**Research Skills Immersive Induction: Preparing Widening Participation First Year Students for Undergraduate Art School Study**

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**Abstract**

Much has been written about the necessity for induction programmes that help students

bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education. Oftentimes the language around

this issue focuses on perceived student deficit rather than institutional shortcomings, not

least in discussion of students from Widening Participation backgrounds. The purpose of this

study was to use action research to critically examine aspects of the bridging programme I

helped deliver in my role within an art school Widening Participation programme, and

investigate the impact it was having on students entering higher education from high school.

My action research project aimed to address the disparity between student preparedness

and institutional expectations and explore improvements that could be made at institutional

level to smooth students’ transition to art school undergraduate study. This article outlines

my findings on the impact of this project, drawing on thematic analysis of qualitative and

quantitative data collected through participant evaluation forms and interviews conducted

with former students on the Transitions Week programme, as well as reflections gathered

from my project research diary.

**Keywords**

Widening Participation, art school, bridging programmes, research skills, immersive induction, secondary to tertiary

**Introduction**

The focus of this study was an art school widening participation (WP) programme offering free courses, activities and support to high school pupils who are interested in studying creative courses at university. Eligible pupils either:

Live in a ‘priority postcode’ area

Attend one of 37 ‘target schools’

Are care experienced

Are a young carer

Are estranged from their family

Have refugee status or are seeking asylum

One key intervention within this programme is *Transitions Week*, a 5-day studio-based activity for eligible incoming undergraduate students. The activity takes place before regular matriculation and aims to ‘get the engine running’ before students start their degree. After an initial ice-breaker activity, students undertake a practical brief for the rest of the week, ‘*City, Site, Context’* which aims to generate multi-disciplinary responses to geographical sites assigned to each student in locations close to the studio. Students are given a unique GPS code which leads them to their location, where they spend thirty minutes collecting primary research in as many formats at possible; drawing, writing, photography, video, sound, collecting debris etc. On return to the studio, they supplement their findings with secondary research pertaining to their location, using online tools such as Google, Wikipedia, the National Library of Scotland’s (NLS) Digital Map archive and Canmore’s historical database. The combination of findings in both primary and secondary research is then used by students to develop visual responses which are presented at a group critique on day five.

Recognising that students’ engagement with secondary research had been varied in previous iterations, I devised an Action Research study that would investigate the impact of introducing a greater level of ‘scaffolding’ (Bruner 1978) and immersion to this aspect of the activity. As I will show within this paper, there seems to be a disparity in the practical integration of research at secondary and tertiary level creative study. My Action Research project aimed to address this disparity and explore improvements that could be made at institutional level to smooth students’ transition to tertiary level education.

**Rationale**

In previous iterations of *Transitions Week,* I identified a recurring phenomenon of students struggling to engage with the secondary research aspects of the activity. I was eager to explore ways of improving this to better support students in making a smooth transition into first year study.

As Orr (2017) has stated, definitions of what constitutes ‘research’ at art school and guidance for its integration with the physical making of work are rarely made clear. Fluency in the process of studio-based research at art school often relies on some prior, tacitly learned experience (Orr 2017, p.115). On reflection it became clear that *Transitions Week* had not adequately ‘scaffolded’ (Bruner 1978) the research requirements of the brief, to address the students’ uncertainty around this part of their practice. Students were not provided with IT facilities within the studio, and, having not yet matriculated, couldn’t access such resources within the Library. Online resources could only be accessed through personal devices. There were limited printing facilities within the studio, which severely impacted students’ ability to evidence the scope of their research. This messy, unstructured method of supporting students’ research was having a negative impacting on engagement, creating a ‘teaching failure’ (Norton 2009, 70) I identified as a possible catalyst for improvement through Action Research. Through an ‘immersive induction’ (Turner et al. 2017) into undergraduate research skills, I hoped to improve students’ engagement and sense of preparedness for degree level study.

