

Action Research Project:

This is a genuine AR Project. The names have been changed and Appendix A (Blog transcript) has been removed as it contained the names of students from whom permission to use as OER was not sought.

25 February 2008

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Aims

BA (Hons) Criticism, Curation and Communication: Arts & Design is an interdisciplinary course that relies heavily on guest speakers. The course team sees these as integral to providing students with the most up-to-date and compelling commentary on subject-matter students are studying, as well as providing real-world career models and contacts for internships. Guests are invited both to give stand-alone lectures, and lectures embedded in the units on topics directly related to coursework. It is a key feature of a course that positions itself as being connected to the creative industries in London.¹

Notably, the guest lecture programme is costly in terms of resources (guests have historically been more expensive than staff or Associate Lecturers)² and goodwill, as it draws on the personal contacts of the staff (a valuable and unremunerated resource). Nonetheless, there have been issues surrounding both attendance and student engagement with these lectures. Few students ask good questions of the speaker, but more worrying is how few make connections between what the speaker said and their coursework.³ Students have, however, made good use of the contacts for internships.

As a Senior Lecturer and one of three of the staff members on BACCC, I designed an action research project to try to increase student engagement with these guest lectures. The project took the form of a weblog (hereafter referred to by its common name, a blog), entitled BACCC Forum, which would function as a location for information on the lectures and a base for a dialogue about them between students on the course. A key feature of the project was to introduce students to an important learning and research skill, writing a précis. I wanted students to post comments on the blog that were substantial and reflective; the action I initiated was that students write up their notes from the lectures, post them on the blog, and comment directly on other students' posts.

Quantitative evidence of student uptake of the project reflects a clear failure: only one post was placed. Qualitative evidence of student engagement is—predictably—more complex. This report, therefore, is concerned with mapping the strengths and weaknesses of the action research project, linking them to pedagogical theory and discussions of good practice in teaching and learning, and, lastly, considering what potential there is in some of its original aims. Three elements of teaching and learning emerged as issues in this project: technology-based learning environments, critical writing skills, and the lecture itself. I conclude that a technology-based solution to a learning issue needs significant support, and raises issues of access and whether it is the most appropriate format for

¹ This is in the description of the course on Central Saint Martins' website—the way most of our students find us. See <http://courses.csm.arts.ac.uk/DisplayCourse.asp?CI=773&MA=4&CT=5> (accessed 1 September 2007).

² This has changed with the implementation this year of new arrangements for grading and pay. Now, guest lectures are paid at the lowest AL spine point. This will no doubt have an impact on the most senior AL staff, encouraging "outsourcing".

³ An example from two years ago was when students wrote an essay on the British Culture & Heritage industry, and only one even mentioned what the guest speaker—a director of English Heritage—who was specifically invited to teach this subject, had talked about.

teaching key skills. On the subject of critical writing skills, my action research project fell short of collecting enough data, due to poor participation. On the final issue—the lecture—it is much beloved by the student group on BACCC and appears to be very well practiced as a teaching and learning activity.

Literature Review

This section reviews what I see as the most relevant pedagogical issues for my action research project: action research, student-centred learning, lecturing, and the uses of technology in education.

Action Research:

Action Research is about changing practice in order to understand it better and make improvements in it (Carr and Kemmis, 1986 in Waters-Adams, 2006, p. 3). One of its key features is that it links to the tutor's "educational values" (Whitehead, 1989 in McNiff, McGeedy and Elliott, 2001). To this end, it was important to me to investigate questions about the acquisition of knowledge by students. My focus on guest lectures was a response to an impression held by myself and other BACCC staff that students attend them for career-contacts rather than understanding that there is learning to be done there. This situation felt to me like an opportunity to engage with Jack Whitehead's conception of action research:

1. I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice
 2. I imagine a solution to my problem;
 3. I act in the direction of the solution;
 4. I evaluate the outcomes of my actions;
 5. I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.
- (Whitehead, 1985, p. 98; in Waters-Adams, 2006, p. 5)

Action research differs from one's ongoing self-monitoring as an educator in that it is somewhat scientific; one structures into the process episodes of collecting data, actively and (more) systematically seeking feedback on the effects of one's change in practice. The strength of this practice has longstanding value, as one becomes more comfortable with and adept at evaluating an intervention's success or failure (rather than only noting failure, which often happens, and makes one averse to making future interventions).

One aspect of action research that is particularly compelling is its "emancipatory" or "political" potential, as emphasized by Stephen Waters-Adams in his essay, "Action Research in Education." Following Carr and Kemmis, Waters-Adams suggests that action research could be "a means of

social change” and is “empowering professionally” (p. 4). For myself, this compelled me to pursue what I hold in highest esteem and worry most is being dissipated in the current climate of Higher Education in the United Kingdom: scholarship, autonomy, and the pursuit of knowledge in the tradition of liberal education. What I want for students is to participate actively in dialogue, with each other, with us, and the guest lecturer. I also want them to learn how to become informed, thus raising the level of the dialogue to be “deep” and “critical”.

Student-centred learning:

Student-centred learning is rooted in early twentieth-century research into education done by John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, known generally as *constructivism*, which is a key tenet of authors influential in British pedagogy such as Biggs, Brockbank and McGill, Malcolm Knowles and Paul Ramsden. Whilst much of the early thinking was around *social constructivism* (the understanding that human cognition is not pre-existing but constructed socially), constructivism now signals an emphasis on the activities of the individual in the acquisition and structuring of knowledge, and in this way is a background theory and justification for student-centred learning.

