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Designing Filmmaking: shaping first year curriculum for transition, progression and effective collaboration
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Introduction

This article evaluates a research project focusing on first year transition and progression on the BA Filmmaking course in the Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. The project was developed in response to recently identified shifts in well-being, resilience and confidence among first year students, including a growing number of issues related to insecurity about performance and ability, social anxiety and problems with collaborative practice. An increase in these concerns in the 2017 cohort was linked to lower than average first year progression: a higher than usual number of students left within the first term, with a greater proportion uncharacteristically transferring to subjects in humanities or other faculties. Manchester Metropolitan University's retention strategy commits to supporting students to reach their potential by improving and maintaining high levels of retention, and a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project was undertaken to address the issue in Filmmaking. The project adopted an Action Research model as a responsive and adaptive method of embedded education research to make improvements for open ended outcomes (Koshy 2005), setting out to:

- Review existing research into first year transition, engagement and retention
- Reflect on the programme's curriculum, culture and student experience including the wider pedagogical context of the discipline
- Analyse progression data and other evidence related to first year
- Informed by this research, develop and deliver appropriate transition intervention strategies
- Evaluate outcomes of the intervention

The first year experience was analysed through course data, surveys and records, raising questions about how the course, its curriculum and community were introduced, developed and established in first year and extending to questions about the student experience across all three years. The wider pedagogical context of the course and the student journey - including prior academic background, marketing and recruitment, graduate destinations and feedback from alumni and industry - was also considered.

An analysis of the wider context included reflection on enquiry-based pedagogies of art and design as well as those of the wider ecology of film education as practiced at UK HEIs. Informed by the research and building on existing sessions, a remodelled curriculum focusing on the first term of first year with a particular emphasis on the first six weeks was identified as the most effective intervention within the timescale. This article will consider both the pedagogical scope of Filmmaking at Manchester School of Art, referencing the wider context of the sector in UK HEIs, and an overview of existing research into the first year transition experience, engagement and retention. The aims, design and delivery of the first year curriculum will then be described, and outcomes of the project including student and staff experience evaluated.

Filmmaking pedagogies in the Art School context

An analysis of the wider pedagogical context of the Filmmaking curriculum was integral to the research, encompassing reflection on enquiry-based pedagogies of art and design as they pertain to the discipline, as well as the ecology of film education at UK HEIs more widely. Generally speaking, HE art and design pedagogies are informed by the enquiry-based learning model of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1987). Orr and Shreeve (2018) describe this as a 'sticky curriculum' which is complex, active and generative: subverting the transmission model of teaching, it is a 'kind of exchange' between tutor and student (Shreeve, Sims and Trowler 2010). The creative project brief, a key component of art school's enquiry-based learning, is open-ended, ambiguous and indeterminate. Research has found the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty of enquiry-based learning is a pre-requisite for creativity (Dineen and Collins 2005), a key feature of learning as well as employability and enabling students to become confident creative practitioners with the skills to negotiate the complex and unpredictable demands of the creative industries (Austerlitz et al 2008). Recent research into pedagogies of risk in the contemporary art school curriculum[1] emphasize the benefits of embedding risk-taking in the creative curriculum through innovative pedagogies which valorise uncertainty and ambiguity as productive and transformative (Gale 2020).

Analysis of enquiry-based studio learning's application in Filmmaking suggests that its necessary adaptations of a 'sticky curriculum' are of key importance to student experience and engagement. These can broadly be described as linked questions of studio space, timetabling, community, collaborative practice and perceptions of training for specific industry roles. Firstly, the physical space of the 'studio' is very differently organized and experienced. BA Filmmaking students can utilize communal spaces or independently book teaching spaces outside timetabled sessions. However, there is no designated/situated studio for the development of practice as is common in other art and design disciplines and almost all student productions take place external to the university. Without the informal everyday integration provided by the mutual meeting space of the studio, all face-to-face activity must be timetabled, putting greater emphasis on advanced programming of all formal and informal learning opportunities. Furthermore, as a cohesive student community is key to the collaborative production model germane to filmmaking, strategies outside of studio culture must be consciously designed to build and foster communities of practice and a supportive peer network.

