

What Works? Student Retention & Success



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Cloth, Colour and Communities of Practice: embedding co-curricular learning in Textile Art, Design and Fashion.

Rationale for the case study

This case study will illustrate the development of a co-curricular approach to learning and teaching. Three years ago, we began to work with the student cohort, our graduate artists and designers in residence along with technical and academic colleagues to build a community of practice, a greater sense of belonging and personal confidence in both students and staff.

Textile Art Design and Fashion (TADF) is one of the largest programmes in the Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment with around 180 students. When the project began, we were in the first year of a new course, the result of an amalgamation of two separate programmes in Textile Art and Textiles and Fashion Design.

The new course was different in design, ethos and approach to the previous courses and required radical change. The team decided to transfer all students on previous programmes over to the new course (with the students' permission) rather than introduce one programme and run the other out. To add to this challenge, our studios, workshops and offices were located in a number of temporary spaces, spread across three floors of two separately linked buildings.

Consequently there was significant upheaval and uncertainty for students and academic and technical staff as we began something very new in very challenging circumstances.

When we were asked to join *What works? Student retention and success change programme*, the team wanted to focus on improving identity and belonging in large cohorts, with an emphasis on the effective use of space and place. Retention was not a particular cause for concern, but student confidence and belonging did require attention, which was partly historical and partly because of the recent significant change in approach and direction.

We devised a yearlong programme to:

encourage meaningful staff/student partnerships that engender a shared responsibility underpinned by a positive student experience within a supportive learning environment

(SRS briefing paper, unpublished)

A recent reduction in space meant we no longer had a dedicated studio for first years and we were concerned about the impact of this on their sense of belonging and confidence. Being part of the SR&S project gave us an opportunity to develop co-curricular activities aimed at building

relationships between students across the course, with the artists in residence and with technical and academic staff, which might not happen so readily in the curriculum.

This project began at a period of significant change for TADF. There were so many variables: changes to our environment, course content, ethos and organisation that we felt it was difficult to attribute any change in attitude or improvement in statistics to any specific intervention because the new course had so many different elements. Much of the data used to bring us onto the programme was not relevant as it related to the old course, which was closed and it was therefore difficult to point to tangible results or firm conclusions on improvements.

Again, in summer 2015, we moved all studios and five workshops into a new space as part of the Greater Belfast Development necessitating a change in approach to Semester 1 teaching as the spaces were not ready for the start of teaching.

However, we had a number of aspirations to build confidence, for both the individual and their work in the academic discipline, to foster a sense of belonging to the subject, course, space, and university/campus and were able to work towards these goals by taking part in this project.

Art and Design education is carried out publicly much of the time (i.e. in shared open studio spaces). This can be challenging for both the students and the collective cohort, particularly at the beginning of a course where students do not know what to expect and are immersed into unfamiliar situations with new people they don't know. The course team were keen to build in activities, which encouraged friendships to flourish and to help students understand and recognise the time investment required to build confidence in showing work and the importance of creative risk-taking on the course.

We were keen to add value to the course through the co-curricular approach and we were pleased that many students opted in to activities at first and as word spread then further students participated. The informal and social nature of these activities was important.

What we did

Our programme design was influenced by the first HEA institutional visit to Ulster in summer 2013. **Key message 3**, states that rather than suggesting specific interventions:

'the institution, department, programme and module should all nurture a culture of belonging through the way they function and relate to people.'

In the final report from the What works? Student retention and success programme, 'Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change, Liz Thomas explains,

our analysis of effective approaches to improving retention and success demonstrates that student belonging is achieved through:

- supportive **peer relations**;
- meaningful **interaction between staff and students**;
- developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners;
- an HE experience that is **relevant to interests and future goals**.

(Thomas 2012,p.14-15)

We devised a series of collaborative learning events to improve the learning experience; extended the induction and transition process, embedded peer learning into the course to foster a sense of confidence and belonging within the various stakeholder groups both within and outside the university.

In the pilot year 2013/14 we recruited 12 student ‘partners’ from second year who played a significant role in mentoring new students throughout that year and beyond. Artists in residence, a number of final year students, technical, and academic staff were all involved in the process.

In the pilot year the following chart shows the key activities aligned to the SRS project.

Semester 1	
August 2013 - Pre entry 2 day summer school Supported by student partners and tutors	Icebreakers, orientation, drawing,
September 2013 – Pre entry induction event supported by student partners and tutors	Icebreakers, orientation, inductions,
October 2013 Pre entry – foundation workshops aimed at prospective students from UU year 0. Supported by artists in residence, student partners and technical staff	Practical workshops/discipline experience
September – December 2013 Year 2 with year 1 professional placements supported by academic and technical staff. Student partners support year 1 students in practical workshops as part of a professional practice module	Work based placements in TADF workshops
Semester 2	
March 2014 Interviews for prospective students Facilitated by student partners and artists in residence	All students interviewed, bringing them in in groups of approx. 40. Student partners and residents organized a collage workshop for interviewees and worked as ambassadors for the course, answering questions and calming nerves
March 2014 Cloth, Colour and Community practice. Year 1 + student partners, third years, technicians and academic staff working together.	Big Day of Colour workshop with 50 students Learning about colour theory, an integral part of Textiles and Fashion Our main event

Most elements of the pilot year have been embedded in the programme. Artists in Residence, more familiarly known as ‘residents’ and final year students support the interview process, running workshops, orientating prospective students around the campus, talking about the course giving

prospective students a positive, active and collegiate experience in what can be a stressful day. By doing this, we set the tone for the course at the interview stage with the aspiration that applicants would remember the welcome and the experience, not just the interview.

