photographic and academic experience so that they still progress to meet the necessary levels and learning outcomes.

Importantly the examiner felt that in the very first year of the block redesign '1st year students were attaining a level that is higher than last year' and noted how compressed deadlines at Level 4 'encourages engagement and offers transition'.

Whilst the course data and external examiner comments provide positive evidence, we must also consider the nature of change. 'Progress' in its teleological sense is a rather problematic concept; change is an unfolding process that has different effects upon different people. We must consider how altering one thing might have interrelated consequences. For example, whilst refocusing the Level 4 structure to better support students with different academic achievements, whilst securing high student progression, what other implications might this also have? For example, could this limit achievement for other students from more privileged backgrounds? After all, the course's high proportion of 'non-traditional' students, at 27.4 per

cent, nevertheless still represents a minority of the student year group. Also, what effects might Level 4 redesign have upon Levels 5 and 6? In response to the issue of overall student results, a review of yearly grade averages in Figure 5 provides some basic indication that this remained, overall, very similar for each cohort from one year to the next. Figure 6 suggests that students who did significantly better or worse were relatively balanced, although there is some variation that we will consider.

	2014–15 & 2015–16	2015–16 & 2016–17	2016–17 & 2017–18	2017–18 & 2018–19
L4 year average	57%	59.5%	59.4%	59.7%
L5 year average	58.3%	61.4%	59%	59.3%

Figure 5: Average student grade for Levels 4 to 5 from 2014–15 to 2018–19.

	2015–18	2016–19	2017–20
Level 4 > 5 increase	65%	50%	38%
Level 4 > 5 decrease	31%	50%	58%
Level 4 > 5 identical	4%	0%	4%

Figure 6: Number of students who increased, decreased and remained consistent in average grade between Levels 4 and 5.

One interpretation of this, given the consistency across years, could be that the year restructure has had little, or no, effect. However, this would ignore the significance of consistent outcomes in relation to improvements in rates of student retention and progression for a course with a relatively high proportion of widening participation students. Another view might be that Level 4 enables students to achieve good outcomes whilst providing a more supportive framework for student progression that then lasts throughout their degree. Indeed, Figure 4's NSS figures evidence a growing student satisfaction. However, the data is broad, so it would be useful to now finally consider students' own reflections upon their specific experiences. Student year groups, as well as recent graduates who demonstrated any significant increase, decrease and consistency of grade averages across year groups, were invited to participate. As mentioned, it is important to consider that any change in teaching and learning approaches could be uneven. Students were asked to reflect upon four questions: (1) whether or not they felt that Year 1 supported their transition into university; (2) what they felt were key factors in any successful transition into degree study; (3) whether, and what, differences between Year 1 and Year 2

made an impact upon their learning, and if so how?; (4) were there any other reflections between each year that they would like to comment upon?

Student responses were unanimously positive regarding their experience of block module design. Mark responded: ‘I strongly agree in the method of doing a 5–6 week project based in Year 1 […] [it] definitely helped my transition over from college’. He believed the shorter deadlines ‘fires up’ students from the very beginning – in contrast to a summative deadline that was months away. As previously mentioned, a six-week summative assessment point requires immediate engagement whilst remaining achievable if supported by a clear, structured map of the ‘route’. Other comments regarding Level 4’s structure included those by Catherine: ‘[When] starting out, one project at a time worked well […] focussing on one thing helped me to develop without other worries’. Melissa replied in a similar way: ‘[Level 4] gave me the chance to get my bearings and to deal with moving to university’, continuing, ‘[t]he course was really well laid out as it gave everyone the chance to get on the same level no matter what level you were at’. She reflected that by covering everything in a focused, sequential manner, the year helped with the differences and diversity of student experience prior to starting. For Jo, Level 4 ‘helped a lot as I was never taught these subjects in college’.

Two key things emerge in the breadth of comments: (1) Level 4 enabled students to ‘get to grips’ with the university and ‘find [their] feet’ with the course, and (2) weekly subject themes provided a foundational knowledge base whilst clearly positioning the course’s ethos. Mark’s comments echo those of Jo: ‘[A] lot of students in college wouldn’t have been exposed to all of this’. Kirsty describes a similar position:

> [T]he best thing about starting the year this way is that you’re not questioned on how much you know and how much you don’t, everyone starts at the same stage and therefore you’re never put in an uncomfortable position to own up and admit you don’t know something.