Student-centred learning is widely practiced and infinitely nuanced, but the following quotation is a representative set of characteristics:

1. the reliance on active rather than passive learning,
2. an emphasis on deep learning and understanding,
3. increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student,
4. an increased sense of autonomy in the learner
5. an interdependence between teacher and learner,
6. mutual respect within the learner teacher relationship,
7. and a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner (Lea et al., as quoted in O’Neill and McMahon, n.d.).

It clearly emphasises a more active approach on the part of the student, and a two-way dialogue between student and teacher. Nonetheless, pushing these ideas further beyond instrumental levels of activity is difficult, and some critiques of student-centred learning focus on the possibility for misunderstanding being compounded. Laurillard comments that “it does not necessarily lead [the students] to what they are supposed to know” (2002, p. 158). If not supported by a teacher, “students [might be left] to flounder in mutually progressive ignorance” (p. 159). Prosser and Trigwell mount another critique on the grounds that there are clear gaps in knowledge, experience, and values between student and teacher that need to be bridged (Prosser and Trigwell, 2002, as quoted in O’Neill and McMahon, n.d.).

It is clear that my action research project is to a large degree trying to prompt student-centred learning; it stages and models behaviours that lead the student toward higher or metacognitive

activities and autonomy.

Lecturing:

Much research has been done that indicates that the majority of teaching students receive in university comes in the form of lectures, and that learning does not occur well in this “transmissional mode.” In most of the key texts assigned for the course, the writers aimed new pedagogic theories against lectures. Biggs has a mainly negative view of lecturing, reporting that it is a less effective form of disseminating knowledge than reading, and “ineffective for stimulating *higher-order thinking*” (2003, p. 100). For example, Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill take their eclipse as a starting point when they write, in the Introduction to their book *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*:

If the purpose of institutions of higher education is to encourage the move beyond the transmissional to the transformative, then it [learning] should be a fundamental condition of the student's experience . . . (1997, p. 5)

Taken negatively, the implication of this statement is that the transmissional mode is a deterrent to transformation. Indeed, the authors link the transmissional mode with an attitude that students are “empty vessels” waiting to be “filled” with the content and attitude taught to them. They contrast this with their belief, grounded in social constructivism, that people, knowledge and most human activity—learning included—are social and contextual (Brockbank & McGill, 1997, p. 4). Biggs is more pragmatic, and reviews research on activities that make lecturing a more effective teaching tool, such as changing activity every 15 minutes and staging an “active review” at the end (Biggs, 2003, pp. 103-4). More pragmatic approaches to lecturing are recounted in the very readable book, *Lecturing: Case Studies, Experience and Practice*, from how to deal with large numbers, mixed abilities, and mobile phone use in class (Edwards, Smith and Webb, 2001).

Laurillard provides us with a perhaps less ideological and more specific critique of lecturing: the problem is that it is *presentational*—in other words, delivered in one direction—and *narrative*—that is, representing *one* person's point of view. Laurillard's model of a better form of education is akin to a feedback loop between student and teacher. The lecture format is fundamentally problematic because there is so much room for misunderstanding on the part of the students. All the experimentation with it (such as buzz groups or taking questions from students) is only tinkering (Laurillard, 2002, pp. 92-3). For her part, Laurillard favours different formats that promote what she calls a “Conversational Framework”, and her book documents a range of other ways of teaching that use various techniques and technologies to facilitate teaching in a more “adaptive” mode (i.e. a system that changes by the student's actions) or “discursive” (i.e. including the response of the teacher to the student's “representation of the topic”) (Laurillard, 2002, pp. 98-9). The lecture is not jettisoned (nor is reading, another “narrative” format); it needs to be balanced against other forms of teaching. Most telling is that the acme of teaching formats for Laurillard is the one-to-one tutorial, because of the chance for real

interaction and discourse between the student and teacher. The lecture is a less-advantageous form of this; her book mainly explores technological solutions to approximating the “conversation” of the tutorial.

In terms of my action research project—and in real life—I had little control over the way invited guests did their lecturing (other than in choosing them and giving them direction in terms of content—but this last, according to the theory, has little to do with the learning). Asking students to write up their notes, however, functions as an “active review”, and would in theory improve retention.

Technology in teaching & learning:

In his chapter on Education Technology, Biggs warns: “Too many people see ET as a fool-proof delivery system that obviates the need for expert, reflective teaching and that can be run by technocrats rather than educators” (2002, p. 225). Biggs is referring to the overwhelming emphasis being placed on various technological solutions for problems having to do with scarce resources in education, a kind of thrall with the power of information technology that can often overwhelm simpler the goals of teaching, and he insists that ET is only as good as the educational goals it serves. Echoing this, but more taking a more critical stance, Brockbank & McGill argue that reflective learning (or at least its support) *cannot* take place via ET (they refer to IT generally); indeed, they see IT as another mode of the transmission model (1998, pp. 7-8).

