Kickstarting creative collaboration: Placing authentic feedback at the heart of online digital media education

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Digital Media career paths......

- There are growing employment opportunities for digital media creatives – digital media professionals who work in both traditional media industries, and a range of other organisations, to design and produce digital media content.

- The digital media sector is part of the Creative Industries, which, in 2020 employed 194,000 Australian workers and directly contributed $14.7 billion to Australia’s Gross Domestic Product.

- While there’s plenty of career potential for digital media creatives, graduates often struggle to transition into a diverse workforce that requires a range of technical skills and professional practice competencies.
What professional practice skills?

- Digital media – like many professions – is a practice-based profession.
- To successfully enter their profession digital media creatives need a range of professional practice capabilities that support their ability to creatively collaborate with clients, creative teams and colleagues.
- These professional practice capabilities include being able to convey creative options through visual solutions, addressing client and audience needs through experimentation and being able to discuss, critically reflect and adjust their work in progress.
- Being able to give and receive, learn from and act on feedback and engage in ongoing creative collaboration is central to these professional practice capabilities.
Industry has a focus on Creative Collaboration

- Design leaders from the world’s leading brands and agencies will be sharing their expertise in creative innovation, design leadership and professional development at next month’s Adobe MAX Creativity Conference.
- Among the sessions being offered is one titled “Creative Collaboration Across a Global Team” facilitated by the creative lead at Coca-Cola Creative Studios.
- The session is being promoted as essential “to help creatives build their skills because creative collaboration requires individuals and teams to take risks, explore the unknown, and try new things but to do this successfully people need to feel confident enough to step out of their comfort zone”.
Mike Peng - Chief Creative Officer at Moon Creative Lab

“The goal of creative collaboration is to explore unknown directions and to develop new possibilities. It’s not about knowing the answers—it’s about learning through exploration and experimentation.”
Creative collaboration is an integral aspect of the work of many different professions where they are required to interact and engage with colleagues and clients by sharing and discussing ideas in order to stimulate creativity and develop novel project outcomes.

The dialogue and conversations at the heart of creative collaboration provide opportunities for creative team members to assess ‘work in progress’ through an interactive cycle of feedback, reflection and integration (Sawyer 2021) that is a trademark of creative professional practice.
In face-to-face learning, studio environments provide opportunities for digital media students to practice creative collaboration. These are physical spaces that deliver “values, resources, objects, space, time, situations and a signature pedagogy enriched by active and creative modes of experiential learning and practice” (Marshalsey & Sclater 2020 p. 827), enabling students to work collaboratively on projects with open-ended, real-world problems and engage in real-time, interactive dialogue throughout the creative process. However, the authentic interactions found in studio learning have rarely been replicated in online courses because the asynchronous nature of online learning limits opportunities for students to engage in real-time discussions with educators or peers.
Using formative feedback to support creative collaboration

- As an alternative to the studio environment, we decided to investigate whether formative feedback could be used to support digital media students in developing their collaborative capabilities in an online learning environment.
- To design a learning experience that encouraged and rewarded active participation.
- Formative feedback processes that incorporate purposeful activities congruent with a discipline’s professional feedback practice have been found to make students “better prepared to participate effectively in feedback in their graduate workplace” (Dawson et al. 2021).
- When feedback is authentic, it can support learners to actively construct knowledge, apply critical judgement, and develop transferable profession-relevant skills (Dawson et al., 2021), promoting students' learning and employability by mirroring the types of interactions and dialogue that they are likely to experience with colleagues and clients in the workplace.
- However little research has considered how this can be implemented into online learning environments … or, more specifically, to what extent it can support online digital media students in building their collaborative capabilities.
This study aimed to address the gap in the extant literature by documenting the implementation of a technology-facilitated formative feedback process into an online digital media course.

Digital Media Project 1 is a first year capstone project course that teaches the professional production cycle from conceptualisation through to production and delivery to the client.

Students combine the digital media skills they have learnt in pre-requisite courses with creative thinking as they work through the Design Thinking stages for their own individual projects.
The challenges with the course...

**Low engagement:** Instead of engaging with the whole creative process students were reverse engineering their assessments to align with their pre-conceived final project outcomes.

**Lacking authenticity:** Authentic learning experiences that reflected, and prepared students for, the ongoing process of creative collaboration were missing from the ad-hoc formative feedback conversations in course forums, email or zoom.

