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The effectiveness of Design Thinking techniques to enhance undergraduate student learning

Jane Ritchie, Dr Amanda Tinker, Dr Jess Power

Abstract

Students have access to an ever-increasing quantity and diversity of information, presented to them in multiple formats; the challenge for them is to identify and use this data effectively. Many undergraduate students experience difficulties in managing the knowledge that they gather, in recognising the quality and authenticity of this information, and in assessing the importance and priority of data. This therefore requires the development of strategies to support their learning.

This paper explores the potential for using design thinking tools and techniques to enhance the learning of undergraduate students of the creative industries. Design thinking is an approach to problem solving that is a collaborative, iterative and reflexive process (Brown, 2008) and as such is closely aligned to action research and action learning. Using an action research methodology, workshops were developed to encourage and support the students in the formulations and development of their ideas for case studies, dissertations and major projects. The workshops were conducted with successive cohorts of final year fashion business students.

Within the series of workshops students engaged with the collaborative tools and techniques of design thinking, drawing from their prior knowledge and their experiences of work and placement to contribute to the development of each other’s ideas and concepts. The paper documents the outcomes of the workshops; how the group discussion and subsequent reflective activities, with peers and individually, motivated and supported students in the further development of their individual projects. How the iterative process of presenting their ideas additionally supported the development of their communication skills.

This study has demonstrated the importance of action learning in a collaborative context to the development of student learning and metacognition. The collaborative tools of design thinking have the potential for application not only to collective projects, but can also be used for the benefit of individual student projects. Design thinking offers a strategy for tutors to; engage their students in reflection, to encourage students to integrate their knowledge and experience, to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and to build students’ communication skills. The development of these abilities and skills is fundamental to the readiness of students for employment on graduation.


Keywords: Design thinking, action learning, metacognition, action research