

# **An evaluation of the module guides and assignment briefs used in the School of Art and Design (SAD)**

Paul Scull  
School of Art and Design

## **Background and rationale**

At the beginning of the 1999/2000 academic year, the School of Art and Design at the University of Wolverhampton introduced all students to new module guides. The aim of this project was to evaluate the module guides and assignment briefs currently used in the School of Art and Design and to propose any modifications. In particular, the objectives were:

- to identify key issues and constraints by means of a literature review
- to identify and use methods by which relevant, reliable and unbiased information might be gathered
- evaluate collected information
- identify aspects of the guides and briefs which might benefit from changes as well as aspects of good practice

Although originally identified as an ‘innovation’ bid, the innovation (the introduction of new module guides and assignment briefs) had already taken place. The primary concern of this project was therefore to review the innovation.

## **The research**

### **Literature review**

Campbell (1999, p57) made a number of observations on the subject. In his overview of instructional materials he stated that they should ‘facilitate the learning process by exhibiting information necessary to acquire knowledge and skills’. Holsgrove, Lamphear and Ledingham (1998, p99) claimed that effective study guides should be designed ‘to help students as a good tutor might if they were present whilst a student studies’. According to Baume (1993, p4) part of the function of course handbooks was as a ‘source of liberation for both students and staff’, since handbooks could help reduce student panic and confusion and reduce demand on staff time.

In terms of the content of a module guide, Holsgrove, Lamphear and Ledingham (1998, p99) believed that a study guide should include far more than merely a list of detailed curriculum objectives and a copy of the course timetable; for how else ‘will teachers know what to teach, students know what to learn and examiners know what to examine’ (op.cit. p102). Race and Brown (1998, p119) state the importance of giving students ‘white space’. They said providing space for students to make notes was ‘likely to be more effective at promoting effective learning by doing’. Bochner, Gibbs and Wisker (1995, p28) suggested that written information should include a clear list of aims and objectives and what will happen week by week. Carew-Kingsley (1993, p43) stated that assignment material ‘should indicate exactly what the student will achieve upon its completion, and have a set of assessment criteria for the student to chart his/her progress through the course’.

From another perspective, Journeaux (1995) found that students’ module choices were influenced by the title of the module, the module staff, the type of module (compulsory, optional, recommended) and module descriptions.

The amount of material to be included is an area of debate. Holsgrove, Lamphear and Ledingham (1998, p100) believed ‘there is always a risk that the writers of study guides may yield to the temptation of including too much information’. Experience has also shown them that there had been a tendency to include information which was ‘not particularly relevant to the students’. Campbell (2000, p107) stated ‘efficient instructional materials strive for the maximum amount of learning with the minimum amount of material. Only essential material is included, redundant and extraneous “nice to know” content is unnecessary and inappropriate. The greater the volume of content that must be read and used, the greater the time required’.

There is a range of views on terminology, vocabulary and sentence length. Campbell (1999) stated that terms should be selected with care and consistency and that words and phrases with specific meaning should be easily understood. Campbell (2000, p107) claimed that 'effective writing requires words that create clear pictures in the reader's mind. Words are often used imprecisely because of their careless use in speech'. Holsgrove, Lamphear and Ledingham (1998, p102) found curriculum evaluation revealed 'that students are often confused by the sudden introduction of new words and abbreviations and have usually been reluctant to ask their meaning'. Race and Brown (1998, p116) expressed the view that in writing learning outcomes they should be 'clear, friendly and jargon free'. Garber (2000, p18) argued that some jargon was an essentially scholarly tool. Having surveyed students Garber concluded 'juxtaposition and context are everything'. Rowntree (1986, p221) also believed that as much as he would 'weigh in against jargon... especially abstract long-windedness', he could not see 'that we can survive without our specialist vocabularies'. Baume (1993, p6) pointed out differences in audience, describing how 'Academics, writing for each other about material on which they share understanding and knowledge, can cope with long and complex sentences. Students who are new to a course, possible even new to a subject, may appreciate a simpler style'.