Another variance to the enquiry-based model of the art school is arguably filmmaking's perceived direct affiliation with a career path into a specific industry framework, linked to generic preconceptions of 'film school' or training for industry models which can influence expectations. Petrie and Stoneman argue that film education in the UK began to part company with the critically engaged ethos of American and European film schools in the early 2000s, in favour of a narrower training agenda towards predetermined industry skills (2014: 7). They argue that this turn towards a more focused technical skillset providing a pipeline for industry 'ignored the need to nurture those qualities of social engagement, intellectual curiosity and personal expression' which underpin filmmaking practices, and constitute a necessary driver for artistic innovation and cultural relevance (2014: 8). Dichotomies between student preconceptions of 'training' towards perceived industry requirements, and the creative research and risk-taking culture germane to art school's enquiry-based learning can complicate the balance between convergent and divergent thinking within the curriculum. Encouraging students to see creativity-fed innovation as an industry driver, live briefs and other exchanges with professionals and industry partners in dialogue with enquiry-based projects is one method of refocusing this narrative, leading to

enhanced learning opportunities. This reframing of professional skills extends to the role of critical thinking and contextual research. Studied in conjunction with and embedded in practice, the 'contextual studies' curriculum often seen as divorced from personal practice can become one of the key bridges between the artistic research of an enquiry-based learning model and graduate outcomes for employability (Houtman 2011, Knudsen 2014). Free text comments on NSS and ISS surveys are evidence that the creative freedom of the course is highly valued, and the culture of experimentation, innovation and critical research implicit in creative enquiry-based learning are recognised employability skills of increasing relevance to expanding cultural and creative industries.

Overview of first year transition and retention research

Improvements in retention are a key UK-wide policy priority for 'moral, economic and legal reasons' and are central to teaching excellence (Thomas et al 2017: 3). Existing research into first year highlights the critical importance of transition in successful engagement and progression (Yorke and Longden 2008; Clark and Hall 2010; Yorke and Vaughan 2012; Thomas et al 2012, 2017). O'Donnell et al (2016) argue that a lack of consensus in defining transition itself problematises assessment of transition interventions' efficacy and clarity would improve retention research. Gayle and Parker (2014) offer 'the capability to navigate change' as the most appropriate definition of transition: in broadly conceptualising transition into themes of 'induction', 'development' and 'becoming' they raise questions about HEI transition policies' consideration of student agency and lived reality, which lie beyond institutional systems. Examining transition initiatives at thirteen HEIs, the Higher Education Academy's landmark 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' programme (Thomas et al 2012, 2017) revealed a sense of belonging to be a key factor in student engagement (2012:12), with friendships, confidence and feeling a part of the course found to be optimum criteria for academic success (2017: 3). The programme's most effective retention interventions were delivered as part of the curriculum and were explicitly relevant and academically purposeful, informed by specific issues of concern. These projects nurtured belongingness through encouraging supportive peer relationships and meaningful interactions between students and staff; they developed knowledge, confidence and identity and were relevant to students' interests and future goals. 'What Works?' further revealed that non-white students, alongside students with higher levels of 'adverse circumstances' exhibit lower levels of belongingness - and as a sense of belonging correlates with lower rates of retention and attainment (2017: 10), transition interventions can claim to be vital inclusivity strategies with wider impact across a diverse student community. A six-stage intervention framework developed by 'What Works?' from an evaluation of its retention and success programme informed this project's intervention design.

Yorke and Longden's 2008 survey of first year experience examined students' views across a range of subjects with a focus on finding out why students withdraw. They summarized these reasons as educational (including wrong choice of course and academic demands), issues with location, resources, finances and social integration, adding that most students cite a combination of factors rather than a single cause. The same study's appraisal of art and design revealed anomalies to these findings: students were less likely to cite academic workload or the wrong choice of course in their reasons for withdrawal, and more likely to comment on dissatisfaction with teaching or organisation and a mismatch between expectation and reality (2008: 42). These findings are endorsed by Yorke and Vaughan's more focused study of first year art and design (2012). Although recognizing the

impossibility of designing a ‘one size fits all’ curriculum to suit every student, they found that a greater degree of prior knowledge of the course and a close match between student expectation and experience was linked to higher satisfaction rates in first year. Some students cited an unexpectedly independent studio culture including lack of guidance and tutor support as reasons for dissatisfaction and withdrawal; timetabling, course organisation and communication also emerged as key indicative factors related to student engagement.

