The Effects of Specific Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria in Creative Art Education: Do educators and Students have the Opportunity to Teach and Learn Vital Transversal Skills?

Simon Callus
Simon.Callus@mcast.edu.mt
Institute for the Creative Arts, MCAST

Abstract: Within the courses offered at bachelor levels at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology’s (MCAST) Institute of the Creative Arts (ICA), students are led through a number of units related to the specific art they chose over a three-year period. Although there is a large emphasis on the practical and artistic components, the structures of assessment and unit building imposed on the lecturers might often restrict the flexibility needed to teach their art form in the way they see most fit. Instead of adopting pedagogies usually associated with the creative arts, such as studio work, and (artistic) research to strengthen the importance given to the practical element within vocational education and training (VET) in the creative arts, the current structures of assessment criteria used also create situations where students simply carry out a box-ticking exercise, spending very little time or effort on the project itself and yet achieving the grade but not the intended learning outcomes.

Through interviews with lecturers from different departments at MCAST ICA, this study will determine how lecturers build their units around the learning outcomes, assess the work of the students based on the assessment criteria, and if they feel restricted and need to find creative ways to circumnavigate these restrictions in order to deliver the unit. The interviews also determine how much thought and importance is given to creating the opportunities for the transversal skills to be learnt by the students.

Keywords: vocational education and training; art education; student-led learning; grading criteria; MCAST; pedagogy; transversal skills

Introduction

The Context of the Study

Within the courses offered at bachelor levels at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology’s (MCAST) Institute of the Creative Arts (ICA), students are led through a number of units related to the specific art they chose over a three-year period. In the final year, they are asked to produce a dissertation. In most courses, there is a large practical and artistic component to the content of the units and to the deliverables expected from the students. The dissertation also has a reduced word count to allow the associated project to carry a substantial portion of the weight.

In such a context, adopting pedagogies usually associated with the creative arts, such as studio work, the live project, development work, dialogic exchange, and (artistic) research, (Orr and Shreeve 2018) would be preferable. These would allow students to take charge of their own learning. Students working within the mentioned learning scenarios are encouraged to interact and communicate, therefore developing vital transverse skills needed in the industry.
Despite the importance given to the practical element within vocational education and training (VET) in the creative arts, the structures of assessment and unit-building imposed on the lecturers might often restrict the flexibility needed to teach their art form in the way they see most fit. The structure of assessment criteria used might also create situations where students simply carry out a box-ticking exercise, spending very little time or effort on the project itself and yet achieving the grade but not the intended learning outcomes.

This study determines if the described scenario is the case across a number of departments at MCAST ICA. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with lecturers from different departments, the study will determine how lecturers build their units around the learning outcomes, assess the work of the students based on the assessment criteria, and if they feel restricted and need to find creative ways to circumnavigate these restrictions in order to deliver the unit. The interviews also determine how much thought and importance is given to creating the opportunities for transversal skills to be learnt by the students. Lecturers who are also dissertation supervisors were chosen to be able to gauge how the dissertation grading rubric affects the learning process at this final stage of the educational journey at this level.

In-depth interviews are preferred to questionnaires or surveys as they allow each participating lecturer to go into depth about the reality of their subject, classroom, and subject. The open-ended nature of questions usually associated with semi-structured interviews will allow the participants to discuss anything they feel is relevant (Collins 2010). While every lecturer, subject, and class is different, in-depth interviews will provide enough qualitative data to be able to draw out similarities that surveys and questionnaires would not, as the interviewer and interviewees are able to interact on a more personal level.

The Relevance of the Study

The study provides a better understanding of the realities of lecturers in the artistic field. Because many of the systems and assessment methods in place at MCAST ICA are similar across the whole of MCAST, they need to accommodate a large variety of subjects and fields. It is understandably difficult to create a method of assessment that accommodates mathematical and logical subjects such as engineering and artistic and creative ones like creative media production, graphic design, or fine arts. The study might aid in highlighting these differences. A better comprehension of the needs of the creative arts lecturer might lead to administrations at various levels to begin accepting that different institutes, departments, and even individual units (not to mention individual students) might require diverse forms of assessment.

Not being restricted by the assessment criteria model as it stands will in turn allow educators to develop their units and their pedagogies to better fit their subject and the real industry reality. This will help students learn the specific skill associated with that unit and the transverse skills needed in the industry that they will eventually be entering.

The Aims, the Objectives, and the Research Questions

The research aims to examine how grading criteria structures in VET in the creative arts affect the preparation of the student for the industry.

By determining if the grading criteria restrict educators from delivering the units in a way that promotes the education of transversal skills—which are vital for the creative industry—the research determines if these (grading criteria) allow the most beneficial pedagogies to be employed. The research explores the possibility that the grading criteria structure used at MCAST ICA needs to be rethought.
Personal Motivation

Previous research carried out explored the purpose of the dissertation in the creative arts as a collaborative process that should encourage a student to take a leadership role in their educational journey. During this research, several participants expressed their frustrations at the restrictive nature of the grading criteria in their units as well as while grading dissertations. The general understanding that grading criteria in specific learning outcomes should translate to specific tasks created an environment that is opposed to lecturers being creative with their units. Trying to create the most fruitful learning experience possible seems to be met with opposition of a purely administrative nature. Because the criteria are perceived to be so restrictive, lecturers are unable to give attention to creating opportunities for transversal skills to be developed.

