

# *Imagining Futures: Solution Focused Practice in an Interdisciplinary Creative Arts Foundation Year*

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*This personal and self-reflective paper describes the development of an Arts Foundation Year module focused on employability, professionalism and social innovation and change. The module was developed over a three-year period and involves students being engaged with the university's strategic plan and 'Changemaker' ethos and investigating a range of creative solutions to global problems. The structure of the module and changes made are discussed. Evidence is provided that developing the module has led to greater student engagement and satisfaction and an improvement in success and attainment rates.*

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on the student as partner, and engagement and development in an interdisciplinary creative arts setting. It is a personal and self-reflective account of one 40 credit, year 0 module that was developed over three years and has now been embedded throughout all modules on the Integrated Foundation Year, Arts cognate at the University of Northampton (UoN). The Foundation Year at UoN is split into different cognate areas which are made up of similar disciplines; for example, the arts cognate is made up of visual arts, performing arts, lens based media and journalism degree programmes. The maxim of the University of Northampton is 'Transforming Lives; Inspiring Change' (UoN, 2020b). The module attempts to fulfil this by enabling students to: access information and research that they are interested in and passionate about; become solution focussed Changemakers of the future; develop their professional and employability skills; provide a safe space where students can explore both their ideas and themselves; and to increase individual student confidence in a wide range of areas.

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## Context

A dedicated team joined and formed the University of Northampton Foundation Study Framework (FSF) in September 2017. Three 40 credit modules had been written and validated prior to the team's arrival, and these were generic across the entire Foundation Year (fifty-degree programmes, split into three cognates; Arts; Business, Education and Social Sciences; Science and Health). The intention was for these three modules to be taught differently within the cognates in relation to the subject specific disciplines while also allowing for shared knowledge across disciplines and parity across the whole Foundation Year. The modules were designed to run one after another and to build on each other in content and knowledge in order for students to develop a substantial 'toolkit' in preparation for their undergraduate programmes. The modules were titled 'Investigating your Subject, 1, 2 and 3'. The second module, which will be discussed here, was based around the student's understanding of, and development of, their employability skills.

In 2013, the University of Northampton was designated an AshokaU Changemaker Campus - the first in the UK - based on its commitment to embedding social innovation at the centre of the curriculum (Maxwell & Irwin, 2020). The Changemaker ethos, which 'envison[s] a world where EVERY student acquires the skills, confidence, and motivation to create change for the good of all' (AshoukaU, 2020) is embedded implicitly through a series of COGS (Changemaker Outcomes for Graduate Success), which enable modules to contain a number of Changemaker learning outcomes for assessment. In addition, Northampton's ChANGE framework (Changemaker Attributes at Northampton for Graduate Employability) develops several transferable skills to support student progression beyond Higher Education (Fig. 1). There is a face-to-face Changemaker Hub that supports students with careers advice, social innovation and impact and enables students to develop and create solution focussed projects. The Changemaker Hub offers a number of certificates which allow students to progress through ideas and projects. Students can obtain three Employability+ certificates and three Changemaker Awards (bronze, silver and gold) during their time at the university.



Fig. 1 The University of Northampton Framework of Graduate Attributes (UoN, 2020a)

As well as the Changemaker ethos, the module being discussed here was also required to relate to the diverse subject disciplines within the Arts cognate including performing arts, media, film and television, journalism and a wide range of visual arts and design subjects. It was vital to make sure that all students would acquire both subject specific knowledge and transferable skills. The module as it stands has been developed over the past three years, using team reflection and student feedback.

More broadly, the ethos of the Foundation Study Framework focuses on interdisciplinary work, student belonging, and personal and academic development. Over recent years, the University of Northampton has moved away from traditional style lectures, to Active Blended Learning (ABL). The team that was engaged in 2017 all had a background in teaching, education and pedagogy and evidenced clear knowledge about workshop style classes in place of the traditional 'chalk and talk' methods. A range of teaching methods are used in the current Foundation Year provision and always focus on student-centred teaching. These methods include group and paired work, peer feedback, individual work, worksheets, online work, and the development of academic, reflective and presentation techniques. A focus within the Foundation Study Framework is to address the Every Youth Matters agenda (DFES, 2005) to allow students the chance to be 'healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, engage in decision making and positive relationships and achieve economic wellbeing' (Knight & Yorke, 2003), whilst maintaining a psychologically safe environment to enable the students to access their zone of proximal learning (Penn, 2014). Paul Ginnis (2002) points out that this safe space enables the 'conditions in which "risky" learning strategies are most likely to work'.

