

Interactive Media at the University of Western England

The Situation

This video case study is part of a three year consortium project that is looking at Group Work Assessment in Media Production. Six higher education institutions have been involved in recording their method of assessing student groups involved in different areas of media production.

Seth Giddings: I mean, in terms of the demands on what... I'd like to have seen it a little bit more closely related to reading... you're actually working on some quite sophisticated ideas about interactivity, but it isn't kind of backed up theoretically, which is something you need to think about, particularly for the final project, that you need to do a little more work for... In terms of the pilot, I think... [fades out].

[Music sting]

Seth Giddings: The objectives for the module I suppose work on a number of levels. There's the over all objective that we have for all the production modules, which is to see and use the process of making media as a kind of critical tool in its own right, so the idea is not to teach necessarily vocational skills but to get an understanding of the techniques, the technicalities of making media, but also to address the conventions of particular media forms through production, so for interactive media we look specifically at the whole idea of interactivity itself, the kind of hyper and interactivity [ph], questioning the extent to which it does herald new media forms, you know, brave new worlds.

Phil Hargreaves: If your technical ability isn't quite as good because the main part of this module is actually theory, not production, then we'll say, try and get somebody, a technical wizard in your group to handle that side of things. But people aren't missing out because of that, because everybody's been taken to the same level in the taught sessions anyway.

Seth Giddings: The process of forming groups is pretty informal and ad hoc really. As far as possible we like the students to kind of cluster together around a set of shared ideas or set of interests. Obviously more often than not that involves a group of friends who decide what they might have in common but we have seminars with kind of brainstorming sessions where the students come up with as many different ideas as they possibly can and then we discuss some of those in more detail and I perhaps identify ones I think are particularly imaginative or promising and then... so identify the students who are interested and who have come up with those ideas. Perhaps people who are talking about similar sets of ideas suggests they speak to each other and then if they don't coalesce into groups of their own

accord it's then a question of going round individually and suggesting that they perhaps talk to each other.

Chris (student): I think three is a magic number when it comes to working in groups because there's something about four where people tend to pair off, whereas three, two people always feel the responsibility of bringing a third person in and so it works as a group, whereas any number larger than that tends to split off and you get two people who want to share an idea, the other two share a different one and so they feel strength in their different ideas, but it actually, rather than helping the group actually pulls it apart, whereas three, you always have to talk about it.

Seth Giddings: One of the reasons that we don't... we aren't too prescriptive about the way they organise themselves as groups I think is due to the nature of the particular media that they're using. In making a web site or CD ROM, there aren't the set roles that there might be with for example video production, you know, director, camera person and so on, and again, partly due to the fact that it's such a new medium and such a diverse... there's such a diverse range of projects they could do from sort of children's projects through to Havant grade interactive novels or game based projects, but the lines between the different roles are so blurred. I've been teaching on the module for a number of years and I think in the first couple of years there did seem to be the students who weren't so confident with using computers were perhaps disproportionately female but by no means exclusively female, but over the last few years there doesn't seem to be any real difference. If students have their own laptops with their own copies of the software and are working at home confidently, they're just as likely to be female as male.

Hazel (student): Well me and Rhea were going to work together and then we decided that we wanted to work with someone else 'cause it would make it better because we wanted to work in a three, and then Chris was working in a four and also he wanted to work in a smaller group and we thought it would be good to have a boy in the group as well, get a bit of male influence, you know...

Seth Giddings: I suppose just this year I've noticed certain changes in relation to the kind of backgrounds of the students or the context of the students, primarily around money really. The amount of time that students seem to have to spend working and a number... a couple of groups have collapsed due to students having difficulties and leaving the course, which through talking to other students, financial matters seem to have been part of that.

Seth Giddings: Group working isn't explicitly taught as part of the module and largely we tend to leave the groups to organise themselves and to develop their own working methods. What we ask them to do is perhaps reflect on their group work, so partly through workshop time I will actually discuss, just to check that the groups are working effectively and that each of them is kind of pulling their weight and they're all happy with what they're doing. Strategies for getting them to reflect on their group work, I suppose the main one is getting them to keep a work book, which is a record of the kind of theoretical issues they're dealing with, the other web sites, games, CD ROMs that they're looking at, a diary of the kinds of

resources that they need to draw on, what they've been reading, and also the kind of working method that they've developed, the decisions they've made, the kind of strategies they have for drawing up storyboards, deciding and making decisions, all that has to be recorded in a book, so they are asked to think about that as it's going along.

Chris (student): The tutors do have a responsibility to make sure that everybody in the group is working and they should make it clear at the beginning of a project that if someone is not working, that they're approachable and there are certain things that can be done, so for that person to be ejected from the group.

Rhia (student): You know, everyone's got a lot of work to do, you don't need to be doing extra because other people can't be bothered...

Hazel (student): And also this module is actually worth 30 credits, so that's like, that's quite a hefty weighting for a module within like the final year and our final year is weighted 75%, so if you start letting people down in this module then you're kind of affecting their future in that sense, because your final classification is going to be actually affected by that, so I mean that's... another thing of being in the final year, you can now start taking that on board a lot more, kind of... it's got to...this is like, your future.