Being a lecturer who also feels these frustrations could bias the study. Questions for the interviews were therefore written beforehand and checked to assure that there were no leading questions. The questions were then read accurately, with care being taken not to imply anything beyond what is being said through the researcher’s non-verbal communication (Cohen et al. 2018). This avoided the imposition of the researcher’s views upon the participants.

Outline of the Study

The next chapter consists of an exploration of existing literature on the assessment and teaching of the arts, including an in-depth look at the different pedagogies used. The majority of the chapter looks at the fluidity of the subject matter as well as the student-driven nature of the learning that takes place in the context. This “stickiness” (Orr and Shreeve 2018) and the resulting difficulty in planning and assessing units are also explored.

The following chapter on methodology explains the reasons behind the chosen research method—the semi-structured interview. The results of these interviews are discussed using thematic analysis in Chapter 4. The concluding chapter proposes recommendations and further studies needed before actions may be taken to improve the learning situation within the MCAST ICA.

Literature Review

Creative Arts Education

Within the creative arts, educators have a different role than in traditional education. The educator aids the student, determining what is needed by them and providing it. The educator needs to know when an authoritarian figure is required or if a passive approach is better suited to the student. The learning is in the hands of the learner (Orr and Shreeve 2018). Art education is not about passing on knowledge and theories based on text; the role of the art educator is to create a space where students reflect and then create, acting upon their reflections. This externalisation of students’ thoughts and feelings into the outside world through their art is the most important aspect of learning (Kolb and Kolb 2005). The way students gain knowledge is part of the knowledge itself: students create, self-evaluate, and connect the experience of creating to the scholastic and everyday life (Bensur 2002).

Art education makes use of a variety of pedagogical approaches which may seem very alien to the traditional classroom setting: the studio setting, the ambiguity of outcomes, the brief as a launch for the student’s project, the live project, as based on research and as a continuous development of work. All of these are carried out in dialogue with the educator who is purely a guide to the process (Orr and Shreeve 2018).
Most importantly, learners in the arts are the ones leading their own education, often becoming more knowledgeable on the specific subject or technique they choose to explore, especially at the later stages of their studies, and specifically during their dissertation (Orr and Shreeve 2018). This changes the relationship dynamic within the classroom. Feedback from educators is not expected to be simply accepted by the student, but any difference in ideas should open a dialogue (Greenbank and Penketh 2009). The learner, given a valid reason, may even refuse the educator’s views on their project (Del Rio et al. 2017). The educator, from their end, should take the dialogue as an opportunity to learn and improve their own practice. Educators who are also learners are often the most successful educators in the field (Lucas and Spencer 2018).

**Creative Art Curriculum**

With art education being student-centred, allowing them to lead their own learning seems to imply that a personalised curriculum for each student is needed. As one can imagine, this makes curricula in the arts messy and uncertain (Orr and Shreeve 2018). Orr and Shreeve see the arts curriculum not as “lists of topics and engagement in pedagogies which help students to learn those topics”, but as “a complex web of activities in which students forge a way to becoming a creative practitioner” (2018: 7).

There has been a shift within the educational sector to incorporate art schools into universities as faculties. Regulations designed for traditional university courses were applied to the creative art subjects, including the writing of learning outcomes, and the breaking down of the course into credits (Orr and Shreeve 2018). These badly designed standards often become a distraction however, and quite often a source of frustration. Although they are often understood to not be working, once codified in the art educational system, they become very difficult to remove (Bensur 2002).

Both learners and educators find themselves functioning within an academic system that does not accept creative practice and ways of knowing in practice. Quality assurance is demanded, imposing checks and balances on an educator. These might be at odds with the art educator’s pedagogical approach, creating tension. An open-ended project brief, for example, which has been proven to be an effective pedagogical approach in the arts, clashes with the deterministic learning outcome approach imposed in most university-like educational institutions (Orr and Shreeve 2018). Educators are faced with the difficulty of “accounting for the learning and measuring what students know, while still somehow preserving the unique creative nature of art” (Bensur 2002: 19).

**Assessment in the Creative Arts**

Assessment in the creative arts has always been problematic, with scholars in the early 80s arguing that the art room should be a place of refuge from school regulations, where students can express their own feelings, and evaluate their own progress towards their goals, without the fear of an “arbitrary grading system” (Bensur 2002).

As discussed previously, a big element of creative arts education is the application of tactile and visual skills, as well as critical thinking. These skills are often difficult to assess with one assessment method (Bensur 2002).

The tension in the assessment rises from the approach to assessment as “assessment of learning” as opposed to assessment for learning (A4L). Assessment of learning is part of the education process, but it categorizes and separates students at points throughout their learning. A4L, on the other hand, tries to encourage learning by offering students formative ongoing feedback aimed at improving their work until the final submission (Orr and
Shreeve 2018). Strategies in A4L include effective classroom discussions that elicit what learning has taken place, feedback that helps the student move forward, using students to instruct and review each other’s work, and entrusting students with their own learning. Added to these strategies is the clarification of learning outcomes and assessment criteria (Lucas and Spencer 2018).