Laurillard considers teaching and learning technology in a critical and extended way, more so than other texts explicitly about technology in education. It is telling that the standard to which she holds any media form is the one-on-one tutorial. This is important; she’s rescuing the ubiquitous and now quite instrumental term “interactive,” arguing that interaction is not merely activity, but activity that includes “meaningful feedback” (2002, p. 78). For Laurillard, there are nevertheless ways of using technology to simulate and model interaction for good effect, and she runs through a dozen forms of technology, analysing them in terms of their adherence to her list of key learning activities (from attending to articulating, see p. 90) and media characteristics (narrative, interactive, communicative, adaptive, and productive). In her summary of study-time and modes of study, she suggests that much more than 50% of teaching being conducted via IT would be “inappropriate” (p. 176). Against this are writers like James Cornford and Neil Pollock who argue that IT cannot be ignored. Indeed, they contend: “If information technologies destabilise boundaries, then they can also be used to shore them up” (p. 3)

It’s important that all of the mainstream, rather than specialist, pedagogues we’ve read are resistant to education being overwhelmed by technological solutions, and skeptical that learning technologies hold real solutions for increased numbers of students. Laurillard states: “With an analysis of this kind [cited in the paragraph above], it becomes possible to see the extent to which the idea of a wholly

electronic university is an extremely sub-optimal solution” (p. 176)

Methodology

At base, the BACCC Forum is a reworking of a practice I experienced on my Master’s degree in art history, where incoming students were required to attend every guest lecture and write up a one-page critical analysis of it (which was read and marked formatively by the tutor). Retrospectively, I feel this is a key method for learning how to think both independently and critically. A *précis* functions as means for understanding, a bridge between ideas and arguments, and the first stage in honing one’s own ideas against existing ones. I use *précis*-writing in my teaching of first-year students already, and consistently receive positive feedback about it.

Having been encouraged by university protocols and the PGCert course to embrace the VLE, I decided that facilitating the project via IT would achieve several improvements over the student-teacher model employed on my own MA. Firstly, it would establish a productive place where students are communicating and learning in the process. Once it got going, it would be relatively easy to keep going since it exploits a resource—the discussion board or blog—which the course has access to but has not yet explored. It could quite literally make manifest student engagement—either surface or deep, and confirm that the guest speaker programme is worth the resources spent. Lastly, students would be able to engage with the lectures on their own terms rather than in the ways tutors prescribe, making them more active learners.

Some consideration was given to the best VLE format for the project, whether to use a blog or a wiki, and moreover whether it should be located on Blackboard or on a social networking site. I chose a blog over a wiki, because the project was not a collaborative one, but a *dialogue* between students (I wanted the students to develop and maintain autonomy over the early stages of listening, researching, articulating, and developing an argument).⁴ I chose Blogger.com as a host for BACCC Forum for several reasons: it is much more flexible and better designed (nicer on the eyes and easier to navigate) than the discussion board on Blackboard, and moreover meets the students where they’re comfortable—on the web instead of the Intranet. I considered but rejected putting the Forum on Facebook or Myspace, as I wished to establish a difference between how students might approach BACCC Forum and sites they visit on their own time; I wanted attitudinal differences as well: substantive writing rather than off-the-cuff; research and argument rather than chit-chat or gossip.

⁴ Thanks to Pete Hillier for his guidance on this matter—he put me in touch with several tutors at UAL who are active with blogs and wikis, and I received good advice from them.

Being asked to “write up” your notes from a lecture propagates several important skills: it turns you into an active listener, teaches you how to take good notes, creates a moment of secondary reflection on the content and methodology of the speaker when the student transforms those notes into formal writing. Regularly writing up notes from independent work has the potential to make the student see the connections between what he or she is doing in different learning areas, and this written-up material becomes “ready” for incorporation into essays. Regularly writing up lecture notes also has the potential to make students more confident about asking critical, content- or methodology-based questions to the speaker. These are key skills for BACCC, which places high value on research, interdisciplinarity, and independence. They are also skills that are important to creating a sense of autonomy and professionalism in the student. Indeed, the original aim of the BACCC Forum was to model a real behaviour that serves not only the student in an educational context, but also the professional in the field.

When I was a student, this work was done as a private activity (initially marked by our tutor, but later pursued independently). Originally I considered asking students to submit these writings on paper, and making them available to other students in a binder in the studio. The blog provides better access (all students can reach it from anywhere, not just the studio) and it has the further benefit of facilitating further communication in the form of discussions. It also functions as a “representation” of action and a method of learning, that is, it takes something that was either private (writing/research) or shared between a few individuals (conversation), and makes it manifest. These ideas are explored by Pamela Lomax and Zoe Parker in their essay, “Accounting for Ourselves”, where they discuss “public meaning” and “intra-subjective dialectic” (1995, 302-3).

In its design, the BACCC Forum dovetails with several key pedagogical concerns: it aims to foster student-centred learning, to model reflective practice and active learning, and to teach the skills described as “relational” and “extended abstract” in Biggs’ Solo Taxonomy (2003, 38-40).⁵

My action research project contains two aspects: one is to model a behaviour by which the student has to articulate his or her own conception of a representation of a particular topic. The other is to understand student behaviour better by collecting data that opens a window on what they do. The project represent an exploratory study, in the sense that Laurillard describes in Chapter 2 of *Rethinking University Teaching*, “What students bring to learning.” The model of phenomenography she explores there is closely aligned with action research, since it is aimed at understanding a particular group of students on a particular course (mine) doing what I conceive that they need to be doing.

⁵ A good explanation of the importance of getting students to ask critical questions can be read in: anon. (n.d.) “The Role of Questions in Teaching, Thinking and Learning,” n.p.

Laurillard was also relevant for how I designed the monitoring of the action research project. She catalogues different ways of characterising what students do, via questionnaire studies (which try to summarise “learning styles”); phenomenographic studies of the student population (which focus on how students describe what they understand rather than what they do); and longitudinal studies (which look at how an individual student’s behaviour changes over periods of time).⁶ Clearly a longitudinal study was not possible, but I used both questionnaires and exploratory interviews, and have used Laurillard’s conception of their differences in the way I interpreted them.

