

# PALATINE

## working paper

dance  
drama  
music  
performance

## Negotiating assessment

*an approach to assessing practical work, including  
assessment criteria*

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The  
Higher  
Education  
Academy

**PALATINE**  
Dance, Drama  
and Music

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# NEGOTIATING ASSESSMENT: an approach to assessing practical work.

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This approach to assessing practical work was developed at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA). As notions of creativity, innovation and excellence were at the heart of LIPA's educational mission, it was essential that the institute's assessment system, which also had to meet the requirements of the validating university, was able to meet those aspirations in practice. Also, as the curriculum was designed to ensure that students from different subject areas worked together on single, major practical modules, the assessment system had to be designed to ensure that students understood that there was a single, unified approach to assessment that would enable, for example, a dancer to be assessed alongside a designer, and a musician alongside a manager.

With the support of the chief external examiner a system of 'negotiated assessment' for creative practical work was developed, first in the performance design curriculum area, and then adopted across the other curriculum areas. It is perhaps significant that it was the performance design department that drove the initiative, as the pedagogic ethos of that department was based on that more commonly found in UK art schools rather than the more traditional dance, music and drama conservatoires or university departments.

The negotiated assessment system at LIPA was based on several ideas:

- that students engaged in creative practice would be working not only at different levels but also in different ways, and that the products they created would be different as would the processes and methods utilised.
- that assessment should operate and be perceived to be an integral part of the learning process rather than 'bolted-on' to the end of that process.
- that the form, content and implementation of the assessment process should be commensurable with the discourse and practices of the field
- that the word 'assessment' derives from the Latin '*ad sedere*' which means 'to sit down together' students became agents in their own assessment rather than objects of assessment.

Six assessment fields were identified:

1. **Presentation/Production** i.e. the finished product presented to an audience
2. **Process** i.e. the journey that led to the product
3. **Idea** i.e. the ideas that informed both the process and the product.
4. **Technical** i.e. the quality and utility of the technical features of the product and the skills with which they were assembled and/or operated
5. **Documentation** i.e. research, design, planning, evaluation etc.
6. **Interview** i.e. the student's ability to articulate their understanding, utilisation and application and use of any of the above.

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Each field was divided into grade bands (see the criteria at end of this introduction) that correlated to the somewhat eccentric UK honours system, and detailed assessment criteria, were developed for each band. One departure from the norm was the introduction of a band of 'High First' (85% - 100%) to acknowledge truly outstanding work.

The important feature of this system was that, through negotiation between the students and the tutor(s), the assessment weighting for each of the fields could be altered. This allowed the student who was quite consciously and determinedly 'taking a creative risk' to have the assessment emphasis placed less on presentation/production and more on process, idea, and documentation. It also allowed the student who was carrying out a specific task or working to a strictly defined brief i.e. to make rather than design a particular artefact, to have more emphasis placed on the final product and technical features and less on idea and process. In the case of the latter there would still be a requirement for documentation, and in both cases students would still be required to undertake an assessment interview.

The interview would normally last between 30- 40 minutes. Students would bring all and any the evidence they had to support their 'case', and the interview would consist of the tutors turning the assessment criteria statements into questions. An important and essential feature of this process was that tutors would rigorously work their way up from a level that was clearly below that which was applicable to the student's work. This gave an opportunity to the students to demonstrate or argue that their work not only met a particular criterion in full, but exceeded it. (Sometimes the tutors had to persuade the student that their work was actually better than they conceived it to be).

A typical exchange, for a good a piece of work, might go as follows:

Tutor: *What would you say if your work was described as adequate and shows little more than a basic grasp of the task?* (taken from third class, performance & presentation).

Student: *I don't agree with that at all! My work is much better than that.*

Tutor: *Ok. Explain why you think that.*

At which point the student has to articulate their knowledge and understanding of what they have achieved (or not), and to justify their response.

Eventually a point would be reached where there were more negative than positive responses to the questions. That would indicate, both to the assessors and the student, that the assessment of the work had reached its maximal level.