The single set of criteria for a creative art unit is problematic. Students bring their own lives into their artistic process and therefore into their final projects and their learning. How can one set of criteria assess a class with a range of talent coming from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and even linguistic backgrounds? Knowing the criteria often results in students not feeling free to explore their art but stick to what they know in order to achieve the grade. This feeling is often shared with the educators who become so concerned with the assessment that time and paperwork take over the actual teaching of the art form (Bensur 2002).

The outcome-based assessment, which continues to remove the insecurity of students not knowing what they will be assessed on, removes the possibility of open-ended assignments and projects. The modern ideas of accountability and viewing students as clients pushes for this mode of assessment. This high demand for transparency in assessing also stops lecturers from recognizing less tangible skills acquired through the learning process (Orr and Shreeve 2018).

The problem arising from the strict and deterministic assessment criteria exists because individuals in a position of power within the educational sector attempt to create systems to be used across the board, regardless of content-specific needs. Creative art assessment focuses on the process, the problem-solving journey through the creation of an open-ended problem, and not simply on the final work as in other subject areas (Bensur 2002). Assessment of creative arts is fuzzy, however, meaning that it is difficult to mark with precision. Educators feel forced to use “an inappropriate rational, objective, quasi-scientific model to assess a largely irrational spontaneous and subjective art” (Orr and Shreeve 2018: 129). One educator explains how they assess students’ work on what they refer to as “zing.” They admit that this is not something one would find in a learning outcome (Orr and Shreeve 2018).

Eisner explains how the spontaneity essential to the education of art makes it impossible to predict what the learning outcomes will be at the end of the unit. It is completely dependent on the student and the baggage they bring to the class. The materiality of the work is a sign of the learning that has taken place and should therefore be the main focus of the assessment. Even then, the work becomes a part of who they are and is directly linked to their sense of self and their confidence. In a sense, the outcome of the learning is that the student becomes certain in their work (Orr and Shreeve 2018).

Skills Needed in the Creative Art Industry

Educators cannot concentrate only on the subject-specific skills but need to also create opportunities for the learning of transversal skills. It is imperative that students pick up these skills for their further education or to work in the creative industry (Lucas and Spencer 2018). It has been shown that transversal skills are more important to the industry, not only in the creative sector. Lucas and Spencer (2018) compare two lists, one from the economic sector and one drawn up by an educational researcher, on what skills students need to have after graduating. The similarities between the two are evident. Transversal skills are a need in all sectors, regardless of the specific industry.

Creativity, one of the most talked-about transversal skills in the arts, is a holistic one. It relies on analysis and intuition. As the artist becomes more aware and sensitive to the project,
a feeling of “rightness” or “wrongness” is often all there is to go on. This has pushed the creative arts to the side, especially in a culture where importance is given to what can be measured or proved.

By their very nature, transversal skills are not the ones usually being assessed within the course or unit, but within the arts, skills like creativity, empathy, motivation, openness to experiences, self-perception and reflection, and communication are integral to the art-specific skills. Being able to visualise, for example, is not the kind of learned skill that can be measured (Orr and Shreeve 2018).

Orr and Shreeve (2018) describe how besides the actual production of the work itself, the ability to communicate a critical view and defend the work is critical to a creative practitioner. They emphasize that the ambiguity which should be present in artistic briefs forces the students to work in a “sticky” environment. “If they successfully negotiate the sticky curriculum, learn to manage and work through uncertainty, the work demonstrates that confidence and a mastery of ambiguity” (Orr and Shreeve 2018: 84). This in turn indicates an ability to reevaluate their own identity, which then enables them to engage with new possibilities and realities (Orr and Shreeve 2018). This certainty, stemming from self-evaluation, critical thinking, and the ability to communicate it and defend one’s views, are all transversal skills essential in the creative arts industry.

Conclusion

“There is a key sticking point between the needs to make our learning expectations clear to students in the interest of accountability and fairness whilst at the same time allowing students to surprise us with the unanticipated creative work they produce” (Orr and Shreeve 2018: 129). The nature of the creative arts is also unpredictable. A transparent, clearly defined educational system does not prepare students for the real industry, where they will need to research, present, and defend the work that they create stemming from their own motivation.

Methodology

The research is exploring the way in which grading criteria affect the ability of lecturers in the creative arts to deliver their units in the way they best see fit in order to prepare the students for the relevant industry. With this in mind, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured informal interviews with various lecturers from different departments within MCAST ICA.

Research Design

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six lecturers within the MCAST ICA. Lecturers who deliver practical units within creative or artistic fields were given preference.

The open-ended questions usually associated with semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al. 2018) allow space for the participants to open up about their experiences, sharing any difficulties faced, and the solutions or workarounds they adopted.

