action research project

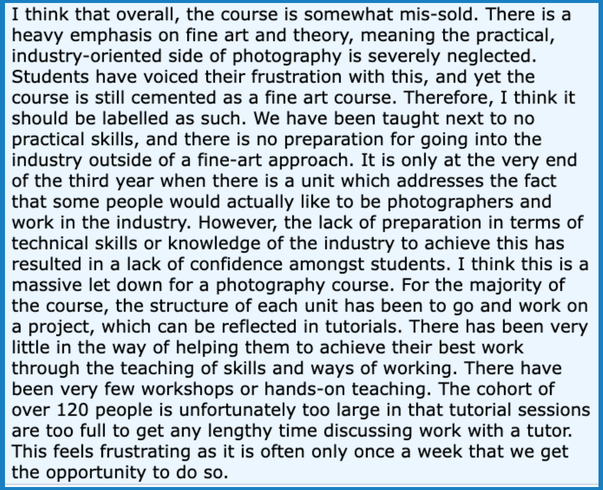
max ferguson

research question

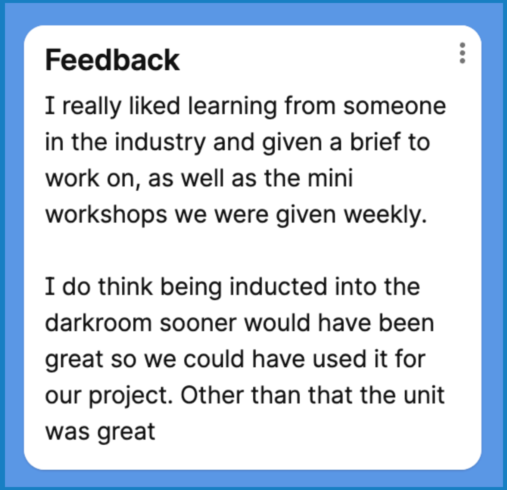
How does early industry exposure in the first year prepare students from diverse backgrounds for later collaborative units and professional expectations in years two and three, and how can its impact on confidence, belonging, and readiness be observed or evaluated over time?

student feedback

collected from NSS, CSS and unit surveys



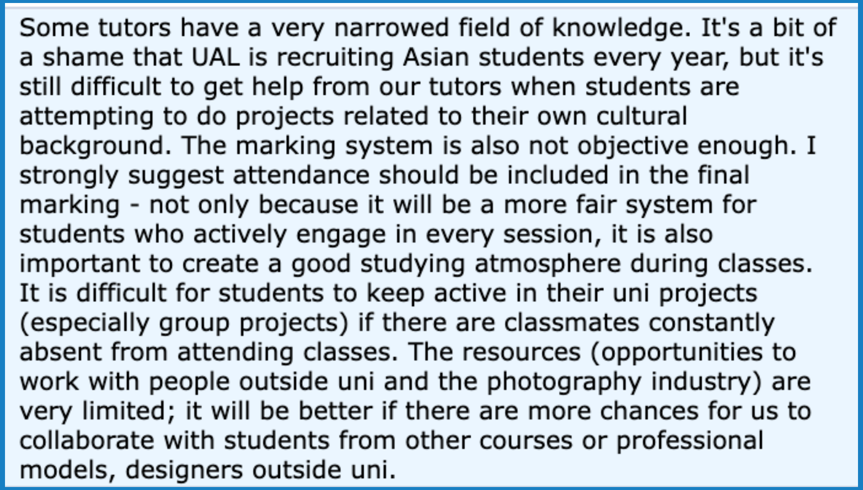
I think that overall, the course is somewhat mis-sold. There is a heavy emphasis on fine art and theory, meaning the practical, industry-oriented side of photography is severely neglected. Students have voiced their frustration with this, and yet the course is still cemented as a fine art course. Therefore, I think it should be labelled as such. We have been taught next to no practical skills, and there is no preparation for going into the industry outside of a fine-art approach. It is only at the very end of the third year when there is a unit which addresses the fact that some people would actually like to be photographers and work in the industry. However, the lack of preparation in terms of technical skills or knowledge of the industry to achieve this has resulted in a lack of confidence amongst students. I think this is a massive let down for a photography course. For the majority of the course, the structure of each unit has been to go and work on a project, which can be reflected in tutorials. There has been very little in the way of helping them to achieve their best work through the teaching of skills and ways of working. There have been very few workshops or hands-on teaching. The cohort of over 120 people is unfortunately too large in that tutorial sessions are too full to get any lengthy time discussing work with a tutor. This feels frustrating as it is often only once a week that we get the opportunity to do so.



Feedback

I really liked learning from someone in the industry and given a brief to work on, as well as the mini workshops we were given weekly.

I do think being inducted into the darkroom sooner would have been great so we could have used it for our project. Other than that the unit was great



Some tutors have a very narrowed field of knowledge. It's a bit of a shame that UAL is recruiting Asian students every year, but it's still difficult to get help from our tutors when students are attempting to do projects related to their own cultural background. The marking system is also not objective enough. I strongly suggest attendance should be included in the final marking - not only because it will be a more fair system for students who actively engage in every session, it is also important to create a good studying atmosphere during classes. It is difficult for students to keep active in their uni projects (especially group projects) if there are classmates constantly absent from attending classes. The resources (opportunities to work with people outside uni and the photography industry) are very limited; it will be better if there are more chances for us to collaborate with students from other courses or professional models, designers outside uni.

context

2024

I introduced Hot Potato News as an industry partner for the Introduction to Photography unit. This collaboration took place within the university and offered students a supportive start to working with external creative practitioners. Building on this foundation

2025

I extended the approach by partnering with the ICA, moving teaching directly into a professional gallery environment. This intentional progression creates a scaffolded journey, where students first experience a manageable, university-based collaboration before stepping into a major cultural institution, helping them build the cultural awareness and professional readiness necessary for future creative work.

methodology

MICHAEL KORS MICHAEL

- Non-intrusive classroom observations across first-year groups
- Notes on student engagement, confidence, and interaction in gallery settings
- Reflective workshop with second-year cohort
- Discuss experiences of industry-related learning and progression

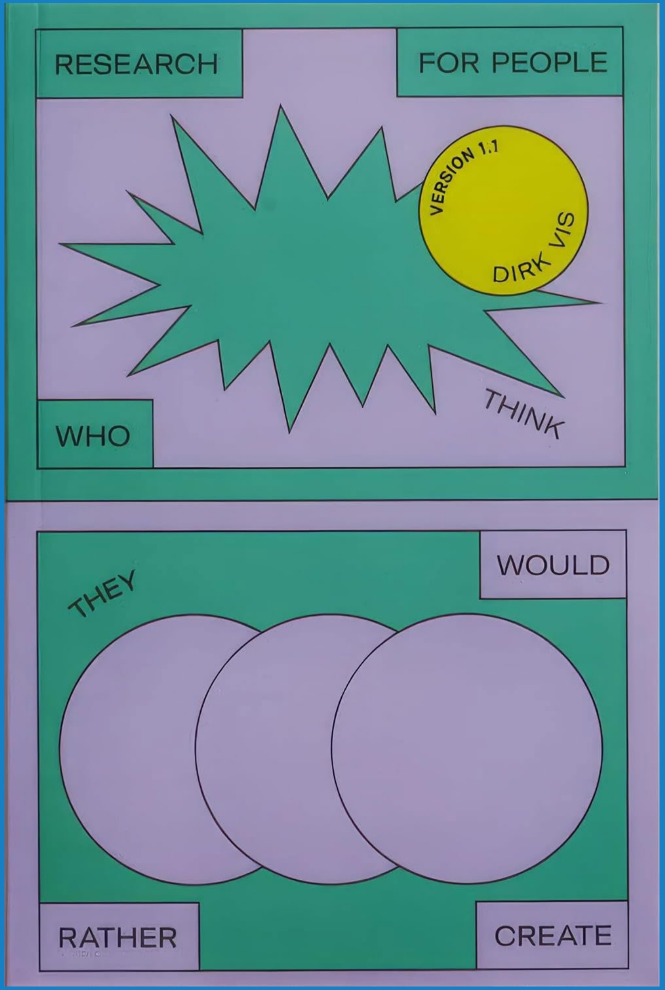
the classroom (LCC)