The nature of the 'cognate' groupings allows for a community of creatives to develop who can support, learn from, and enhance the experience of each other. This approach allows students to find common threads between their subject and others and to be able to connect and blend these threads into something new (Risner, 2015). For example: a range of idea generation techniques were demonstrated and developed, using processes from visual arts (exquisite corpse), drama (5 senses), poetry (echo poems), psychoanalysis (word association), and music (rhythm ribbon), to name a few. This enabled students to generate a variety of ideas that they could continue to work with that were not necessarily subject specific, but allowed for creative ideas to be explored, and at times these ideas were synthesised into a new idea. In addition, this approach has also assisted students to see the boundaries of their discipline and the benefits of working with others with, for example, drama and media students combining ideas, and photography and music students working collaboratively. It is hoped that these collaborations will continue among the student group during subsequent undergraduate study.

## Module Design

The module concerned was a 40-credit module running from November to February with two assessment points. The first, a written idea proposal including developmental targets and a weekly project management plan (40%), was submitted in December and allowed the students time to gather their ideas and to submit them in a format relevant for potential employment. The second, a formal professional presentation of their solution for moving towards a chosen goal, including a full project inquiry log with skills development and mid to long-term aspirations (60%). This assignment was submitted at the end of the module in February and, again, allowed students the opportunity to focus on a real-world employment and professional context.

The starting point for student project work on the module was the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are 17 goals that all UN member states agreed to work towards from over a 15-year period from 2015 to 2030 (see UN, 2020a).

The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. The 17 Goals are all interconnected, and in order to leave no one behind, it is important that we achieve them all by 2030. (UN, 2020b)

Initially, students began to investigate these goals as common threads, but as their projects developed, they were able to focus on one area in more depth. This choice gave students the chance to explore what was important to them as individuals, and enabled them to investigate wider global, personal, community based or local issues. The variety of work that has been produced over the past three years has drawn on subjects such as homelessness in Northampton, personal gender identity concerns, global waste and international cultural identity. It has allowed for discussion and debate around current trending topics, including #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. In addition, students have also been able voice that they do not want to explore something; one student once commented on their relief of not having to do work about race, just because they were black. This choice and freedom for students to find something that they are passionate about has helped them to better understand themselves, their motivations and ultimately has led to greater engagement.

The outcome of the project was focussed around a real-world employability opportunity which, again, the students decided for themselves. They were introduced to creative style interviews, funding bids through the arts council, business models and elevator pitches. The students had to present their work and ideas in a 'Dragon's Den' style approach: 'imagine the staff can invest one million pounds in your project, why is your idea the best and why should we choose you?'. This allowed the students to think about what it is that they can offer, and develop their positive traits. Like a lot of people, the Foundation students have a habit of putting themselves down, of focusing on the negative points and minimising the positives (Race, 2001); this approach forced them to focus on the positives, and where there was room for improvement, to specifically target ways in which they intended to address these both through the project and into the future.

In order to facilitate learning, the teaching and learning sessions were broken into four separate 'strands' (Investigation, Experimentation, Professionalism, and Personal Development) of between two and four hours teaching per week, over a nine-week period. This approach allowed students time to explore and develop before synthesising their learning from each strand into a coherent whole.

### ***Investigation Strand***

This strand was primarily focussed on the development of an academic 'toolkit', making links with the students specific degree subject and the expectations of studying in that subject. The first part of the project was to explore the 'issue', namely the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) they wanted to work with, and the problems and concerns that the UN intends to alleviate through this. Students developed their reading skills by utilising reading circles and 'digging down' into themes through journal articles. The reading circle uses small groups where each member focuses on one aspect of the article and feeds back to the others. It allows large amounts of complex information to be broken down into manageable chunks, while also enabling group and team collaboration. Students created reading logs, where they would summarise and explain the information they were reading, facilitating comprehension and paraphrasing of articles. The result of this was that far more students began to use journals as their first point of reference for information, rather than the internet.