This research is trying to determine any similarities in difficulties faced by lecturers across different creative arts departments with regard to the structure of grading criteria. Thematic analysis was used to determine common themes across all participants. The semi-structured interview is therefore the ideal tool to allow the educator being interviewed to share the various experiences while still being led to give the information relevant to the research.
As a research method, the face-to-face interview allows for more information to be gathered through non-verbal communication, which is not possible through a questionnaire. Interviews also allow participants to delve deeper into a subject, allowing the researcher to follow the trains of thought and reasoning behind specific answers. The non-formal interviews have the benefit of allowing the researcher to respond to the answers given by the participants, encouraging a deeper exploration of the topic. Questions are set beforehand and they are asked in sequence throughout the interview. This helps minimise bias on the part of the interviewer since the wording of the questions are planned to be non-leading. Questions being pre-set and asked in sequence also increases the ease with which answers are compared during the analysis phase of the research (Cohen et al. 2018).

Using a structured interview with close-ended questions or an online survey would not have been efficient in this study as binary answers would have been collected (Cohen et al. 2018). The diversity in subjects would not allow standard questions to elicit detailed answers about the participants’ specific reality. The way the grading criteria affect the educational process and how the educator deals with them are expected to be individual and unique. Most importantly, the transversal skills that students would benefit from acquiring through the classes in preparation for the industry differ across departments. Any methodology other than the open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview would not allow space for this to be expressed by the lecturers being interviewed.

To facilitate interviewing lecturers who have different timetables and busy schedules, some interviews were carried out online via Microsoft Teams. These interviews use video and audio and are synchronous, thus having all the benefits and drawbacks of face-to-face interviews (Cohen et al. 2018). Using the software mentioned above also gets around the potential problem highlighted by Cohen et al. (2018) of users not being able to use the software. All MCAST ICA lecturers have become proficient in using Microsoft Teams during the last academic year when all lectures were held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Participants

The interviewed participants were lecturers at MCAST ICA who teach creative arts subjects. All participants lecture in units that have a practical element to them. Lecturers from different departments were chosen to collect a wide range of realities with regard to education pedagogies and their interaction with the academic structure that exists within MCAST ICA.

In choosing the participants for the research, an attempt was made to have a variety of experiences as educators. It is important to acknowledge the different length of time the participants have been educators: experience in the classroom and dealing with education administration could change how individuals approach the conflict between how they think they should educate and the educational system in place at the institute.

Importantly, the participants were encouraged, through the questions and the semi-formal setting, to be reflective about their role as educators, and their approach to their profession.

The Interviews

Semi-structured interviews guide participants to giving the information needed for the research while allowing space for the interviewee to delve into as much depth as they want and feel comfortable discussing. Having determined the kind of relationship that could be reached between the researcher and participant (Cohen et al. 2018), the interview schedule was created. Themes were elicited from the literature review to determine areas where information was required from the participants. These themes were then turned
into questions (Collins 2010). The interview schedule outlines the themes present in the literature review and the related devised questions.

When forming questions, it was made sure that the vocabulary used was clear, the questions were not ambiguous or prejudicial, no assumptions were being made, and the questions devised were open-ended. Open-ended questions were deemed to be ideal as they provide a general area of interest for the interviewee, but do not restrict what information the participant gives (Cohen et al. 2018).

Limitations and Strengths of the Research Tool

Both face-to-face interviews and interviews carried out on Microsoft Teams will be treated as face-to-face interviews as the strengths and limitations of the research tool are identical (Cohen et al. 2018).

During a face-to-face interview, the participant communicates more than merely by what they are saying. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is occurring, giving more data to the researcher. Pauses and stresses in the language also communicate more than would be communicated through written answers in an online survey, for example. While this is useful for the researcher when the participant is giving more information, it may also communicate the biases and personal opinions of the researcher to the interviewee as the questions are being asked. This could in turn affect the answers given.

Semi-formal interviews, with open-ended questions, have the benefit of allowing the participant to delve deeply into the subject being discussed. This gives the researcher more data to strengthen the study being carried out. Depending on the participant, however, it might also result in a lot of extra information which is not relevant to the research.

Face-to-face interviews are more time-consuming than other research tools. Once the interviews are complete, the data analysis also takes more time than other research tools. Transcriptions are required, as well as collation of information received, which cannot be simplified into tables and graphs automatically, (Cohen et al. 2018).

Data Collection

All data will be collected through the interviews. The interviews will be recorded for further analysis later. No further data will be required. The participants are MCAST lecturers so no gatekeeping is foreseen.

The interviews took thirty minutes each on average, including setting up and dismantling of recording equipment. The transcription and analysis of data were more time-consuming. Collecting, organising, and comparing the data collected manually took longer than data from an online survey would have taken, but resulted in deeper answers which strengthened the research project.

Ethical Issues

All participants in the study were full-time lecturers in a VET higher educational institute and their participation was voluntary. They were informed at the beginning of the interview that they could withdraw from the study whenever they wished and were free to refuse to answer any questions they might feel uncomfortable with. They were reassured that only the researcher and supervisor would have access to the recorded interviews and transcripts and that all material will be destroyed once they have exhausted their purpose. A consent form was given to the participants to make sure this was understood.
This research will be in line with the Malta Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), such that the identity of participants will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. While analysing the data collected, the participants will be given coded names to preserve confidentiality. Any data collected during the interview which might jeopardise the anonymity of the participants will not be quoted directly during the analysis but will be paraphrased accordingly.