These findings support the argument that navigation of its ‘pedagogy of ambiguity’ can be especially challenging for first year art and design students (Austerlitz et al 2008). Seeking certainty and reassurance, students often encounter a culture of *un*certainty, their tutors expecting to see risk-taking approaches to practice and an implicit understanding of their pedagogical environment without providing guidance (Finnigan and Richards 2016). These mismatched expectations can widen the gap between students and tutors leading to dissatisfaction or anxiety on the part of the student, and an idealised model of the ‘super student’ on the part of the tutor (Austerlitz et al 2008: 138). Although considered essential for creative development and employability, enquiry-based learning may complicate a safe and enabling first year transition experience (2008: 132), and in Filmmaking may be further challenged by incoming students’ diverse educational backgrounds, including a significant proportion with little or no prior experience of art and design education. Filmmaking’s collaborative practice and related dependence on a strong community - without the supportive framework of studio culture - are further factors to consider, particularly in regard to students who are unfamiliar with group working. In addition, recent research into a proposed correlation between the sharp rise in reported mental health problems among young people and rapid growth of smart phones and social media (Twenge 2017) arguably further problematises young people’s transition into university – an issue which correlates with recent experience on the Filmmaking course.

Method and design of the intervention project

The project drew on a transition intervention design developed by the ‘What Works?’ student retention and success programme (2017) from an analysis of its most successful intervention projects. ‘What Works?’ recommendations for intervention design can be summarised through the following six stages: understanding the local contexts; identifying evidence informed interventions; reviewing the institutional context; designing a process of change; using monitoring and formative evaluation and embedding and sustaining organisational learning (2017: 28). In the context of the six stages, pedagogical, institutional and student-specific research in conjunction with an identification of transition issues needing to be addressed were investigated in relationship to each other to inform the project’s curriculum redesign. Monitoring and evaluation were embedded in its design towards developing a sustainable curriculum model.

Considering the existing curriculum and student experience in the light of pedagogical and transition research highlighted how and why some students might feel ‘thrown in at the deep end’, more clearly revealing how enquiry-based ‘pedagogies of ambiguity’ and collaborative practice may cause anxiety - particularly for students not versed in such frameworks and seeking reassurance at the start of university. In contrast with Yorke and Vaughan’s findings (2012), several withdrawing Filmmaking students did cite their intention to study another discipline, transferring to other courses outside the Art School. This appears to correlate with Filmmaking’s broader entry route compared with a majority of other art and design subjects,

and some students' relative lack of subject knowledge. Indications of a fragile sense of confidence and security especially with group working and social cohesion were noted among departing students as well as among many of those who were struggling but did not withdraw, indicating an underlying social integration issue impacting on senses of belonging. Nurturing belongingness as a key focus materialised as additionally relevant to Filmmaking: to support students' diverse educational backgrounds and build confidence; to foster a community of collaborative practitioners and to encourage an intellectually and creatively discursive environment, promoting benefits of an art school 'studio culture' in the absence of a physical studio space.

A question emerged regarding resolving the balance between the complexity of the course curriculum aims and culture across a wide range of creative and technical activities and the necessity for a coherently structured timetable (Clark and Hall 2010, Yorke and Vaughan 2012). The curriculum would need to solve the problem of embracing this complexity by involving students in creatively challenging and engaging collaborative activities and attending to a range of technical workshops, delivered within a clear framework. Improvements in organisational rigour, clarity of communication and a more thoroughly scaffolded and clear-to-understand curriculum (Yorke and Vaughan 2012) were seen as synonymous with encouraging integration, community and a sense of belonging.

Rather than targeting a specific student group or theme for the intervention, a remodelling of the overall Autumn term curriculum was developed. Although attention was paid to a wider transition period from pre-entry to the end of first year, the intervention project itself was dedicated to the first term curriculum with particular focus on the first six weeks. Using what worked effectively in the existing curriculum as a baseline, knowledge acquired through the research enabled a clearer understanding of how learning and teaching could be more effectively structured and delivered. Informed by the research, small tweaks to the curriculum in certain areas created disproportionate measures of impact – often involving little or no additional cost or resources.