Amongst the outcomes of the implementation of this system was the genuine interest and pleasure - for both students and tutors - that derived from engaging in the purposeful discussion of creative practice and product, and the sense that the student's efforts as well as product had been fully considered and assessed fairly. One unexpected benefit was that student appeals against their grades virtually disappeared, as the process was transparent, explicit and mutually agreed.

Though it was not without some drawbacks (particularly time<sup>2</sup>) the system developed at LIPA demonstrated that it was possible - within an higher education context - to assess creative processes and products in a way that was not only valid, fair and reliable but also, and importantly, was perceived and experienced to be so. It demonstrated that assessment and creativity were not mutually exclusive terms.

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<sup>2</sup> The time element is obviously an important factor. Though this approach would appear to be incredibly time intensive, it needs to be placed alongside the time it takes to read, mark, write the feedback, meet with the student etc. for a standard student essay. The assessment interview IS the assessment all 'wrapped up' in one session. The difference, of course, that whereas the marking of essays is expected to be undertaken outside 'normal' time, this is built into learning time and is regarded as part of that learning time.

## **CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING PRACTICAL WORK**

**Category: 'High' FIRST**

**Grade: 85%+**

Description: 'Outstanding work in all respects'; 'Work of high professional standard'

### **Performance/Presentation:**

- The work is structured, designed, performed and presented throughout in a manner which is entirely suited to the subject-matter and allows for a powerful engagement with the relevant audience.
- High levels of creative imagination and originality in artistic choices.
- The form of presentation/construction/execution of the work is entirely appropriate, and offers no grounds for criticism.
- All matters pertaining to the performance/presentation which should have been considered have been addressed.
- The performance/presentation skills required of the students are extremely good and offer no grounds for criticism.

### **Process:**

- There is strong evidence (see Documentation & Interview below) of a consistently high level of commitment to the project - over the timescale of the project - in terms of research, time management and practical application.
- In a group-based or collaborative context, the student's work is judged to be integral to the project's success by virtue of its intellectual insight, sustained commitment, and disciplined organisation.
- The student concerned has also demonstrated the ability to detect and solve major problems associated with the project, to collaborate with others for the benefit of the whole group, and to perform/present the project in a highly favourable light using high levels of personal and practical skills.

### **Ideas:**

- The work demonstrates a clear ability to communicate ideas of significance through performance/presentation.
- The intellectual ideas to be found in the work or upon which the work is based, constitute a valid, highly individual perspective on the issues being addressed.
- This perspective shows full awareness of current trends/debates in the performing arts and cultural practice and contributes a fresh approach to the task.
- The brief which the student(s) set themselves or were given has been followed in every respect and subjected to a penetrating critical appraisal where appropriate.
- There is evidence of relevant research on current practice.

### **Technical Features:**

- All technical aspects of the work within the student's control have been skilfully dealt with, and there are no technical problems that prevent the concept of the work being realised.
- There is a complete and satisfying fusion of the technical and the creative.
- Where a technical issue is of particular importance, the ability that is evident is of an extremely high standard.
- The work has been organised and managed efficiently and within all budgetary and time constraints.

### **Documentation:**

- If applicable, this should reveal an extremely detailed account (recording of data/reflection/analysis) of a dynamic process of research, exploration and technical experimentation which has evolved over a period of time.

### **Interview:**

- If called upon to be interviewed, the student(s) can defend their work in all respects with a persuasive rationale that is relevant, comprehensive and elegant.

**CATEGORY: FIRST****Grade: 70%-84%**

Description: 'excellent in most respects'

For a grade in the 70% - 84% band work will be clearly outstanding in at least one aspect (Performance/Presentation, Process, Ideas, and Technical Features) but will have flaws in the other areas.

*NOTE: The overall impression of work given a First Class grade of any kind is still excellent; any flaws may emerge on closer examination'.*

**Category: UPPER SECOND****Grade: 60%-69%**

Description: 'Generally good or very good work ( above average), but with some defects'; 'Accomplished'

**Performance/Presentation:**

- The form of the work is appropriate to the task and fulfils the brief/directions given to the students well. Clear ability to synthesise an understanding of process through performance allowing for consistent engagement with the audience;
- The work demonstrates a clear ability to synthesise an understanding of process through performance allowing for consistent engagement with the relevant audience.
- The work demonstrates good levels of imagination though not particularly original in expression.
- The form of the work is suitably chosen and executed competently.
- The presentation of the work gives a generally very good impression, although there will be some aspects in which it could be improved upon.
- The relevant skills are displayed mostly to acceptable standards of professional practice, with good focus in performance and/or good form of presentation.
- The defects, however, are matters of style/technique/finish rather than fundamental errors.