Illustration and visual appearance were deemed to be significant. Campbell (1996, p66) claimed that 'meaningful illustrations eliminate the need for wordy explanations' and that 'illustrations are also effective in arousing interest and holding attention'. Race and Brown (1998, p121) believed that in choosing and designing flexible learning materials 'A sketch can be more useful than 1000 words'. Baume (1993, p6) stated that the look of documents does affect readers' response to them. He added that 'However the text is produced, an interesting cover can help a lot'. In their experience, Holsgrove, Lamphear and Ledingham (1998, p100) considered 'The different layout used for each guide made modular information retrieval difficult'. They added that 'if these documents can be designed to an agreed "house style" then this, too, conveys important messages about the quality and cohesion of the curriculum'.

The question of legibility was developed in detail by several authors. Campbell (1999, p68) considered several aspects such as typeface, underscoring, capitalization, use of italics and boldening, use of headings, spacing, justification and the integration of blank space. Craig and Bevington (1998, p71) also referred to the importance of 'white space' which allowed a design to breathe. They likened it to 'the silence between notes on a musical score, without which the music would simply become noise'. Race and Brown (1998, p119) asked 'Is it easy for students to find their way backwards and forwards?'. They referred to this a 'signposting'.

### **Methodology**

The author used three methods of data collection: student questionnaire (Appendix 1); unstructured individual student interviews; e-mail contact with all the School's staff. The project was limited to the School of Art and Design.

The modules selected for the questionnaire were chosen because they spanned four academic divisions within the School and four levels of study. They also targeted a broad spectrum of subject within the School (e.g. digital media to life drawing) and included a module delivered at a partner institution. Although this project was originally planned from the students' perspective, as the project progressed the author considered he should also take account of the views of staff.

### **The outcomes**

Of the ten modules targeted to complete the student questionnaire, seven module leaders returned completed questionnaires. A total of 89 students completed the questionnaires. Two modules provided nineteen responses each. The lowest return from a module was seven. The completed questionnaires spanned three of the four academic divisions within the School and three of the four levels of study. There was no response from the module targeted to investigate post-graduate level four guides and assignment briefs. The following findings do not therefore refer to the post graduate provision.

#### **Q1: When you were introduced to the module did you experience one of the following?**

Seven sub questions were attached to the above question. From the answers given and comments made it was quite clear that generally students across the School were positive and at times complimentary about its current module guides. Very few respondents, for example, considered they contained too much or too little information. Also very little concern was expressed over possible misleading information or that the format of the guides was unclear.

A finding from one specific module though highlighted how seemingly small changes can impact on students. Although many of the students in this module complimented the module guide's design, a significant number of students (50%) expressed concern with the typesize. All the written information for this module guide was included on two sides of A4. All other module targeted appeared to use, or largely use, the standard typesize and typeface and contained a minimum of three A4 sheets of paper.

The most significant problem highlighted in this section was 'difficulties with terminology' with just under a quarter of all students recording concern. In this respect it was the biggest single issue recorded in this section. Unlike the question on typesize there was no pattern to the distribution of concerns across all three levels and all targeted subjects.

Very few students made any comments at the bottom where space was provided.

**Q2: When referring to the assignment briefs in this module did you experience any of the following?**

Again seven sub questions were attached to this question. Few students appeared worried about too much information, the format, the typesize or typeface.

Two other issues appear to be of much greater student concern. The second largest of these was that students in all but one of the targeted modules considered there was too little information in the assignment briefs. In the case of one module, just under 50% of the students claimed to have experienced this. However, the biggest issue again was terminology. In every module respondents claimed to have experienced some difficulty. In two modules well over a quarter of the students indicated some concern with this aspect of the brief. Typical of student comments were: *'this was a good example of what I expected, although, I would have required a little more description of the brief'* or *'don't think [there was] enough information'* or *'didn't feel I confidently knew what I had to do'*.

**Q3: What do you like about the module guide?**

A significant number of students made positive and complimentary remarks about the module guides. Across all the targeted modules students frequently used *'clear'*, *'clear deadlines'*, *'thorough'* and *'informative'* to describe them. Other student comments suggested that they valued information such as the weekly indicative programme, the module/component weightings, task requirements, the general layout, where and when to contact the tutor and handing in dates ad/or deadlines. Of special note was that in one module—Digital Technologies—just under half the students wrote that their module was very *'accessible'* since it was available online.

**Q4: What do you like about the assignment brief(s)?**

Many of the comments made above (Q3) apply to this question. Handing in dates, for example, was again raised as a positive element by a number of students. *'Clear'*, *'easy to understand'* and *'easy to read'* were the most common comments. One student claimed they found the use of bullet points (in their module) to list the required tasks very helpful. Another stated *'everything is set out step by step'*.

