

EMPLOYABILITY AND

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS IN ART

AND DESIGN



AIM HIGH
FLY HIGHER

**ABOUT JULIE**

Julie Read (BA Hons, PGCE), is a **Creativity expert**, mentor & speaker. She's a leading educator in the Creative Industries on a mission to create a legacy to 'unlock your creative genius'. Her primary passion is in enabling individuals to explore the world and their experience of the world, through their art. Portfolio preparation, in particular the creative process and sketchbooks are the founding principles. Her passion and mission is assisting students in creating an art portfolio for university.

Julie has been at both ends of the system; helping students creating art college portfolios for university as well as interviewing applicants for entry to Edinburgh College of Art for 9 years.

She led the student recruitment activity at Edinburgh College of Art from 2006 – 9. This involved advising many prospective students and their parents about applying to art college and creating art college portfolios for university.

Julie was also a student who didn't get a place at art college many, many years ago - in fact didn't get a place at a staggering 3 art colleges!

She realised that she clearly had NO IDEA when creating an art college portfolio, what the tutors were looking for in her or her work – crucial. What she didn't realise was that it said nothing about her, what she was interested in and it showed quite clearly that her passion for art hadn't really been ignited.

However, success did prevail and Julie is an **artist** based in Midlothian, 8 miles south of Edinburgh. She received her BA (Hons) in Fine Art Printmaking from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art (Dundee) and a teaching qualification from the University of Strathclyde. Julie has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally and undertaken residencies in Switzerland and Austria.

Her work is included in a number of collections, including Royal Bank of Scotland, Archive Centre for Artists Books at Dundee Contemporary Arts, National Library of Scotland, International Portrait Gallery in Tuzla, Bosnia, Karelian State Museum Permanent Collection, Russia.

She has received 4 awards from the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland) also the British Council, Friends of the Royal Scottish Academy, Hope Scott Trust, City of Edinburgh Council and the Arts Trust of Scotland.