Data Analysis

The research uses qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts are read in detail for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the answers given. Coding then takes place. Following this step, themes are generated, grouping coded sections together. There is a time to readjust codes and themes as the interview transcripts are analysed until a final list of themes is achieved, at which point the analysis of these is written up (Del Rio et al. 2017) (Greenbank and Penketh 2009) (Cohen et al. 2018).

Analysis of Results and Discussion

Introduction

After being granted permission by the MCAST ICA director, lecturers who agreed to participate in the study were all interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The participants’ lecturing experience covers a wide range, with the newest lecturer about to finish their first academic year, and the most experienced finishing their twelfth. The difference in experience provides a diverse outlook on the criteria and learning outcomes, and how they are used in teaching. The data was collected through recordings, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. The resulting themes were compared to the literature review.

This chapter presents the analysed data and themes which emerged from the interviews. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, they were assigned coded names as described in the methodology chapter. Ideally, any reference to their specific teaching subject or department they form part of would be omitted from the analysis, but some examples of their pedagogical practices include specific topics and equipment which might give away the identity. The participants were asked about this and they all gave permission for the data to be used as needed.

The Holistic Student in Art Education

During the interviews, it was clear that the six lecturers from across six different departments within the MCAST ICA view the role of art education as more than learning the tools, techniques, and theories related to their particular art form. Art education deals with students as holistic individuals. Lecturer 5 specified that any educational journey should aim to help persons reach their full potential, not only as practitioners of the art but as individuals. Lecturer 4 explained that the process should help students discover who they are and gain emotional intelligence. Lecturer 6 described how they experience satisfaction when they realise that the students have learnt something through the way they speak. There is a realisation that students have adopted values and ethics throughout the unit by the way they communicate with the lecturer.

Once students are able to be themselves in the classroom, they can open up more according to Lecturer 4. Lecturer 3 takes this a step further and says that it is essential for
students to bring their “baggage” and their emotions to the classroom so that they explore what is being learnt from an emotional point of view: “topics are given soul through the baggage the students bring” (Lecturer 3). This viewpoint confirms Kolb and Kolb (2005) saying that in art education students need to act upon their reflections. Bensur (2002) says that the connection between what is done in class and what happens in the real world is how students learn, which ties into the acknowledgement of a student’s life outside the classroom as has been discussed. It also links to what Lecturers 1, 2, and 3 say when they point out the importance of art education in making students better citizens who are able to analyse the information they receive and not simply accept what they are told. Lecturer 4 describes how the process of learning together enables students to learn about each other and in so doing begin to understand their place in society.

Transversal and Interpersonal Skills

The importance of society and viewing the student as a holistic member of that society comes out strongly when discussing transversal skills. Agreeing with Lucas and Spencer (2018), all participants in the research spoke about the importance of transversal skills as a practitioner within the industry. Lecturer 5 explains how transversal skills are important in any industry— not only the artistic one—and Lecturer 4 argues that transversal skills, such as empathy, creativity, and emotional intelligence are as important as the actual artistic skills. Confirming this, Lecturer 3 explains how in the position of an employer, they would rather work with someone less skilful but with very good interpersonal skills than with a very talented person with bad interpersonal skills. Lecturer 3 reconfirms later that “it’s all about collaboration”.

When describing their role as an educator, Lecturer 2 includes “pushing certain principles like punctuality and deadlines” which are not directly related to the arts. Lecturer 2 said that the learning of transversal skills does not only happen within the classroom. A lot of what is learnt by the students is “from each other, from the environment, from interacting with the lecturers,” and from communicating. Lecturer 2 also points out that some of this important learning is missing at the moment because students do not spend time on campus interacting outside the classroom as they used to in the past.

Teaching the Arts within MCAST

When discussing lecturing and grading at MCAST, the participants mention learning outcomes and grading criteria. Within MCAST, units are written containing learning outcomes (LOs), split into 10 grading criteria carrying 10 marks each. These grading criteria are what students are assessed on and therefore define the content that needs to be covered within the unit.

Practical Sessions and Workshops

Out of the six participating lecturers, all of them indicated the importance and effectiveness of the practical element in teaching the arts, concurring with Orr and Shreeve (2018). Lecturer 1 simply stated that the hands-on approach is the best way to learn, while Lecturer 3 added the interplay between practice and theory, confirming Bensur’s (2002) views. Lecturers 2 and 5 specified the importance of practice allowing students to troubleshoot and problem-solve any issues that may arise as they work on their projects. Lecturer 4 specified the importance of students creating, reflecting on their creation, and then acting on that reflection, very similar to what Kolb and Kolb (2005) describe. While Lecturer 6 does not specify the need for practical lectures, they expressed the need for students to leave with a portfolio, implying the importance given to creating work.
The practical element of learning fits in with the different pedagogical approaches described by Orr and Shreeve (2018), including the workshop. Lecturer 5 explains how the structure at MCAST ICA gives them the opportunity to use equipment and allows students to practice using it in class; there is an abundance of space around the institute where students can practice, as well as the necessary professional space to operate. The traditional classroom is not really applied. However, Lecturer 5 does mention a lack of resources which may hinder students.