**Research Questions**

This study was designed to address the following research question:

*What impact will a scaffolded and immersive research skills activity have on Widening Participation students’ sense of preparedness for HE-Level study at art school?*

And subsequently:

*To what extent will library and IT access demonstrably improve student engagement with secondary research within this learning activity?*

*In what ways do WP students, past and present, feel the Transitions Week activity eases their journey from high school to art school?*

**Literature review**

Since the publication of the Dearing report (Dearing and Garrick 1997) and mainstreaming of the Widening Participation agenda within HE, much has been written about the importance of pre-matriculation induction activities in helping students bridge the gap between Secondary and Tertiary level study. In their paper for Scotland’s QAA Enhancement Themes initiative, Land & Gordon (2008) state that “Engaging students from the outset in research-type activities…[is] likely to improve their transition experience, be it from schools or from other educational backgrounds.” (62). More recently the Scottish Framework for Fair Access toolkit classified ‘Extended Induction’ (Scottish Framework for Fair Access, 2019) as a key example of positive impact intervention on incoming undergraduate students.

By example, Turner et al (2017, 1) investigated such an induction activity that targeted “essential aspects of the transition experience e.g. social integration, academic literacies and the sense of preparation for HE.” Within an art school context, these ‘academic literacies’ would incorporate studio practice and practical research competencies. As previous Transitions Week events had shown me, incoming students may need additional support in building preparedness for the specific academic pressures of Higher Education (HE) study. Lowe & Cook (2003) suggest this requirement exists due in part to the fact that approaches to learning in high schools are not reflective of the requirements of HE study. Before considering further socio-economic barriers WP students may face in preparing themselves for their degree, there is clearly a ‘lack’ in Secondary education providing adequate skills in independent study that would allow students to transition into tertiary education more easily. Taken within an art school context, students entering HE study without adequate preparedness could be particularly at risk, given the “centrality of ‘ambiguity’ to the creative process.” (Vaughn et al 2008).

A successful transitional activity, then, would effectively mimic the specifics of art school studio-based learning, and attempt to eradicate some of the ambiguities around academic practice within it. Susan Orr (2017) describes art school studio-based learning as being in itself a mimic of professional practice. It could be argued, therefore that an effective art school transitional induction would give students some prior immersion into similar practices that will not only prepare them for HE study, but also provide lasting impact into their careers beyond art school. Neil & Reid (2011) describe an art school transitional activity in their paper *Accessing and Decoding Communities of Cultural Capital.* However, rather than providing a mimic of contemporary art school studio-learning practices, this activity involved a study trip to Prato, Italy where students took part in a series of site-visits and lectures on the Italian Renaissance. Though at pains to assure that it was “not simply a two week course in Tuscany to give working class students exposure to high culture” Neil & Reid (2011), it is difficult to see this event as an effective method of helping students navigate the specific gap in the academic requirements of secondary education and contemporary art school study.

As Orr, Yorke and Blair (2014) state, art school students often experience an “initial bewilderment with creative pedagogy.” This bewilderment is not exclusive to students entering creative HE study. Turner et al. (2017) and Lowe & Cooke (2003) have highlighted the wide-reaching challenges faced by students on the journey from secondary to tertiary education, encountering a storm front between two pedagogical zones, with varying and conflicting requirements. Lowe & Cook (2003) and Smith (2004) show how the looming spectre of performance league tables may be pressurising UK secondary schools into strategically aligning their teaching to specific assessment criteria of examinations, what Winterson & Russ (2009) term “externally determined syllabus”. Often this is to the detriment of pupils developing the self-efficacy (Bandura 1977; Chemers et al 2001; Turner et al. 2017) required to become engaged with their area of study in ways beyond the surface and strategic, and inhibiting opportunity for self-directed ‘deeper’ learning (Marton & Säljö 1976).

