

Engaging international visual arts foundation students in primary research to develop their understanding and motivation: A case study

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This paper describes a study which uses smaller galleries and employs a scaffolded approach to help international foundation students on a visual arts pathway understand and develop primary research methods such as observation and interviews, enhancing academic integrity. It outlines stages of the study along with findings, challenges and benefits. Though limited in scope it shows positive results in enhancing primary research skills and further independent study which ultimately also increases motivation and course engagement: building a sense of belonging and integration into the student and wider community.

Introduction

Supporting international visual arts students in methodological research is crucial for fostering academic integrity which is defined by the European Network for Academic Integrity as 'compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and consistent system of values, that serves as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research and scholarship' (Tauginiene et al., 2018). For foundation students, a scaffolded learning approach is essential, helping them acquire the necessary concepts, knowledge, and skills incrementally.

This study aims to show that utilising smaller galleries and venues provides situations where students can gain more confidence in primary research skills, which in turn increases course engagement and motivation.

Smaller venues offer distinct advantages over larger galleries. Larger galleries can feel impersonal and crowded, making it difficult for students to focus, identify relevant pieces, and spend time studying or sketching. In contrast, smaller venues provide a more intimate experience with personalized talks, behind-the-scenes access, or exclusive use on closure days. This less-intimidating setting, shared with peers, encourages confidence in asking questions and communicating. Students also benefit from having ample time and space to sketch and take notes.

Literature review

Research in the arts is highly specific and requires a distinctive approach more likely using art itself for inspiration. Resources for teaching research skills in visual arts at foundation level are limited. For instance, Gray and Malins' *Visualising Research* (2004) and Biggs and Karlsson's *Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (2012) offer valuable insights but are more suited to postgraduate levels. Bell (2022) highlights a gap in methodology for EAP where traditional EAP resources focus primarily on secondary research and referencing, perhaps with primary research such as surveys and data analysis, which may not align with the specific needs of arts research. Gray and Malins (2004) argue individuality and personal development are key objectives in student-centred teaching in art and design.

Watson (2003, cited in Bell, 2022) stresses the importance of promoting learner autonomy and using authentic tasks to reflect real-world academic challenges. Von Lier (2004) introduced the concept of 'affordances' - learning opportunities that encourage active student participation. Perkins and Solomon (1994) introduce a methodology termed 'hugging' where 'learning in one context' can impact performance in another, a principle supported by James (2023) who notes the importance of connecting EAP input with

subject-specific skills. In fact, Jeon (cited in James, 2023) states that a disconnect between EAP and subject courses can limit skill transfer and student motivation. Thus EAP lecturers should provide real-world opportunities for this transfer to take place.

International art students coming from diverse educational backgrounds may face several challenges. For example, some students may have had limited exposure to technology for research purposes or perhaps had limited access to galleries. Additionally, inadequate guidance on conducting primary research can hinder engagement: gallery visits often result in students simply taking photos without delving into deeper research or sketching due to time or venue constraints, resulting in mixed feedback on trip value. These issues underscore the importance of targeted instruction on research, particularly primary, and referencing conventions tailored to the visual arts.

Case study

The case study (Mulders, 2024) involved a multi-national Foundation cohort of 35 students, including from Nigeria, China, and Iran enrolled for a range of art specialisms such as film, illustration and game design: thus multi-disciplinary. The unit was an EAP academic skills one where the summative assessment was an essay evaluating their own primary and secondary research sources for a project. The venue was the Craft Study Centre, a gallery associated with the University for the Creative Arts. The exhibition was textile-based with some pieces focusing on sustainability. (Making: 50, 2024)

Methodology

Determined by gallery capacity, students were divided into groups of 8 each arriving 20 minutes apart. They were allowed to remain in the gallery as long as they wished. Students were instructed to circulate and identify either a work related to their specialism or directly to the project, or a line that resonated in the artist statement which could be cited. Roughly half the students spent extended time in the gallery, sketching, taking notes and photos and interacting with each other in discussion. Students who did not find a connection to the works were encouraged to consider display methods, lighting and labelling which would be helpful for their final major project exhibition. Students who remained in/returned to class worked on secondary research and their project.

Pre-visit preparation included input on a sustainability project, which tasked students with incorporating waste or recycled materials into their work highlighting single-use product awareness. Prior sessions covered academic integrity, identifying reliable sources, and Harvard Referencing, while an exhibition overview was provided using the Craft Study Centre website.

While visiting, task prompts encouraged close analysis of a piece through observation and sketching from different angles or focusing on a specific section. Students considered how the piece could integrate into their work by identifying resonant aspects, why these stood out, and potential changes to suit their own style or intent. They also reflected on questions to ask the artist, exploring their choices, techniques, or inspirations. A more comprehensive list of task prompts is included (Appendix 1).

Post visit, students worked individually or in groups to research their chosen artist online, analysing recurring themes and comparing these to their observations. They searched for contact details and, with peer and tutor support, created and refined questions. To streamline communication, they pooled questions with others who chose the same artist, avoiding the sending of multiple messages.

During the follow-up week, students presented artist replies individually (or in groups if questions had been pooled). Academic integrity and Harvard Referencing skills were consolidated through image captioning, citing and referencing artist replies, and adding appendices. Finally, students also completed a survey providing feedback on the sessions' value.

Results

The questionnaire, which included a mix of multiple-choice, 5-point Likert scale, and open-ended questions (Appendix 2), revealed several insights. Seventy-seven percent of students found the activities very or extremely useful for understanding primary research (Fig. 1), while 65% reported that the out-of-class activity was more motivating than in-class work, aligning with a key aim of the study (Fig. 2). Fourteen out of 35 students contacted an artist, and 8 received a response, representing 40% of the group—a higher-than-expected outcome and a positive result. The low score for artist contact could be attributed to the lack of relatability for students from disciplines like film and animation and the fact that 6 students had not received replies by the time of the survey. Activity evaluation showed that students found the gallery visit more enjoyable than useful, while the discussion and question-forming activities, though less enjoyable, were perceived as beneficial (Fig. 3). Strong engagement with the survey provided extended answers to open-ended questions, offering valuable feedback.

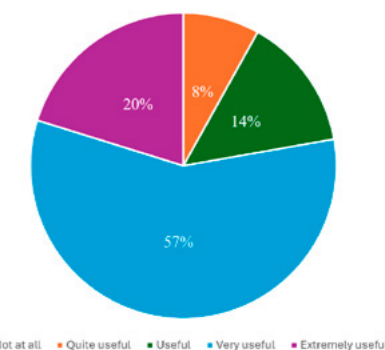


Figure 1: Q: Was the day's input useful in understanding primary research?

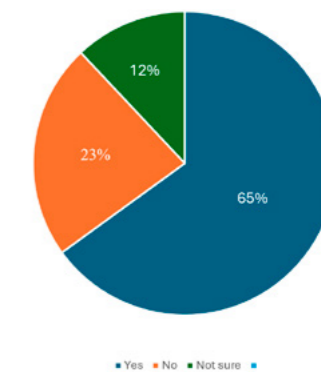


Figure 2: Q: Is out-of-class work more motivating than in-class work?

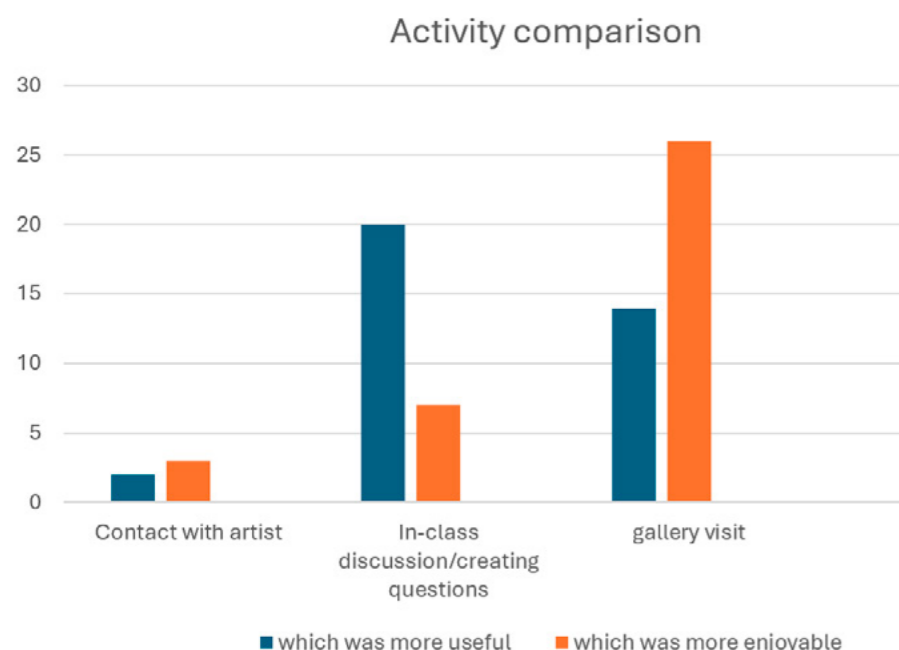


Figure 3: Activity comparison

Implications

Advantages for teachers include the opportunity to build relationships with event organisers and galleries, simplifying future collaboration for educational visits. Supporting small galleries also contributes to their sustainability and survival, as they rely on community engagement. Additionally, increased interaction with students fosters stronger relationships and provides valuable insights to inform future teaching. Teachers can also gain specialist knowledge from students and subject colleagues, enhancing the quality and relevance of course content.