Feel free to contact Julie on 07815 810797

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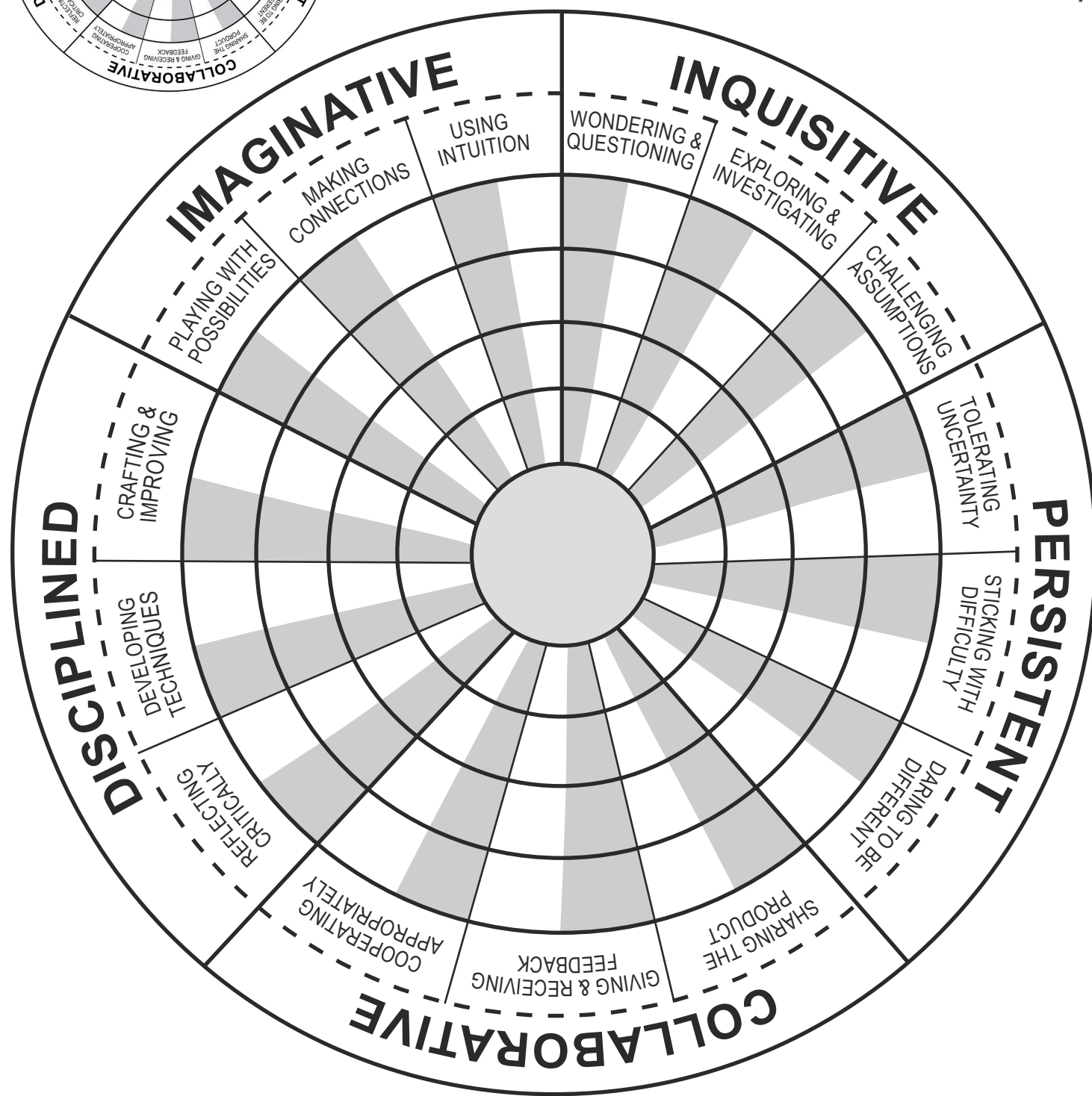
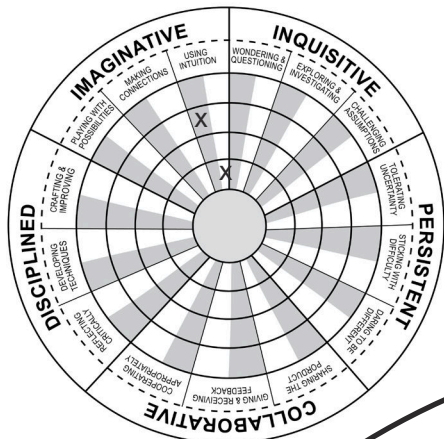


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Rate your creativity and employability skills!

For each section, place an X in the grey area before you start your portfolio. So if you think you're not so good at 'using intuition' place it closest to the outside of the ring. If after you've completed your portfolio, you feel you're much better at it, place it towards the centre of the ring in the white area (see inset left). See how things change, build your skills, build your confidence.

[Illustration originally produced by Centre for Real-World Learning www.winchester.ac.uk]



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Welcome to my eBook AND 15 “Employability bites” video series on Employability and Transferable skills.

Employability skills are the skills that you need for the world of work – and they’re pretty important for life as well. By developing employability skills, you’ll improve your chances of getting a job and thriving in your creative career.

Transferable skills are skills and abilities that are relevant and helpful across different areas of life: socially, professionally and at school, they are ‘portable skills’.


I had no idea that I had acquired any of these skills when I left art college - but then, education was quite different in the early 1990s! You might think that this is boring part of art college but actually, it’s the really exciting part (apart from making work of course) that happens as a product of making great art.

Art education IS useful beyond learning technical creative skills and ideas. The more we harness this notion, the higher the profile in society the arts will become.

I wanted to talk to you about some of the skills that you learn while you’re in a creative education, it’s not just necessarily about learning to master the techniques and think/communicate about ideas, there’s lots of employability and transferable skills. And goodness, if I’d known this it would have helped me big time. But I came away from art college thinking that all I’d really learnt was how to draw, print and make art. So I want to break down the different skills that you may learn that will be useful for any kind of careers, any kind of job, any kind of employer.