**Q5: Do these documents clearly explain the relationship between assessment criteria and outcomes?**

Not all the students circled one of the three available options. This is of significance because of those who did fill in this, the results showed that just over a third of the total number of students were unsure of the relationship between assessment criteria and outcomes. Only three students considered the documents did not explain the relationship.

**Q6: Is there anything that would make the module guide/assignment briefs easier to use?**

Many of the comments for this question appeared to confirm other results. While a number of students felt they could make *'no complaints'* about the information, terminology once again dominated the comments. Comments included *'less unnecessary jargon'*, *'language could be easier, a simple break down of terminology'*. Another possible confusion over outcomes and assessment criteria was highlighted in one case when a Level 2 student suggested that the material should *'be more clear about the objectives'*. A Level 2 student would not have been given any assignment briefs using the term *'objective'* by the School of Art and Design.

The second largest complaint was that some information was repeated unnecessarily—was *'superfluous'* or *'repeated information especially assessment information'*. One comment appeared typical of a number of others and again related closely to earlier answers in the questionnaire. This particular student commented that the

module guides did not require anything to make them easier but interestingly added '*as long as [the] briefs are explained, I have no problems*'. One other suggestion was that each guide should contain a summary of its content. And finally a student who was not undertaking a module which was online felt that this material was '*easily lost*'.

### **Summary and key themes**

Overall the results showed that the module guides and assignment briefs were viewed positively by the student population. Generally there no difficulty with format, too much information, misleading information, typeface and typesize, with one exception. The key themes identified included the terminology, too little information in assignment briefs, the relationship between outcomes and assessment criteria and the repetition of information.

### **Unstructured student interviews**

Ten students from SAD were interviewed individually at least once or twice by the author. Students interviewed twice were seen at the beginning of the semester after module guides had been given out and secondly during week ten of the module programme. Like the questionnaire, students were selected from Level One to Three and across a wide range of subject specialisms. In addition, the author included a mature student, a student with severe hearing difficulties and a student officially registered as dyslexic. Each interview lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. The interviewer asked for any feedback (positive and/or negative) the student might like to make on module guides and assignment briefs. The interviewer informed each participant that the School welcomed and valued their comments and that these could possibly lead to future changes in the material.

All students began by expressing positive opinions. The ranged from '*very useful*' to '*fairly good*'. However, several did express the view that the material became more meaningful once the lecturer explained the material. The students also appeared to use the material as an aide-memoire especially for the information on submission dates and for details on what was expected to be assessed. Typical comments included the one from the student with dyslexia. She said '*I refer to them all the time particularly for when to hand in work*'.

Less positive comments, again from the majority of those interviewed, focussed on two issues. Firstly the amount of information repeated in every module guide seemed to annoy or irritate the majority of interviewees. One said '*the bump at the back—I don't need to be told it over and over again. I only need to be told it once*'.

The other issue raised was terminology/difficult words/sentences. Just under half the students spoke about difficulties in understanding one or more words/phrases in at least some of the guides. Typical remarks were '*felt confused*' and '*I was not clear what was required*'. However, the author did not pursue this further and so was unable to discover whether these feelings were experienced prior to or after explanations by the module tutor(s) at the beginning of the module.

### **Summary and key themes**

Overall the students interviewed appeared to be very positive about both module guides and assignment briefs and regarded them as valuable reference materials especially for submission dates and assessment tasks. The key themes identified included repetition of information, terminology, clarity in writing briefs—what is being assessed—and the title of the modules which should be more descriptive.

### **E-mail contact with staff**

5 academic members of staff responded to the author's e-mail. Replies were received from module leaders representing four different subjects and one Divisional Leader. Each returned a number of observations or concerns. All commented on the design/layout. One felt very strongly that the basic layout needed to be more '*user friendly*'. A second felt module guides should be '*visually appealing*' and considered '*the current page 1 is a big turn off*'.

The quantity of information was another issue raised. Views varied considerably. One thought that module guides should be much more comprehensive, but admitted that colleagues felt they contained too much information. Another rejected the latter's viewpoint and expressed the opinion that module guides contained too much information—especially the statutory information. Two staff voiced concerns over the use of certain words in the module guides and were worried that some students, specifically first years, would not fully grasp the content/instructions. Two members of staff considered that this material should be designed in such a manner as to make it easy to distribute electronically.