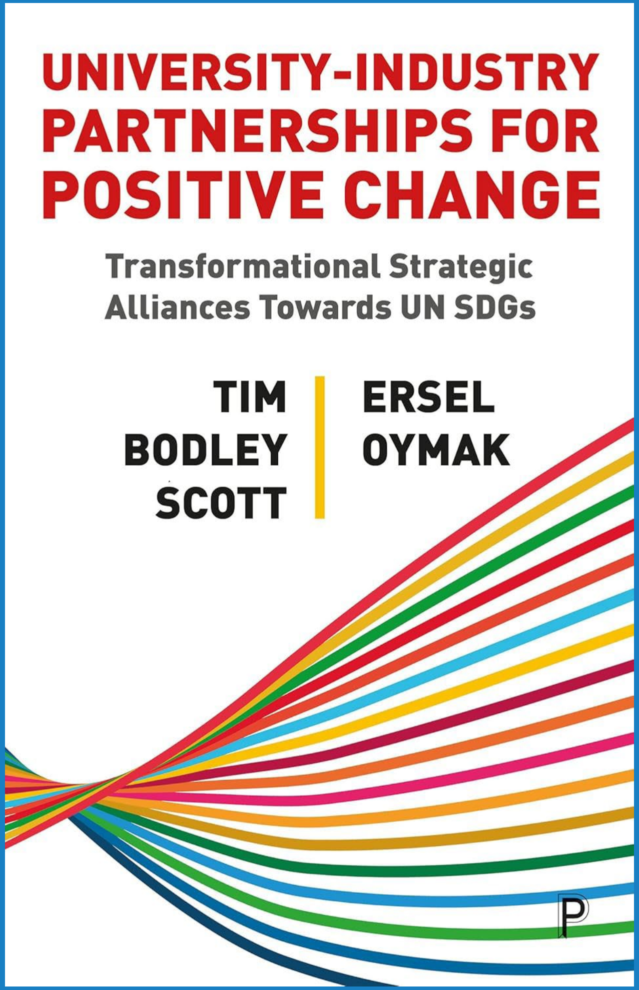
observation one

During the first seminar following the industry briefing, I observed Hayleigh's initial session with the new first year group. This was the students' first class after being introduced to the ICA collaboration, and Hayleigh began by establishing a supportive and inclusive learning environment. She opened with a five minute free writing activity and encouraged students to introduce themselves to one another. This helped bridge connections between home and international students and lowered early social barriers.

The tone of the session was calm and constructive, with space for curiosity and questions about the brief. Hayleigh reassured students about the value of their ideas while gently guiding discussion back to the project aims. The lesson incorporated short, structured writing exercises, from identity based prompts (childhood objects, food from home) to a timed creative task with playful word cues. These activities offered students low stakes entry points into ideation, providing a bank of material to draw from as they begin developing work for a professional context.

What stood out was how this workshop style approach supported students in building confidence before stepping into the ICA space. While the collaboration introduces an industry level challenge from week one, the supportive classroom atmosphere, combined with creative writing strategies drawn from Hayleigh's recent poetry workshops, helped students feel grounded and capable. This early scaffolding appears to play a key role in preparing students for industry expectations by nurturing creative resilience, voice, and peer connection at the outset of the unit.


