Case study: Learning Journal assignment for 1st year Fashion and Fashion and Contour at De Montfort University.

Key Words
Critical and contextual studies – learning journal – academic writing – essay – virtual learning environment – inclusive curriculum – diverse learning groups

Abstract
Julia Reeve (Senior Lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies) and Chris Boydell (Principal Lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies) have developed a teaching programme and assignment that offers students the opportunity to produce regular, small 'chunks' of writing as opposed to the traditional essay format. These 'chunks' are generated in response to weekly lectures and posted on the University's VLE. This assignment takes place in the second term of the first year, and forms 60% of the Critical and Contextual Studies assessment alongside a presentation assignment that forms the remaining 40%.

Context
Name of Institution: De Montfort University, Leicester.
Name of Department: School of Fine and Applied Art.
Name of Authors: Julia Reeve and Chris Boydell.
Name of Course Modules: Complete Fashion Studies (BA Fashion Design) and Complete Fashion and Contour Design (BA Fashion and Contour). Critical and Contextual Studies assignments represent 20% of the total module mark in both cases. Students attend 1 lecture and 1 seminar each week throughout term 2.
Level: BA level 1.
Number of students: 98, divided into groups of approx. 20 for seminar sessions.

Background of students: Some have gained A level qualifications prior to the course while others have studied on more practical, vocational courses such as National Diplomas.

Aims:
- To overcome barriers to academic writing among students studying within highly practical, specialist design disciplines.

- To utilise the VLE in creating interactive and reflective spaces for learning.

- To develop inclusive learning and teaching strategies for Critical and Contextual Studies (CCS).

- To develop CCS assignments that address the needs of diverse learning groups by combining both accessible and challenging characteristics.

Rationale: We have found attendance by 1st year Fashion students at CCS lectures to be poor in previous years, and partly as a result of this, finished essays to often have little engagement with issues. Also, many students have expressed anxieties about academic writing and have tended to produced rushed, poorly-written essays. The learning journal assignment, piloted with first year students on the Fashion

Design and Fashion and Contour BA courses during the 2009/10 academic year, was developed to address these concerns. This assignment was part of the Critical and Contextual Studies element of each module (FSHN1200 for Fashion Design and FSHN1503 for Fashion and Contour). CCS assignments constituted 20% of the total mark for each module. The total CCS mark was made up of the learning journal (60%) and a presentation (40%).

This case study should form the basis of the next phase of curriculum development for CCS, where the design and delivery of the learning journal assignment within fashion and textiles can be refined and ultimately rolled out into other areas of CCS teaching.

Procedure:

Critical and Contextual Studies assignments overview:

The assignments, assessment criteria, reading lists and teaching programme for CCS were set out in a student handbook which was distributed and discussed during the first week's sessions. This was also made available digitally via the VLE.

The teaching programme was composed of a weekly lecture and seminar (both 1 hour) plus one to one tutorials available by appointment with the seminar tutor. Seminar sessions were used to develop skills in research and analysis, as well as for student presentations. This case study centres on the teaching programme as it relates to the Learning Journal assignment: the lecture programme, tutorial support and the use of the VLE are the main focus.

Lecture programme:

Weekly lectures were given, each covering a different critical and contextual topic: for example, youth subcultures/gender and dress. Lecture notes, reading lists and links to video clips were posted on the VLE (Blackboard) immediately following the lecture. At the end of the lecture, students were set a related task (150 words) for their learning journal entry: for example, 'How do contemporary youth subcultures differ from those of previous decades?' Weekly tasks were also posted on the VLE with the lecture notes.

Learning journal assignment:

- Added to week by week, based on lectures.
- Involved a variety of tasks.
- Included visual information.
- Final learning journal was be collated into one document containing images and references.

Use of VLE:

- The 'wiki' tool within Blackboard was used as the area for student learning journal entries: each student created their own page.

- Staff were able to access student learning journals via Blackboard in order to give formative feedback.
- Lecture notes, reading lists, links to video clips and other relevant announcements/information were posted on Blackboard.