## Summary and key themes

None of the replies expressed any positive views on guides and briefs. The first concern listed by all those who replied was poor design/layout. The key themes identified included the design/layout of module guides and assignment briefs, the quantity of information, the difficulty with some words and publishing the material electronically.

## Evaluation

The results of the study appear to show students and staff perceived module guides and assignment briefs quite differently. The original impetus for this project originated in some staff in the School airing reservations at the description in the Subject Review, Art and Design Self Assessment Document (University of Wolverhampton 1999, p7) of module guides as being 'user friendly'. When the author's interim report of this project was discussed at the School of Art and Design Learning and teaching Committee on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2001 'some members expressed surprise at how positive the students' comments had been'. The QAA Subject Review Report on Art and Design (April 2000, p5) stated that 'Students are informed of teaching and learning methods by user friendly and clear module and award guides'. They reported that in their opinion modules had 'clearly articulated assignments, and assessment attached to outcomes'. The above comments, together with the findings of student interviews demonstrate neither the students nor the QAA shared the staff's views. However, students did express concerns and these will be taken forward.

## Future developments

Following this project a detailed set of recommendations, (of which the list below is a synopsis) have been put forward:

- First year module guides to include a very brief note to inform students that certain terms/words are explained in the award and/or subject guides e.g. learning outcomes etc.
- Staff to consider very carefully the use of certain terms/words before printing guides and briefs and where possible consult a colleague
- Staff to explain key terms to students, particularly first year, when guides and briefs are given out
- Staff to carefully consider the titles of modules
- Remove information under the heading 'Assessment Criteria' in guides and replace it with a note which refers students to more detailed information on assessment in subject guides and assessment handbook
- Consider integrating assignment briefs into module guides
- Guides to include a contents page
- Include a cover sheet for guides
- Continue staff development on learning outcomes and assessment criteria
- Appropriate staff to reconsider the sequence of information and suitability of paper colour, typeface and size etc.
- Place module guides and assignment briefs online to support and perhaps eventually replace printed copies

[The above article is an edited version of a much longer and more detailed report. Staff wishing to read the original report should contact the author.]

## References

Allan, J. (1996) *Design for Learning*. University of Wolverhampton.

Baume, D. (1993) *Course Handbooks: Key Questions*. New Academic, Vol. 2, No. 2 pp. 4–6.

Bochner, D. Gibbs, G. & Wisker, G. (1995) *Teaching More Students - Supporting More Students*. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Campbell, C. P. (1999) *Instructional Materials: their preparation and evaluation*. Journal of European Industrial Training, Vol. 23 No.2, pp. 55–107.

- Campbell, C. P. (2000) *A cost effective procedure for adapting instructional materials*. Education + Training, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 101–114.
- Carew-Kingsley, A. (1993) *Guide to practical assignment writing*. Business Education Today, Oct.–Nov., pp. 42–43.
- Craig, J & Bevington, W (1989) *Working with Graphic Designers*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications.
- Garber, M. (2000) *To limms divine, burbs are for borons*. Times Higher Education Supplement, July 7, i 1443, p. 18(l).
- Holsgrove, G. J. Lanphear, J. H. & Ledingham, I. McA. (1998) *Study Guides: an essential student learning tool in an integrated curriculum [I.]* Medical Teacher, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 99–103
- Journeaux, J (1995) Modularity and the Visual Arts: Fine Art.- The Student Experience in Buss, D (Ed.) *The Impact of Modularity on Art & Design in Higher Education*. Exeter: University of Plymouth.
- Kinnell, F (1995) *The Student Experience* in Buss, D (Ed.) *The Impact of Modularity on Art & Design in Higher Education*. Exeter: University of Plymouth.
- Pallet, A (1995) Year I of Modularity at Staffordshire University in Buss, D (Ed.) *The Impact of Modularity on Art & Design in Higher Education*. Exeter: University of Plymouth.
- Plain English Campaign (2000a) *How to write reports in plain English*. New Mills, High Peak <<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/reportguide.html>> (accessed 29 March 2001)
- Plain English Campaign (2000b) *The A to Z of Alternative Words*. . New Mills, High Peak <<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/A-Z.html>> (accessed 29 March 2001)
- Plain English Campaign (2001) Examples of Gobbledygook . New Mills, High Peak <<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/exarnples>> (accessed 29 March 2001)
- Race, P. & Brown, S. (1998) *The Lecturer's Toolkit*. London: Kogan Page.
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000) *Handbook for academic review*. Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000) *Subject Review Report University of Wolverhampton Art and Design*. Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- University of Wolverhampton School of Art & Design (1999) *Subject Review, Art & Design Self Assessment Document*. University of Wolverhampton.
- University of Wolverhampton School of Art & Design (2000a). *Printmaking Subject Guide 2000/2001*. University of Wolverhampton Press.
- University of Wolverhampton School of Art & Design (2000b) *Combined Awards: Award Handbook 2000/2001*. University of Wolverhampton Press.
- University of Wolverhampton School of Art & Design (2000c) *School of Art & Design Assessment Handbook for Students and Staff* University of Wolverhampton.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beckett, F. (1998) *New Statesman*. Nov 13, vl 27 i4411 p XXIV(I).