Lack of Resources

Lecturer 2 goes into much more detail about how the lack of space and resources negatively affects the teaching that takes place at MCAST ICA. While agreeing with Lecturers 4 and 5 that the structures in place at MCAST allow for non-traditional forms of education, Lecturer 2 focuses on how their idea of education—that which takes place outside the classroom—is not possible because of the lack of resources. Timetabled classes with restrictive hours when students are able to use spaces is a situation which does not allow students to remain on campus practising their art form while building the relationships and transversal skills essential to the arts. The ability of students to spend the required amount of hours working by themselves to reach the units’ objectives is not possible because of the lack of resources and infrastructure. Lecturer 6 also voiced the need for students to have their own space where they can work, practice, and build their projects outside the restrictive time-tabled hours. Lecturer 2 repeats that because of the importance given to the number of students attending the college by the administration, the MCAST ICA is overpopulated, thus removing the space needed for students to interact with each other and with lecturers. According to Lecturer 2, MCAST is sacrificing quality [of student education] for quantity [of students].

Student-Led Learning

The importance of student-led learning within the abovementioned pedagogical approaches is made apparent by all participants. All interviewed lecturers expressed how they allow the students to take charge of their work and therefore their learning. Lecturer 1 allows the students to choose their own theme, take charge of the project, and express their theme in their own way.

Lecturers 2, 3, 5, and 6 all express views in line with Orr and Shreeve (2018), Greenbank and Penketh (2009), and Lucas and Spencer (2018), namely that the role of the educator in the arts is to support and guide students while they discover their own style, methods, and approaches, testing and retesting until they find the formula that works for them, and finally deciding when a project has reached completion and if it works or not. This includes the ability to lead their own passions (Lecturer 6), express themselves creatively (Lecturer 3), and research their own ideas and concepts with as little help from the lecturer as possible (Lecturer 2).

Grading Criteria as a Framework

Lecturers 3 and 5, while allowing that there are aspects of learning which should be left to the students, both expressed the importance of “certain rigidities” and a “framework”. Lecturer 3 explains their view that unfortunately MCAST “is an entity which is designed by people coming from a scientific background” and frameworks are therefore given which reflect how an engineer or computer scientist would operate. They go on to express similar views to Orr and Shreeve (2018) and Bensur (2002) by expressing that being forced to “squeeze” the arts into this scientific-based framework is “not healthy—from a pedagogical, and of course from an artistic point of view.” A framework is important and needed as a
The Effects of Specific Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria in Creative Art Education: Do educators and Students have the Opportunity to Teach and Learn Vital Transversal Skills?

starting point and ending point, however; and both Lecturers 3 and 5 explain that there are certain technical aspects of the subjects they teach which cannot be left out. The lecturers and the institute have a responsibility to make sure that the content fulfils the certification being awarded to the student. There is also a need for certain basics to be covered to enable students to truly express themselves in the chosen art form.

Lecturer 4 builds an argument along the same lines, expressing how in their field what the students need to be guided in is “a bit of heart, a little bit of magic”, but that they also need to be acquainted with the software and basic principles first. The criteria provide a target which helps the students know where they are going, Lecturer 2 agrees and describes the grading criteria as “telling the story of the brief”: They cover the steps that need to be taken when completing a project within that particular field, so there is really no escaping them.

Opposing the view that the criteria are needed and fit for purpose, Lecturer 1 and Lecturer 6 find the criteria too restrictive. Lecturer 6 gives examples of units they teach which were “clearly designed” with the whole of MCAST in mind, and not the particular subject. Lecturer 1 explains their understanding as to why the criteria can often feel restrictive to lecturers. The person writing the unit has in mind what the unit should cover and how it should be taught and assessed. When a different lecturer is later given the unit descriptor, they are trying to interpret and understand what the original author of the unit had in mind and are restricted in what they can teach by what the original author thought the unit should cover. Lecturer 1 pointed out that like every student is different and comes with their own baggage and way of doing things, the same applies to lecturers. Each lecturer is different and the system should allow for the lecturer to affect the unit they are teaching.

While all the lecturers interviewed feel that in some cases the criteria are too restrictive, not representative of the current industry reality, or do not cover all the material that should be covered, they all explained how they have been creative with their interpretation of the criteria where necessary to ensure that everything they believe the student should receive within that unit is covered. There was also a very strong understanding that while the criteria and learning outcomes determine what is being assessed, they do not prescribe how the learning takes place.

The majority of the participants expressed the need for lecturers to be creative when delivering a unit. As discussed at the beginning of this article, how the teaching takes place needs to be done after understanding the needs of the students in that class. Lecturer 3 says that is the role of the lecturer to be “present in the moment and what is happening in the classroom... picking up on all the nuances”. Being in the arts takes this process even deeper.

Lecturer 6 also explains the need for the lecturer to understand the student and be able to speak their language, keeping in mind that every student is different. The diversity of the students is something every participant voiced. All of them also indicated that the large variety of characters in their classrooms exists because subjects taught at MCAST ICA are artistic and these attract more openly diverse individuals whose job is to tap into these differences and express them through the very art they are studying.