Account of the Conduct of the Investigation

My action research project occurred in several stages. Following the theory of action research, I built in opportunities for data collection and feedback, and the ability to be responsive to what actually occurred in the process. As discussed before, I had to adjust my activities to reflect the fact that the students didn’t take up the project. In the initial stages, I aimed to get the project started and establish a baseline understanding of how students use the guest lecture series. Halfway through, I reoriented this toward the reasons for lack of uptake. In the second half, I concentrated on producing more data for me to understand better how I might do the project again in the future.

The first stage was to design and build the blog, which was launched a week prior to the first guest lecture (see Appendix A for examples). In this same time-frame, Questionnaire 1 was delivered, handed out to students at the first three lectures (Appendix B).

The second stage was to monitor activity on the blog, and revisit its functionality. As activity was very low, this entailed announcing its existence again to the student cohort, and trying to entice them to participate. This happened on several fronts: emailed reminders/invitations; reminders by staff at the lectures; emails sent by myself to specific, advanced students asking them to take a leadership role in the project; lastly, generating a series of questions based on the lectures that would give students something to respond to (see Appendix A).⁷ There was also some updating of information on the site to make it time-sensitive.

The third stage was to come to an understanding of the blog’s failure. For this I held one feedback session in November, after the lecture series had completed. Following this up, I designed and delivered a second questionnaire in January probing the student cohort on when and why they

⁶ The acme of this type of research in education, as Laurillard points out, is William Perry, the educational researcher who carried out a fifteen-year study of Harvard undergraduates in the form of open-ended interviews with them, one for each year of their study.

⁷ This was all happening in the weeks before and directly after my son was born. As it turned out, this was the crucial time, and my ability to monitor and prompt participation on the blog was necessarily limited.

decided to disengage with the project (Appendix B).

The fourth and final stage was, in the light of lack of student participation, an attempt to gather more data about the core issues of 1) how students learn in lectures and 2) how to teach critical writing skills. For this I held one feedback session, and co-led a workshop on critical writing skills (both in January, see Appendix C and D). This second feedback session followed a phenomenographic approach; I asked one question (“what is happening to you when you’re in a lecture?”) and recorded the way students evolved in their answer to it. The idea behind the Writing Workshop was to explore how I might *teach* the writing skills needed to produce a précis, instead of assuming that students would be able to do it on their own. I did this because I was curious to what degree the failure of student uptake was due to technology or teaching.

Findings

The data for this section is located in Appendices B-D, in which I explain the rationale for each form of monitoring I employed, and summarise the feedback I received there. Following the helpful advice in Judith Riley’s book, *Getting the Most From Your Data*, I have synthesized the findings from the blog itself and the feedback I received into the following set of observations. They reflect the original questions of the project, and some others that emerged along the way. I have presented this summary data in this section, and will draw some conclusions from it in the next one:

- the guest lecture series is robust, engaging, and necessary. The 3rd year students I spoke with claimed that they were an important part of their educational experience
- attendance is not as good as staff would like, but appears to have been augmented by group work being scheduled directly afterward and fact that several of the lectures were compulsory for 3rd years
- students need instruction on how to pose good and relevant questions to a speaker
- writing a précis needs to be taught
- technological solutions to teaching and learning need adequate support. In the case of BACCC Forum, one cannot launch a blog and expect it to be used, even if the target group is identifiable and reachable
- technological forms are not equal, and one needs to be strategic about what type of environment one uses for certain projects (one example of this is feedback from students that indicated the focus of BACCC Forum was too narrow, or not strong enough to merit participation)
- students are interested in having a course discussion based in the VLE

Evaluation

It has been an interesting experience to have my project “fail” so badly, indeed more badly than any new teaching effort I’ve ever tried. But, as it is in the context of an action research project, it provides an opportunity to think through the failure, rather than being disappointed with the students, which is what normally would happen. Elliott’s model of action research includes several cycles of action-reflection-and further action, and thus the following comments reflect ways that I would bring forward the project of an online course discussion forum. Elliott also suggests that tracking the evolution of one’s thinking over the course of the action research project is a key to a report (1991, p. 88). In this evaluation I will focus mainly on the format or media I chose for the project. In one sense, this focus is not what I had intended at the outset. I wanted better engagement with and use of the guest lectures, and this might have manifested itself just as easily in some traditional media, such as paper. The blog was an add on, but in the project’s failure it seems like it functioned as a barrier to participation. A good proportion of the students never made it to the site, or actively rejected it because they didn’t like the idea of a blog. The benefits I predicted for the project’s being based in the VLE—access, intra-student dialogue, self-representation—were never achieved.

It is highly possible, however, that the technology was not the problem, that it was the generic problem of getting students to commit time to non-assessed work. A significant portion of the 3rd years said they didn’t write up their notes or post them because they were too busy working on their dissertations (this is code for not a priority). It’s also likely to be an issue with attending the guest lectures themselves; although many students stated in Questionnaire 1 that they were there because of general interest, a much larger proportion of students did not attend at all. The fact that only one student wrote up their notes and posted them on the Forum can be attributed to the high level of independence and self-initiative required by the many stages of activity therein: attending, taking notes, critical writing skills, confidence at self-presentation, as well as technological skills. These all reflect high-level learning activities, indicative of a deep approach. They are what we want our students to achieve, but are very clearly things that need to be taught and supported. I designed my action research project so that the activities would be staged into smaller tasks, but the fact they were all bundled together into the final achievement—a functioning web-based student dialogue—was likely too high a goal and might itself have been a barrier.