RESEARCH
FOR PEOPLE
VERSION 1.1
DIRK VIS
WHO
THINK
THEY
WOULD
RATHER
CREATE



UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

Transformational Strategic
Alliances Towards UN SDGs

TIM BODLEY SCOTT | ERSEL OYMAK

the gallery (ICA)

gallery visit one

tutorial feedback

Kuljeet Sibia suggested using body mapping and thinking about methodology in relation to safety in public or institutional spaces. This could give weight to students' feelings of belonging or unfamiliarity. Kuljeet also asked how I plan to assess belonging and suggested using one to one conversations and active listening as part of the method. They raised the idea of running the workshop in the ICA, and reminded me there is a realistic scope to the ARP. Instead of feeling pressure to collect formal data, I can also reflect on the conflicting ethical questions around it.

John O'Reilly recommended thinking about photo or object elicitation. For example I could ask students to show an image that gave them a sense of belonging, or bring an image that expresses how they feel in these spaces. John suggested that free writing and image making in a gallery setting, such as the ICA or Tate, could be productive. He highlighted that the activity should offer value to the students, not just to the research, and that this will strengthen the ethical approach. We spoke about starting from feelings first and linking to industry afterwards.

Rory Parnell Mooney focused on engagement and reciprocity. He asked how to gather feedback in a more engaged and less extractive way, and what students would gain from taking part. He also raised the question of whether this process sits within the original workshop or whether a second reflective stage might be needed.

LCC
ZINE
REV1EW

final gallery output

second year students
reviewing the zines

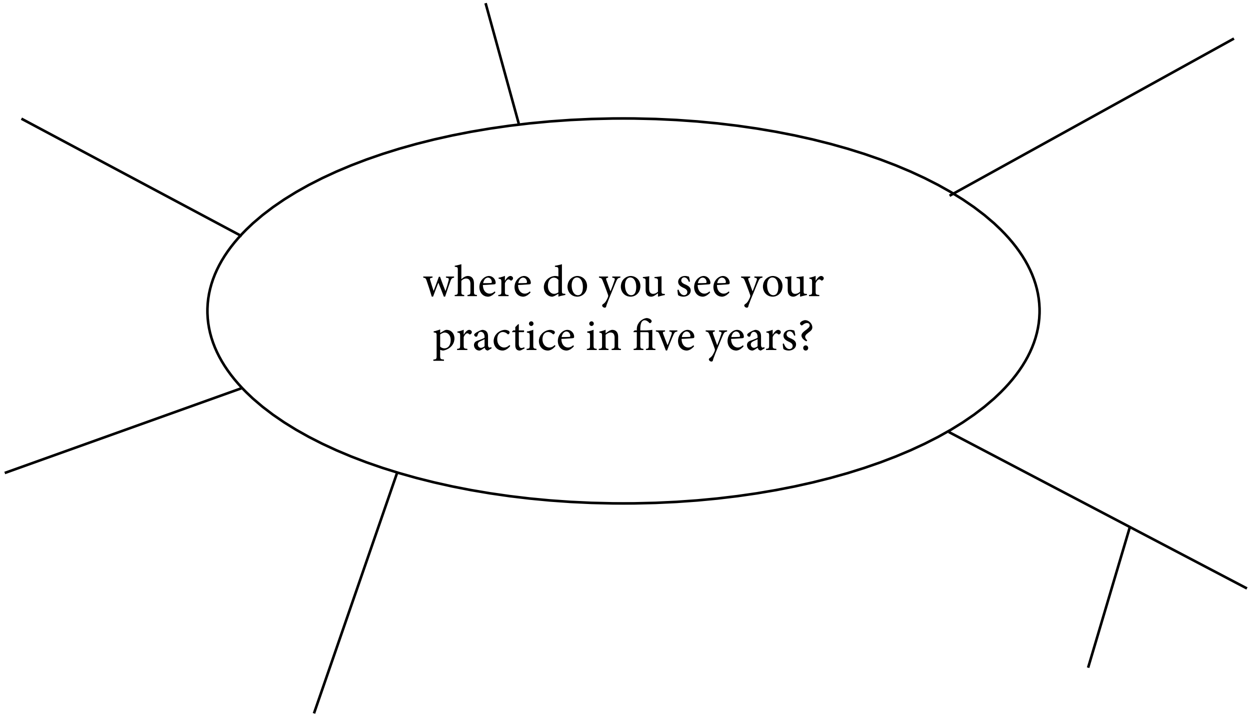
first year students reviewing
each others' zines

ICA staff reviewing
the zines

zone

planned workshop with second years

location TBC
Date TBC



where do you see your practice in five years?

planned workshop with second years

location TBC
Date TBC

Thinking back to first year

What do you remember about the Hot Potato project?
How did you feel at the start?