Corlett, S. (2000) *Forthcoming Legislation on Disability in Higher Education: the technology implications*. Disability Information Systems in Higher Education. [www.disinhe.ac.uk/library/article.asp?id=29](http://www.disinhe.ac.uk/library/article.asp?id=29) (published 10 April 2000, accessed 29 March 2001)

Disability Information Systems in Higher Education (1998) *Enabling Technologies*. [www.disinhe.ac.uk/library/chapter.asp?id=88](http://www.disinhe.ac.uk/library/chapter.asp?id=88) (published 14 October 1998, accessed 29 March 2001)

Cunningsworth, A. (1991) *Evaluating teachers' guides*. Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 128–139.  
Ellington, H. & Race P. (1993), *Producing Teaching Materials*. London: Kogan Page.

Farah, B. N. & Higby M. A. (1995) *Students' perceptions of teaching formats and teaching aids*. *Education for Information*, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 349–359.

Forsyth, I. Jolliffe, A. & Stevens, D. (1995) *Delivering A Course: Practical strategies for Teachers, Lecturers and Trainers*. London: Kogan Page.

Forsyth, I. Jolliffe, A. & Stevens D. (1996), *Planning A Course: Practical strategies for Teachers, Lecturers and Trainers*. London: Kogan Page.

Haralainbos, M. & Holbom, M. (1991) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. London: Harper Collins.

Laidlaw, J. M. & Harden, R. M. (1990) *seat is..... a study guide?*. *Medical Teacher*, Vol. 12, pp. 7–12.

Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Rowntree, D. (1986) *Teaching Through Self Instruction*. London: Kogan Page.

Rowntree, D. (1994) *Preparing Materials for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning*. London: Kogan Page

Zapf, H (1995) *A Few Notes on Legibility of Typefaces*.  
<<http://www.icce.rug.nl/erikjan/bluefuzz/David-Kindersley/David-Kindersley/node3.html>>

# Appendix 1

## SAD STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE MODULE GUIDES & ASSIGNMENT BRIEFS

The School of Art and Design is currently reviewing module guides and assignment briefs and would value your contribution in this process. Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire.

MODULE CODE: \_\_\_\_\_

MODULE TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

1. When you were introduced to the module guide did you experience any of the following?

too little information	yes/no (please circle)
too much information	yes/no
misleading information	yes/no
difficulties with terminology	yes/no
format unclear	yes/no
difficulties with typesize	yes/no
difficulties with typeface	yes/no

Comments:

2. When referring to the assignment briefs in this module did you experience any of the following?

too little information	yes/no
too much information	yes/no
misleading information	yes/no
difficulties with terminology	yes/no
format unclear	yes/no
difficulties with typesize	yes/no
difficulties with typeface	yes/no

Comments:

3. What do you like about the module guide?

4. What do you like about this module's assignment brief(s)?

5. Do these documents clearly explain the relationship between assessment criteria and outcomes?      yes/no/unsure (please circle)

6. Is there anything that would make the module guide/assignment briefs easier to use?      yes/no (please circle)    *if 'yes' please list below*

**We are planning a number of group discussions to address the issues raised in this questionnaire. If you are interested in taking part please enter your name here:**