

Developing Belonging in BA/BSc Product Design

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Purpose

This case study details the development of a new introductory module which is taught across BA & BSc Product Design at De Montfort University. The module was developed in response to an institutional change to move the delivery mode of teaching from multiple term based longitudinal modules to a 7-week sequential block model. In the design and development of the block delivery course it was anticipated that students would need an introductory project that engendered a sense of belonging (Robertson, 2018) on the programme and helped them transition to university life and this delivery method.

This approach looked at quickly creating a sense of belonging in students, new to university life, while critically evaluating their core ability to engage with their selected programme. We did this in order to signpost the students to any relevant support they may require, through our personal tutor family system and help them reflect on their strengths as a designer. This block utilises a range of projects in order to expose students to eight core skills required by a Product Designer, in addition to inducting them into all the practical workshops they will require as a student. Within this block one of the projects was to create a piece (a 10 times larger Lego Minifigure) where they can express their personality to colleagues and lecturers. Helping the staff get to know them and them to know their peers.

Description

In developing this introductory block on Product Design, the team drew heavily on the importance of creating a sticky campus (Robertson 2018, Berman et al 2022) and a sticky curriculum (Orr and Shreeve, 2018) in order to support student learning. To this end the team developed sessions and activities that engaged students in their studio and their practical workshops, in order to immerse them in this creative environment and to develop confidence in their design abilities. The team developed sessions and activities to engender a sense of belonging (Pedler et al, 2020) as they felt this was key in developing a healthy student relationship with the programme and the studio environment. Projects like the induction Lego Minifigure allow the students to create avatars of themselves within the space that then go on to populate their design environment, letting them see themselves and their peers become part of the design studio.

The outputs of this block are a portfolio of the 8 core skills of a Product Designer (Research, Drawing, Digital Drawing, Parametric CAD Modelling, Metalwork and Engineering, Plastic and Soft Model Work, Woodwork and Laser, Rapid Prototyping and Digital tools) which the team then review with the student's personal tutor in order to assess their entry point for these skills and signpost to the students' resources that would help them in their learning journey.

The portfolio was designed to bookend the students' journey, with a similar reflective piece being produced in block 4 Level 6 (the last study block of the course). The intention being students have two tangible comparable outputs to reflect on their progress throughout their degree journey. It was anticipated that the portfolio aspect of the project could allow academics to review a student's journey through an added value lens (Saunders, 1999) rather than focusing solely on a programme's good honours as a metric for success. As the students who undertook the block have not yet reached the point of graduation the programme team will be reviewing this at the end of the academic year 2024/25.

Outcomes of activity

The structure and the activities were well received by both the student body and the technical teams. The integration of the health and safety workshop inductions through timetabled sessions allowed our Technical Instructor colleagues to better track students engagement with these mandatory sessions and provide the academic team with a list of students who needed to book catch up sessions for these activities. This student-centred approach equipped the students with a consistent foundation in the core skills required by a product designer, allowing them all to fully engage with the subsequent blocks and degree.

Students particularly loved the Lego minifigure project and there are currently displays of these in both the product design studio and the ground floor workshops.



Across both programmes students who enrolled under block teaching and engaged with this block saw an 8% increase in year-on-year successful progression to their next level of study. In addition, this year group have increased engaged with Level 5 yearlong student placements. The cohort who had been through the block system and this module received the highest number of placements and placement offers in the Arts, Design and Humanities faculty 33% of students chose to undertake a placement and institutions who regularly take our placement students have reported back positively about these students.

Impact on Students

Internal feedback through both the personal tutor families and the Student Voice Committee (SVC) have reported students love this block project. They particularly like the Lego figures and many spend additional hours customising them outside of delivered sessions creating elaborate costumes and props. The portfolio review prior to the first personal tutor family meeting also led to a higher percentage of students engaging in the personal tutoring system and the personal tutor family has led to a greater level of interaction between the years in the Product Design studio.

It is felt that the design of this block and the selection of fun and individual / group activities supported the sticky course ethos and this appears to be supported by the initial data and student feedback. Students have also stated that they feel this block is a good introduction to the practical workshops which sets them up extremely well for engaging with their future blocks.

Institutional Impact

The activity is both sustainable and scalable, the programme team have presented outputs from this project at our internal DMU Learning and Teaching conferences. The workshop induction activities are used by our Technical Instructor colleagues as exemplar case studies. The project work is also being utilised in part of the development of continual health and safety refreshers for machines within the faculty workshops and colleagues are mentoring other programmes to help develop similar inductor tasks / blocks for their programmes.

Next Steps

The next step in this project is to review the student journey after the first cohort graduate through Block's summer 2024/25. As this was one of the stated goals of this project, the team need to review this to see if there is value in portfolios book ending the student's journey. A review will be undertaken on formatting and it is anticipated some changes may be proposed to one or both of the block's outputs (L4 Block1 and L6 Block 4).

The team are actively looking at how they can leverage the impact of the Level 4 block with other programmes to hopefully get similar improvements in progression. The team are currently discussing this with other programmes in their school to widen the impact in associated subjects.

References

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