Jack described Level 4 as ‘definitely help[ing] with the transition’:

> University is a huge shift from college and the way things in 1st year are set out really helped get through the struggle as it gave us a timeframe for our work to be completed. The whole experience of moving to a new place itself was very hectic, but the course layout allowed for me to focus fully and to find my feet within the university course itself.

Emma's experiences reflects those of Jack: 'It was clear what had to be focussed on, and there was a lot of lesson time on the one project'. For Sarah also, 'these shorter projects [made] us familiar with what is expected [and] discovering your techniques and skills'.

These comments affirm much of the course team's intentions to provide a greater structural framework for supporting students' transition into HE study through shorter, more focused and sequential projects. As Jack mentioned, he could 'find my feet' both personally and academically. In fact, students actually described things as 'perfect': '[T]he transition offered to me was perfect' (Mark); 'The transition into university from sixth form was perfect!' (Kirsty); and 'Overall, I think the structure of the course was perfect. It was almost heavily "scaffolded" in Year 1 to keep everybody on track' (Jennifer). Jennifer's further comments reflect a widespread endorsement evidenced by the feedback:

> having projects one at a time during Year 1 was really beneficial to getting into the swing of university. […] By having a single project at a time gave me a chance to really understand what I was being asked to do and find the necessary equipment and facilities to help. I think if there had been two projects on the go at once during Year 1, this could have been rather overwhelming and perhaps I wouldn't have achieved as much as I did overall.

Whilst this, in many ways, is strong evidence regarding enabling students' transition into HE, supported by very strong retention rates, we should now consider other potential consequences of those changes and the effects of a sequential block structure at Level 4 compared to concurrent semester-long modules in Levels 5 and 6. For example, Elizabeth, whose year average dropped by 5.2% between Levels 4 and 5, reflected whether her first year was 'too nice' given her experience of a 'harsher' second year. Abby (–4.1% between Levels 4 and 5) also considered that there were advantages and disadvantages – Level 4 really supported her transition into a new way of doing things, but she felt that perhaps it then did not fully prepare her for a major shift in expectations for longer modules in Level 5. Of course, it is possible to also consider that perhaps the teaching team did not sufficiently support her further transition from Levels 4 to 5 – and this is something that the course team has since been rethinking through assessing the consequences of pedagogic change. Emma (–3.9%) described entering Level 5 as 'a big shock […] having to juggle the different projects at the same time (especially for people who, like me, worked)'. Many students are in paid employment alongside full-time degree study, although Emma was the only student to mention how non-academic commitments had a significant bearing upon their experience of the course.

Whilst Level 4 was restructured to enable smoother bridging between FE and HE for a new generation of students with different requirements, it is not sufficient that each year operates independently of each other. Each level is interlinked; if Level 4 is altered, so Level 5

(and therefore Level 6) feels an impact. Despite the overwhelming positivity towards the support for transitioning into Level 4, students' feedback showed a more nuanced reflection on the further transition from Level 4 to Level 5. Mark (+5.3% from Levels 4 to 5) described Year 2 as more challenging, describing:

> [T]he metaphoric cooker's heat was turned up. […] Thinking more in-depth and contextually about your work, the 'who', 'what' and 'why' of everything that you do to get the best possible outcome [such as] looking into other areas of influence such as books, writers, poets and painters.

For Kirsty (+8.7%), Year 2 was 'a jump', but also a challenge that she embraced: '[It] prepared me to balance work effectively as we were given two projects at once […] therefore I had to quickly learn how to balance work effectively and understand where I needed to focus on next'. She goes on to describe:

> Second year was a big year for me, I feel its where I developed as a photographer. I started to understand the terminology much more, photographic and artist research and applying analytical analysis within my work. I found my photographic style in second year and I got nothing but support and advice from my lecturers throughout the years. Third year allowed me to progress with my photographic style and use it towards a different subject.

Jennifer (+1.5%) described how she was able to develop her own work with longer projects at Level 5 but insisted that the Level 4 'scaffolding was needed at the start of the degree'. Again, this sense of a foundational structure recurs through shorter, more tightly structured modules. Whilst adjusting to Year 2 was hard for Melissa (–1.5%), she also felt 'the longer projects were more interesting and you had more time to develop your work [although] you had to time manage a bit more'.