We found that throughout the year, students involved in the programme readily volunteered to be advocates for the course at open evenings and other events, experiences that we believe deepened their sense of belonging.

Second year students on a Professional Practice module are given the opportunity to undertake a placement with technical staff, supporting first year workshops. This placement benefits both sets of students in that the 'demonstrator students' grow in confidence and it also affords first year students the time to discuss ideas and progress, develop a cross-course bond, and sharing of experiences both within and beyond the course.

The establishment on the Belfast campus of the first Textile and Fashion Society (in 2013) indicates the confidence that students were developing in their chosen subject and place on the campus. Students became involved in organising fashion shows, swishing (sustainable exchanging of garments) events, field trips and thematic discussions around key topics relating to textiles and fashion.

The pilot year and second year activities proved an excellent way to create a very strong staff/student community of practice. The majority of the academic and technical staff team played a significant role at one stage or another. Some feedback captured following the 'Drawing school' and the first 4 weeks of the semester was very positive,

...really enjoyed meeting staff and technicians.

...getting to know the location, Belfast and the campus...

...the course is intense but love the workshops and the breadth...

(First year students)

A surprising result of the 'Big Day of Colour' was the engagement of students from all year groups in the activities, it was energetic with all year groups and staff (technical and academic) participation. The students enjoyed seeing staff being enthusiastic for their practice and some of the feedback reflected this,

...staff were so enthusiastic dyeing, preparing yarns and fabric it was the best day ever...

(First year student)

We reflected on the pilot year and made several changes for the second year of the project, having learned so much from the first summer school which generated a really positive atmosphere and highly complementary student feedback. On reflection, we did not allow enough time for the group to talk to each other and in the second year we introduced more ice breakers. One colleague ran a café in a corner of the studio, which had a really dynamic impact on the group and we re-designed drawing activities to make them more interactive and group focused, ensured they were easier to facilitate and helped staff to step back and allow the group to gel independently with less necessary staff intervention.

Student feedback was very positive regarding this experience,

we had a drawing week. There was (sic) 2 different days when you had to come in. It was kind of like Summer School it was called and it was basically you came in and it was like open. It was like everyone was doing something. It was really good.

Yeah in August. You were meeting different people so you knew their names and stuff in the first day.

(First year students)

We redesigned the 'Big Colour Workshop' exercise for the second year. More students participated but this time rather than dyeing quantities of cloth, we worked on swatches, paper and yarn. This allowed students to create a huge range of colour, to experiment more, and to create a colour theory research book which became part of the assessable coursework. This increased motivation and linked the co-curricular activity back to assessment and this has now become a core element of the programme.

Issues

Finding the time to devise, organise and facilitate the programme was challenging as was reporting, organising for questionnaires to be completed, briefing everyone on new approaches, attending events and writing papers. A core team of 4 undertook most of the work with the support of technicians and our collective workload increased accordingly.

We streamlined some elements of the programme and have embedded several elements of the project into core teaching, reducing the amount of time given to additional activities, but with no visible detrimental effect on our overall modus operandi.

Internal/External enablers

Funding from the University's SR&S core team for colour workshops enabled us to embed this way of working. Support from colleagues and technicians was crucial and also enabled us to build a team.

A case study of the SR&S textiles project at Ulster was presented at a workshop for the European First Year Experience held in Nottingham Trent University in June 2014. Our work was well received during and following dissemination and informed our approaches for first year induction and week zero activities across Belfast School of Art.

Evidence of impact

There is clear evidence that the subject of 'colour' has moved into the workshops and studios, an impact of these events that is clearly linked to the better use of workshop/studio spaces particularly for independent study, peer learning, and a sense of belonging. Colour is key to all aspects of Textiles and Fashion and has positively impacted on the type of work made, improved the uniqueness and quality of the work, and the marks profile has also improved.

Confidence in the course was evidenced by attendance at New Designers (UK wide show) where one of our students was placed 2nd overall. This event was particularly important as students saw their work in a much broader context and not only their place on the campus, the city but in a national context. Similarly, the Fashion Show (a fantastic event which took place in Belfast Cathedral in June 2015) showed the confidence of students to organise and showcase their final collections supported by all students attending along with a capacity audience including industrialists and the wider community. The Final year shows were supported by 1st and 2nd year students in the preparation and

painting of exhibition spaces and general help to the 3rd year students. These student-led initiatives highlighted their confidence and determination.