Another aspect of this strand was to focus on practitioners in their discipline. Students explored ways in which their subject, their sector and other practitioners were (or were not) tackling and challenging the SDG. This allowed students to understand how other people develop their own creative work, the motivation behind it, and it helped to make these role models appear more human. For example, one student was able to be more open and honest about her mental health issues after reading the struggles that both Whitney Houston and Lady Gaga have gone through. In addition to learning about their lives and motivations, students also began to analyse the work of practitioners. They learned key terminology, analysed the mood, tone, or purpose of an artefact. They learned to critically evaluate the work they were looking at, and to write small, critical essays on it. This served to develop a variety of skills needed for students' undergraduate degrees; while only a small part of a creative degree is usually written, this work most often involves an analytical and critical essay on a practitioner, movement or context of a piece, or pieces of work. Students developed their academic 'voice', their understanding of concepts such as 'arguments' and continued to develop their skills in grammar and referencing.

The final part of this strand was designed to help students develop their understanding of themselves and their own motivations. Students had to complete two first-person written documents. One, the proposal, focussed on their ideas: what they wanted to do and why, and how they planned to execute this. It gave them a clear timeline of when and how to produce work, expectations of the project and themselves, and clear targets to develop and progress. At the end of the project, students completed a full academic reflection on the project and the process they had gone through. They were taught the differences between essays, formal and informal reflective writing and completed their work using the university's Reflective Model (UoN, 2018).

### ***Experimentation Strand***

This strand was the focal point of the students' work. It was where they began to explore their own creativity, their subject and to learn subject specific techniques and expectations. Surprisingly, however, many students struggled in this area. One reason for this is that it was here, where students most wanted to do well in relation to their chosen subjects, that the fear of failure seemed to appear. In this respect, students demonstrated a reluctance to develop and experiment in case they 'got it wrong' or 'looked foolish'. It was here that the idea of the safe space mentioned above was crucial to encourage students to 'get it wrong' and to allow the spontaneous creative play to emerge. Students developed a range of initial ideas using different techniques and began to learn the differences and similarities between their subjects. For example: all creative subjects engage in some type of log of their ideas (sketchbooks, notebooks, critiques, etc.) but these are given different names in different subjects and, although fulfilling the same function, are executed in different ways. Students could explore these differences while also thinking about what is necessary in their own area. Students were encouraged to find their own 'aesthetic' within this strand; their work should not be neutral, 'correct' or conform to a particular model. It is important that the student's own self starts to emerge through their creative work; like a signature, it is unique to them. The safe environment involved allowing students the space to explore this within themselves and to learn not to compare themselves and their way of doing things to others within the group. These sessions were primarily workshop based, allowing time for experimentation, exploration, mistakes and refinement. There were tasks that drew together people from similar disciplines - for example media and photography or visual arts groups - but others which required collaborations work between those in, e.g., journalism and music, or architecture and drama. This allowed for peer learning

to take place at regular intervals, involving peer critiques and feedback to enable learning to take place at a deeper level (Race, 2001). At the end of the sessions, time was allowed for discussions based around, 'what does this mean to me?'. This to enabled students the chance to think about how they related to different elements of the work and to see the larger purpose of the group and individual work. Finally, students were taught about self-development and documentation through annotating their work and ideas, explaining their thoughts, exploring alternative ways to do things, and developing their own work step by step. It is this strand that may have the most impact on them as they move forward in their degrees, as it is the process and documentation of ideas, thoughts and development, and not the final outcome, that leads to greater self-knowledge - and ultimately better grades.

### ***Professionalism Strand***

This strand was based around the student considering their place in the wider world: 'what is their sector?', 'where do they fit?'. Students began small scale projects exploring the creative sector, their subject area and then specific jobs and opportunities they could do on graduation. This was focussed on how to network, exploring relevant career opportunities as well as how to set up your own business and find funding opportunities. This takes place at the same time as to the University of Northampton's 'Changing Futures Week', during which all students are off timetable. Foundation Year students are supported in planning their own timetable for the week and signing up for events and workshops (e.g., trips to the Houses of Parliament, workshops on sustainable dress making, talks from art and mental health services). Students also have the opportunity to meet and work with their undergraduate programme tutors and begin to build these relationships. Students then present on what they learned through these activities, which also enables them to develop their professional presentation skills. Throughout this strand, students are also taught how to develop a professional digital presence ranging from consideration of the use of photographs online to completing a full website and blog.