In summary, the aims of the project were to:

- Improve students' feelings of confidence, security and belonging.
- Recognise and act on signs of disengagement/concern.
- Provide a framework of pastoral support.
- Support effective collaborative partnerships.
- Harness the excitement of transition through a creative and critically ambitious but strongly scaffolded curriculum.
- Encourage playful, explorative experiments within a safe, non-judgemental environment.
- Begin to build a cohesive and networked community of practice.
- Ensure clarity of the curriculum and project briefs.
- Establish a clear creative ethos and understanding of the course culture.
- Provide a grounding in skills and tools of practice which consider diversity of skills/technical knowledge.
- Improve engagement and retention in the Autumn term.

These aims were addressed through:

- A redesign of the first year first term, focusing on the first six weeks' transition as a 'foundation' for first year and beyond.
- An expanded community-building induction week.
- An intensive, tightly-structured timetable to bring students into the School of Art and working together more regularly.
- A more coherent timetable to help orient students and keep a routine in place.
- A redesigned weekly sixty-second film project brief programme involving pre-planned rotating student groups.
- A weekly group tutorial focused on mentoring collaboration and expansion of a pastoral tutorial system.
- Dovetailing with the creative themes of the weekly projects, a regular programme of workshops to support skills development, particularly aimed at those with less prior technical knowledge.
- A reorientation of the staff teaching timetable to create a dedicated 1st year team, promoting familiarity and establishing a sense of security and trust early in the course.

The redesigned framework

The curriculum redesign of the first term aimed to maintain the course's central ethos of creative freedom, encouraging students in playful, explorative experiments while maximising their feelings of security, confidence and belonging through a clearly structured learning and teaching framework. It aimed to create a culture of trust and support while guiding students to more effectively realise collaborative partnerships. It also aimed to provide a grounding in skills and tools of practice which attended to students' existing diversity of skillsets and technical knowledge. The first six weeks of term were remodelled to create a stronger scaffold of progression focused around its weekly project briefs, orienting students by keeping a routine in place and maximising opportunities for students and staff to meet. The formative nature of the weekly projects promoted experimentation without fear of failure while also contributing to their summative assessment. This encouraged a risk-taking approach to practice, giving students space to familiarize themselves with their environment and each other without immediate pressure of assessment. At the end of term however, students submitted two of the weekly projects of their own choosing to contribute to the unit's assessed portfolio. This approach cultivated student agency in their own assessment while promoting the value of risk in a supportive environment (Giloi et al 2019, Gale 2020). Existing briefs perceived to have been effective introductory projects were adapted to synchronise with the structure. A mixed delivery of sessions including whole year group lectures and screenings and smaller seminar, workshop and tutorial groups were put in place at the same time each week. Opportunities for one-to-one pastoral tutorials were also increased. The number of academic staff teaching into first year was reduced, creating a tighter knit group so that a smaller number of staff taught into a greater number of sessions to accelerate familiarity between staff and students.

Weekly project briefs

The weekly framework involved lectures, screenings, tutorials and aligned workshops, with the work produced each week screened in a group review. Projects were structured around a sixty-second film brief, designed to encourage experimentation and underpin the correlation between theory and practice and the value of research. Each brief was designed to achieve a

balance between an introduction to key tenets of film language, a directive film task to aid the free development of ideas and encouragement to explore and experiment with film. The projects aimed to directly engage students with the correlation between theory/history of art and film, and their own practice - so that critical contexts were not perceived in isolation but as direct and living, supporting ideas and enabling a framework for practice. Houtman's point that students need not be placed in 'the invidious position of having to produce "originality" from nothing' (2011: 172) is especially pertinent, and the process not only provided a bridge between practice and theory but also introduced and continually reinforced the importance of research to creative practice, knowledge to innovation. References and resources were introduced through lectures and provided for independent research, including a screening programme available to view on online platforms and a small task to enable discussion of ideas. Students were encouraged to research these critical contexts as a springboard for ideas and experimentation of practice. Technical workshops were delivered in alignment with each brief, such as sound recording workshops built into the 'Art of Sound' project; weekly film screenings were similarly aligned.