Confidence and skills

Did the project help your confidence?
What skills did you learn from working with others or with an outside partner?

Belonging and experience

Did the project help you feel part of the course or the creative world?
Were there any challenges?

Moving into second year

Did the first year project help you prepare for later collaborations?
What feels different about how you work now?

Advice and improvements

What advice would you give new first years doing the ICA project?
What would make industry projects more useful for students?

planned workshop with second years

location TBC
Date TBC

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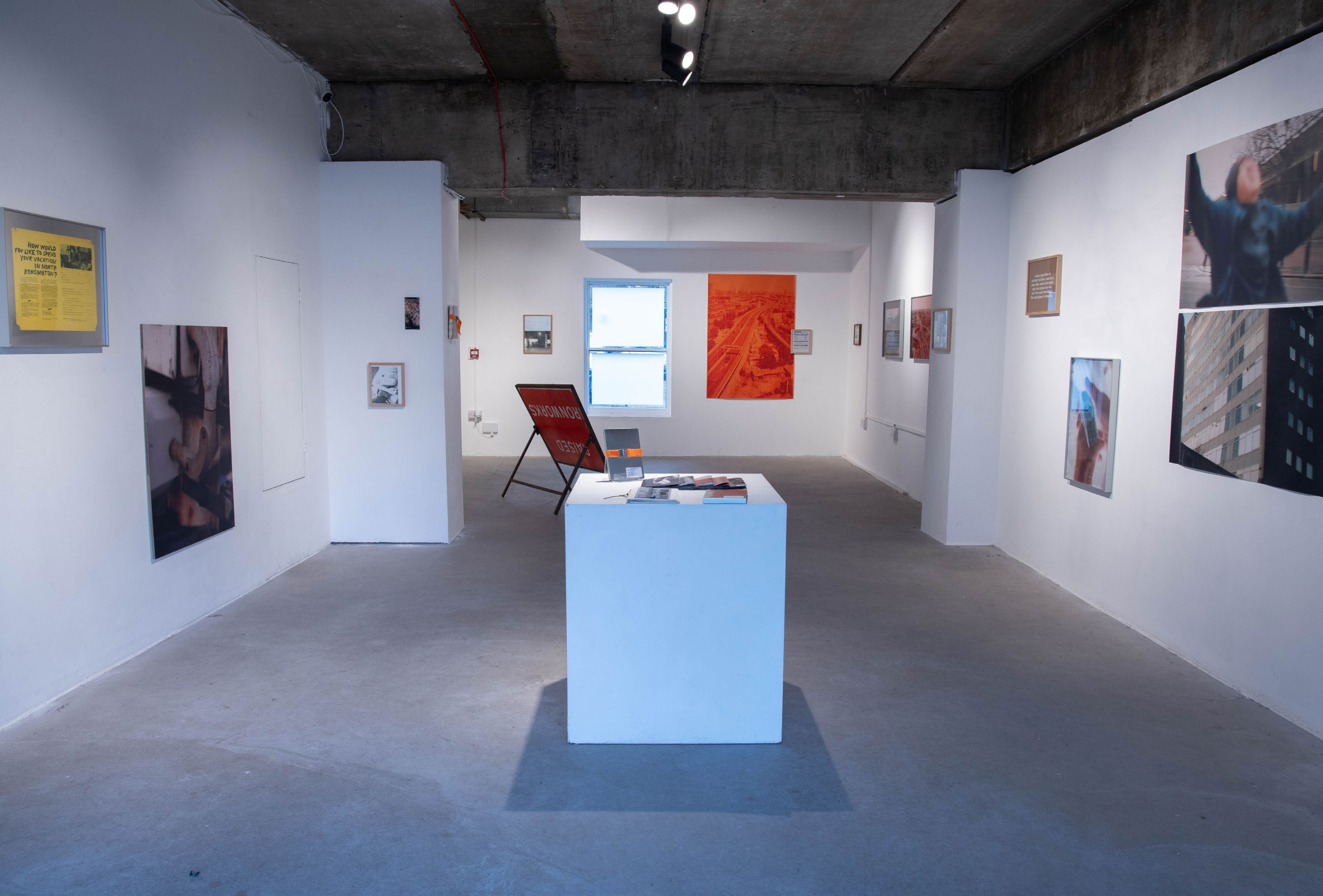
the workshop


HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPEND YOUR VACATION IN NORTH KENSINGTON?
IRONWORKS

How does early industry exposure in the first year prepare students from diverse backgrounds for later collaborative units and professional expectations in years two and three, and how can its impact on confidence, belonging, and readiness be observed or evaluated over time?

belonging in the creative industries

PgCert ARP workshop
January 2026

How does early industry exposure in the first year prepare students from diverse backgrounds for later collaborative units and professional expectations in years two and three, and how can its impact on confidence, belonging, and readiness be observed or evaluated over time?

belonging in the creative industries

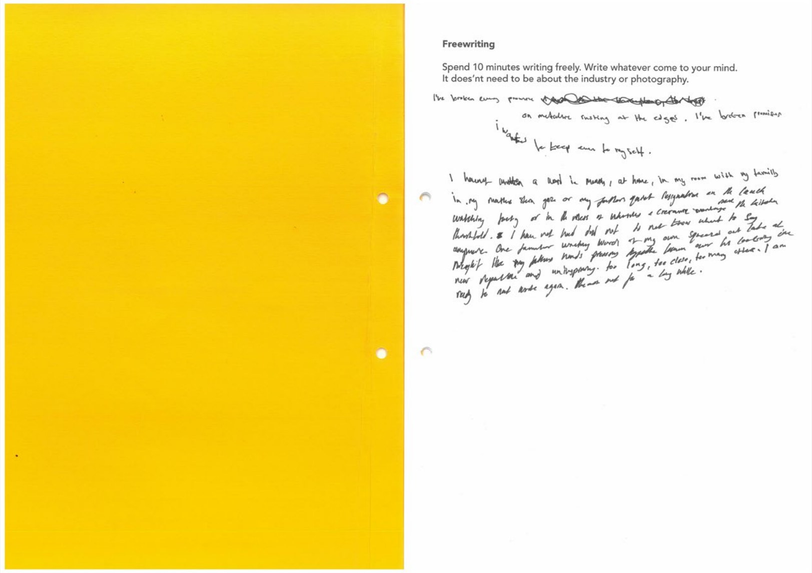
PgCert ARP workshop
January 2026

gallery workshop with second years

location
KOPPEL Collective

date
20 Jan 2026

student one responses

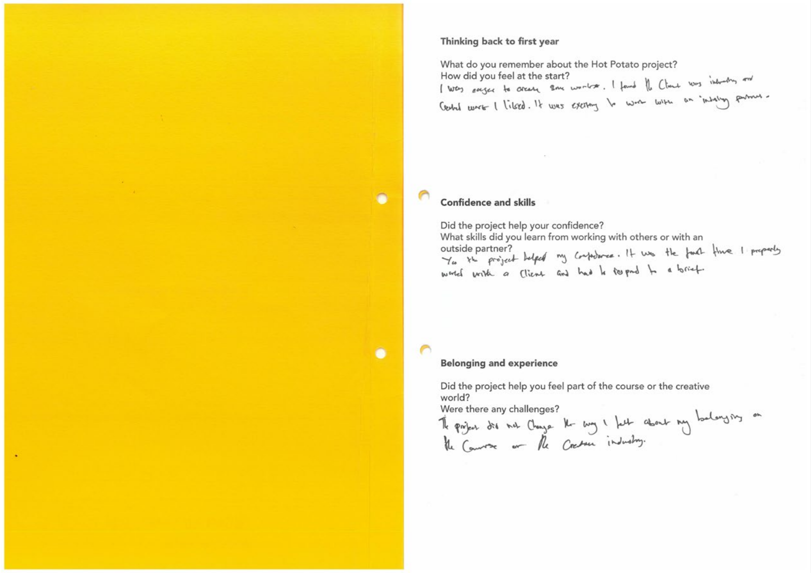


Freewriting

Spend 10 minutes writing freely. Write whatever come to your mind.
It does'nt need to be about the industry or photography.

I've broken every promise [illegible].
on metalwork rusting at the edges. I've broken promises
