

**This document has been archived
because it is no longer current.**

Individual and exploratory sketchbooks: Loughborough University

URN: 133834

Area: East Midlands

Date published: 6 February 2014

Reference: 140031

Brief description

The art foundation diploma at Loughborough University develops students' approach to creating highly individual and exploratory sketchbooks, with a focus on first-hand drawing and visual notation, and exploration of new ideas, materials and techniques. The sketchbook is seen primarily as a personal visual diary of the students' thinking and creative processes, with emphasis on thoughtful and critical evaluation rather than a repository of secondary imagery and lengthy description of process.

Overview – the provider's message



**Carl, Yanina, Ian and Heather – the core staff team
for the foundation diploma**

'Our students come with very different previous experiences of art and design.

As the main aim of the foundation diploma is to prepare students for specialist higher education, it's absolutely essential that they explore a wide range of disciplines and learn to think and work creatively and independently.

The sketchbook is key to this approach, so we encourage students to develop a very open and exploratory approach and to use a sketchbook as a

personalised visual diary which charts their journey of discovery and learning throughout the course. This often contrasts sharply with how they have worked previously. Many students

come to us with sketchbooks which are more like “presentation books” rather than a real record of their exploration, or a source of personal visual reference. The emphasis on good presentation means that students often have to un-learn habits they have developed before coming to university, such as decorating pages, making elaborate backgrounds and titles, rather than focusing on first-hand visual research, developing and working up their ideas, which is what is required on a foundation course. The sketchbooks which we see at interview for are often superficially attractive and colourful, but this can be at the expense of real content and substance. The expectations of annotation at A level often lead to students writing at length in these books, but the writing is often too descriptive, rather than analytical or evaluative.

Some weaker examples we see at interview rely far too heavily on second-hand sources pasted into books, or copies of images from magazines or the internet – too much “lick and stick” rather than students making their own drawings and developing personal responses to themes and other artists’ work.’

Carl Silvester, Course coordinator – foundation diploma course

The good practice in detail

The emphasis on students developing high-quality and personalised sketchbooks starts very early – even before they actually come to the course. All students offered a place on the foundation diploma carry out a pre-course project over the summer holiday period. This is designed to prepare them for the start of the course, and to set out early expectations of how they need to develop their thinking, visual research, analysis and recording.

Setting up in summer

The summer project is in two parts:

- one aspect is focused on developing critical and analytical skills through the analysis of the work of selected contemporary artists and designers
- the other encourages students to use photography as a tool for recording ideas and a means of expressing them.

In the [image analysis project](#), students are provided with a [long list of contemporary art and design practitioners and design studios](#), from which they must select three names and collate research in an A5 hardback sketchbook. Students are instructed to use their own drawings alongside collated images on each artist or designer, and are encouraged to be selective in their annotation – using bullet points to note key information, rather than writing lots of prose. Staff provide an art and design terminology guide to help students analyse their chosen examples, focusing on subject matter, the historical and social context of the work, formal elements and visual language. Students are also asked to visit a major exhibition or art gallery, and collate information and images of the work in a group or solo exhibition.

‘Jumping in at the deep end... [was I] doing the right thing?!’

The [photographic project](#) requires students to research the work of a known photographer, and present at least two images of their work, with notes and visual annotation on an A2 sheet. In the second part of the assignment, students produce a body of photographic work to represent visually themselves and their family, through a series of photographic images, but without the use of portraiture. This is designed

to encourage students to think beyond the literal, and to be as inventive as possible with the camera, to explore how they can represent different people, their traits, emotions, personality and interests. Students are given precise instructions on number and size of images they are to mount on an A2 sheet, as well as how to present them – specifically ‘do not window or border mount the images or decorate the sheet.’

Students often find this work quite challenging, as they are left very much to their own devices on how to carry out the work. One described it as ‘jumping in at the deep end’ and another remembered her uncertainty about ‘whether she was doing the right thing’. However, all feel they benefited from this early work – it encourages them to keep thinking and to be creative in the long gap between leaving school and starting the course.

Starting together



Sketchbook pages from early projects in colour, mark-making, composition and life drawing.