**Poor learning outcomes:** Students expected untimely summative feedback to support their individual project creative process and teaching staff struggled to provide the volume required.
The course re-design and research

**Core Changes:**
1. High frequency work in progress feedback
2. Integration of industry relevant technology
3. Restructuring of assessments

Across two terms of course delivery, qualitative action research was undertaken using a combination of 22 email interviews and 2 in-depth interviews with students.

Digital Media Project 1 was redesigned and restructured around the implementation of a formative feedback process to facilitate students' engagement and develop their industry relevant capabilities.
Student Work In Progress Padlet

- At the heart of the course design was the formative work in progress feedback, where tutors with industry provided frequent and authentic feedback across all stages of the design thinking process.
- 10% of the final grade was allocated to weekly feedback submissions and a critical reflection of the creative collaboration process.
Why Padlet?

Padlet is similar in look and functionality to industry team project management software that could not be used for cost and license reasons and because they are not supported by the Moodle LMS.

The visual nature of Padlet provided the opportunity for the teaching team to facilitate dynamic and media rich feedback discussions that included text, images, graphics, audio and video and links to additional resources and inspirational examples.

I researched the use of externally hosted platforms (like social media) but they do not provide the ability to manage content and privacy settings.

Students were familiar with Padlet as it was used as a teaching and learning tool across most courses in first year.
Easily embedded in the course site...
Assessment structure and form

Assessments were reconfigured using the Backward Design framework to create three equally weighted (30%) assessments spread across the Design Thinking creative process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessments</th>
<th>Before re-design</th>
<th>After re-design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Assessment 1</td>
<td>Mood Board and Writing Brief in the form of a word document 40%</td>
<td>Creative Brief in the form used in industry 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Assessment 2</td>
<td>Experiments 20%</td>
<td>Experiments 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Assessment 1</td>
<td>Creative Artefact 40%</td>
<td>Creative Artefact 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Assessment 2</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Work In Progress Weekly Submissions and Final Reflection 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What did the data show?

- The student data collected showed that the re-design of the course provided an industry relevant experience through which the students were more able to develop their collaborative capabilities and practice valuable professional skills.

- In particular, students identified three key aspects which supported their creative collaboration:
  - The timely and personal nature of the feedback.
  - The industry-derived knowledge of the feedback providers.
  - The interactivity and usability of Padlet.
Timely and personalised feedback

- The regularity of the feedback encouraged students to engage in back-and-forth dialogue about their projects across the whole term – thereby enabling them to critically discuss their work.
  - “[It] motivated me to push on and create results that I was really pleased with – knowing that the teaching team was always there to help and provide their thoughts made the world of difference”.

- Conducting all feedback discussions through Padlet, and having the whole teaching team involved in these discussions streamlined communications and motivated students to share and discuss their work with all members of the teaching team.
  - “I went from someone who never posts a public question in a forum or anything, to every week I just posted heaps even if I was just thinking about something”
  - “it (the Padlet) exponentially increased the amount that I was engaging or asking questions that I wouldn’t usually ask”.
Timely and personalised feedback

- Formative feedback allowed students to focus on the creative elements that supported their summative assessment outcomes, which in turn encouraged them to engage with the feedback they received and adjust their work before submission:
  - “Having to submit regular updates on your progress motivates you to make sure you do each step of the course and better understand each lecture or activity which then helps you to complete your assessments with more confidence.”

- The Padlet platform supported personalised creative discussions that were easy to access, interesting to explore and stored in one location:
  - “I found the strengths of this kind of feedback was how efficient, thorough, and personal the feedback was. It was also good that I was receiving regular feedback as I went along, so I would be able to make small changes if I had to, rather than finding out something was wrong later on and having to undo huge amounts of work.”
Industry knowledge of feedback providers

- Providing feedback which resembled the interaction and dialogue of the workplace supported the students in gaining industry-relevant experience of creative collaboration:
  - "At the beginning it was made clear that the feedback was to replicate the real-life industry of how it works. And to me I think I felt more encouraged to engage with the feedback."
- It did take time for students to adjust to the process and the different tone of conversations with the teaching team:
  - "It was daunting at first but the way that the feedback was given was just so constructive it didn't feel like it was like an attack on my work or anything. And it was like I genuinely felt like the teaching team was there to help me all the way."
- However, students increasingly adjusted to the process, demonstrating a shift in their thinking and willingness to engage with the feedback:
  - "It felt like it simulated the style of collaboration that would take place within an industry project, which made the overall course more dynamic and engaging."
Industry knowledge of feedback providers

- The authentic feedback, delivered in simulated style of collaboration that would take place within an industry project team, was described as making the overall course experience more dynamic and engaging:
  - “To get feedback from an expert in the area is a huge benefit. My feeling is the feedback I receive is valid and coming from an expert.”
  - “It felt like the feedback I was getting was from the industry that my project was in. That I was receiving feedback from someone who had thought about it from the field I was doing my project in.”