If some of you are concerned or worried about an art education or if your parents are worried, then these are some of things that can help you. When we work on our creative endeavours, we form habitual ways of working and these are the skills that we have outlined.


At the end of this eBook is a list of how they key themes might ‘look’ in the workplace.


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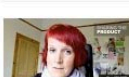
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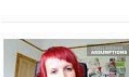
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PLAYING WITH POSSIBILITIES - How willing are you to try out new and different ways of expressing yourself?

I want to talk about the idea of playing with possibilities. Within an art education you're thinking about possible ways to create, you're not thinking necessarily as you do in subjects like maths or science where there are wrong and right answers - you're playing with possibilities, you're finding alternative ways for things.

And the idea of 'play' can be substituted for exploration - you're exploring ideas but I like to use the word playing as well because I think you do that as a child, it's instinctive to play, it's fun and we learn an awful lot through play.

I believe the early stages of the creative process are about having fun, are about playing, playing with the idea, playing with the materials, playing with the techniques and once you've given yourself time to play with the materials, techniques and ideas then it's time to reflect and think about what you've done in that process. What's working, what's not, what's worth doing more of, what's 'not really what I'm looking for'?

That's the reflection and an essential part of the creative process. And as you reflect on what you've done in that play process, you start to refine your ideas, processes until you reach your goal. Throw in a little bit of other artists work and you're covering the creative process or the design process and what the art colleges want to see. So being able to play with possibilities, what potential has an idea got? What potential do certain materials have?

It's really important and this kind of skill is important to any kind of employer, you're not set in stone, things aren't concrete - they're ambiguous in nature. This is just one of the aspects that we teach you at art college and it's one of the things that I instil here at Portfolio Oomph in my mentoring and course. So if you can keep in your mind playing with possibilities then that will stand to in very good stead.

MAKING CONNECTIONS - How good are you at linking different techniques, experiences and ideas - LATERAL THINKING?

As artists have talked about the importance of collecting ideas and bits of knowledge from the world around us, and making connections between those dots to fuel creative thinking and new ideas. That's what our research is essentially. When we research an idea we're looking at all the possible ways.

Steve Jobs is an obvious person to quote on the idea of creativity and innovation; "Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something."

So if you can aim to connect experiences you've had, this can be any experiences - using certain materials, visiting places, travelling, reading books on artists but also outside of art - around the ideas and themes that you're interested in.

Writer **Maria Popova**... "in order for us to truly create and contribute to the world, we have to be able to connect countless dots, to cross-pollinate ideas from a wealth of disciplines, to combine and recombine these pieces and build new castles."

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So keep your sketchbook handy and make notes when you think of exciting and interesting things that you're thinking about. Even if you can't see the connections between these thoughts, topics at the moment, you might in days/ weeks to come. Mindmaps are a great way to make connections between ideas but also linking through to materials and processes.

USING INTUITION - How good are you at 'having a hunch' about something?

So what is intuition? One way of relating to it is when you just know something in its wholeness without having to work it out. It 'feels' right, and where do you feel it? In your heart, your tummy, your head?

But you just know that what you're doing or the situation you're in is what is needed right now. This can be quite a difficult feeling to identify and to be aware of if you're not used to working like this. And whilst working in many other areas of life, intuition perhaps doesn't really play a part at all. Maths, Science and other subjects rely on knowing, although Science you do often have a 'hunch' but it then needs to be proved.

We sometimes look too much for reassurance and direction from others around us - teachers, parents, peers. By using your intuition you'll produce your best work, your most powerful work. And as you get more experienced in the creative process you'll learn to trust that your gut feeling is valuable and that it's a really valuable skill for your future as an artist or an employee in any field.

There will be many instances in our life where you've quashed your gut's opinion

and did what you thought you were "supposed" to do, instead of what you knew in your gut was right. When we can relax and trust ourselves, we begin to listen to and to rely on our intuition.