Assessing the Arts within MCAST

Being Creative with the Grading Criteria

The creativity of lecturers mentioned in the previous section is needed during the assessment of students more so than during the delivery, according to the participants of the research. The need for creativity rises from the need to assess the students on what
they should have learnt. All interviewees agree that if lecturers follow the grading criteria to the letter, without creatively interpreting them, there is usually an imbalance in how marks are awarded. Lecturers 2 and 3 both explained that some criteria are complete giveaways. Lecturer 3 describes that in some units, the criteria make it almost impossible for students to fail. They explained that they take no pleasure in failing students, but that if one deserves to fail, the criteria should not be built in such a way that the student almost automatically passes.

Lecturers 2 and 5 described that because of the way the criteria are related to tasks throughout the unit, a student could potentially submit their plans and research, and an evaluation of the work done and, assuming those simple tasks were done well, attain a passing grade without having touched the art form itself. A student might pass a unit in animation without animating, or a unit in basic camera techniques without filming. Lecturer 3 expresses their concern that this reality could lead to false illusions of the student’s ability. One would assume that if a student passes a unit in acting, they will be good actors, and yet this is not the case.

Lecturer 5 recalls students who plan their grades out in this way and submit the bare minimum to pass the unit. This is only possible because of the transparency of the grading criteria. This tallies with Bensur’s (2008) and Orr and Shreeve’s (2018) views on transparency in the assessment of the arts. Contrary to this view, Lecturers 3, 4, and 6 all agree that the transparency of grading criteria is a good thing. It allows the student to understand what is expected of them, which might help in reducing the stress levels they experience.

Lecturer 5 explains that in order to make the weighting of the criteria make sense, they have learnt throughout the years to be creative with the way these criteria are assessed. While certain criteria simply state that a student must have knowledge of a technical issue, Lecturer 5 has learnt to include that technicality as a specific requirement in one final project. The assessment of that particular criteria is then carried out when viewing the final project. In this way, the criteria are being reached—within a context—while maintaining the spirit of the unit.

**Assessing Artistic Processes and Products**

Lecturer 5 explains that in most cases within the units they deliver, the grading criteria tackle technical skills. It is not difficult to assess if a shot is in focus or not, if the exposure is set correctly, or if the framing is level. The grading criteria in this case are almost binary in nature. This eliminates the problem faced by lecturers in other art forms. In the case of purely technical criteria, assessing does become a tickbox exercise. It does not matter how the student learnt, or the procedure they went through, as long as the final product is technically correct. The difficulty arises when a student decides to break the rules of composition on purpose to communicate something specific.

Lecturer 5 explains that through their years of experience they have found different ways of assessing certain transversal skills like teamwork, although they admit that assessing creativity, for example, is still sometimes a question mark. One must communicate with the students and view them holistically, looking at the process the student went through—assuming the students present this process or communicate it in some way.

Lecturer 2 also comments on this, explaining that they continuously encourage students to deliver detailed journals or reports describing their process, research, discoveries, and experiments. Without this documentation from the students, there is nothing to assess some of the grading criteria on. Lecturer 1 explains that not all students are good at documenting a process in a tangible form, yet the grading criteria are asking lecturers to assess the
creativity of the process. It is clear that the criteria do not assess the documentation of the process. It falls to the lecturer, therefore, to be creative in the ways they assess the artistic, creative process, as was discussed by Bensur (2002).

Once again, the argument goes full circle and returns to viewing the student holistically. Communication through building a relationship between student and lecturer becomes an essential part of the art education and assessment process. Lecturer 1 goes into detail explaining different ways in which they seek to gain enough information from the student to be able to assess their work. The amount of work involved in this process is often ignored by the administration who seem to not be able to differentiate between artistic and scientific subjects.

Lecturers 2 and 4 point out that the problem then, once again, becomes one of time and resources. Lecturer 3, who typically has small classes of about four students, comments that their assessing process often takes very long as there is a continuous back and forth, adjusting grades as the assessment of one student opens the lecturer’s eye to something missing in a previously assessed student. Lecturer 3 admits that it would be impossible for them to assess the large classes of more than 20 students that lecturers in other departments have.

**Preparedness for the Industry**

Part of the purpose of art education, especially within a VET setting, is preparing students for the industry. All participants mentioned the need to acknowledge the industry in some way in the delivery of their lectures. Lecturers 1, 2, and 5 mention the importance of conveying the “industry standard” way of doing things, as well as the transversal skills to adapt to the ever-changing reality of the industry. Lecturers 3 and 4 mainly focus on these transversal skills. They speak less about technical skills as their subject is more artistic than technical in nature so communication and collaboration are essential to functioning within the different sectors. Lecturer 6 speaks about the need to help students build a portfolio as that is what the industry in their field looks for.

All lecturers make it very clear, however, that “it is not just about ticking boxes for the industry…but [it’s about] allowing them to process things and mould them into something that works for them [but which is] however still valid for the world around them” (Lecturer 4).

Every participant explains that students need to be prepared to adapt and learn new techniques, tools, and procedures. The artistic industry is an ever-changing one. New software is developed, new styles become in vogue, and students entering the working world need to learn how to teach themselves to keep up. The projects and self-guided learning that most lecturers encourage students to adopt throughout the years at MCAST are described as more important than the actual technical skills.

**Conclusion**

The various lecturers interviewed expressed different views on their experience of teaching and assessing using the grading criteria. Most interviewees agree that the criteria form a solid framework to guide the lecturer in delivering and assessing the unit. Because the artistic field is continuously changing, it stands to reason that the relevance of the criteria to the industry changes. Lecturer 1 commented on the role of cyclical reviews in this regard, but they and other participants also stated that there needs to be more flexibility allowed to the lecturer delivering the unit. The lecturer should be able to make minor changes to the grading criteria, to allow more important aspects of the unit to be given the time
needed and the relevant mark weighting. Lecturers, especially those with a number of years of experience, creatively interpret the criteria in ways that allow the teaching and assessment to make sense for what the student should be getting out of the unit, while also satisfying the administrative needs. While this is done on an ad hoc basis, a need for this flexibility allowed to the lecturers to be formalised was voiced. This is probably true across many different institutes, but definitely in the arts. The individual student’s background, emotions, and interpretations of the criteria and brief merge with the individual lecturer’s background, emotions, and interpretations of the criteria and brief to create what Orr and Shreeve (2018) call a very sticky curriculum.

The inclusion of electives was also something mentioned as a possible solution by Lecturers 1 and 2, as it would allow students to formulate their own learning while also satisfying the need to fit into the college’s university-like rules and regulations. This still does not solve the problem of a lack of resources in terms of space and equipment, which seems to be at the root of the problems faced by lecturers.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

*Introduction*

The aim of the research was to determine how the scientific model of unit descriptors, learning outcomes, and grading criteria affects the teaching and learning of art subjects in the VET setting present at MCAST ICA. After reviewing the literature on pedagogical approaches within the arts and assessments of artistic projects, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with six lecturers from MCAST ICA. The lecturers chosen range from new lecturers to veterans approaching twelve years of teaching an artistic subject. It was ensured that lecturers from different departments, covering different art forms, were selected. This ensured that the collected data covered the entirety of the artistic subjects taught at MCAST ICA.

*General Discussion*

The study revealed a range of realities with a number of common factors. After applying thematic analysis of the data collected through the in-depth interviews, it was determined that, across all departments, the main aim of education is to guide students towards becoming better human beings and citizens, while also making sure that the appropriate skills for their chosen industry are acquired. The importance of viewing students holistically is reflected in the importance given to transversal skills across departments. The artistic industry is ever-changing, and students will gain more from being able to think creatively, communicate, show empathy, adapt to new situations and challenges, and work well with others.

While the lecturers know that these are the most essential take-aways from the courses offered at MCAST ICA, the grading criteria which determine how students are assessed at the end of each unit do not always reflect this reality. More than that, most lecturers find themselves restricted in their grading of a student because of the way the grading criteria are written. Lecturers find themselves being forced to pass a student who has not even attempted the project, and sometimes failing students who do good, creative practical work, but are not inclined to document and show their research in traditional ways.

This adds pressure on lecturers to search for ways to interpret the criteria creatively with the aim of making the unit more relevant and allowing the assessment and resulting grade to be more reflective of the actual skills possessed by the student. This pressure to creatively
find workarounds for the administrative system imposed takes a lot out of the lecturers, resulting in attention to the “teaching” of transversal skills being pushed into the margins.

All participants indicated that the importance of art education is not simply the time spent in class, but also the interaction between students and lecturers in a space which students are allowed to use freely as they take charge of their own projects and guide their own learning. The limiting factor to this process is the lack of resources. The increase in the number of students at ICA—when compared to a few years ago—has meant more classes of larger cohorts. Lecturers are therefore less able to build individual relationships with every student—an essential part of art education and a realistic assessment. The space available for the number of students also means that students are not able to own a space which is available for them to work and practice at any time.

**Limitations of the Study**

While every attempt was made to interview lecturers with different amounts of experience from different departments, the study showed how different each individual lecture is. The reality of a lecturer delivering a more theoretical unit and a lecturer delivering a technical and practical one, even within the same department, might be completely different. This calls for a more in-depth study, possibly department by department first. That being said, the suggestion to allow more flexibility to lecturers to adapt the currently rigid system to the needs of their realities would still solve the issues mentioned here.

MCAST ICA is currently the only artistic vocational education institute on the island. This means that there was no diversity in management and administrative systems which could be compared in the study. A study including foreign institutes would possibly bring to light more realities and more solutions which have been adopted successfully.

**Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

The study shows a need for research to be carried out on a number of factors which are directly negatively affecting students’ learning experiences. The number of students per class and the need for students to be able to have a permanent space they can “call their own” throughout an academic year are just two of these.

More importantly, and possibly easier to accomplish, is the need to grant more flexibility and freedom to lecturers to adapt the unit the way they see fit. While it is clear that guidelines are important, the lecturer should not have to bend over backwards looking for loopholes to be able to deliver the unit in the way that they know is what the students really need—they are the experts after all.

There should also be more studies on the possibility of allowing students to communicate their research, process, and ideas in non-traditional forms. This will give lecturers more content upon which to assess those grading criteria which are not linked to easy-to-quantify skills.
References