Films were screened in a review which ran at the same time each week. Moving away from the existing 'crit' model with one tutor and a small number of students, an alternative approach entailing splitting the year in half and team teaching the review was trialled. This allowed for greater exposure to other students and tutors, ideas and practices and create a more vibrant atmosphere. Getting students into a routine of regularly showing and discussing their practice/ideas in a secure environment helped establish good practice, develop greater resilience and take some of the fear out of presentation. As students were encouraged to take risks and allow for creative failure, this ethos was built into the discussion to develop a non-judgmental environment of debate and critique. As a deliberate encouragement of this ethos tutors leading the session framed the discussion around creative and conceptual ideas rather than strength/weakness polarities and technical skill, which otherwise too easily become the overriding feature of peer feedback in film practice. Third year students were invited to participate in the weekly review, adding to the variety of feedback and allow for networking - this strategy was a successful intervention generating additional learning benefits for third years.

Collaborative working, building confidence

Sabal (2009) argues that the collaborative practice model central to filmmaking and integral to the student experience is neglected in teaching and learning strategies of film educators, and this particularly needs addressing where an art education ethos valuing artistic voice and authorial vision is conflated with an industry production model (2009: 6). Hodge (2009) argues that collaboration and conflict negotiation must be treated as a set of skills to be learned and nurtured, alongside craft, critical and creative skills, in order for collaboration to become a conscious activity, allowing students to successfully navigate the complexities of the filmmaking process and its interpersonal relationships (2009: 29). Hanney similarly contends that effective team working is as integral to the creative process of student media projects as the ability to operate equipment (2016: 12). Intensive projects have been found to be an effective tool in developing collaborative production skills: in their 'intensive mode' screen production model using an analogous method of weekly one-minute collaborative projects, Murray, Barkat & Pearlman (2020) describe this as 'a rapid prototyping process for working as a team'(2020: 24) offering real-world, professionalised collaboration opportunities. Alongside developing valuable creative and employability skills, effective

team work helps to foster interpersonal relationships and generate senses of belonging during transition. Creating strategies to support students to work together effectively was therefore a key feature in enabling community-building at the start of the course, as well as providing the groundwork for successful collaborative practice across their three years of study and beyond.

To enable students to work with as many of their peers as possible, they were placed into randomly selected groups of three for each of the projects, rotated each week. The weekly project brief tasked each student with bringing something along to a group tutorial the following day as a starting point for discussion - an object, a recorded sound, an image - which linked to the brief and acted as a springboard for ideas. Often meeting for the first time, the group were coached by the tutor in a structured discussion of their ideas as a starting point for the project: the task of bringing something physical to the session acted as an ice-breaker and was found to be an effective way to start the discussion and give space to each student to share their initial ideas. Research has shown that collaboration is most effective in a culture of trust and emotional safety, with conversational 'turn taking' inspiring collective intelligence (Wooley 2008). The tutor acted as mediator, guiding students in listening, taking turns and linking ideas, initiating a culture of support and respect aiming to set the tone for the group's continued work. Students were encouraged to continue brainstorming after the tutorial and counselled in the value of face-to-face meetings instead of relying on social media.

Evaluation

The redesigned curriculum was monitored and evaluated through progression metrics, a mid-unit evaluation captured through anonymous feedback forms completed by all first year students, and a small student focus group which took place in the summer term. Observations and notes made by tutors and written feedback from a first year tutor and first year graduate teaching assistant were also used for monitoring and evaluation purposes. 2018 retention figures clearly indicate a fall in students withdrawing from the course by the end of term compared with the previous year. Average marks for the unit and pass rate improved with only one student not submitting and no students failing the unit. It is also worth noting that as a result of unexpected over-recruitment the 2018 cohort was larger than preceding years: the tighter timetable structure turned out to be of critical importance to absorb the additional numbers and enable smooth operational management of the course.

