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1. **Teaching Cycle: Module Design and Learning Outcomes**

**Module Design and Curriculum Review**

Starting my position at the Department of Theatre, Film, and Television at Aberystwyth University in February 2008, I was encouraged to develop a new module integrating my current research interest in dance with the department’s current provision in theatre and performance studies. As part of the departmental curriculum review process, new modules were designed in alignment with the QAA subject benchmark statements for dance, drama and performance. Subject benchmark statements within Higher Education describe the nature and characteristics of each discipline. Their function was outlined by the QAA in 2002 as follows:

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum subject. Benchmark statements provide for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework (in: “Starting Out in Dance”, Palatine, 2009).

Subject benchmarks thus characterize both traditional and contemporary conceptions of dance, drama and performance (DDP). Practice and theory of the performing arts span a dynamic field that embraces changing socio-cultural, political and historical subject areas. Most University programmes therefore strive for an integration of theory and
practice that includes the pursuit of scholarship and research. Subject knowledge and understanding at University level thus include: a) practical work (performance and production) and b) theoretical studies (critical analysis of historical context and aesthetics).

More recently, new theoretical frameworks have arisen to address postmodern challenges to the traditional ways of theorising practice. These include among others:

- the knowledge and understanding of non-western performance cultures
- embodied knowledge

Processes of research, action, reflection an evaluation are thus embedded in the student learning experience and fostered by workshop-based teaching and learning methods. Transferable skills that comprise the level of graduateness in DDP include “communication (written, oral and performance) of research and analysis, the ability to work independently, interpersonally and in groups, to deadlines and under pressure, with flexibility, imagination, self-motivation and organisation” ("Starting Out in Dance", Palatine, 2009: 3).

In order to adequately address these standards and criteria I was encouraged to develop a new module on physical theatre and dance as part of the departmental curriculum review and I chose to reflect on this process as my first teaching cycle for the PGCTHE course. The module I designed was in many ways a revision of an earlier course I had taught in Germany with an emphasis on performance analysis and key 20th century
physical theatre and dance practitioners. Histories, forms and traditions of 20\textsuperscript{th} century performances are thus examined via practical case studies and theoretical writings that inform these works.

Threshold Concepts, Learning Outcomes and Module Design

Threshold Concepts

Since I had taught a similar course which covered 20\textsuperscript{th} century dance and theatre practitioners in the form of a tutor-led seminar before, I used much of the existing syllabus and reading list in designing the new module structure. In alignment with the QAA subject benchmarks I became interested in Meyer and Land’s pedagogy of disciplinary ‘threshold concepts’ which they define by the following set of criteria: 1. transformative, 2. irreversible, 3. integrative, 4. troublesome, and 5. disciplinary bounded (2003; 2006). Applying their idea to the module design for DR21020, one such concept for theatre, performance and cultural studies is indeed ‘the body’ (Fraser/Greco 2005). Studying ‘the body’ in theatre, dance and performance is transformative for the student learning experience, as undergraduates are challenged to revise notions of a ‘natural’ body alongside cultural theories of constructivism and performativity. As eminent dance scholar Susan Foster points out by example of classical ballet, the body in performance is highly trained and thus represents specific cultural ‘ideas’:

The perceived body, never sufficiently thin or well proportioned, must mold itself repeatedly into the abstract forms presented in class and then on stage. The dancer’s self exists to facilitate the craftsmanship acquisition of skills: it serves the
choreographer and, ultimately, the tradition by ordering the body to practice and then to perform the ideals of movement (1997: 243). Students who grasp the significance of ‘the body’ in performance as a ‘body of ideas’ thus gain a practical understanding of cultural constructivism and identity politics. Once this paradigm shift towards postmodern understandings of cultural performance is understood this knowledge is irreversible and integrative in the sense that it allows students to see the political challenges and potentials of such theory as it applies for such diverse areas of research as gender, ethnicity and class. Lastly, this latter recognition makes ‘the body’ a troublesome and disciplinary bounded concept as trans-gender performance, for example, complicates notions of biological sex. In the case of ‘the body’ then all five criteria for a threshold concept apply, and as Irvine and Carmichaels studies suggest such threshold concepts may serve as a fruitful “organizing principle in curriculum and professional design” (Irvine and Carmichael 2009: 106; 104). The notion of ‘the body’ as a threshold concept in theatre, dance and performance studies thus proved particularly helpful in drafting a first set of learning outcomes based on my past teaching experience and in anticipation of successful student learning.

