Embedding inclusivity through non-traditional assessment (Sharon Marshall, University of Exeter)

Abstract

In 2014, the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Exeter introduced a creative project module that was explicitly designed to make our teaching more inclusive by allowing students to bring skills, knowledge and experience gained in extra-curricular settings into the degree programme for credit. The module, now in its sixth year, seeks to deepen students' understanding of the ancient world through critical practice and has seen students complete projects as diverse as an orchestral symphony based on Aeneas' descent to the underworld, a reworking of Antigone based on the WikiLeaks scandal, and a graphic novel on the life of Cicero.

Aims of the module

- To deepen understanding of the ancient world through creative practice, on the principle that we can more intensely understand the remote worlds of the past not just by writing *about* them, but by engaging *directly with them* through creative means.
- To consider the role of art in society, both ancient and modern, the importance of creativity and the imagination in scholarship and education, and the communication and enhancement of meaning through artistic expression.
- To stimulate, through practice, reflection on the critical value of engaging with the ancient world in the modern context.

Intended Learning Outcomes

1. Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of a range of ancient Greek and Roman sources and the ability to evaluate and discuss their significance from a variety of perspectives
2. Demonstrate awareness of the extent to which creative interpretations of ancient material are shaped by changing contemporary concerns
3. Demonstrate an individual imaginative and critical response to selected ancient material
4. Demonstrate an appreciation of the methodological and ideological issues which are involved in using the ancient Greek and Roman world as a resource for modern creative and critical expression
5. Through writing a critical interpretation of the project, demonstrate ability to present a strong, coherent argument in written form
6. Demonstrate skills in project-planning and execution
7. Demonstrate ability to respond constructively to feedback gained from formative work-in-progress seminars

Description of the module

- Type: optional third-year 15 credit module (accounting for 12.5% of third-year credits)
- Delivery: 22 hours of scheduled learning and teaching and 128 hours of guided independent work across two terms
- Term One: fortnightly two-hour specialist workshops and taught sessions designed to stimulate and enhance creativity and to provide an intellectual framework for students' creative projects, including how to respond critically to other creative responses to the ancient world
- Term Two: fortnightly work-in-progress seminars, supplemented by one-to-one supervision meetings
- Prerequisites: Students are required to submit a proposal at the start of the module which outlines briefly their proposed medium or area of practice

- Assessment: Project (60%); critical interpretation to accompany the project (40%)

The inspiration

Inspiration for the module came in part from Kate Hatton's work on the BAME participation, retention and attainment gap. Building on Dennis Atkinson's work on art education, Hatton considered the ways in which his concept of the 'pedagogised other' might apply to all HE learning contexts in terms that rang true for our own experience of working in Classics and Ancient History departments in the UK:

> "In many educational contexts, strong student and staff identities can be formed both within courses and in smaller teaching situations. This works to legitimise key learning 'situations' […] where both the pedagogised practices and the pedagogised identity of the course will be presented as the norm. In these areas of educational practice, strong identities are formed both in course areas, the curriculum and in assessment as methods are shaped by small teams of staff and reproduced year by year. The legitimising power of the tutors and institutions over curriculum practices and the normalisation of discourses around subjects through the promotion of particular modes of learning, therefore, may exclude students who do not conform to those practices or identities, and they may, in turn, become pedagogised others." (Hatton, 2012, p. 39).

Assessing creativity

A creative project assessment seemed to us far removed from our traditional practices and, crucially, an approach which might be shaped more by students' identities outside of the classroom, giving them the opportunity to apply the skills, knowledge and experience that we knew they were gaining in extra-curricular settings into their degree programme.

In thinking about how to assess creativity, we drew heavily on the work of Cowdroy and Williams (2006) who identified three 'agreed' types of creative ability, each representing a separate stage in progression from initial idea to realised work:

1) Conceptualization at the highest level, and exclusively intellectual, involving the generation of imaginative original ideas
2) Schematization at an intermediate level, involving the translation of the concept into preliminary form for thinking through the development of the original idea
3) Actualization at a lower level, involving the final realization of work

As we worked to develop bespoke marking criteria, we felt that assessing the project alone might cause us to over-privilege actualisation at the expense of the other two creative abilities. We therefore introduced a critical interpretation to allow students to address more explicitly those other parts of the criteria. This also helped us to address the disparity between diverse art forms and areas of creative practice, some of which (e.g. painting) have more tangible outcomes, and some of which (e.g. musical composition or script-writing) have more intangible outcomes that might rely on others for their realisation (Cowdroy and Williams, 2006, p. 102).

Results (quantitative)

As illustrated by the figures below, analysis of student performance on the module so far has allowed us to identify a number of key trends:

1. Students tend to achieve higher grades for the project than they do for the critical interpretation at both the higher and lower end of the range of marks (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - Comparison of Critical Interpretation Mark with Project Mark
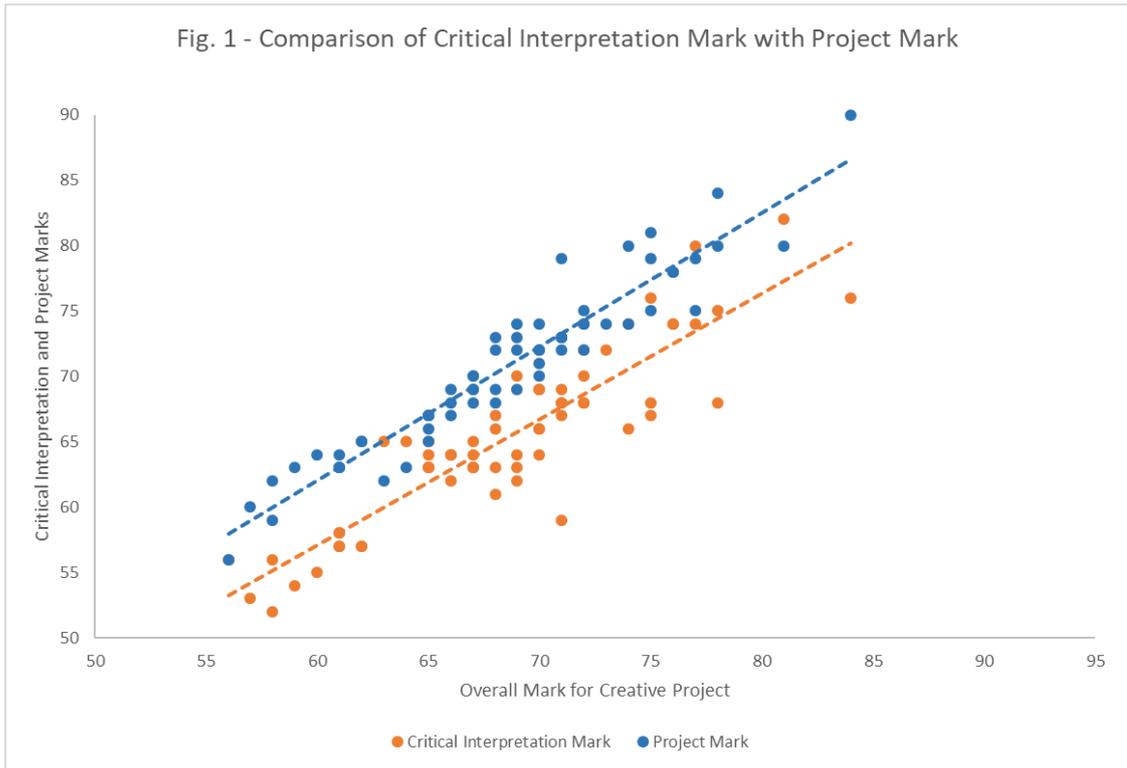
2. Students tend to achieve higher marks for the module overall in comparison with their individual weighted average of marks across other third-year modules. This is more pronounced at the lower end of the range (fig. 2.).

Fig.2 - Comparison of Overall Creative Project Marks with Weighted Average of Marks across Other Modules
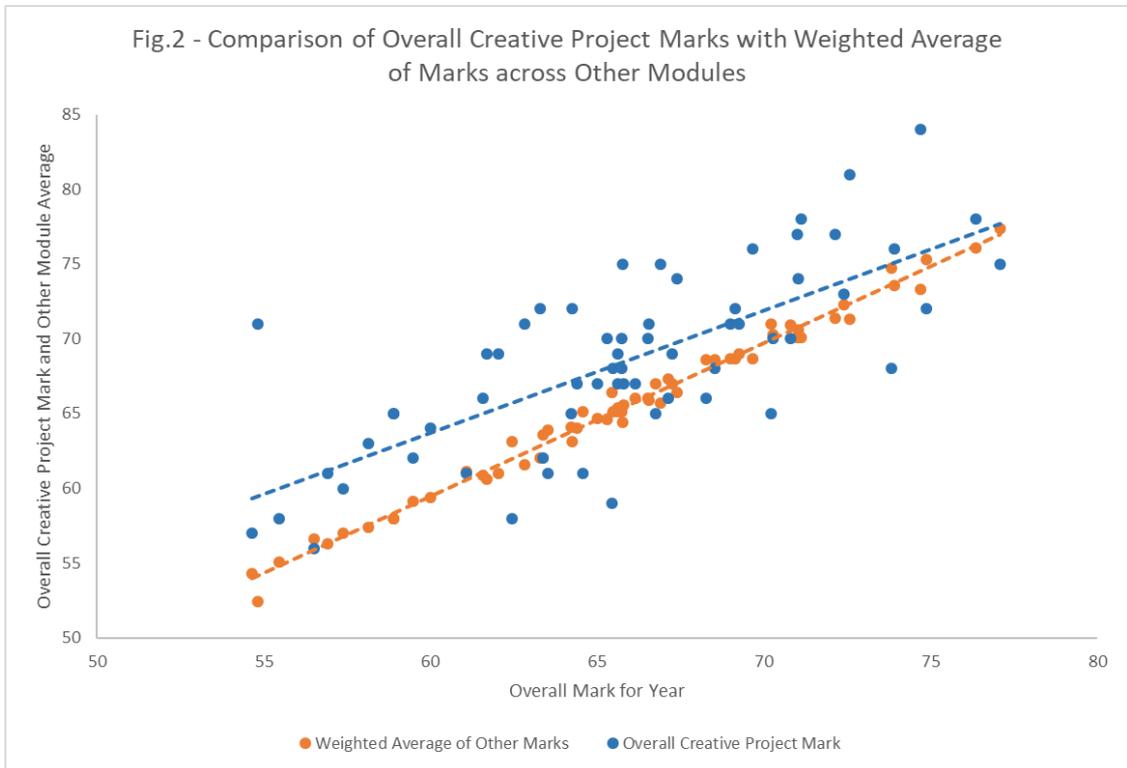
3. A comparison of the individual elements of the assessment reveals that whereas the project mark is generally higher than the weighted average of marks for the year (again with a more pronounced difference at the lower end), performance on the critical interpretation is much more variable (fig. 3 & 4).

Fig.3 - Comparison of Critical Interpretation Mark with Weighted Average of Marks across Other Modules

Fig.4 - Comparison of Project Mark with Weighted Average of Marks across Other Modules
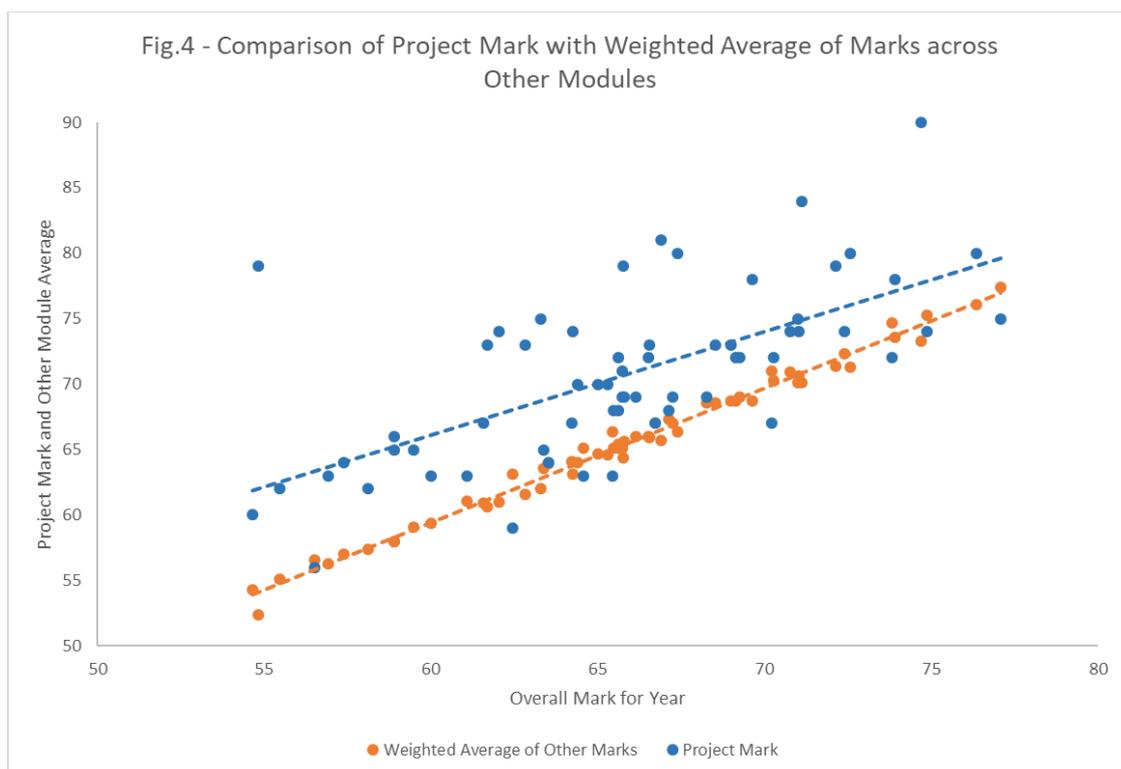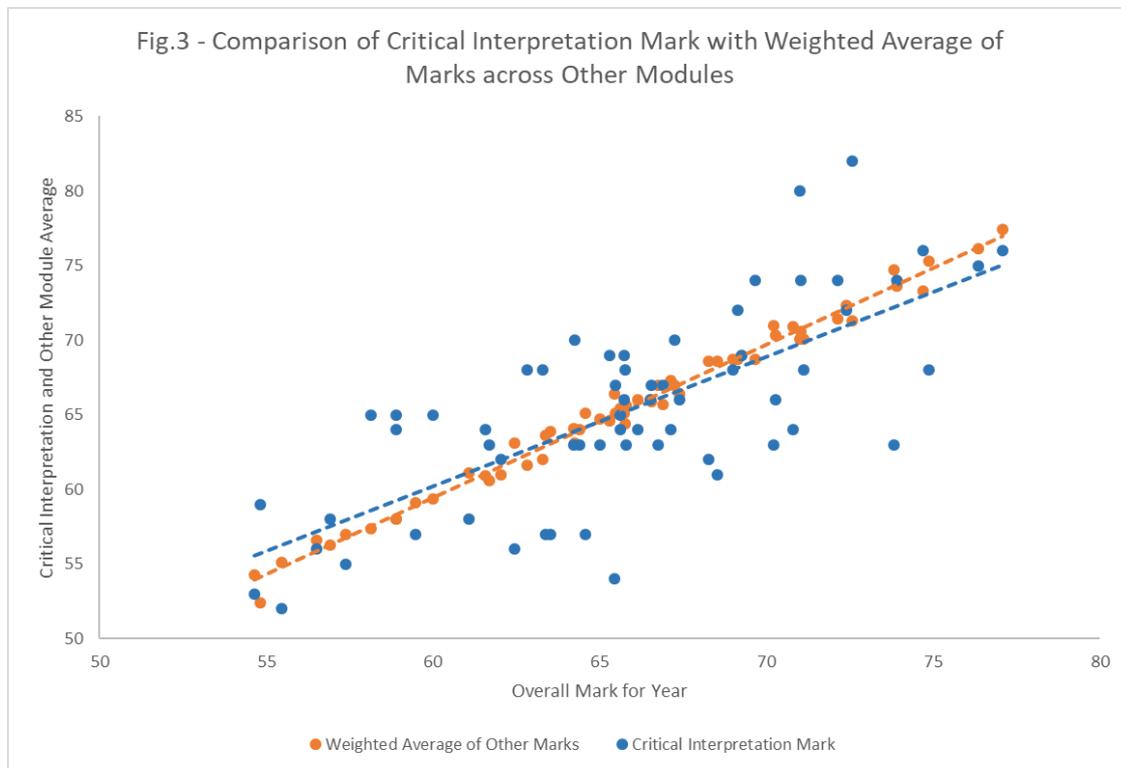
Results (qualitative)

> "What a relief it was to be able to respond to a subject I loved so much in a way that wasn't an essay. As a not super-academic person, getting to dance my thoughts was such a joy & one of the highlights of my degree" (Anna V., student, 2018)

[If you are interested, Anna has given permission to share her project here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/w1vqwf8nixn8zpm/The%20Keeper%282%29.mp4?dl=0]

There is ample evidence to support a correlation between creativity and positive wellbeing, especially in the Higher Education context (Hughes and Wilson, 2017), and we know from anecdotal evidence that the module has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of those who have taken it. We now need to work on ways of capturing this impact through formal and informal feedback opportunities.

We also think that the module plays an important role in enhancing students' employability and is a useful way of allowing students to showcase their work, particularly for those looking to enter the creative sector where the under-representation of BME groups and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds is well documented and the barriers to entry and advancement clear (Allen et al., 2012).

At the same time, we are mindful of avoiding the over-determination of an employability agenda and are being guided by the work of Jan McArthur on the role of assessment in achieving social justice:

> "If social justice involves an interaction of social and economic factors, then connecting assessment solely to the economic realm (as in employability and/or preparation for work) is unreasonable. While work is important to wellbeing, there is more to wellbeing than the economic exchange value of our labour" (Mcarthur, 2015, p. 976).

Challenges

One of the important questions we are asking as we review the effectiveness of the module is whether we are failing to challenge cultural, disciplinary and individual norms, values and knowledge hierarchies in our insistence on the critical interpretation to accompany the project. In a piece on the future of assessment in higher education, Pauline Hanesworth, Senior Adviser at Advance HE, discussed the future of assessment in higher education and the challenges to overcome:

> "As a social construct, assessment could be said to comprise practices and processes through and in which specific values – such as, in the UK at least, **rationality, individuality, objectivity and written linguistic capabilities** – are reflected and enshrined" (Hanesworth, 2019).

It is clear that, as it stands, the design of the assessment and the bespoke criteria adhere closely to those values and the generally lower performance in the critical interpretation might speak to the difficulty of letting go of particular methods. The challenge for us is to think about how we might get more innovative and inclusive assessments approved through an accreditation process that is so heavily entrenched in practices that are neither value-neutral nor culture-free.

Next steps and opportunities

The creative project module has proved a promising way of starting to think about inclusive assessment at Exeter through the lens of creative practice, but as a stand-alone optional module,

remains rather peripheral. In addition to the continued development of the module itself, the challenge now, as advocated by Hanesworth, is to consider how to move beyond what we have done so far at module level to embed the thinking and principles we employed in the design of the creative project across our assessment more broadly:

> "Although commonly (though not wholly) accepted as good pedagogic practice, inclusive assessment is still often only implemented in a piecemeal fashion in institutions, and sometimes seen solely as diversification of assessment. How can we encourage more mainstreamed implementation? What are the limitations of inclusive assessment? And what are the next steps in the route to equitable assessment and feedback practices?" (Hanesworth, 2019).

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