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### **Visualising Academia: How to make academia sexy**

*A case study highlighting the development of the Academic Visual Essay; for nurturing students' critical understanding of a topic, linking images and text.*

Visualising academia reflects a different approach to the production and demonstration of critical and theoretical work, whereby students produce and present an Academic Visual Essay as opposed to the traditional written format. It maintains the core values of academic practice; where the content is validated and contextualised with supporting evidence and follows standard academic conventions. However, Visual Essays offer students a means of representing academic practice in a structured visual format and can be articulated using various means; visually, verbally, multi-media and well as comprehensively.

There are a wide-ranging number of reasons why this work is important. Firstly, the Academic Visual Essay was developed because some students within Art and Design get frustrated with academic tasks. What they want to do, is Design. By visualising academic work, academic practices can be communicated to, and by, students creatively within a learning style they may be more accepting to. This is reminiscent to Honey and Mumford's (1982) research looking at appropriate learning styles and the importance of tailoring teaching practice to suit learners.

It is not simple the production of the Academic Visual Essay which offers opportunities for academic learning as students are asked to present their essays to a student audience. Such peer-review opportunities widen students' awareness and understanding academic practice further and encouraging debate and discussion. By having such variety and scope, students have the opportunity to development and enhance a variety of skills; not simple their writing abilities, but also professional skills and their own personal perspective on topics being discussed.

Art and Design students currently represent the highest number dyslexic students at Nottingham Trent University, so enhancing academic standards, using and projecting visual information, was important in easing students' fears and encouraging enthusiastic participation in the research and production of essays. By offering a visual format, along with suitable curriculum and educational practices, may open up academic understanding and inclusivity, relevant to a wide variety of learners' needs.

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#### **Biographical Note**

<sup>1</sup> Phillipa Martin is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Design and Built Environment at The Nottingham Trent University. Her research interests are based in student experiences within the learning environment, the quality of student learning and student approaches to study. Her previous background is as an interior designer within architecture and as a product designer. She has also completed a Masters degree in Research Methods at Sheffield Hallam University focusing on student experiences and approaches to adult education.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Arthur is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture and the Built Environment who has experience of working in disciplines that range from the arts to the sciences. His current teaching interests look at developing and implementing new and different teaching methods. These methods work alongside delivering material in a traditional manner to enhance teaching and learning and enliven the educational environment. The focus is upon methods, mechanisms and methodologies of research, which compliment design practice, critical and contextual studies.