On the other side of this storm, incoming art school students are often confronted with unfamiliar ‘pedagogies of ambiguity’ Orr (2017) where self-direction, creative exploration and divergent learning paths are central features of the learner journey. This would come as a shock to students used to the ‘How-to-do-it’ approach (Smith 2004, 90) they may have encountered in the final stages of their secondary education. Far from being simply a difficult period of adjustment, Turner et al. (2017) have shown how Widening Participation students are often acutely at risk of withdrawal due to mismatches in preparedness for HE study.

In their submission to Land and Gordon (2008), The Glasgow School of Art stated that “Art school pedagogical strategies are modelled on the real-world behaviours of professional practice and research in the creative arts.” In much the same way as art school studio-based pedagogy functions as a mimic of the real-life processes of creative industries in the context beyond university (Biggs and Tang, 2011), transitions initiatives to prepare students should perhaps act as immersive clones of the art school learning environment to help students develop strategies to navigate its “signature pedagogies” (Orr 2017). As Cleaver, Lintern and McLinden (2018, 5) state, for incoming students, the HE learning environment is saturated with “unfamiliar paradigms, language, research approaches and methods and understandings of ‘validity’’. This is no less prevalent at art school, where even universal terms such as ‘Research’ are infused with their own specialist meaning, that is expected to be tacitly understood (Orr 2017, 93).

As a key component of art school learning, yet not easy to define within or outwith it’s context, the research process at art school certainly stands out as probable stumbling block for students entering HE from Secondary Education, particularly students eligible for WP support due to existing modes of disadvantage. Following Orr’s (2017) assertion that art school research processes manifest in ways that defy easy explanation, it would also stand to reason that they should form a key part of immersive induction activities, since the ‘real life’ experiential of undertaking these research processes may be the only effective way of getting students to understand them. Land and Gordon (2008), state that studio-based learning:

includes gathering of contextual, conceptual and material-based information. From this baseline of data, questions are formed, problems are articulated and issues identified as part of the development of the individual's knowledge (38).

At art school, good studio practice is an effective mixture of physical ‘making’ **and** undertaking personal, self-directed research within areas of interest that link directly to the students work and inform its direction. Orr, Yorke and Blair (2014) propose that the interplay between these elements could be defined as the ‘content’ of a studio-based course of study. For an immersive induction, familiarisation with these essential processes would be vital to ensure that students were at least partly fluent in the language and practice of their discipline (Turner et al. 2017).

The rationale for ‘getting it right’ for Transitions students is clear. Lowe & Cook (2003, 53) explain the consequences for the health, wellbeing and retention of students whose ‘abrupt shift’ from school to HE is not properly mitigated. Orr (2017), perhaps extending the architectural metaphor of Bruner’s (1978) ‘scaffold’, suggests ‘learning bridges” as a means to help students traverse these shifts; unsupported vacuums between their current educational experiences and the ‘threshold concepts’ they are expected to quickly adapt to when beginning their studies at art school. Unfortunately for these students, Orr (2017) suggests that many of these threshold concepts revolve around a “tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty” and that this is built through “multiple little leaps into the not-known” (Orr 2017, 63). Perhaps less of a ‘learning bridge’ and more of a ‘pedagogic diving board’ into the ambiguous curriculum below. What’s missing from this proposed learning-bridge is the provision of fundamental strategies that allow students to go beyond simply tolerating an ambiguous curriculum. A bridging activity that immerses students in a studio learning environment, and properly scaffolds the processes by which students engage with the pedagogies of ambiguity (Orr 2017) should provide a more effective way of bridging this crucial point of their educational journey.

**Research Methods and Methodology**

This study was comprised of a five-stage Action Research cycle (Mills 2011, 16) through which a flaw is identified, an improvement is planned, tested in action, observed and then reflected upon to inform planning for future improvements in further cycles. I was reassured by Kember’s (2000) characterisation of these ‘cycles’ as imperfect journeys, with deviations and side-tracks along the way.

I was an Active Participant Observer (Mills 2011), using a research diary to collect naturalistic observations (Norton 2009) allowing me to experience the natural ebb and flow of the students’ engagement first-hand. I took a mixed-methods approach to data collection research for this project; quantitative and qualitative data was collected through pre and post-event questionnaires, the research diary, and semi-structured interviews with former students. Thematic analysis was used to decipher common themes within the qualitative data, and key takeaways from the quantitative results informed visual representations (Norton 2009, 93) in bar graph form. On day one students completed a self-evaluation form of Likert Scale and open-ended questions around their sense of HE preparedness, apprehensions, and experiences of using research within their practice. A similar questionnaire was distributed on day five, with linked questions that allowed them to reflect on changes over the week. I hoped to establish the ways in which the students felt the event had benefited them, alleviated anxieties, and impacted their conception of research within their practice. Thematic analysis examined the written responses at a semantic level (Braun & Clarke 2006), subjectively interpreting recurring themes, and grouping statements into clusters. These clusters could then be interpreted further in relation to the research questions and provide possible avenues for subsequent cycles of research.

Observations of students’ engagement collected in the research diary were supplemented with reflections from tutorials and group critique. From these reflections I was able to infer further themes, identifying categories of student engagement with the task. In the interest of fairness, particularly given the nature of the activity as access course for disadvantaged young people, I decided against any ‘positivist’ methodologies that would privilege one part of the group receiving an intervention and not the other.

The project was aided greatly by the student mentor programme within the school. Our Student mentors are undergraduate students who have previously received WP support through activities such as portfolio courses and *Transitions Week* before they began their studies. Their role involves assisting teaching activities and acting as ‘role-models’ providing insight into their own journey to art school. For this study, the mentor’s voice was vital, providing insight on their experience as *Transitions Week* students, and as classroom assistants within the latest cycle. Their reflections were gathered through semi-structured interviews, audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised. As “expert holder[s] of knowledge” (Orr 2017, 37) the students’ feedback led to highly constructive, practical discussions of how the *Transitions Week* event could be further modified and improved upon in future cycles. This ‘decentred’ (Orr 2017), social constructivist tutor/student dialogue could be of obvious benefit to students in the conception of their own learning, but will also directly inform curriculum planning for future years.

**Research design**

This research was designed around a cycle of examining, planning, testing, observing, reflecting, implementing. This cycle is a constructive, cumulative process, whereby improvements are built on the foundations of good previous practice. The idea was not to completely deconstruct a learning activity in pursuit of enhancements, but to focus on impactful interventions on areas where failures had been clearly identified. A learning activity such as *Transitions Week* has its own fragile eco-system, with elements that require a kind of harmonious balance to maintain themselves. If too much emphasis is placed on overhauling one particular aspect, it could have unintended negative aspects on another.

**The Intervention**

The intervention centred on scaffolding students’ integration of secondary research into their *City, Site, Context* project. Early matriculation was arranged, enabling students to receive access to learning resources such as the library, on-campus Wi-Fi and IT facilities. Through this I was able to provide students with a digital induction session with Library staff, familiarising them with the IT facilities, and providing them with printing credit to allow use of on-site photocopiers. I was also able to provide an in-depth, practical demo of relevant digital research resources the students could use to further investigate their site. These resources were chosen based on their accessibility and potential for helping students open up avenues of research, be it thematic, historical, cultural, social and so on. The resources included:

A bespoke interactive Google Map containing each students GPS site

GeoHack and WikiMapia – content aggregators that geographically link sources such a Wikipedia articles and mapping platforms to GPS information you provide.

Geograph: a photographic resource that gathers open source images by GPS location

National Library of Scotland’s Georeferenced Maps: high resolution overlays of maps dating back as far as the 1700’s

 SCRAN; Historic Environment Scotland’s online research resource.

I guided the students stage-by-stage through the process of using their GPS information to link varying routes of contextual research on their given location. Basic internet search strategies were also demonstrated, using exemplar site locations, to illustrate how information discovered from one resource could be used to dig for further findings within another other, taking the research on a journey that provided a richness of sources for creative exploration back in the studio. Finally, students were given a demonstration of how to visually gather their research, through printouts and photocopying, and given tips on how to use this material within their studio experimentations throughout the week.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

Quantitative Data

From Likert responses to evaluation forms on Day one and five of the activity, grouped bar charts were generated to visualise variance in responses to key questions, pre and post intervention (See Figure 3). Displaying responses side by side provides a visual ‘audit’ of impact (Mills, 2011) and certain patterns could be inferred. The main pattern was an overall shift to towards the highest level of ‘agreement’ within questioning. There was an increase of 31% of pupils ‘strongly agreeing’ to the statement “*I am confident in my self-directed study skills*” and a 34.5% increase in pupils stating they strongly agreed to the statement *"I know that research is an important part of my studio practice".* The largest shift was seen in the statement *“I am feeling confident about beginning my studies at art school”* where zero participants had strongly agreed on day one, and an overwhelming majority of 89.7% strongly agreed with this sentence on the final day.

## Qualitative data

Also within the evaluation forms was a series of free text question boxes.

Through thematic analysis, several themes were discerned that could be traced as signifiers of impact between the Day 1 and Day 5 responses

Day One Questionnaire

There was a high prevalence of language describing the “gap” or “jump” to HE study and anxieties

around social integration with the student body. These concerns are common and have formed the core mission objective of *Transitions Week* activity over previous years. The question “How were you encouraged to use research in creative work you made at high school?” revealed themes around previous research experience that was either disconnected from creative practice or used arbitrarily as a ‘starting’ task. This recurred several times, using very similar language and seemed to point towards research processes that sit slightly outwith the ongoing production of practical work, solely as some kind of preamble before the main business of making art. This again was reassuringly aligned to the aims and objectives of Transitions Week, particularly with the interventions planned for the iteration the pupils were about to experience.

Day Five Questionnaire

On day five students expressed an improved senseof preparedness for their course and the social aspects of university life, suggesting the week had positive impact here. There were still some anxieties around course structure and orientation, though these would be dealt with in course inductions. There was a thematic prevalence of pupils stating improvement with their research practices, both within their learning strategies and on a logistical/practical level. Overall, the responses could correlate with, and show marked improvement

to the themes gleaned from the day one responses.

## Research Diary

One key theme that emerged in the diary over the week, was of secondary research ‘overpowering’ students’ practical investigations in the studio:

*students who could confidently work through the brief without issue on day one might get distracted by day two research and feel obliged to incorporate it at the detriment of the creative flow they were already in. Unexpected outcome. Finding a balance is important*

This suggested that students who would traditionally enter *Transitions Week* with existing successful strategies for their practice, were now being unexpectedly diverted by the prominent focus on secondary research. Such students would typically breeze through the *City, Site, Context* brief, so It was an interesting aspect to consider for future cycles. On the other hand, the more ‘surface’ (Marton & Saljo 1976) learners in the group were showing signs of increased engagement with the brief and the secondary research improvements seemed to be bearing fruit:

*Students that would typically struggle and feel frustrated by day one site visits seem to have been invigorated by day two research. Some excellent ‘finds’ about local history, architecture, culture and more.*

The tutorial sessions proved important in reassuring the ‘diverted’ students that their secondary research was not the be-all-and-end-all of the project, and simply another aspect to consider within their existing strategies of practice. It was notable that the highest occurrence of this phenomenon came from students of practical, hands-on design courses such as Silversmithing & Jewellery. Such students would typically engage well with the primary research element *of the City, Site, Context* brief – namely gathering visual research on their site through drawing, photography, object collecting and so on. In previous years, such students would then use this primary research as the basis of material investigation of form, colour and pattern. The Secondary Research intervention had seemed to pressurise some of these students into thinking material investigation was somehow less valid as a means of enquiry, and **had** to be contextualised by the additional secondary information around their site. It was an unexpected subtext to an otherwise successful intervention.