i wanted to keep even to myself.

I haven't written a word in months, at home, in my room with my family
in my mother's stern gaze or my father's quiet resignation on the couch
watching footy or in the offices of whatever a creative workshop near the kitchen
threshold. I have not had that not to not know what to say
anymore. One familiar writing word of my own spread out [illegible]
[illegible] like my fathers hands pressing together [illegible] over his [illegible] others. I am
now [illegible] and unforgiving. too long, too close, too many
ready to not write again. [illegible] not for a long while.



Thinking back to first year

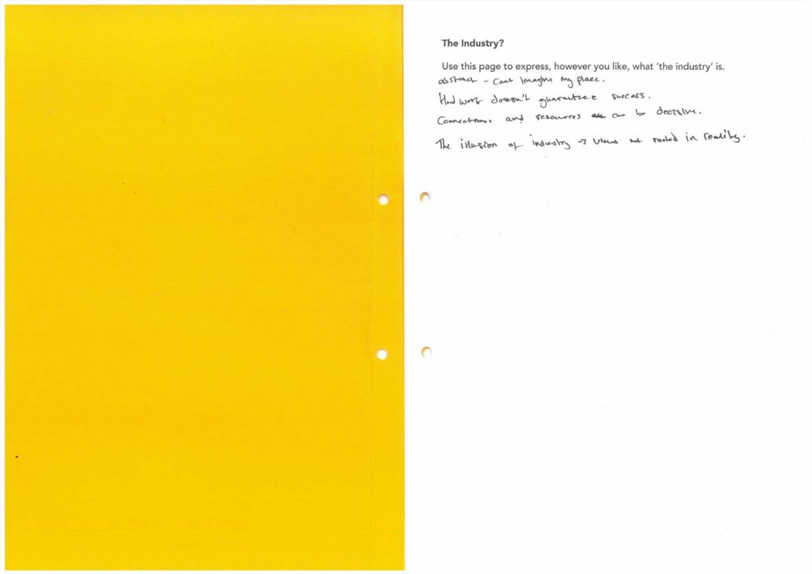
What do you remember about the Hot Potato project?
How did you feel at the start?
I was eager to create some work. I found the Client was interesting and
Created work I liked. It was exciting to work with an industry partner.

Confidence and skills

Did the project help your confidence?
What skills did you learn from working with others or with an outside partner?
Yes the project helped my Confidence. It was the first time I properly
worked with a Client and had to respond to a brief.