I definitely also underestimated the issues one needs to consider when using an IT-based solution to a project like this. At the outset my decisions around the technology seemed sound: to use a blog over other forms of VLE, where I chose to have it hosted, and how I designed it. But after the blog’s

failure it's clear there are further things to consider. A huge element is building a community of users; there is evidence to suggest that a blog should be student-led, with a tutor as facilitator.⁸ Some research I've done suggests that blogs themselves are a heterogeneous medium, but I am open to the possibility that there is a fundamental mismatch between précis-writing and blogging, that they represent very different styles of participation and reflection and are ill suited to each other. Some

Against the use of IT is the feedback I received suggesting we as educators cannot make any assumptions about the student group, especially as they become more diverse in terms of background and age. Some were strongly in favour of a blog; others felt negatively about receiving teaching via IT, and/or liked a clearer separation between their college and personal lives (blogging being associated with social life).

All this said, the key way I'd like to reflect on the failure of the BACCC Forum is to analyse what I did according to Laurillard's Conversational Framework. I feel compatible with her view of teaching and learning, and she is very acute when describing the strengths and limitations of different media in educational settings. Laurillard does not discuss blogs per se (the book was published in 2002, before they really became a common feature of the web), but her Framework is designed to be adaptable.

Laurillard's Conversational Framework follows from her studies of research into student learning, and is based on a model of learning as a "relationship between the learner and the world, mediated by the teacher." (2006, p. 86). She describes four requirements for any teaching & learning experience:

- it must operate as an iterative dialogue;
- which must be discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective;
- and which must operate at the level of descriptions of the topic;
- and at the level of actions within related tasks (2006, p. 86).

In my understanding of Laurillard's terminology, the BACCC Forum ticked many of these boxes: its very basis is a dialogue (between students); the discursive and descriptive elements would occur in the representation of the guest speaker, and in the arguments made in student writing; the format is adaptive because it can change in response to the situation changing (new speakers, the format of the blog, introduction of new discussion threads); and the dialogue operated in relation to tasks, directly.

⁸ At the December PGCert meeting, both Pete Hillier and Geoffrey Matsukis suggested that a blog was probably not the right format for my project. Pete suggested that blogs are associated with alternative practices, and it's difficult to *require* students to use them (he also suggested that one might have to provide another format alongside a blog, so that the format doesn't inhibit the students who don't like it—in this case I might have said that all students should try to do the writing, and if they didn't wish to post their comments publicly, they could either share with another student, or email them to me). It's very possible that in my desire to lead students into the project, I was too prescriptive in my descriptions of their potential activities

Moreover, the BACCC Forum contains in it most of the “media forms” Laurillard describes as supporting learning: narrative, communicative, adaptive and productive. There is the lecture (narrative), follow-up research (interactive), discussing and debating amongst student group (communicative), testing ideas, and responding to comments on the blog (adaptive), and of course the writing itself (productive). It does not, however, contain the face-to-face dialogue between student and teacher or student and student (although there could be, in the form of dialogue during the lecture).

Laurillard also represents the Conversational Framework as a diagram, with the learning activities conducted by the teacher and students represented by arrows. Figure 1 is my adaptation of her diagram for the BACCC Forum, which follows some of the more complex diagrams she constructs for describing communicative media, and incorporates learning that takes place between students.

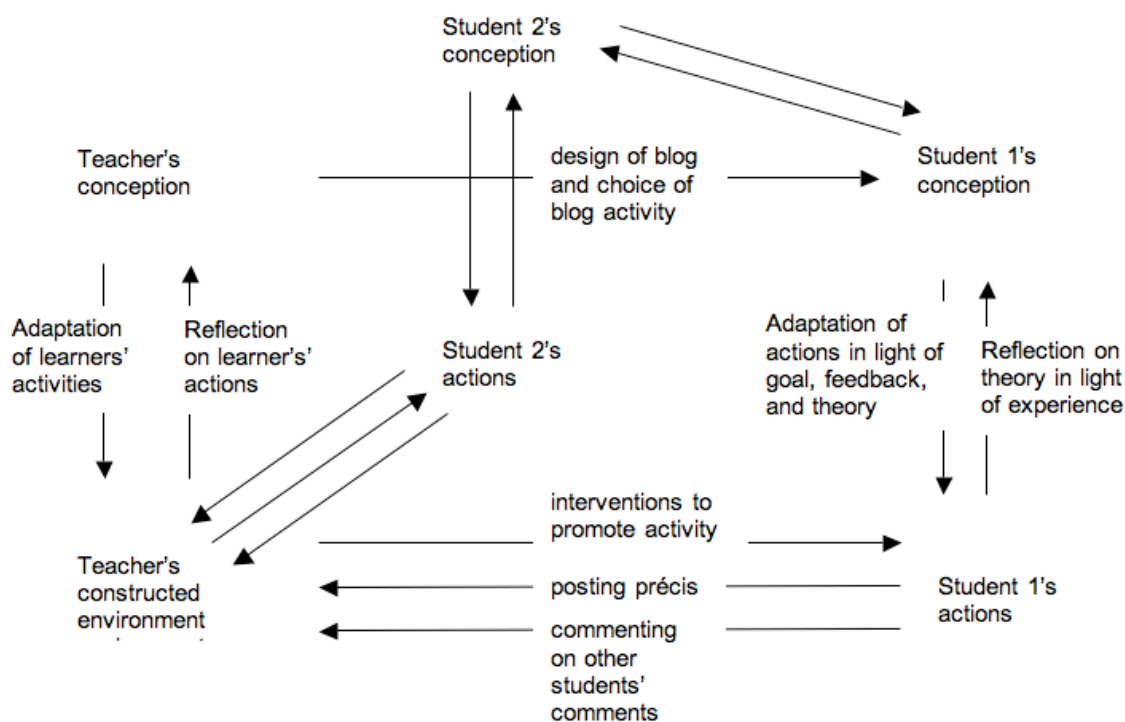


Fig. 1. Adaptation of Laurillard’s Conversational Framework diagram for BACCC Forum; based on her Fig. 8.1 (2006, p. 150)

A feature of the blog that is positive (over and above the ideal model of the one-on-one tutorial) is that it leaves time for reflection (is asynchronous). This occurs during the writing-up notes stage, and when the student reads the comments posted by other students. In addition, what Laurillard calls “student control” is high in a blog (p. 148); it is accessible any time and from home as well as college, and can steer the discussion with new threads.