So these videos I'm producing aren't to be seen as separate skills to master - but they need to work as a jigsaw, you'll find some skills are dependent on having acquired others. For example you'll find you're more able to use your intuition if you're more comfortable at tolerating uncertainty.

WONDERING AND QUESTIONING - How much do you think about the world around you, also the work you and others produce?

"I think curiosity is probably the most important energy any creative person can have." Robert Rauschenberg

To be inquisitive is found to be just as important as intelligence in order to succeed and navigate our increasingly complex world. It takes us into an area of uncertainty, which we'll discuss later, which in turn opens our minds to new ways, ideas, skills and problem solving. As Albert Einstein said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious."

So being curious takes practice like any new habit. But by delving just that bit deeper into the world you'll be providing the colleges with really good evidence of your ability to enquire and work with ideas rigorously.

Again, the evidence of this curiosity should be recorded in your sketchbooks and the benefit of working like this will also be evident in your final outcome - although not explicitly. Wondering and questioning leads you to the next skill in the series,

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‘exploring and investigating’. In fact, research shows that curiosity increases with knowledge: the more we know, the more we want to know.

EXPLORING AND INVESTIGATING - How willing are you to try out new and different techniques and ideas?

Following on from wondering and questioning, taking this curiosity a step or a few steps further to exploring and investigating. This can be done in your sketchbook to form visual evidence but remember, it also can be with you day to day in yourself. Start with the thing you’re curious about, and letting yourself follow the tangents you need in order to understand what you’re interested in, or master the skills you want.

If you can try to keep your sense of humour while you’re experimenting and exploring then this is useful. You are more creative when you are relaxed. Humour aids in putting your problems (and yourself) in perspective. Many times it relieves tension and makes you more relaxed therefore more creative.

The more open you are to trying new techniques and ideas the easier it becomes - it’s practise, like anything else.

Exploring and investigating are essential cross curricular skills which allow learners to employ critical thinking, alongside articulating their findings.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS - How willing are you to challenge something which you are told is correct?

I think this is crucial to a creatively wired brain - to be able to feel strong enough in yourself to challenge the world around you and what you know to be correct.

Do you ever stop to consider how our assumptions shape and mold our actions, behaviours and our lives? If you challenge what you’re told is correct then new discoveries will happen and think about where that might take you! There is also the chance that you might discover that you’re not correct either.

However, thinking about a problem in a fresh way enables you to come up solutions that are innovative and creative. From an early age we are told what is correct by parents then teachers, then bosses etc.

One of the ways that we challenge assumptions is with our drawing skills. We assume that if we use our ‘correct’ hand, use pencil, measure, spend weeks and weeks perfecting tonal shading etc. that we will produce our best work. But what happens when we use the ‘wrong’ hand, limit the time we have to produce a drawing to 60 seconds, don’t look at the drawing whilst doing it? We assume that we will produce rubbish. But hey - why not try it?

Listen out for your language when talking about your work and when you use words and phrases like “never”, “always”, “all of” and “none of.”

I speak with many students who tell me that they always use pencil or they work best from photos. My response is ‘so try something that you don’t know gets good results, so to challenge yourself - you might find this produces even better results!’

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And this leads on to our next skill which is 'tolerating uncertainty'. If we think of art more like science (where actually there are many commonalities) then assumptions are essentially hypotheses.

In the world of science, hypotheses are either accepted or refuted with proof. Many assumptions are based on past history – don't get stuck there, instead view your assumptions through the lens of how things might be in the future. We often make assumptions because it's easier and quicker - but what do we compromise by doing so?

TOLERATING UNCERTAINTY - How easy do you find it not to be sure about something you do?

Research has found that people vary in their ability to tolerate uncertainty and if you're one of those who find uncertainty difficult, your anxiety levels will high. I think most people can feel quite out of their comfort zone when they don't know where they are going with a project.

Developing a willingness or openness to experience uncertainty without trying to eliminate or control it is a really valuable skill. If we always know exactly what we are doing, how things are going to turn out then we get very few breakthroughs of original, innovative ideas.