*Learning Outcomes*

As suggested by the Palatine “Guide for Busy Academics. Using Learning Outcomes to Design a Course and Assess Learning”, I next considered the following steps at this initial stage of the new module design:
1. What are learning outcomes?

   An outcome is simply a result or consequence of an action or process.

   A learning outcome is what results from a learning process.

   Intended learning outcomes are statements that predict what learners will have gained as a result of learning.

2. The outcomes approach requires teachers to pose and answer the questions:

   what do I intend students to learn (what learning outcomes do I want to achieve)?

   what teaching methods and curriculum design will I use to encourage students to behave in ways that are likely to achieve these outcomes?

   what assessment tasks and criteria will tell me that students have achieved the outcomes I intend?

3. Figure 1: My teaching and learning system

   What I do as a teacher to promote students' learning

   Create design for teaching session

   Select appropriate teaching model

   Identify intended learning outcomes

   Content-learning theories/approach to modelling session

   Research topics

   Objectives for teaching

   Invite participants to think about key concepts in Advance

   Request resources to support approach.

   Prepare teaching notes and power point slides – (learning resources)

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2 Ibid. 2.
Prepare a concise guide to main topic of learning outcomes and their use in course
design

Create a series of analytical tools for the evaluation of course designs (learning
resources)

Teach session – part transmission – part facilitation

Capture knowledge of participants

Identify key knowledge sources for learners

Gain feedback from students to a) inform strategy during session b) gain new
knowledge for teaching in future.

What students do to learn in the classroom

Preparation – think about key concepts before session and bring own resources
(module specs)

Actively participate in session by sharing
Knowledge

Read and learn from the learning materials

Provided

Take notes

Participate in small group discussions

Evaluate, process/analyse course designs and
Assessments

Engage in in-class assessment exercise

Outside the classroom

Reflect on what was learnt and construct
meaning for their contexts

Read Guide for Busy Academics on Using
Learning Outcomes to Design Courses and
other recommended sources of information

Build portfolio of evidence of critical appraisal
of own course designs.

Visit LTSN Subject and Generic Centre web
site to see what help/materials are available.

In response to the above steps and guidelines I eventually drafted the module form for
DR21020 “The Body in 20th Century Theatre and Dance” which was approved by faculty and
ran for the first time in the fall semester of 2008. Although the module was introduced as an
optional choice, I had an initial enrolment of 16 students on the course, proving a shared
interest in the topic amongst the drama and performance studies’ student cohort. The
module descriptor and handbook (see Appendix: Item 1, pp. 88ff.) define the learning outcomes upon completion of the module as follows:

1. To display critical understanding of the relevance of theatre and dance practice to the discursive formation of corporeality in the 20th century.
2. To organize and present informed and original arguments reflecting research and independent thought in the subject area of the course.
3. To demonstrate critical awareness of current socio-cultural debates on corporeality, identity and embodiment as they relate to discursive formation in 20th century theatre and dance practices.
4. To co-operate as part of a group in presenting and argument in the analysis of course material.

Initially, this placed an emphasis on critical analysis, theoretical investigation and research and was taught as a one hour lecture course followed by a one hour seminar. The lectures and seminars were focussed on theories of the body introducing students to ‘the body’ as threshold concept as to facilitate their understanding of how we perform, experience and read/interpret the body on stage according to different aesthetic choices, modes of training and choreography. Whilst the lectures covered key practitioners and their work using PowerPoint slides and film excerpts, the seminars were intended to engage students’ active learning by providing them with assigned readings and study questions for each week (see Appendix). I also offered an optional practical workshop at this stage as to test the value of practical learning experience in addition to the historical context and theoretical reading offered in the lectures and seminars. Although the workshop was non-assessed it was enthusiastically embraced by half of the student body as the below feedback figures demonstrate (see table 1-4, pp. 21-22).