## Student Mentor Interviews

In the month following *Transitions Week* I undertook two recorded, semi-structured interviews with four WP student mentors. These mentors had assisted with the *Transitions Week* event, and attended a previous iteration as students. This provided a doubly interesting perspective as they could compare their own *Transitions Week* experiences with their observations of the experiences of the students in this year’s cohort. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve participants' anonymity.

Emerging themes

1. *Transitions Week* has positive impact on social integration:

*Amy: Even now I'm still connected to those people and we have that thing... I can’t explain...It’s so wholesome! So we just we all have that common thing, that experience that happened, and... that benefited us*

2. *Transitions Week* works as a mimic of art school studio practice:

*Aminah: it gets you in like 'creative mode'. I know I spent that whole summer just not doing artsy things. Cos I was just waiting for my results, just stressing, just trying to enjoy my time. And I feel like if I just gone straight into Uni I might have struggled a little bit*

*Finaly: I think the brief and … reinforcing experimentation, be prolific, you know, having the crit at the end? I think that just got you set up for going into art school.*

4. There were issues with the secondary research aspect of previous *Transitions Weeks*:

*Finlay: For secondary research... last year it was…pretty difficult for me at least, with not being amazing at using computers and such to actually work everything out on maps etc. Secondary research was certainly pushed aside quite a lot.*

*Amy: I didn't know if it was relevant to what I wanted to do, and relevant to my site, because I had a phone box and I don't know if looking at the 'National Collection of Aerial Photography’ would help me with my phone box, do you know what I mean?!*

5. Students felt unprepared for the step-up from high school to HE-level research approaches:

*Finlay: I think high school level is not at that stage of using the word research... or it certainly wasn't in my high school and it was only used within the kind of core academic subjects of English and history*

*Aminah: I think I was intimidated by the brief cos it was so open? And at high school were basically spoon fed even if it doesn't seem like it…So I was a little but stuck.*

6. The intervention around secondary research was successful

*Amy: it is definitely important that the research element is part of the brief because basically every single brief you do in art school, even fine artists who are responding to things, will still do some sort of research.*

*Finlay: [At art School] You know, we're always told “go research this, go research that", but we're not actually... like nobody takes the time to go: "This is the library. This is what you do. This is how it can impact your practice"…But I think what you're doing here in the Transitions Week is making that link between "this is the library, this is your studio. This is it both happening in the same week. This is the normal thing.".*

**Reflection and Further Action**

It is evident from the findings in this project, that there are gaps in high school students’ comprehension of art school notions of ‘research’, in particular that which informs and infuses with studio practice. I feel that the intervention successfully addressed some of these gaps, and provided students with a more scaffolded introduction to the principles of art school research practices. All students expressed positive experience on the course and greater familiarisation with the modes of studio research. Most importantly, there was no ‘down-tooling’ during the activity, and all students found a path through the secondary research requirements of the brief. This was a major step forward from previous years. Equally and unexpectedly valuable however was responding to the phenomenon of certain capable students being thrown off-course slightly by the extra focus on secondary research. It was a fascinating revelation, and seemed to confirm that activities like *Transitions Week* do have fragile eco-systems, with elements requiring harmonious balance. Further cycles of this action research project could take this into account, and form the basis of a new intervention. Additionally, I believe it is vital that subsequent cycles continue to conduct interviews with our WP Mentors. This process was incredibly enlightening for me as a practitioner, challenging my assumptions and dissolving hierarchies in a way that pointed towards a more collaborative, evidence based approach to building curriculum. I saw the value in open discussion with students about their own learning. Overall this action research project has made me appreciate the benefit of continual observation, reflection and planning in your practice, to initiate real impact on curriculum development.

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