### ***Personal Development***

This strand embedded the Employability+ awards and the Changemaker certificates mentioned above and was vital to enable students' holistic development (Fallon in Murray, 2008). Through a series of online tasks (Changemaker Hub, 2020), students explored their own transferable skills and development. They created action plans based around the skills that they had identified in the professionalism strand and their own personal skills assessment and compared this with the Myers-Briggs based personality test (NERIS Analytics, 2020). In this way, students were able to set targets for themselves and explore a variety of ways in which they could develop. These could be as simple as visiting the PAT (Pets as Therapy) dogs onsite, or more sustained initiatives such as volunteering in the local community. Targets were addressed that focussed on short, medium and long-term goals and aspirations and this action plan linked to the first assessment of the written project proposal. Throughout the sessions, students were taught a range of social innovation techniques, including elevator pitches, empathy mapping, cause and effect trees and rich pictures. These supported the students in their project development, from identifying initial ideas, motivations and reasons behind the project, to thinking about solutions, who would benefit and how the project could be realised. This was summarised and synthesised into a business model canvas, which consolidated the project and allowed the students to gain their Changemaker Bronze Certificate. Another focus of all the sessions, was sharing ideas and work. Students were encouraged to present to the group on regular occasions, which allowed for

enhanced discussions, improved group dynamics, presentation preparation and greater student confidence.

### **Participants and Outcomes**

Over the three years this module has been running, cognate numbers have been in the region of 30-50 students, with 20-30% being black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME). Students come from both A-Level and BTEC routes and a large number are the first generation in their family to attend university. Some students have not gained the results they wanted to enter the three-year degree programme, whilst a number want the extra year to enable them to transition and gain confidence. The majority of students are under 20, with a few being between 20-25 years of age. In addition, some may have the skills in other areas and want to develop a stronger portfolio before progressing to undergraduate study. The University of Northampton student population is largely 'non-traditional' and students come with mid-low-end entry grade profiles (Maxwell & Irwin, 2020). This means that Foundation Year students can be accepted with very low or no qualifications at the start.

Since 2017, student satisfaction for the module discussed above has been consistent at around 85% positive. Module evaluation forms are submitted through the central university system and feedback is broken into anonymised data and comments. Anonymous comments from this context largely suggest satisfaction with the module, including the following: 'The Changemaker group lectures have been good to break up from the general format of normal lectures, giving a more casual environment'; 'The module has been helpful, improving my presentation skills and improving my confidence'; 'It is clear and informative to a great degree and has given a nice gateway into my specific industry and how it works'; 'I know that I'm on the right path for reaching what I want out of this course'; 'So many things to learn from this module, many opportunities, exposure to new skills, networking connections'; 'I found the module incredibly interesting, allowing me to explore a theme I'm passionate about to a new level of depth and developed personal and professional skills'; and finally, 'I am not sure how the module could ever be improved'.

The grades students have achieved on the module have increased over the past three years. The pass rate has remained well over 80%, with over 50% of the students who have failed the module being those who did not submit work for other modules and who failed the entire year. The high grades (As and Bs) have also improved, from 20% in 2017-18, to 24% in 2018-19 and to 33% in 2019-20, thus evidencing an upward trend correlating to the development of the module during this period.

### **Moving Forward**

This year, the Foundation Study Framework has been revalidated and from September 2020 will be the Integrated Foundation Year (IFY). The year has been extended to all degree programmes at the university, excepting those that opt out due to challenges around external bodies' approval. The year will now contain four 'cognates': arts; science and health; development, education and law; and business and management. The original three 40 credit modules have been rewritten into two 40 credit and two 20 credit modules, which include a subject specific module and a negotiated learning project.

For the arts, this means that the above design can be spread out and implemented across the year and all modules, allowing for a greater depth of investigation to occur. The exploring

yourself and your sector will come first in the year which will allow students to think about their place in the university. Hopefully, this format will give students greater clarity on their chosen subject and enable them to consider their choice of degree early on. The Employability+ award will be embedded within the first module, so students can see the relevance of the skills they are learning, in both their subject and their longer career goals. The solution focused Changemaker certificate will be embedded in the second term, which should allow students the chance to explore the topics and issues connected with global concerns in greater depth. This will then lead into the final negotiated project, where students will decide their own themes and topics, but will have a greater knowledge of social impact and innovation as a starting point. The UN Sustainable Development Goals will be retained as the overarching theme, not only on account of the points raised above, but also in relation to the University of Northampton's newly launched plan to be the 'world's most socially innovative university' (UoN, 2020c).

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