Tutorial support:

- Appointments for individual tutorials with seminar tutors were available each week via a 'sign up' system.
- Students were also able to obtain guidance on their learning journals by emailing their seminar tutor.

Assessment and Criteria:

Formative feedback:

- Students were given formative written feedback on their learning journals halfway through the module.

Summative feedback:

- Students were given summative written feedback on the completed learning journal, including areas for development in year 2.

Assessment criteria:

- The assessment criteria for the learning journal was based on the criteria for previous written assignments, but with a greater emphasis on creativity and reflection.

Feedback:

Feedback from students:

49 respondents completed anonymous written evaluation forms at the end of the module (50% of cohort).

Summary of findings:

(1). Given the choice between the following formats for CCS assignments, which would you prefer?

1. *Essay*   **2**
2. *Learning Journal*   **47**
3. *Other (please specify)* **0**

(2). Please give reasons for your choices:

(3). What did you like about completing the Learning Journal assignment?

I have combined the feedback from questions 2 and 3 as there was considerable crossover in the comments made.

A summary of key points in favour of the learning journal:

- Students enjoyed writing about a range of topics, both contemporary and historical.
- The learning journal format was seen as a less intimidating assignment than an essay.
- Students found that writing every week prevented the 'last minute panic' of an essay hand in at end of term (helping them to manage their time better), and that learning could be gradually added to.
- Students found the topics covered interesting.
- The assignment kept students motivated and interested.
- Students enjoyed the visual aspect of the learning journal.
- The learning journal online format meant that it was easy to access, review and refine work.
- Students enjoyed expressing their own opinion on the topics covered, and felt that there was more scope for personal, individual content.
- Students commented that they learnt a lot from the assignment.
- The more informal learning journal format gave more freedom to write and was lees restrictive than a conventional essay.
- Students, including those with dyslexia, found the learning journal a less stressful assignment than a formal essay.
- Students found writing the learning journal more relaxed, and similar to writing a blog.

Some quotes from evaluation forms in response to questions 2 and 3 (not corrected for spelling and grammar):

- 'Easier to keep on top of.'
- 'More interesting to write about different topics each week.'
- 'it dsent seem as scarey as an essay as when I have the word essay I start to panic.'
- 'The learning journal allows you to explore lots of different areas whereas an essay would allow only one topic.'
- 'Being able to look at other peoples views.'
- 'Essays always seem very tedious and boring, however the learning journal has kept me motivated and interested throughout.'
- 'We discussed a number of controversial topics as a class. I enjoyed writing about them afterwards because I have a lot of opinions.'
- 'It helped to look into things, which gave a proper understanding of the subject, (like fashion is not abt just designing clothes, there is a lot more to it)'
- 'I am not a strong writer so do a journal is more personal and less daunting to complete.'
- 'I like that fact that its divided into different topics, makes it more enjoyable.'
- 'We were given interesting topics to write about.'
- 'I liked it because you listened to the lecture then had to go out and research and write about what you thought.'

- 'it was good doing it online rather than writing it up & handing it in each week.'
- 'being able to give your own view and opinion.'
- 'Very easy to add entries, can see what other students are doing.'
- 'Room for creativity in writing.'
- 'The learning journal is more free and therefore people are more open and write better arguments than just being scared off and restricted by the prospect of an essay.'
- 'The knowledge that I've gained was massive, I liked that I had an opinion about everything and that the whole class became involved.'
- 'Art people find it hard when it comes to writing. By have a small amount of work to do each week makes it a lot less daunting than writing an essay.'
- 'I think it's a lot more interesting and it keeps your writing all the time and makes you think more in everyday life about your writing.'
- 'I think because your completing it every week it's fresh and vibrant.'
- 'It was convenient, easily accessible, easily altered and open to criticism from other students and tutors'
- 'I find essays difficult, doing a learning journal has been less stressful from a dyslexics point of view.'
- 'By having one task a week it has helped me to stay on task with all my other work and I've found that I am more prepared for the deadline because I haven't left it all to the last minute.'
- 'The learning journal had a more relaxed feel to it which meant I didn't worry as much when answering the questions. Writing an essay makes it feel more formal and rigid.'
- 'I like the way it was personal & almost like blogging. I felt like a fashion journalist.'
- 'An essay would be good as you can sit & do it all at once instead of faffing about, and then there is time to do more important work.'