Following Laurillard’s requirements, BACCC Forum was faulty because there was no real dialogue between teacher and student. I set the task (write up your notes from a guest lecture); their “conceptions” were to be posted on the site. Any re-descriptions were planned to be between students (although the teacher was not excluded from this activity).

Because of some clear positive features of the project, I think there are strong reasons for planning another cycle of action research. They include:

- combination of discussion and task environment
- promotes “eavesdropping”
- is an example of an “asynchronous network”—it leaves time for the participants to reflect (as opposed to a seminar, where they must react in real time)
- everyone has access to the same material, and can read and comment on each other’s work

It is clear also that a more effective practice of student-centred learning would support a better implementation of the Forum, addressing issues of style, voice, functionality, appropriate subject matter, and means to participation. On the issue of uptake of non-assessed work, I feel its necessary to persevere with the Forum as a formative exercise, as it constitutes exactly the kind of skills that function as building blocks for assessed work, and for the nature of blogs as voluntary and alternative. Overall, it is clear that whilst I had strategised my action research project around my absence from the course over the Autumn and Spring terms (indeed looked to technology to make it possible for me to monitor student activity remotely), further implementation of such a project needs old fashioned face-to-face contact and discussion to get it started and keep it rolling.

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Appendix A (The Blog transcript has been removed as permission for its wider use has not been agreed).

Appendix B

I did some research on questionnaire design, including looking at all the questionnaires I had previously submitted to students (only one of which I'd written). The other research was web-based, e.g. Walonick (1997), Galloway (1997) and Anon. (n.d.).

Questionnaire 1: Guest Lectures

delivered & returned in weeks 1-4, Autumn term

100 given out/25 returned

Questionnaire 1 tried to get at differences between “deep” and “surface” approaches (Marton, as referred to in Laurillard (2006) 28), or students who work independently, or look to the tutor as a source of authority (Entwistle (1981) as quoted in Laurillard (2006) 27). In this, I was (at the time unconsciously) looking at student behaviour.

The main line of questioning was asking students what they expected and got from the guest lectures. This was also intended for me to get a baseline understanding of attendance, level of engagement and expectations.

Summary of Results for Q1:

respondents split between 1st and 3rd years; NO 2nd years returned

vast majority of respondents wrote that they came to the lecture voluntarily, because they were interested. Eight (all 3rd years) mentioned that it was compulsory

vast majority of respondents indicated that they like being told what a lecture is about at the beginning. This could be an indication of a surface approach, or that my question was leading most students like a “chatty” rather than a “formal” lecture style. Other features they like are “a skilled talker”; questions posed to audience; good visuals; “willingness to interact”; “hearing about something they’ve never known about”/“interesting subject”; good structure; “lots of knowledge”; “relevant to things we’re studying”

half of the respondents said they had ever asked a question of a speaker in public; of the ones that explained why not, shyness was indicated, or the belief that “all questions were already answered” or “don’t know what to ask”

level of preparation for guest lecture very low—either nil, or looking up the speaker on the Internet; two students indicated that they read something the speaker had written

just under half indicated that guest lectures helped them with coursework; comments ranged from “good for research and methodology” to “gave me hope”; only two wrote that the speaker had given them career advice or functioned as a professional contact

one final comment asked that students be involved with inviting speakers or suggesting topics (he or she was a 3rd year student)

Questionnaire 2

delivered & returned in weeks 3-4, Spring term

100 given out/2 returned

For Questionnaire 2, I wanted the students to focus retrospectively on my Action Research Project, and to track firstly engagement with the lecture series, and secondly with the project brief—writing up notes and posting them on the BACCC Forum. Since I knew at the time of writing the questionnaire that no one had done so, the format was oriented around understanding at what stage a student disengaged, and why. This aspect of Questionnaire 2 was aimed at my understanding of where the implementation of the technology failed.

Because I wrote Questionnaire 2 whilst reading Laurillard, I was interested in asking a question that might provoke a phenomenographic response, and this accounts for the final question.

Summary results for Q2:

Level of uptake was so low that I’ll describe the results in full:

one student claimed to have gotten the invitation but not visited the blog; the other didn’t get the email both attended lectures, but couldn’t recall how many

both said they prepared for the lecture; one took notes

one asked a question, the other did not

one wrote up his or her notes, the other did not

neither made use of them in coursework

neither student answered questions 12 or 13

It’s impossible to generalise from only two questionnaires; I know from other sources that around 15% of the invited students registered for the blog; more visited but didn’t register; some portion failed to

receive the invitation. What they do reflect (and this is backed up by my general observations) that engagement with the project was minimal. It's not possible to know from the questionnaire data whether this was the blog itself or the task of writing up the notes.