Being comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity is an essential skill to develop in this age as job security is very uncertain. It's quite unusual these days to have a 'job for life' and many people work from project to project not necessarily knowing when the next contract is coming. It's also common for people to have 'portfolio

careers' where they work freelance for a number of organisations which they manage themselves.

So when we are firmly grounded in the present moment rather than thinking about what the final piece of art is going to be, our minds cannot worry about uncertainty.

I have to say this is easier said than done but it's something I work very hard with my mentoring students to achieve - to try to live in the moment of creating rather than 'what is it going to be?' When it comes to uncertainty, the most important thing to do is to challenge any behaviour that you do in an effort to eliminate or control your discomfort.

One wonderful quote I always use with students is "Writing a novel (creating art) is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." E.L. Doctorow.

STICKING WITH DIFFICULTY - How well do you stick at something when you are finding it difficult - PROBLEM SOLVING?

It can be so easy to throw in towel at the first sign of difficulty but if you don't push past these feelings that new, innovative solutions to design and creative problems don't get solved.

Dare I say it but in this digital age of instant gratification, we want things now, we don't want to have to work at stuff, try a number of possibilities before we come to the solutions. But by being persistent and working logically sometimes, through ideas, techniques etc. we are building good skills useful for a number of careers. Learning to be creative is almost like a habit that requires a schedule and your

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attention - you need to put the hours in and stick with it.

Part of sticking with difficulty is failing and being open and comfortable with failure.

When Dyson invented his first Dual Cyclone vacuum cleaner, he spent 15 years creating 5,126 versions that failed before he made one that worked. Do you think he gave up when the going got tough? Each version is a step in the right direction and to be innovative, create new designs then push past these difficult stages is essential. "We have to embrace failure and almost get a kick out of it. Not in a perverse way, but in a problem-solving way. Life is a mountain of solvable problems and I enjoy that." James Dyson

DARING TO BE DIFFERENT - How easy do you find it to go your own way and be different from the crowd?

I think this is a really difficult one to deal with. We spend a lot of our life trying to conform - our 9 year old daughter is keen to be like everyone else no matter how much we say to her that it's good to be different, you don't have to be like everyone else - the tendency at this age is to want to fit in.

But I dare say that the very fact that you're thinking of applying to art college, you probably like being different to a degree anyway! By being different you mustn't be worried about what people will say about you. If you want to do something different, you're going to come up against a lot of nay-sayers. So you need to be confident in yourself and your skills.

So how do you dare to be different? I

would say to see how others do it - take a look at other artists and designers - see how they are pushing the boundaries, what do they explore that makes them different?

It can be very difficult to produce ideas and artwork for public viewing that are different, as essentially you're putting yourself out there, warts and all, for criticism and possibly misunderstanding.

But this is where the dialogue begins about peoples' different views and as we ARE all unique, there will be many different views and this we have to accept. You can break free of these limits by exposing yourself to new, external influences. It's not a question of doing things differently just for the sake of it, but conventional thinking, behaviour and appearance will only get you so far.

[Read more](#) on businesses who dare to be different and as one day you might run your own creative business this is a fabulous article.

SHARING THE PRODUCT - How easy do you find it to share your work with others?

We're all quite at ease working away on our ideas in our studio or bedroom or comfort and safety of our own homes, but what happens when we have to show it off? Not just to the teacher, but to the WHOLE class and invite feedback.

This feedback we'll cover in the next section can be really quite stressful. It might be in school to the class or in a school exhibition. Even as seasoned artists, having a show in a gallery can be quite daunting and I know some artists prefer not to be present that their opening nights/private views!

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But if you're working as part of a design team, as an architect, interior designer, fashion designer, product designer etc. you'll need to feel comfortable to show your work and to be able to talk about it. Even if you're a freelancer working on your own, there is still the time for you to show it to your client for feedback and being able to communicate about your work is essential to progress the design process.

Inevitably you'll also have to show your work to the art colleges either at interview or by means of digital portfolio so you need to start being comfortable with this. Lack of confidence in showing your work comes from feeling - or actually being - unprepared in the situation.