Students are now more confident in their use of the space. Since the project began, we have moved base location once more and now benefit from having one large studio, shared by all students. Much of what we undertook during this project informed a new school-wide approach to induction. Feedback on School induction was very positive, the first year students are very confident users of shared studio spaces, and they exhibited the behaviour of people who belong to a course and a space. We have embedded so many approaches from this project that perhaps the current first year students are the real beneficiaries of the work. Across the course, it feels like there is greater confidence, collegiality and student independence. The group of students who were our first 'student partners' took the role very seriously and benefited greatly.

The '2 Big Days of Colour' resulted in a radical change in approach to colour; rather than sourcing commercial dyed yarns and fibres students learned to create their own bespoke colours, giving their work a definite creative edge.

Indicator measures

Retention and Attrition was 5.1% in 2012/13 rose to 9% in 2013/14 but dropped to 4.5% in 2014/15, when three students left the programme and 4.2% in the current academic year. We have had no fails in the first semester Studio Practice module this year, a fantastic outcome. The students have a base room and this has been used as a social space, attendance overall has improved and those who have had attendance problems have received support, studies advice and practical support from the staff, artists in residence, and 2nd year partners. Feedback is very positive:

I personally feel the studio practice modules are great as they are. If there were more activities where the class could work as a whole or even with the other year groups that would be great.

(First year student)

...I didn't know anyone on the course, but I soon settled in with all the events, the 2nd year students were great helping us with course work, and even problems outside of Uni...

(First year student)

The marks profile over the 2 semesters has shown improvement,

2013

1 st	2	3%
2:1	18	31%
2:2	22	38%
3 rd	11	19%
Fail	5	9%

2014

1 st	3	5%
2:1	39	63%
2:2	11	18%
3 rd	9	14%

The quality of coursework elements have improved in year 1 because of the co-curricular focus on colour, leading to improved results. Module Questionnaires and reports from Staff/Student Consultative Committees note the co-curricular events as high points and attendance monitoring indicates a confidence in the subject and a strong sense of belonging.

The first group of student partners were very positive about the experience with demonstrable increases in levels of technical and intellectual skills, confidence and social capital within a greater sense of belonging. Our students helped each other and students from other year groups and they volunteered regularly and formed the core of student helpers at the Belfast School of Art week zero event in September 14. They worked unpaid with enthusiasm for two days and were willing to step up to help the next intake. They improved their employment skills, boosted their CV's, developed their social capital, and undertaken extra work as volunteers within a broader community of practice.

Our programme focused on building confidence, engagement and belonging and survey data for Textile Art, Design and Fashion suggests we have succeeded comparing the results for semester 1 14/15 which are equal to or better than data for both Ulster-All and Overall results.

		Year 1 14/15		Year 2 14/15		Sem 1 14/15		Sem 2 13-14		Sem 1 13/14
Belonging	46	3.95	37	4.00	47	4.39	29	4.0034	35	4.13
Engagement	46	3.91	37	3.68	47	4.24	29	4.0586	35	4.01
Self-confidence	46	3.57	37	3.46	47	3.54	29	3.7672	35	3.56

The team were really interested in the practical outcomes of the programme, for example, the large group dyeing workshops were inspirational, those not involved on the day were able to work independently in the following days and a number of students were able to embark on complex dye recipes, an excellent example of further independent high-level learning.

Investigating a core skill (colour theory) in a different way has positively impacted on the student experience with a renewed focus on group work resulting in a great element of alchemy in colour through dyes.

Key learning from phase 2 of *What works? Student retention and success change* programme are as follows:

- Improving learning experience
- Continuing transition process for 1st year but extending across interaction across all years
- Peer learning - staff and students working together

Sustainability

Financially the course is unable to cover the costs of large scale activities, however – the course can cover the costs of smaller scale activities and ensure our activities, interventions and approaches were about a change in approach and attitude for both student and staff behaviours and these changes have been embedded in the programme.

There has been a nurturing of the Textile Art, Design and Fashion community and certain activities have developed as a result, more student trips, more competitions and attendance at national and

international events for both staff and students an increase in self-confidence in the activities and approaches of TADF.

The programme moved into new space in 2015 with four of the five workshops and large studio area co-located with another workshop nearby. This open shared space makes it very easy to integrate SR&S approaches into the curriculum and the course is now visibly coherent and possesses all of the visual characteristics of a community of practice.

TADF is centrally located within the Belfast campus building and in a high value and visible location – commensurate with the importance of the longstanding history of Belfast as a world centre of textiles production. There is now a visible confidence about what we do and how we do it – and a greater interest from the wider university community.

Lessons learnt

The second group of student partners were distinctly different to the initial group. Students didn't volunteer in the same numbers and their personalities were different, they appeared to be less social and more introspective. There was less enthusiasm and engagement in the project even though they had benefitted from the original group of student partners. The differing identities changed the working relationship staff had with the first and second group of partners, although the changing nature of the student partners did not impede the continued collaborations and roles actively as they saw this as being part of the community. As a result more time would be allocated to describing the project and encouraging participation from a group of partners with different personalities and attributes. We need to think about addressing certain approaches more efficiently through 'catch-up' sessions and not only map the progress of the first year group but also the student partners.

References

Thomas, L (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme*. Available from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-final-report>

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>