Questionnaire 1

BACCC Guest Lectures

Please DO NOT put your name down

Hand this back to Caroline or return it to the staff office when you're done

1. Circle your year: stage 1 stage 2 stage 3

2. What made you come to the lecture today?

3. Generally, do you like to be told at the beginning of a lecture exactly what the subject will be?

4. Do you like the lecture better when it's chatty, or formal?

5. Have you ever asked a question of a speaker in public?

6. If not, why?

7. In your experience, what makes for a really good lecture?

8. Have you ever prepared for a guest lecture? What did you do?

9. If you are a stage 2 or 3 student, approximately how many guest lectures did you go to last year?

10. Did the speaker's discussion help you in your coursework?

11. Did you use the speaker as a contact for getting an internship?

12. Any other comments?

This questionnaire was written by Fred Blog, who is studying the effectiveness of BACCC's guest lecture programme. The main part of the project is to run an online discussion site for students to comment on the lectures: <http://www.bacccforum.blogspot.com>
It's part of Fred's teacher-training (PGCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). You might be asked later in the term to participate in a focus group (late November) and a second questionnaire (early January).
Thanks for your help!

Questionnaire 2

BACCC Guest Lectures

BACCC Forum (Blog)

Please DO NOT put your name down

Return it to Mary Smith or slip it under the door of the Course Director's office

1. Circle your year: stage 1 stage 2 stage 3

Please answer (honestly!!) yes or no to all of these questions

- | | | | |
|----|---|--------|---------|
| 2. | Did you get the email invitation? | Yes/No | |
| 3. | Did you visit the blog? | Yes/No | |
| 4. | Did you register? | Yes/No | |
| 5. | Did you attend lectures (how many)? | Yes/No | Number: |
| 6. | Did you prepare for the lecture in any way? | Yes/No | |
| 7. | Did you take notes? | Yes/No | |
| 8. | Did you ask a question in the lecture? | Yes/No | |
- (pls describe it in general terms)

- | | | |
|-----|--|--------|
| 9. | Did you write up your notes? | Yes/No |
| 10. | Did you consider posting these notes? | Yes/No |
| 11. | Did you make use of your notes in any other aspect of your coursework? | Yes/No |

12. Please explain why you decided not to go any further into the project (in other words, if you took notes in the guest talks but didn't write them up, why?).

13. Last question: please describe your experience of ONE of the lectures you attended. You can do this from memory or refer back to your notes. Say what interested you and why. Was there anything in the talk that was entirely new to you? If so, describe it and your thinking about it. Was there anything in it that repeated something you already know? If so, describe it and your current thinking on the topic.

This questionnaire was written by Fred Blog, who is studying the effectiveness of BACCC's guest lecture programme. The main part of the project is to run an online discussion site for students to comment on the lectures: <http://www.bacccforum.blogspot.com>
It's part of Fred's teacher-training (PGCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). If you have any questions or comments, please email me at xxxxx
Thanks for your help!

Appendix C

Feedback session 1: BACCC Forum
27 November 2007
c. 25 stage 3 students

The focus of this feedback session was the Blog itself. I asked several questions, based around the main issue of “why did the Blog fail?” The setting was in the BACCC student room, sitting on a sofa and soft chairs; students came and went voluntarily. Although I sent an invitation to the whole course, only 3rd year students came as they were the only ones in that day. It was a good group to speak to because we know each other quite well, and could speak candidly to each other. The conversation was focused, but fairly open. I took notes by hand.

Summary of Feedback Session 1:

I saw the first email, never went to the blog, but planned to get to it at some point
I'm not a technical person; not interested in blogs or doing much more than the minimum on the internet

I was intimidated by the idea of putting my writing up in such a “public” way

I didn't see that the lecture series was an interesting thing to blog about; didn't think the lectures themselves were interesting enough

I think that blogs are only really about opinion and gossip; not a place for serious critical writing

I tried to log on but couldn't

I think it's a great idea but didn't have time to do it—too busy doing coursework (dissertation)

we were already discussing the guest lectures in our group tutorials

Beyond the technical problems and engagement issues, the interesting questions to me arose out of a) the idea that the blog duplicated work they already felt they were doing and b) it didn't appear to offer a safe or compelling place to establish an intra-course dialogue.

Feedback Session 2: The Lecture
23 January 2008
5 Stage 3 students

Setting was the same as above; many fewer students but some were the same as had come in November. I wanted this session to be phenomenographic, and so I asked them one question, over and over: “what is happening to you when you're in a lecture?” What I wanted to come to understand is how a student learns in the context of listening to content being delivered aurally and visually, and to understand what they gain from that experience as opposed to their other activities.

Summary of Feedback session 2:

The experience of this session was akin to peeling an onion—each layer was a different type of answer, and near the end I seemed to finally get close to the students “representing” their experience.

First, they described a good lecture:

- the lecturer used compelling visuals
- it linked well to readings and to assignments
- the lecturer was knowledgeable but approachable
- the lecturer introduced them to something they had never known before
- the lecturer was available in person for dialogue; he or she is calm and had a nice rapport
- it gave them an introduction and overview of a subject, and prepared them to do their independent work

Next, they discussed what they want from a lecture:

content

- back and forth between speaker and audience
- to read something and then talk about it
- to learn how to analyse a text
- that it is linked to other aspects of the unit
- that it is targeted at students
- good structure; good “signposts” in the lecture
- desire to know more facts

In the midst of this discussion, some comments shed light on the way students learn:

- H. said that she found out that doing the recommended reading made her more engaged with the lecture; likes being stretched by them
- M. gets energized by things she doesn't know about
- S. described voluntarily attending a large lecture at another university, and liking the anonymity mixed with being part of a large, diverse and enthusiastic group; discouraged that this is a rare opportunity at CSM
- lectures made them feel involved and busy in a positive way