The group review of students’ work on the first day sets the tone and high expectations for the course. Staff and students review the work together, comparing and contrasting different approaches. One student described this initial review as ‘eye-opening’ as they saw widely varying interpretations of the same project. Students are asked to write brief written evaluations of another student’s sketchbook, identifying more or less successful aspects in the work. Staff use this opportunity to emphasise the importance of using sketchbooks and

presentation sheets to record and articulate how ideas develop, and to actively discourage over-presenting images and decorating pages, which has no real purpose.

The first stage of the course consists of a series of short projects, lasting one or two days, where students explore a very wide range of media, techniques and creative disciplines. Projects include: 'colour lovers', 'true colours', 'Wednesday is indigo blue' and 'mark-making'.

The importance of the sketchbook

The sketchbook quickly becomes a personal journal, recording each student's own journey of discovery and experimentation, through direct drawing and annotation. Students use photography extensively to record larger scale work, models, maquettes (small-scale models) and samples, which articulate their thinking and exploration. The use of photographic contact sheets enables students to include sequences of images – visual research, or records of their own work – and to highlight key features through written and visual annotation.

Photographs of work carried out on A2 sheets and 3D work are often included. Students use their sketchbooks to draw together all the different strands of their work, which helps them reflect on their progress, decisions taken and how they intend to develop their work further.



Pages from a student's sketchbook, showing how they explored images and ideas.

Short, intense projects over one or two days encourage students to explore a wide range of sources, recording visual and other experiences, through drawing, photography, use of different materials and annotation. For example, in a two-day 'walkabout' project, students spent the first day working in small groups in their local surroundings, documenting their journey and interacting physically with the space they were in. On the second day, groups worked together in the studios, sharing their ideas and responses with others, and identifying how they planned to develop the imagery further, through a range of media, including photography, video and sound recordings and two- and three-dimensional media. All ideas and developments were recorded in sketchbooks.



As students choose their specialist pathway, their sketchbooks reflect an increasingly personalised approach to their work. Students noted how sketchbooks reflected very strongly individual interests and styles.

For example, 3D design is a very broad discipline: some books are very technical and precise, others much more fluid and expressive, depending on the nature of each student's approach. Neither version is seen as being inherently 'better' than another – all approaches are valid if they support and justify the outcomes.

The course team provides a useful guide to [annotation, analysis and evaluation](#) that clearly articulates their different purposes. Students are encouraged to annotate and evaluate work all the way through the project, with brief written notes and visual notation – not just to complete a lengthy written evaluation at the end, as they often did at A level. Students develop longer pieces of analytical and critical writing through their essays for critical and contextual studies, but lengthy explanation or exposition is generally discouraged in sketchbooks.

‘[They are]... honest sketchbooks, which show the sequence of students' thinking – not engineered to present some polished version of work leading to a final piece, or produced to a formula.’

Students articulated very clearly how their experiences on the foundation course had completely changed their approach to annotation. One student commented, 'At A level, we had to write about everything, usually with a big written evaluation at the end. Sometimes there was more writing than drawing in my sketchbooks.' Another said, 'Now I annotate with much shorter notes, but it's much more purposeful – it's about conceptual thinking, reasoning, justifying my decisions – not so much what I have done, but why.' One student described her on-going annotation in her sketchbook as 'like having a conversation with myself – it's really helpful

to write things down, as a way of clarifying my thinking.'

Students also reflected on how they had quickly learned to stop decorating their pages, with colour-washed or collaged backgrounds, and elaborate borders and titles, which added nothing to the substance of their work. One said 'I now spend all that time on actually doing the work and taking things further, and my work is so much better as a result.'

Tutors monitor the quality of the sketchbooks and effectiveness of students' annotation and evaluation of their work through regular tutorials. Frequent group and individual discussions help to hone students' critical and reflective thinking, which in turn, supports more astute evaluation of their own practice.

One of the tutors summed up the impact of the team's approach in describing students' sketchbooks as 'honest sketchbooks, which show the sequence of students' thinking – not engineered to present some polished version of work leading to a final piece, or produced to a formula, where every project has the same approach.'

Provider background

[Loughborough University](#) is located in Loughborough, Leicestershire. It offers a wide range of undergraduate and post-graduate courses and one further education course, the foundation diploma in art and design. Around 170 students take this course each year. Most are over 18 and join the course after completing A levels or equivalent advanced-level study.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

To view other good practice examples, go to:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice