

Towards programme-focused learning, teaching and assessment

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The role of Programme Leader is pivotal in managing change and navigating the challenges associated with programme development. In my experience, enforced or dictated change never works the way you hoped it might as it often faces resistance from staff who 'protect' their modules. The biggest challenge is onboarding colleagues to work together for the greater good of the programme. Colleagues have to understand the value of change and the benefit to their students, themselves, and the team in which they work. This article explores how Programme Leaders might bring colleagues together to actively participate in the process of programme-focused course and LTA design through examination of a case study of the BA Popular Music at Edinburgh Napier University.

"WHAT I DO, AND HOW I DO IT, CAN'T CHANGE!"

This is often the first thing a Programme Leader hears when they ask a colleague to update or change their LTA approach within their module. Colleagues can be protective of their modules and role within a department, so the seed of change needs to be planted well before development begins.

It is vital that an open dialogue begins about the need for change that is backed up with evidence that suggests why change is necessary. To begin the discussion around programme development on the BA Popular Music, staff who contributed to the programme were asked to present to the team on their modules and the content they covered. This enabled staff to learn and ask questions about what was happening within other modules and to identify synergies and possible links with their own. This process also helped to better identify student pathways through the degree.

Secondly, an approach I borrowed from our business development team was to print out a poster of the programme structure at A0 size, put it on the wall in the office where everyone could see it (keeping change visible), and then ask staff to stick post-its on the diagram. Using Pixar's 'Plussing' approach, which we use across the programme, staff were encouraged to add their suggestions for change to the poster only if it the suggestion would help to enhance the programme experience for staff and/or students.

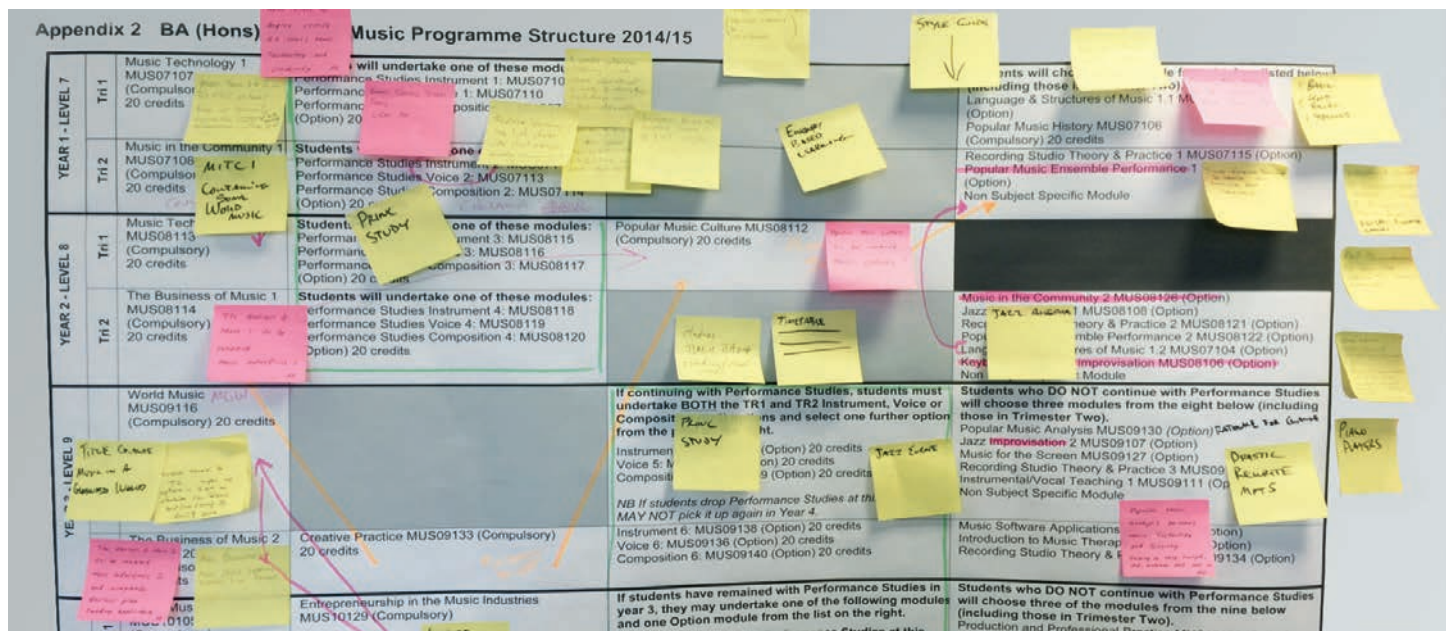


Figure 1: The BA Popular Music programme structure with development suggestions

This approach ensured that team members felt listened to and gained a greater collective understanding of the constituent parts of the programme. They could see the relationships between what they taught and other modules, and where they might contribute to programme development activities. This was the first stage in developing a programme focus and onboarding colleagues.

“IT IS THE PROGRAMME LEADER’S JOB TO DEVELOP THE PROGRAMME!”

Programme development is a significant task that often falls solely on the shoulders of the Programme Leader to complete, with Module Leaders concerning themselves only with what happens within the microcosm of their module(s). The presentations staff delivered and the post-it notes placed on the BA Popular Music structure enabled identification of student pathways through the degree and cross modular links which then allowed development workstreams to be identified, discussed and agreed. Three staff were assigned to each workstream. Each workstream was led by a Pathway Expert with support from two colleagues, one with expertise in the specialist pathway and another from a linked workstream. This ensured that there was visibility of the proposed changes across the programme team and shared knowledge of how other workstreams were linking together.

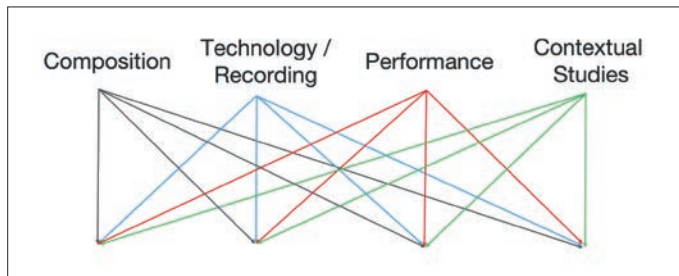


Figure 2: The BA Popular Music curricular design

This approach had an unexpected but hugely significant benefit in that it was equipping Module Leaders with leadership skills at a programme level and building leadership capacity. Since the 2015 review, all the workstream leads have gone on to lead the BA Popular Music programme. The outcome of these workstreams was a programme with a curriculum design that is represented by figure 2, where all elements of the programme interacted. For example, students learned about the history of the music technologies they were currently implementing in music technology classes. The music the students composed using these technologies that they then went on to perform live.

“WHAT CAN STUDENTS TELL US ABOUT OUR COURSES?”

The answer to this question is always – more than you think. They experience the learning experience first-hand and as such are in a prime position to let us know what works, what needs enhanced and to

propose new content based on their lived experience. Engaging students and alumni in the process of programme or course development is key factor in shaping provision and in creating high quality learning experiences. This evidence base can also help to convince colleagues of the need for change. We are well aware of what we think students need to learn to succeed post-university. However, student input to curricular content, the learning links they see across modules and the assessment approaches taken can provide new and exciting ways of developing programme-focused LTA. Take the time to run focus groups, surveys, SIGs or even less formal catchups to gather views, you won’t regret it.

TAKE TIME TO CONSIDER ASSESSMENT

A single factor that can have a significant impact on student learning, and also satisfaction, is assessment design. As discussed earlier, examining and linking all aspects of LTA is an integral part of ensuring that programme focused LTA works. However, a relatively easy win is to look for assessment interdependency. The potential for assessment interdependency begins to surface from the conversations that happen within workstreams, with students (current and alumni), and industry. It doesn’t matter whether assessments are formative or summative within modules, you still have the freedom to link what is formative in one module with summative in another and vice versa. Linking summative assessments across modules and across year groups within the programme provides strong curricular cohesion and supports programme focus. Figure 3 shows an example of inter-reliant formative and summative assessments between a performance module and studio recording module. The modules rely on each other to exist themselves e.g. performers need studio engineers to record their performances and engineers need performers to play for their recordings.

Within the BA Popular Music, we adopted a consistent assessment approach to marking and feedback across the programme. All assessments are graded using rubrics with detailed grading characteristics provided for students. The rubrics calculate the grade and remove any ambiguous ‘academic judgement’. Feedback is aligned to the criteria and always speaks to positive areas within submissions.

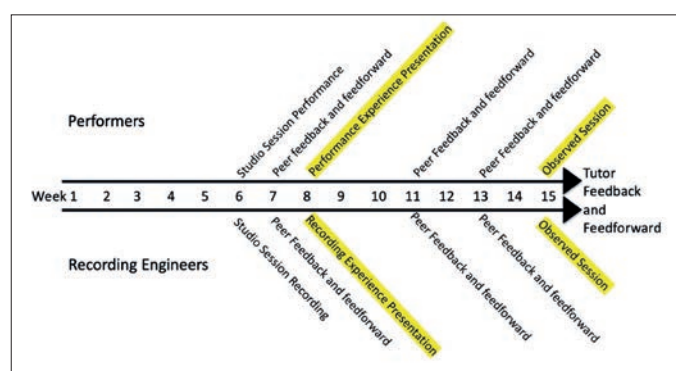


Figure 3: Cross module assessment interaction

Using the Plussing approach, students are given suggestions of how their submissions could be improved. This approach has been very well received by students on the programme and has resulted in significant increases in student satisfaction within module and programme surveys.

A SET OF PRINCIPLES TO HELP GUIDE DEVELOPMENT

When reflecting on the approach taken to develop a programme-focused LTA design in Music at Edinburgh Napier there are a list of principles that might act as a framework for others who are looking to embed a programme-focused approach to LTA.

1. Start the programme development dialogue early with your team and make the change process visible.
2. Interact with and get feedback from your stakeholders (colleagues, students, alumni, Department of L&T, External Examiners, industry etc.).

3. Link your curriculum and assessments where you can (expose the synergies).
4. Support Module Leaders to take on key leadership roles within the programme development.
5. Embed formative assessment as part of the general learning within each module (these can also interact across modules/programmes).
6. Implement consistency in assessment practice (assessment briefs, rubrics, grading characteristics etc.).
7. Implement consistency in feedback practice selecting the best medium for the job (written, verbal, audio, video).

NOTES



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