- The collaborative approach to feedback discussions in the Padlet allowed students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that mirrored real-world problems and projects and the students embraced the opportunity:
  - “This is the most enjoyable course I had so far. I think the main thing was because I knew it was a step closer to replicating the real world and that’s what excited me about doing the course.”
The interactivity and usability of Padlet

- Students responded positively to the visual and creative process of posting and responding through the Padlet:
  - “I felt with this course that the Padlet was really appropriate because it felt more creative than just typing out a forum post and adding a picture or something. It actually felt like I was sticking things onto a cork board or writing things creatively up on a white board that I could show and then get feedback on.”
  - “The Padlet provided a place to ask questions, get feedback, and push my work further than ever before. It was an opportunity to expand my learning and gain insight into how professional workplaces in the creative industry can work.”
The interactivity and usability of Padlet

- Students found Padlet made following conversations and responding to dialogue about their project creative elements easier and more enjoyable than in a course forum due to the content being more visually appealing and easier to access:
  - "Using Padlet is a whole lot more creative that just typing out a post. Getting on the Padlet just felt more involved. A bit like a scrapbook full of ideas that was overall creative."

- They appreciated that each "thread" was visible in one place, and that they were not required to go in and out of forums to engage with other topics:
  - "I felt with this course that the Padlet was really appropriate because it felt more creative than just typing out a forum post and adding a picture or something. It actually felt like I was sticking things onto a cork board or writing things creatively up on a white board that I could show and then get feedback on."

- For some students, the Padlet was also seen as a safe space through which they could share and discuss their ideas which in turn built their confidence:
  - "I am someone who does not like to reach out and ask for help (especially publicly) so posting on forums is often a no-go for me. However, the formative feedback in the Padlet was amazing as it was one on one and did not feel formal."
Challenges with the process

- The formative feedback process supported creative collaboration and provided students with an authentic learning experience which mirrored workplace practices.
- But the first time it was implemented it also presented some key challenges for the teaching team including:
  - A lack of student exemplars for the redesigned assessments and the WIP Padlet posts
  - The time required to create and embed the Padlets in the course site
  - Supporting students to understand the purpose and timing of WIP feedback
  - Building a relationship with students in their WIP Padlet whereby they felt empowered to robustly discuss their designs with the teaching team as colleagues rather just accept feedback as a value judgment from a potential marker of their work
Key Learnings

- The blurring of the lines between the teaching team as “markers” in the summative feedback process and the teaching team as “colleagues” in the formative feedback process needs consideration.
- Encouraging students to engage with the weekly WIP process was challenging at times so the teaching team regularly posted prompts for students to share their ideas or work. This process will be expanded to include a range of additional resources, images and graphics to be included in posts to further encourage students to engage.
- The industry experience of the teaching team is essential to ensuring the authenticity of the process so careful consideration needs to be given to the staff contracted.
- Different potential layouts and technical elements of Padlet may simplify the feedback dialogue process.
- Student exemplars will ensure students understand the WIP feedback process.
Key Learnings

- Students need time and encouragement to shift their expectations of the timing, value and purpose of feedback from being intrinsically linked to the grading of their work to helping influence students' future work and learning strategies.

- It is important to reassure students that the Padlet is a safe space to share and experiment and that the collaborative process involves all teaching team members to mirror professional practice and encourage robust discussions about creative options.

- The range of stakeholders involved in the WIP feedback process has been expanded in the second and third year Digital Media Project capstone courses to enhance the authenticity of the work in progress feedback process.
Final thoughts

- Further data analysis has shown that the course re-design positively impacted student behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement with feedback and positively impacted learning outcomes.

- The professional learning challenges and strategies of those in digital media are highly relevant to other types of knowledge workers because all professions have increasing access to online learning opportunities and the demand for digital media professional skills is growing (Deloitte 2022).

- The learnings from this, and future research, can therefore potentially be applied to a range of disciplines and courses where creative collaboration is a valued professional skill.

- Effective online studio pedagogy can also serve as a model for teaching and learning in a range of disciplines when educators want to design creative online learning experiences that prepare students to be innovative and create new knowledge (Sawyer 2017).
References


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