So the more you can anticipate, prepare and rehearse a successful outcome (whatever that means for you), the more confident you will feel. In my eyes a successful outcome means being able to stand up for your work and your ideas amid criticism but being open and reflective to constructive criticism.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK -
How easy do you feel about others talking about your work and you talking about the work of others?

I have to say that this was something that I found really difficult at college. There is definitely an art to developing good skills to feed back to others on their work.

Hearing potentially negative things about your work is sometimes difficult to not take personally and most of us would rather avoid the awkwardness that comes with telling someone else how they could

improve their work or ideas.

But certainly having been a lecturer for some 20 years you learn that some ways to communicate are better than others. And feedback should be a valued opportunity and even a bonding, positive experience. It's important to hear other people's views on your work because as a creator sometimes you are so close to your ideas and your work that you fail to see really obvious mistakes or opportunities.

If when giving feedback you can focus on the work, rather than the person this is key. Starting off your feedback with a few questions can help the other person feel like an equal part in the conversation as you discuss the challenge together. Sometimes it's good if you're able to talk about a negative aspect of someone's work to sandwich it between 2 positive comments - it feels more constructive. Feedback and respectful confrontation are essential in the creative and design process and the more we can expose ourselves to it, the better.

“Criticism is something you can easily avoid by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.” Aristotle

[Read more.](#)

COOPERATING APPROPRIATELY - How easy do you find it being part of a team?

This is the process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal. Working effectively as part of team is essential in many areas of art and design and in doing so you will gather many skills. You'll be able to express yourself clearly and effectively, able to explain difficult or complex ideas and concepts clearly, have explicit and concise writing skills, be a

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good listener, be courteous and respectful of others - among many other skills.

If you've decided that you're not really a team player and prefer to work alone as a freelance fine artist (painter, sculptor) you'll still need to possess some of these skills as you negotiate with gallery owners, commissioners and services who manufacture your work or designs (like bronze casting, printing of photographs, industrial services if you're working to large scale installations/public arts etc.)

The skills that will assist you to operate well in a team will grow and develop over time and the more that you converse in a team. As with any skill, it needs practise as do all the topics that these employability and transferable skills are discussing.

REFLECTING CRITICALLY - How often do you think about your work in a reflective, critical manner?

Are you overly critical as regards to your own work?

Critical reflection is an extension of "critical thinking". It asks us to think about our practice and ideas and then it challenges us to step-back and examine our thinking by asking probing questions learning lessons from what did or did not work.

The process of critical thinking and reflection is often seen to be done in the final stages of a project - an evaluation is often written at the end of a project for coursework and exam work at school. However, for reflection to be really useful, it needs to be ongoing to help direct the path that your projects take.

Lots of the work in the initial stages of the creative/design process will be quite experimental and playful. You'll be trying out new materials, new processes and new ideas back to back, so the reflection on this is crucial to enable the opportunities to be seen and embraced.

If no or very little reflection is done during a project then the ideas or aims might take unexpected de-tours that don't comply with the client brief or with the expectations of a project. Sometimes the experiments work, sometimes they don't. Becoming used to making mistakes, trying things differently and allowing for surprises is key to successful creative solutions.

As far as being critical is concerned it's also important not to be over-critical - being critical is good but then finding solutions to move forward from that is very important too.

By asking yourself a range of questions that relate to the intended aim of the particular exercise is important and this can be recorded in your sketchbook and is often called annotation. It's basically a running commentary on if what you've done is successful, interesting, thought provoking, fit for brief and essentially worth doing more of - or not.

Be alert in your observations. Look for similarities, differences, as well as unique and distinguishing features in situations and problems.

DEVELOPING TECHNIQUES - How easy do you find it to acquire the basics of a new technique?

When we work on creative projects, but especially as a student, we are developing

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and refining our skills and techniques all the time.

I hear many students say to me that they prefer to work in a particular medium because they are 'really good at it'. This is all well and good but then it's time to put that aside and think about expanding your repertoire and exploring and experimenting with techniques that you've not tried before or don't 'like'.