Challenges using this methodology include creating tailored materials for each event or gallery, which might be streamlined with adaptable templates. Identifying specific, relevant events is time-consuming, while liaising with galleries and preparing the trip adds another labour-intensive component. Additionally, managing large groups, especially for distant venues, requires adequate staffing and resources for smooth coordination.

Despite the complexity of planning and execution, these sessions offer clear benefits for students. They provide a practical, authentic experience of primary research and a context-based approach to Harvard referencing which is more engaging than using random examples from course books.

Immersive learning enhances understanding of academic integrity and analysis skills, leading to deeper learning. Students build confidence in research and communication with peers and professionals. The sessions create memorable experiences often referenced later, while varied activities sustain interest and engagement. Reflection through surveys fosters valuable feedback for both students and lecturers. Finally, these sessions strengthen the link between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and subject specialisms.

Conclusion

The study, though limited in scope, shows positive outcomes in enhancing visual arts students' understanding of primary research and engagement with EAP skills, as evidenced by their research files and sketchbooks. Future research should examine ways to tailor sessions for multidisciplinary groups, potentially through smaller, discipline-specific visits. However, staffing, costs, and scheduling constraints pose challenges. Institutions can still prioritise practical EAP experiences and incremental interventions to maintain student motivation. Encouraging cross-disciplinary thinking, even when activities may not seem equally relevant to all, could also foster critical thinking skills. This approach may guide other institutions in balancing discipline-specific needs with broader pedagogical goals.

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Appendix 1

Outline/ task suggestions for a gallery visit to support primary research

Today's objectives:

- To explore the work of xxx
- To select works relevant to your subject specialism and/or project

Practical exercise: Explore, create, respond: In your sketchbooks record/show how selected art elements or principles were used with annotation. Consider elements such as materials, composition, colour, theme, texture, repetition...

These should be related to your own specialism. Analysis of technical and stylistic features of specific artworks related to your subject area with your own observations and interpretation of ideas is important for primary research and inform your own creative outputs

Analysis exercise: Try to give your own unique perspective on the artwork that you see and write the answers to the questions below. This work will be completed at the gallery and for homework and this sheet can be added to your reflective journals.

(Note: selection of questions per event/ visit)

- What are some repeated motifs in xxxx's works?
- What do you think xxx is trying to communicate? Do you think he/she is trying to communicate?
- How have ideas been communicated through the formal elements in the work?
- Why do you think xxx has used yyy as a media?
- How does xxx's work differ from other artists in this genre?
- Do you see a common theme in xxx's works?
- What is the historical/geographical/cultural context of the work?
- What ideas is the work trying to explore?
- How might his/her sketches and drawings influence your own style or process?
- How does the work engage the audience?
- Does xxx's exhibition/work make you feel anything? What?
- Explain how the image/work reflects both playful and serious elements.
- How do you think xxx sees his/her role in society? What does the work do?
- Do you like or dislike the exhibition? Or not feel anything? Why?
- How important is the placement and lighting of the work?
- Does the work inspire you? What specific aspect inspires you?
- Reflect on the specific work you chose to sketch: why did you feel a connection to it? Was there an issue it was addressing that resonated with you? What was it?
- Which elements would you like to use in your own art works? How would you adapt them?
- How has the research changed the way you think about your ideas and own work?
- How would you reference the work to use it in any oral or written paper?

Appendix 2

Student Questionnaire IIF – CSC primary research: 20/02/2024

(Where applicable please circle the emoji that applies from: 😞 = not at all to 😊 = very)

- How enjoyable was the gallery session? 😞 😟 😐 😄 😊
- What was the most interesting aspect/information? 😞 😟 😐 😄 😊
- Was the day's input useful for understanding primary research? 😞 😟 😐 😄 😊
- Did you get any information you could apply to your own work? What? Y / N
- Did you make contact with an artist? Y / N
- Did you get an answer? Y / N
- How useful was the answer to your own work/specialism/way of working? 😞 😟 😐 😄 😊
- Is out-of-class work more motivating than in-class work? Y / N
- Out of the 3 sections for this input, which did you enjoy most?
 - Gallery visit
 - In-class discussion/creating questions
 - Contact with the artist
- Out of the 3 sections for this input, which do you think is most useful for your studies?
 - a.Gallery visit
 - b.In-class discussion/creating questions
 - c.Contact with the artist
- Thinking about the different skills we covered, which do you think you now feel confident about – tick all that apply:
 - Understanding and doing primary research
 - Working collaboratively
 - Thinking analytically when viewing a piece of art
 - Creating relevant material (questions for artist)
 - Harvard Referencing skills
 - Speaking: communicating your ideas
 - Connecting research to your own output
- Thinking about the skills you did not tick, why do you think you are not confident about them? – list all that apply. (What do you need to know to become confident?)
- What was the biggest challenge in this lesson?
- If you were a teacher, what would you change for a future, similar lesson?