**Process:**

- There is evidence (see Documentation and/or Interview below) of a generally high but occasionally inconsistent or variable level of commitment to the project - over the timescale of the project - in terms of research, time management and practical application.
- In a group-based or collaborative process, the student has made a very good contribution to the project; has the majority of the skills needed in collaborative group work; and has maintained the degree of effort necessary to complete the work to a high standard.
- Certain problems have been identified and a number of important solutions proposed by this student.
- He or she is reflective; can accept most useful criticism; and will have an accurate understanding of the project's achievements.

**Ideas:**

- The ideas in the work have been assembled coherently by the student(s) into a convincing response, but they do not constitute a radically innovative approach.
- The intellectual issues posed by the work, have, however, been addressed in all important respects.
- There has been a clear attempt to communicate ideas of significance though performance.
- Some ideas may not have been considered in full, however, and there are opportunities for further refinement.



### Technical Features:

- All technical aspects of the work are dealt with effectively, although there may be some relatively small problems which the student(s) should have considered.
- These are not sufficiently serious to obscure the basic concept of the work.
- Where technical skill is demanded this has been shown.
- The work has been accomplished within broad budgetary and time constraints.

### Documentation:

- A very good account of the technical development of the project with some reflection on the problems and the means of overcoming them.

### Interview:

- If interviewed, the student(s) can defend their work convincingly, and provide reasons for their actions in most important respects.

*NOTE: As a general guide, the work will be above average on the whole, although there may be some respects in which it falls to an average standard.*

*Grade range:*

*67%-69% the work will conform to the criteria above.*

*63%-66% the majority, but not all of the work conforms to the criteria above.*

*60%-62% half of the work conforms to the above criteria, and the overall impression is that the work is accomplished in what it has achieved.*

### Category: LOWER SECOND

**Grade: 50%-59%**

Description: 'Generally sound work (average), but with a number of notable defects'.  
'Competent but uninspired'.

### Performance/Presentation:

- These elements are handled appropriately, with little flair, but no serious problems.
- Any difficulties that are evident are obvious but resolvable.
- The work demonstrates an inconsistent ability to synthesise process through performance/presentation, but there is some allowance for an engagement with the audience.

### Process:

- There is evidence (see Documentation and/or Interview below) of a generally satisfactory and/or variable level of commitment to the project - over the timescale of the project - in terms of research, time management and practical application.
- In a group-based or collaborative context, the student:
  - has made a good contribution to the project which is clearly responsible for an element of the project's success, although the personal skills displayed may be limited to that element.
  - will have played a useful though not vital role in the development, organisation, or presentation of the work, and will have shown all the commitment necessary to ensure success in this respect.
  - will have successfully overcome any obstacles or difficulties in their path, and will have adapted their work effectively to the demands of the whole project.
  - will have some understanding of how their own contribution might have been improved.

**Ideas:**

- The concept of the work is relevant, although uninspired, and related in some way to current practices.
- The nature of the work has been understood, and the brief followed, but with no exceptional insight.
- There is some connection between the ideas behind the work and the performance/ presentation, though the connection is not always clearly focused or articulated.
- There may be some clear defects in the thought that has gone into the project, but these are not fundamental mistakes.

**Technical features:**

- The work succeeds in the technical sense.
- All that has been attempted is accomplished, although with varying degrees of skill.
- Some problems may occur, but they are not particularly serious.

**Documentation:**

- If applicable this reveals that the student has done extensive research and preparation and that a concept has gradually been formulated and most problems overcome.
- Interview:
- The student(s) can defend their work adequately in the majority of respects.
- Generally the work will be average on the whole, although there may be some respects in which it falls to a below average standard.

**Interview:**

- The student(s) can defend their work adequately in the majority of respects.