Seth Giddings: The monitoring of group progress again is rather informal, other than through assessment points, formative assessment points. I tend to basically take soundings in the workshops, walk round, ask how they're getting on and obviously keep an eye if certain group members aren't turning up repeatedly I will ask you know, have you been in touch with them? You know, are they working, keeping up with the work? Have you been in touch? At the start of the year we encouraged students to swap phone numbers, email addresses, and by and large that works. There are times when that does break down and again I do try and encourage the students to let me know if there's a problem as early as possible. Occasionally we don't hear about it until after an assessment point when suddenly we get a student saying you know, my group didn't do any work on this, so then we have to try and deal with that.

There are four assessment points on the module, and the sequencing of these assessment points is designed to take them through the process of generating their project and then reflecting on interactive media production at the end. The first assessment is a proposal so their initial ideas as a group for their project. This is handed in, it's something... it's written down, it's diagrams, it includes reference to other material they're looking at, theoretical material, other interactive projects that they've looked at. This then sets them up to... the feedback from that proposal then goes towards making a pilot project which demonstrates, well it asks them to initially set out their ideas in actually using Flash or Dream Weaver as an interactive project and it also sets them a certain technical standard. There's a minimum set of technical requirements that they have to fulfill for the pilot project. These are quite basic, it's just to show that they're all at a certain level, you know, the minimum level we expect for them to be able to make a working project. There's then quite a gap and then really that's it until the final project gets handed in, so any feedback then is on the level of

group tutorials, in the workshops, and then the group project is handed in. They then have a couple of weeks and then there's the only individual assessment on the project, which... they write an evaluation, which is based on... they evaluate the work of another group, they don't evaluate their own work. The evaluations of their own work are included in the work book. We used to ask them to evaluate their own work but it was felt that particularly just after the project had been handed in, they were so close to the work they had no kind of critical distance from it and it actually works very well asking them to evaluate someone else's work 'cause it's close enough to their own, you know, they've all been through the same stages and they can look at... we ask them to look at how the ideas have been realised, the navigational structure, you know, the narrative or game structure of it.

Rhia (student): I think a lot of it's going to be weighed on the project itself, 'cause I mean that's what we've been working towards, but I think obviously the other grades that we get for the pilot... there's obviously a reason for splitting the module into three assessments, so I think you are being marked at all stages for all the different skills that you're putting in, which is good.

Seth Giddings: The pilot project and the proposal are both 15% of the final grade. The final project itself is 50% and the evaluation is 20%. So obviously the final project is the most substantial aspect of the grade with the evaluation weighted to signal it's kind of importance, you know, as a theoretical piece. The evaluation is the only individual piece of work, so 20% of their final grade is for themselves as individuals, the rest is all group work. So the grades for the first two, the pilot and the proposals are, that's 15%, that's quite low, but it is quite useful to give them an indication of obviously how they're getting on, but also it does ask the students to kind of focus quite early on on the assessment criteria, so a number of them this year for example were unhappy with their grade because they hadn't realised the work book was so important, you know, so that gave us a chance to emphasise the importance of the process, the working process to the final project. You know, it's not just the final products that we're interested in, in many ways it's... we're more interested in the process that they went through to reach that final project.

At all stages we encourage an awareness of the role of process in the way that they are assessed. There is perhaps a tendency with some students to... they often want to see the project itself, the finished project as the be all and end all of the module, so we do, through the assessment points and through feedback, through group tutorials, we do have to constantly assert, primarily through the device of the workbook, how important process is.

All production work on the Culture and Media Studies degrees is double marked. I take two workshops and take the lectures. There is another member of staff, a visiting lecturer who takes another two workshops, so I second mark his work. As a VL he's not allowed to second mark, so another member of staff is also involved in production work, second marks my group.

If the group of students aren't happy with their mark, and they usually complain to me first as a workshop tutor or the module leader, generally we just sit down, talk through the

feedback sheet that they've been given, talk through the separate assessment criteria. The feedback sheets give quite a lot of scope for... the way they're set out is that we list what the students have achieved and then what they could do to improve, so obviously it's what they could do to improve... they should be quite clearly laid out on the sheet where we think... where the shortcomings were and generally after that they tend to be happy. I don't think on this module I've ever had anyone, any group who's kind of gone away still feeling that they've been unfairly treated. And then by the time they do the final project because of these earlier stages of assessment, I think they're all pretty clear as to what's expected of them, so I don't think we've had any disputes over final grades.

I've found on this module that having very clear learning objectives and assessment criteria and for these to be set out clearly in the handbook has helped a great deal... I think it's helped the students a great deal. They don't always look at them straight away but after the early stages of assessment we go back over them and I think by the time they do the final project, they're very clear about what is expected of them.

Chris (student): If the lecturers were to think well this is a group project so it's quite difficult because of that, then we'll set them an easy task, they wouldn't be doing a good job. The fact that it's a group project and they set a very difficult task actually makes people rise to the challenge in a better way because they know they just can't rely on other people to do other things. We've all got to you know, sort of work really hard as well.

[Music sting]

[End of programme]