Apart from the overall module design and syllabus, I also drafted a map for each week, whereby I intended to promote students’ learning using an appropriate teaching model that identifies learning outcomes for each session as well as research topics and objectives (see
teaching observations). Study questions were emailed to the module via blackboard thus inviting students to think about key concepts in advance of each lecture (see Appendix: Item 2, pp. 100ff.). Finally, assessments were designed to match student progress against the intended learning outcomes. The original assessments for DR21020 were subdivided as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Type</th>
<th>Assessment Length/Details</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester Assessment</td>
<td>1 x 20-minute Group Presentation (oral report)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester Assessment</td>
<td>1 x 2,500 word essay</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester Exam</td>
<td>1 x written Examination (2 hours)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Assessment</td>
<td>Written report</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Assessment</td>
<td>Essay with alternative question</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Exam</td>
<td>Re-sit examination</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intention was that students sign up in pairs for a group presentation each week as an introduction to the seminar session and thus facilitate group discussions and encourage active sharing of knowledge with their peers. This formative assessment was intended to serve as an in-class assessment exercise, where students will not only be tutor-assessed but also gain valuable peer feedback. It should encourage presentational and note taking skills as well as it invites students to think about key concepts before the session and bring their own resources into the peer group. The essay, on the other hand, is an individual assessment of independent research and writing skills. The question was posed well in advance and kept open as to encourage independent student learning (see Appendix: Item 1, pp. 88ff.). Lastly, the exam paper (see Appendix: Item 3, pp. 102ff.) counts as summative.
assessment of all the learning outcomes and students may choose two questions to respond to as to allow for individual research interest and original thinking.

**Evaluation and Student Feedback**

Teaching the course for the first time, several difficulties presented themselves: 1. Students found the assigned readings too difficult to digest on their own and were thus unable to prepare independently for the weekly presentations. I therefore adjusted the assessment by agreeing to have the presentations towards the end of the module so that students could factor in their lecture notes as well as peer contributions form the seminar discussions. Secondly, students generally embraced the optional workshop, although they would have made a stronger learning commitment to these sessions, if they had been assessed. Overall the module was therefore rated as good to satisfactory rather than excellent as the following table demonstrates:

**DR21020: Student Feedback Forms Academic Year 2008/09**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Most Positive Aspect of the Module:

1. Course Syllabus (5)
2. Workshop (3)
3. Film-Excerpts in Lectures (2)
4. Oral Presentation (1)

Table 2

Most Negative Aspect of the Module:

1. Reading Assignments & Theory (4)
2. Oral Presentations (3)
3. Timetabling (4)

Table 3

Suggestions on Module Improvement:

1. More Practical Workshops (7)
2. Separation of Lecture and Seminar (2)
3. More Contact Time (1)

Table 4

Table 1-4 show that many students considered the comparative study of theatre and dance, as well as the choice of practitioners and performances as the most positive aspect of the
module. The dance lectures and workshop elements were especially well received. Whilst
the film excerpts were recognized to help students' practical understanding of the relevant
techniques and forms, the most urgent suggestion for improvement was to make the
practical workshop an assessed and compulsory element of the course (table 4). Students
generally struggled with the independent study of the assigned readings and their
theoretical complexity so that the oral presentations were considered as challenging and
thus negative aspect. Timetabling had been a major issue to increase this difficulty, because
the seminar was immediately scheduled after the lecture. This prevented students to digest
the lecture information first before they engage with the reading and could have been easily
adjusted by the departmental administration. Although this issue had been raised with
administration before the start of the module, it had been turned down as unfeasible.

To summarize, student feedback and evaluation of the module were mostly positive and
encouraged to proceed with the original learning outcomes and syllabus. In terms of the
student learning experience, however, the tested workshop element appeared as the
preferred teaching model rather than the oral presentations. Moreover, the above student
feedback suggests that there was more work to be done in terms of facilitating student
understanding of complex theoretical concepts and reading during the assigned lecture and
seminar contact time. Hence, both of these issues were addressed in the next two teaching
cycles for the PGCTHE course.