Some techniques your tutors might feel aren't the best techniques to be executing certain ideas with. That might be due to the sensitivity of the materials, the conceptual content or other reasons.

Your portfolio needs to show a range of techniques but this shouldn't be seen as a tick box type exercise. It needs to be exploring techniques with some of the critical reflection that we talked about in the previous topic 'reflecting critically'. The more new techniques that you can acquire the more relevant and innovative your creative work will be.

CRAFTING AND IMPROVING - Once you have the basics of a new technique, how easy do you find it to develop your skills?

To develop and hone your skills is somewhere you'll be aiming to be over time.

As an art student at college this is where you'll be focusing your time and energy in the latter parts of your course. Any skill takes time to refine so sticking with difficulty (and this doesn't mean just skills, it can also mean difficulty with concept), as we talked about previously, is another really important skill to have.

Having strong technical skills is a way to save time so that you can execute work quickly so more time can be apportioned to other aspects of a project if necessary.

Thinking longer term, more work can be produced quicker, therefore generating more sales, less waste therefore more profit.

So that's it - is that all!?

Yes, you do acquire many skills in the art studio and we've broken it down even further in the next 2 pages.

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Analytical/ Problem Solving

- Anticipates problems before they become problems
- Recognizes need for more information before a decision can be made
- Clarifies problems or situations
- Gathers information from people by talking to them or interviewing them
- Breaks principles down into parts
- Reviews large amounts of material and extracts essence
- Sees & defines cause & effect relationships, traces problems to their source

Flexibility/ Versatility Skills

- Can improvise on the spur of the moment
- Creative, perceptive
- Willing to experiment with new approaches, ideas or procedures
- Derives things from other's ideas

Interpersonal Skills

- Inspires trust in the mind of others
- Sensitive to the needs of others
- Listens intently & accurately
- Conveys understanding, patience, and fairness
- Tactful, diplomatic and discrete
- Effective in dealing with different kinds of people
- Easy to get along with

Oral and Written Communication Skills

- Expresses self clearly & effectively
- Can explain difficult or complex ideas & concepts clearly
- Explicit and concise writing skills
- Flair for writing interesting reports
- Good listener
- Courteous & respectful of others

Enthusiasm/ Motivation

- Looks for more responsibility
- Ready to try new things
- Committed to personal growth & learning
- Learns from examples of others

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Organization/Planning skills

- Organizes materials & information in a systematic way
- Brings order out of chaos
- Co-ordinates operations or details
- Handles several tasks at once
- Works efficiently and effectively under pressure
- Brings people together in a co-operative effort

Time Management Skills

- Sets goals systematically
- Sets priorities from competing requirements
- Meets deadlines

Leadership Qualities

- Takes the initiative in developing relationships
- Facilitates group discussion; gets diverse groups to work together
- Promotes ideas effectively without tearing down competing ideas
- Motivates others and stimulates them to action
- Adept at conflict management
- Mediates between groups or individuals
- Works without supervision
- Acts decisively

Self-Starter

- Performs with minimum supervision but knows when to ask questions
- Responds well to the unexpected
- Uses imagination and creativity
- Takes action to achieve a goal beyond what is called for

Team Player

- Able to put self in someone else's shoes
- Willing to share credit with others and express appreciation
- Collaborates with colleagues

This eBook has been written by artist and founder of Portfolio Oomph, Julie Read.

Thank you for downloading this eBook, I really hope it goes on to help you succeed in your application for art college. If you're not already following Portfolio Oomph on social media please do so (icons below).

Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Help! There is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't ask for help when you need it. Many people, including myself, are happy to help out. You'd be surprised!



Finally, many hours were spent writing and gathering ideas and research for the Portfolio Oomph eBook series for your use. I would appreciate it if you would respect this and not share or distribute the eBook to anyone else without the prior permission of Portfolio Oomph.

EBOOK USEFUL?

Need more personal and individual guidance?

Arrange a **FREE 30 minute Discovery Call** to discuss potentially working together on building your portfolio and application for art college / university.