(4). What didn't you like about it?

(5). How could the Learning Journal be improved?

I have combined the feedback from questions 4 and 5 as there was considerable crossover in the comments made.

A summary of key points highlighting areas for improvement:

- Students would find it useful to have a list of all the Learning Journal tasks beforehand to allow preparatory research to be carried out.
- Students would prefer the CCS sessions to be timetabled at the start of the academic year as opposed to in term 2.
- The word count (per week and total) could be increased.
- There was a risk of plagiarism and editing of other's work.
- Images could be inserted more easily.
- It would be useful to see exemplar work.
- The deadline came just before the main hand in for studio work.
- There were issues with the use of Blackboard technology.

Some quotes from evaluation forms in response to question 4 (not corrected for spelling and grammar):

- 'Having to reference everything used.'
- 'I felt in a few assignments given I was repeating myself a bit in what I was trying to get across because the subject matters were a bit too similar.'
- 'Getting onto the learning journal was a bit confusing to begin with.'
- 'the small word count'
- 'I didn't like it if we missed a lecture we don't get much of an update other than blackboard.'
- 'having to do it has I find wrighting hard.'
- 'Having to find reliable images is hard'
- 'Having to put it on blackboard as im not confident when it comes to writing & spelling and didn't like that others could see my work.'
- 'It's writing!'

Some quotes from evaluation forms in response to question 5 (not corrected for spelling and grammar):

- 'Knowing the learning journal assignments before the lecture so you can work on it beforehand.'
- 'Need to have time before hand in to do sketchbook and check through everything.'
- 'Maybe if able to add videos online or hand in on powerpoint format.'
- 'extend the word count by a few hundred.'
- 'I don't think you should be able to see other peoples work because people may copy.'
- 'Lecture notes could be put up straight away, as I rarely noted down assignments in time during lecture.'
- 'Have more tutorials, individual tutorials after the lesson.'
- 'A sheet with what is expected each week and maybe an example.'

Feedback from CCS staff involved in delivery and assessment of the modules:

The three members of CCS staff involved met following assessment of the Learning Journals to reflect on the assignment as a whole and identify modifications needed going forward. It was agreed that the assignment had been successful in general terms, and would be rolled out into the next academic year with minor changes.

A summary of key learning journal amendments identified:

- More emphasis needs to given to creative presentation as few students had produced finished work with a strong visual design element.
- Referencing and bad academic practice needs to be covered at the start of the assignment and re-capped later as many students had not referenced sources within the text.
- The Learning Journal assignment checklist should be included in the student handbook and highlighted at the beginning of the module, rather than being given out near to the deadline.

- The list of weekly tasks should be included in the handbook to allow students to prepare for sessions.
- It was generally felt that students were not reading enough, particularly from the set text: Fashion by Christopher Breward. A set reading task, to identify appropriate quotes or summarise a chapter was suggested to address this.
- It was agreed that the word limit should be increased from 1,500 to 1,500-2,500 words to enable students to engage more deeply with the issues raised in the lectures and associated tasks.
- The Learning Journal should include a specific self-evaluation section, building in the opportunity for reflection as few students demonstrated this.
- To address the issue of students being able to view one another's work, the 'Journal' tool on Blackboard 9 should be used going forward (ensuring that entries can only be viewed by teaching staff). It may be possible for Learning journals could be made available to all following assessment.
- The Learning Journal should have a compulsory Introduction and Conclusion, as not all students included this.
- Few students took the opportunity to attend individual tutorials with their seminar tutor: it was apparent that those who did produced work of a higher standard. To address the need for further tutorial support and encourage peer tutoring, it is suggested that individual tutorials are replaced by timetabled small group tutorials. These should follow the seminar if possible.
- To encourage students to spend time each week working on their Learning Journal, a specific time-slot for self-directed study for CCS should be allocated on student timetables.
- A wider variety of writing formats could be included in the Learning Journal tasks: for example, journalistic writing or the composition of text panels.
- The handbook should make clear that all sections of the Learning Journal should be completed in order to pass the assignment.