**Just before the end of the session I told the students that in current pedagogical theory, the lecture is seen as an ineffective method of learning, and asked what they thought of that. The response was very animated and overwhelmingly in favour of keeping lectures:

- they like the buzz of being together
- they like getting content that way
- they see workshops and seminars as providing less for them—that they're empty⁹
- they don't see themselves as passive in a lecture
- they thought that they didn't get enough of them (wished there were more across CSM to attend; liked the idea of being able to dip into other subjects—this seems akin to “auditing” courses one is not enrolled in, which is a feature of universities, but not art schools, as most sessions are designed for specific student groups)
- they thought that the lectures on BACCC were good because of their size (usually the year group of 36, and sometimes open to all three years)

⁹ This directly counters what Biggs writes about lectures: “Students like really good lectures, but as a rule prefer well-conducted group work.” (2003, p. 100). Maybe our lectures are particularly good, or our group work very bad...

Appendix D

Writing Workshop
29 January 2008
7 stage 1 students

The setting for this session was the seminar room in the BACCC Studio, students and two tutors around a large square table. All three years were invited, but only 1st years came. The session was run by myself and a colleague; our styles of teaching are compatible but very different (he is informal and conversational; I present myself as if I have answers). None of the students was known to me.

The session was about writing skills generally; I was interested in practicing how to teach the skills related to précis-writing, and for this to ask questions about and provide instruction on “prewriting.”

To aid in this, I used the diagram below. My colleague led the session with a PowerPoint presentation that introduced basic academic writing skills. My session occurred at the appropriate moment before he began to discuss essay writing.

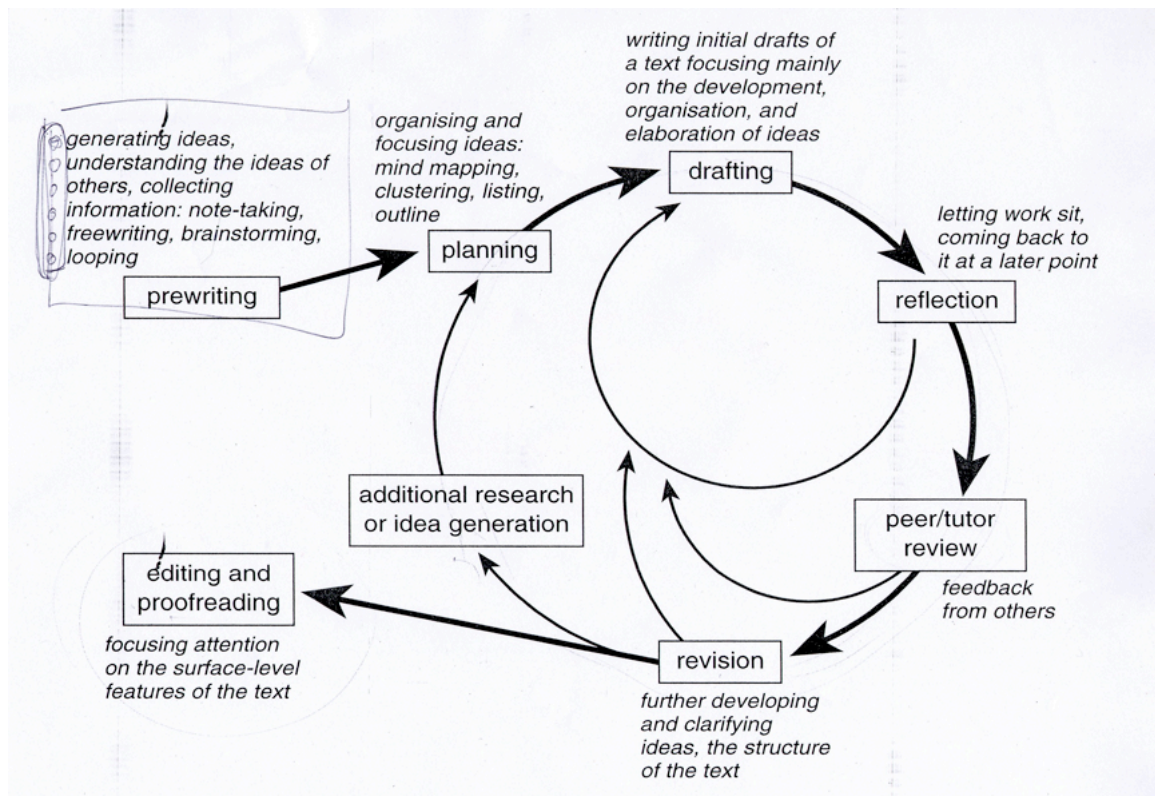


Fig. 2 The writing process approach. From Coffin, Curry, Goodman et al. (2003)

Summary results for the Writing Workshop:

Without question, students need instruction on writing at university level, and for this course specifically. They had very good questions about appropriate levels of research, the use of the first person, how to form an opinion or an argument, and writing process. They were hungry for tips. The fact that that this was a self-selected group only emphasizes the need for such sessions. Afterwards I reflected that two things would help immeasurably toward the success of the BACCC Forum if attempted again: a teaching session on précis-writing specifically; research I did in advance of the workshop suggested to me that it is a skill in itself, rather than a generalisable form of writing. The other “teaching” that would be helpful is a group session in which the students decided on the content and style of writing of the blog; this would help with their ownership of it, and possibly get the ball rolling more effectively than it being tutor-led.

the end