Some students indicated that the shift from what Jennifer describes as the 'comfort zone' of Level 4 was perhaps unfairly difficult. Jack (–10%) had reflected that module blocks were really supportive, but he then struggled with working across concurrent projects. Instead, Level 5 was challenging precisely because of an increased responsibility for self-managing three concurrent semester-long modules, and these greater demands impacted upon his mental health. For Abby (–4.1%), she became 'lost and confused. […] I found it very difficult to advance my ideas, causing the project to really depict my lack of creativity'. That said, whilst this was a difficult year for Abby, she also reflected that it was a transformative one. Indeed, whilst Abby dropped 4.1% in her yearly average between Levels 4 and 5, she then increased 10% between Levels 5 and 6 to finally achieve a first-class degree award. The same happened for Elizabeth: 'I found the transition [between year 1 and 2] hard and found 2nd year to be the hardest year', although she

also reflected '[that] this made the transition to 3rd year easier and I was able to balance the projects easier'. Elizabeth would also go on to achieve first-class grades at Level 6. Melissa agrees: '[T]here was a bigger jump from year 1 to year 2, however they were easy to become accustomed […] [and] the jump between year 2 and 3 was very small'. Even though Jo had a lower year average (–4.4%), she reflected that year 2 was her 'favourite year' as she began 'explor[ing] my own themes in detail, thinking outside of the box and enjoying challenging myself'. However, despite this, there was a 'drastic change in course work. […] Having so many projects was interesting but it was difficult'.

Students also reflected that successful transition into degree-level study is not just course-related but dependent upon individual attitudes, specifically being open-minded and receptive to others. For many students, developing and establishing a solid peer support network in Level 4 was a key factor that would last throughout the degree. Jennifer reflected that she had noticed 'unsuccessful transitions' on other courses 'where there was no support, structure, or guidance and little room for manoeuvring within projects'. For Abby, it was about the course providing a supportive, safe environment for all students to raise queries and concerns. Emma commented that study trips brought closer peer and staff–student relationships. As previously mentioned, the tutor–student relationship is a highly significant factor for experience and retention. It is useful to note that the degree course also is one of a minority within the university to have a course 'baseroom' (and was the subject of one course tutor's HEA application regarding profound benefits for students' learning experience and establishment of community).

The students' comments were very positive about Level 4 and could recognize its distinctiveness and purpose. Given the multiple contextual challenges mentioned previously, this is perhaps a significant achievement. However, it is also clear that, for some students, restructuring Level 4 to scaffold the students' learning and time management had consequences for their transition between Levels 4 and 5. As Elizabeth observed, did that mean that Level 4 was not fulfilling its function of preparing students for the very years where assessment counted towards their final degree award? And, perhaps, does the approach taken in Level 4 move additional burden on to Level 5 in preparing students for Level 6? It is interesting to note that both Elizabeth and Catherine had an overall year grade average reduction between Levels 4 and 5, but then accelerated into first-class awards through Level 6. Again, to reference Elizabeth, the challenge and progress made in Level 5 enabled her to more fully succeed in Level 6. Indeed, however, the transition between years will be a different challenge for each student. Melissa felt very comfortable with the progression, whilst Jo embraced the greater potential that Level 5 afforded. Jennifer wrote, 'I think that gradual decrease of input was really beneficial for us, as students, in growing confidence and self-esteem to realize that we can actually complete a well-informed, well presented project'. As a final note on this, I reflected upon these issues to the course's current external examiner; their opinion was that Level 5 is often the most challenging, perhaps transformative, year in art and design degrees. Students will reflect upon that

experience differently although it was clearly a catalyst for many – even for students who perhaps initially struggled.

Conclusion

The adaptation of module design to structurally change student learning was developed in continuous dialogue between students and staff, against a context of far-reaching transformations in HE. Significant changes in the 2010s have arguably given rise to different challenges for academics and students, for whom existing pedagogies may require reorientation. The original impetus for investigating module design was premised precisely upon observing students' differing engagements with the course, listening to and learning from their experiences to rethink pedagogic structure creatively: how could learning content be experienced more supportively and effectively? Indeed, the most useful indication of the block design's impact is again by listening and talking to students. This article has explored this type of pedagogic adaptation, considered causes and the existing research before finally reviewing course information and student responses. These have all demonstrated different ways that block module design has responded to the challenges of engaging and maintaining a quality of student learning and outcomes in relation to an identified shift in the 'position' from which they begin their undergraduate experience. Students' feedback about their specific experiences, whilst overall very positive, does require pause to navigate and course-correct as appropriate. Whilst we can conceive of a student's learning journey in terms of maps and wayfinding, so we also must conceive of course pedagogy as fluxive map, requiring continuous adjustments in dynamic relation with its users, their starting points and destinations.

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