Assignment feedback

- Headings on feedback sheet (and corresponding sections of assessment criteria) need to be addressed, 'Structure' should be replaced with 'Relevance' as the Learning Journal assignment has an inbuilt structure and some work was not relevant to the set tasks.
- It was suggested that the area for comments on the feedback sheet be divided into 2: the first section giving feedback on the work, the second giving specific areas for development/targets for year 2.
- Another option suggested for the feedback sheet was to divide it into comments boxes for each aspect of the assessment criteria, e.g. 'Research'. This would add greater clarity and could speed up the assessment process.

Feedback from studio staff responsible for delivering practical elements of module (FSHN1200 Complete Fashion Studies only)

Following assessment of Learning Journals, CCS staff met with studio staff to evaluate finished work plus the assignment as a whole.

A summary of key learning journal amendments identified:

- Students should be asked to identify a minimum of 2 book sources plus 2 reliable websites for each Learning Journal entry to counter over-reliance on poor quality websites.
- Citation of information sources should be covered early in the module to address weaknesses in this area. Include accurate referencing/citation in the assessment criteria.
- Keep tasks more open, giving students more freedom in what they can write about.
- For the final hand-in, students should cover a smaller number of tasks in depth (although all weekly tasks should also be completed). The final document should be around 2000 words.
- Look at adopting the feedback sheet used by Fashion (incorporating module Learning Outcomes). This has now been agreed by the head of department.
- Amend the weighting of assignments so that the presentation is 20% and the learning journal 80%.
- Informal feedback from students stated that the learning journal was enjoyable but could be at a higher level and could challenge them more.

Evaluation and Transferability:

Overall, the feedback suggests that the Learning Journal assignment has been successful in addressing key areas of concern relating to attendance at, and engagement with, CCS sessions. The assignment has also clearly helped to address anxieties relating to academic writing among students. The assignment will definitely continue to be used within the FSHN1200 module going forward (although with modifications), and could be transferred to other Art & Design specialisms (this is under discussion). The FSHN1503 module will not be running in 2010/11.

CCS staff have found the level of interest and engagement with topics during teaching sessions to be high. This, coupled with student feedback, suggests that some 'deep' learning has taken place. However, in many cases, the final Learning Journal document did not support this view and suggest that students had engaged with the topics in a fairly superficial and subjective way.

Evaluation criteria:

1. Does the learning journal assignment allow students to achieve the designated learning outcomes?

- *Begin to employ critical analysis and evaluation in relation to the study of objects*

- *Research - source, navigate, select, retrieve, evaluate, manipulate and manage information from a variety of sources*

- *Articulate ideas and information comprehensibly in a structured manner in oral and written form supported by relevant evidence*

- *Study independently and meet deadlines*

- Yes, but the learning outcomes should be more clearly linked to the assessment process by being included explicitly in the assessment criteria and feedback sheets.

2. Does the learning journal assignment allow all students the opportunity to achieve the learning outcomes? (Is it inclusive?)

- All students have been given the opportunity to achieve the learning outcomes through this assignment; however additional input on citation and referencing would enable less confident students to produce more rigorous work. Increasing the word count will give more able writers more scope for in-depth critical analysis.

3. Does the learning journal assignment allow the full range of knowledge and skills developed throughout the CCS programme to be assessed?

- Opportunities to assess skills in research and referencing of sources could not be assessed in sufficient detail in the learning journal assignment. Introducing set reading tasks, giving more emphasis to referencing plus setting a minimum number of sources per learning journal entry will enable staff to assess a broader range of research skills.

The challenge in taking this assignment forward is to encourage an inclusive, lively and creative approach to academic writing without losing sight of accepted conventions and formats.