Cohort	Enrolment Figure	Number of student withdrawal/transfer by end of first term	% of student withdrawal/transfer by end of first term
2017-18	68	8	11
2018-19	84	3	4

Figure 2: Retention figures, first year Filmmaking at the end of the first term 2017 and 2018[2]

First year tutors reported that the new timetable proved invaluable at producing a more cohesive and clear structure to the foundational phase of the first term, finding the well-organised but fast-paced timetable an effective method of maintaining student engagement. On a pastoral level, tutors reported they were able to more quickly identify students who were experiencing issues and needed extra support. Tutors also reported that the first weeks of orientation felt much smoother and less pressured than in previous years, and the student cohort appeared more cohesive, communicative and positive. A mid-unit survey conducted four weeks into term revealed that nearly all students had settled in well, been able to orient themselves and had made good friends on the course. It was clear that the tighter structure and increased contact time had had an impact on students' senses of belonging.

A focus group participant commented that the tight structure had been helpful:

> 'It was the same each week so it was a structure to get used to as you're getting settled in.'
> Focus group participant

The increased contact and reduced number of staff to create a closer community environment appeared to have created a feeling of security:

> '[it's] completely different to my last uni course, none of the lecturers knew my name, I didn't feel I could approach anyone. I was nervous about that before I came here, but the way we have tutorials and meetings, that's really good.' Focus group participant

The randomised weekly group formation for each project was regarded overall in a positive light. Some students mentioned how daunting it was to 'work with strangers' at the start of the course, but recognised it was a valuable way to meet new people, get to know everyone quicker and build teamworking skills:

> 'It builds your confidence a bit more to work with a lot of people on the course.'
> Focus group participant

> 'Strange considering I've never worked in groups before when making a film, but I'm learning that you just have to speak up when you have something to say.' Focus group participant

Inevitably, the weekly group didn't always work out. This was usually related to external pressures, or less frequently an unwillingness or fear of taking part. The structure of the timetable alerted tutors more quickly to these issues and use interventions to tackle them. Occasionally students expressed a preference for working independently, and a focus group participant pointed out the fear of 'messing up' a project by working in a new craft role, an issue relating to the more structured programme of workshops, but highlighting there is more work to be done here:

> 'If someone in my group is better at something I want to do, I don't want to do it and mess it up or fail at it' Focus group participant

Overall, the redesigned term proved to be a very much improved method of supporting and guiding students towards feeling more comfortable and confident with sharing ideas and working together:

> ‘I found the cohort to be more comfortable with the notion of collaboration by the end of the term than previous Level 4 cohorts I have taught at the same point in the year.’ First year tutor

The cohort appeared to bond more positively and quickly than in previous years, which seemed apparent even within the first week or two. There was a positive energy across the year as a whole which seemed to grow throughout the term, and a mutually respectful culture developed in a way that hadn’t been seen previously. Students were visibly less ‘cliquey’ and more likely to spend time in the communal areas working on projects together. Students for the most part appeared to enjoy the ‘random group’ generation, and although some expressed anxiety about it, felt it was an important stage in establishing a community:

> ‘I feel that there has been a significant improvement in developing a community of learners and an understanding of mutual respect that spreads across the whole year group - or more specifically, the breakdown of 'cliques' of students who would only have collaborated with the same course mates from the start of the academic year.’ First year tutor

Tutors also found that the weekly film briefs were highly effective tools to stretch students creatively, providing a framework and encouraging them to experiment. Students also responded enthusiastically when giving feedback about the weekly projects, commenting on the ‘great creative freedom of the weekly briefs’ which kept them engaged, ‘exposure to new artistic techniques’ and ‘expanding knowledge’ of film. Students commented on the benefit of getting straight into a weekly production schedule which was ‘packed full of things to do .. always a sense of purpose to each task.’ One first year tutor commented:

> ‘Allowing for the 'weekly tasks' to be free of the pressure of assessed pieces has opened up students to the importance of collective making/teamwork without encouraging anxiety around the final mark, it has also helped to build creative confidence, technical skillsets and a rigour towards a more critically engaged practice as they build stronger relationships with staff teaching with regularity into the unit.’ First year tutor

The weekly tutorials in support of the project briefs proved invaluable in consolidating methods of group practice, creating a model for mutual respect and ‘turn-taking’, as well as creating a directed starting point as a catalyst to the brainstorming process:

> ‘At the beginning it was good to have the tutorials, have a set time and place to meet, then stay with your group, go somewhere else and continue. Got you into a routine with it.’ Focus group participant

> ‘[It] encourages you to meet up - otherwise if it was just messaging on a group chat it never really happens, but if it’s on the schedule people are more likely to go.’ Focus group participant

The strategy of bringing something 'material' to the tutorial as a catalyst for ideas was also seen as helpful:

> 'Some people don't want to say what their idea is, but when you come in and bring something you have to.' Focus group participant

The reviews were considered a valuable learning and bonding experience in a friendly setting. The review's structure, regularity and atmosphere appeared to help develop students' abilities to present and talk about their work, and there were many comments about how enjoyable they were. Some noted the value of showing work in public to help them develop and improve:

> '[it's] really important to make you want to improve. You watch everyone watch it and if you still don't like it you want to do better.' Focus group participant

> [if I didn't like the film I made] 'I still went [to the review] but thought 'I wish I could redo it'. But I learnt, next time I'm going to try a bit harder.' Focus group participant

Conclusion

For first year tutors, the redesign of the first term proved to be a highly effective intervention that they have continued to develop. Evaluation of the model highlighted where continuous improvements could be made, including a significant development of technical workshop provision linked to creative thematics of the weekly projects.

> 'I have been able to build on the successes of the new structure and introduce more technical workshops into the first year, so that each student has had a weekly workshop that is related further to the brief. I feel that the new structure has fully encouraged first year students to enter a supportive community, where experiential learning is informed by making mistakes outside of any pressurised assessment periods. I strongly believe the successes of the new structure will continue to encourage learners and aid them in their first university term.' Head of first year

Reports of anxiety and problems with social integration and collaborative practice have significantly reduced. It was not expected the project would eradicate these problems, but a culture of transparency and adaptability has been more responsive to tackling problems early on. The greater visibility and connection between staff and students work effectively at promoting dialogue, giving tutors stronger opportunities to intervene earlier in supporting students needing extra help.

Retention figures and unit data improved for the second year: Level 4 to 5 progression rose to 94 per cent for the 2019-20 cohort, a 10 per cent increase over two years. This year, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted on the learning and teaching environment including the first year Filmmaking curriculum. The implementation of a university-wide six-week block teaching unit structure led to modifications to unit specifications, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Guidance from MMU's University Teaching Academy

block teaching framework scaffolded around a six week programme of weekly tasks aligned almost exactly with the remodelled first term curriculum, creating opportunities for Filmmaking to support other courses in the development of their unit redesign. The switch to online teaching and absence of face-to-face group working created many challenges - particularly in nurturing belonging and building community as well as in practical and technical skills development. At the time of writing progression figures are not yet available for the 2020-21 cohort but there are clear signs that the pastoral focus, coherent curriculum, and creatively challenging but supportive culture of the course has helped first years transition as effectively as possible this year. Strategies will be put in place to emulate some of the in-person community-building transition strategies as the 2020-21 first year cohort enter their second year of the course.

Finally, the first year transition research revealed much about the pedagogical framework of filmmaking in the HE art and design context. One of the primary aims of the intervention design - to support collaborative practice in the creative arts - has clear beneficial implications for the related disciplines of screen production, creative media and digital arts practice in the art and design environment as well as digital humanities. With fast-changing technologies, diversifying platforms and professional modes of practice, tenets of collaborative working and multiple craft roles and related skillsets, these disciplines require students, staff and programmes with adaptability and resilience. Further research into the sector's pedagogies, cultures and environments would be invaluable to maximise opportunities in understanding and developing the disciplines in a higher education context. A greater depth of research specifically focused on students without prior art and design academic experience and unversed in its enquiry-based 'pedagogies of ambiguity' would be additionally beneficial, to widen participation as well as enable students needing extra guidance in a pedagogical culture of 'uncertainty' make the best possible start in their educational adventure.

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[1] For example, see *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education,* Special Issue: 'Risk-taking in creative education' 18:1 (2019)

[2] As the intervention was primarily focused on retention during the first term, the available retention data for this stage of the year is limited to the 2017-18 and 2018-19 cohorts.