*Generally the work will be average on the whole, although there may be some respects in which it falls to a below average standard.*

*57%-59% the work will conform to the criteria above.*

*53%-56% the majority, but not all of the work conforms to the criteria above.*

*50%-52% half of the work conforms to the above criteria, and the overall impression is that the work is undistinguished but fundamentally sound.*

**Category: THIRD****Grade: 40%-49%**

Description: 'Work satisfactory, but with a number of significant errors and/or omissions'; 'Adequate'.

**Performance/Presentation:**

- The work is adequate, although it shows little more than a basic grasp of the task.
- Generally below average, but sufficient to constitute a response to the brief.
- One or more elements of the performance/presentation may be inadequately thought through.
- There is an intermittent sense of investment of the intellect/imagination, and a merely adequate focus/direction of effort.
- The artistic choices have been made within a narrow expressive band that is personally safe.
- Relevant skills have been employed but not to standards of professional practice. There is a good deal of awkwardness/self-consciousness/lack of ease in the articulation of the work.

**Process:**

- There is evidence (see Documentation and/or Interview below) of an adequate but rather weak level of commitment to the project - over the timescale of the project - in terms of research, time management and practical application.
- In a group-based or collaborative context the student:
  - has made a satisfactory or adequate contribution, which has shown sufficient talent to prove some basic aspect of the project.
  - has fulfilled a useful, but not vital role in some aspect of the projects overall plan, and has shown enough effort to accomplish this.
  - has demonstrated a limited ability to overcome problems.
  - has interpersonal skills are adequate to cooperate effectively with the group.
  - has taken a role in the presentation of the group's work that is appropriate if not particularly talented.

**Ideas:**

- A very limited, but just adequate concept underlying the work. Some ideas may be clearly wrong/deficient/irrelevant.

**Technical:**

- The technical aspects are just competent, although there will be some respects in which there are technical failures, or omissions.
- The technical skills or features displayed may not always be connected to the communication of the idea.

**Documentation:**

- The log shows that there has been a process of development and thought, although this is not particularly inspired or thorough.
- The student demonstrates some ability to evaluate their personal efforts.

**Interview:**

- The student(s) can attempt a defence which is reasonably coherent, although they cannot add any useful ideas to their existing work.

*Generally the work will be adequate on the whole, although there may be some respects in which it falls to an unacceptable standard.*

*Grade range:*

*47%-49% the work conforms to the above criteria.*

*43%-46% the majority, but not all of the work conforms to the criteria above.*

40%-42% half of the work conforms to the above criteria, and the overall impression is that the work has only marginally succeeded in fulfilling the assessment.

**Category: 'COMPENSATABLE' FAIL**

**Grade: 35%-39%**

Description: 'some serious errors or omissions'. 'a decent but insufficient attempt'

**Performance/Presentation:**

- The form is not appropriate or is so misconceived that it misrepresents the purpose of the exercise.
- The presentation is inadequate to justify or redeem the work.

**Process:**

- There is little evidence (see Documentation and/or Interview below) of a commitment to the project - over the timescale of the project - in terms of research, time management and practical application, but overall level is inadequate/inappropriate/insufficient.

**Ideas:**

- The fundamental idea is not quite what was required for the exercise, although it might possibly be appropriate elsewhere.
- An essential idea is missing.

**Technical features:**

- Technical aspects of the work have failed in a significant respect, which means that the work is not fully complete or presentable.

**Documentation:**

- The evidence does not suggest that the work has evolved as a result of careful planning and research.

**Interview:**

- The student(s) cannot articulate a coherent defence or explain important aspects of their practice.

*NOTE: If any one of the above criteria is satisfied, the mark should be a compensatable fail.*

*Generally the overall impression is that the student has not quite achieved what they were asked to do. However, a mark in this range signifies that the work is redeemable and that it shows signs that with some effort, it could be made pass-worthy.*

**CATEGORY: FAIL****Grade: 0%-34%**

Description: 'Many serious errors and/or omissions', 'Work of a poor/very poor standard'; 'Unacceptable'.

- There is some indication that the student has attempted to fulfil the basic requirements in one of the categories or has given a little thought to each, but this is only an indication. The student must be referred.

*Note: A grade of 0% will be awarded for plagiarism; non-attendance or for work of no appreciable value.*