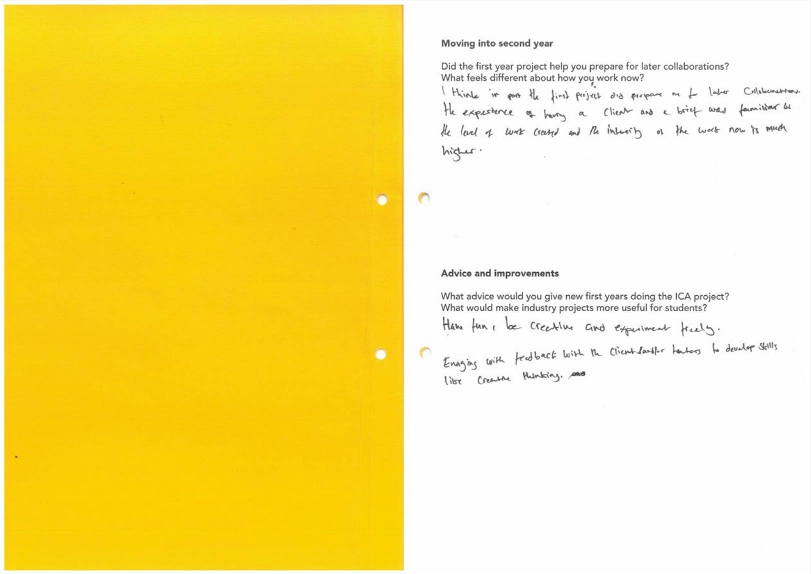
Belonging and experience

Did the project help you feel part of the course or the creative world?
Were there any challenges?
The project did not Change the way I felt about my belonging on
the Course or the Creative industry.



The Industry?

Use this page to express, however you like, what 'the industry' is.
abstract - Cant Imagine my place.
Hard work doesn't guarantee success.
Connections and resources ~~are~~ can be decisive.
The illusion of industry -> Views not rooted in reality.



Moving into second year

Did the first year project help you prepare for later collaborations?
What feels different about how you work now?
I think in parts the first project did prepare me for later Collaborations.
The experience of having a Client and a brief was familiar but
the level of work created and the intensity of the work now is much
higher.

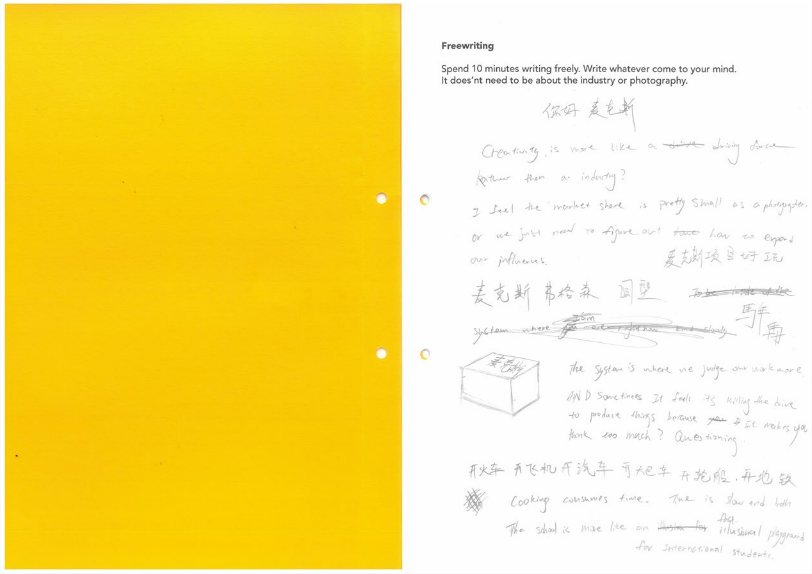
Advice and improvements

What advice would you give new first years doing the ICA project?
What would make industry projects more useful for students?
Have fun, be Creative and experiment freely.

Engaging with feedback with the Client and/or tutors to develop skills
like Creative thinking.

2025 BAP1 / ITP / ICA

student two responses



Freewriting

Spend 10 minutes writing freely. Write whatever come to your mind.
It does'nt need to be about the industry or photography.

你好 麦克斯

Creativity is more like a ~~drive~~ driving force Rather then a industry?

I feel the market share is pretty Small as a photographer, or we just need to figure out ~~how~~ how to expand our influences.

麦克斯项目好玩

麦克斯 弗格森 圆型 ~~To be inside of the~~

~~system where I am are right now kind slowly~~

马年
马

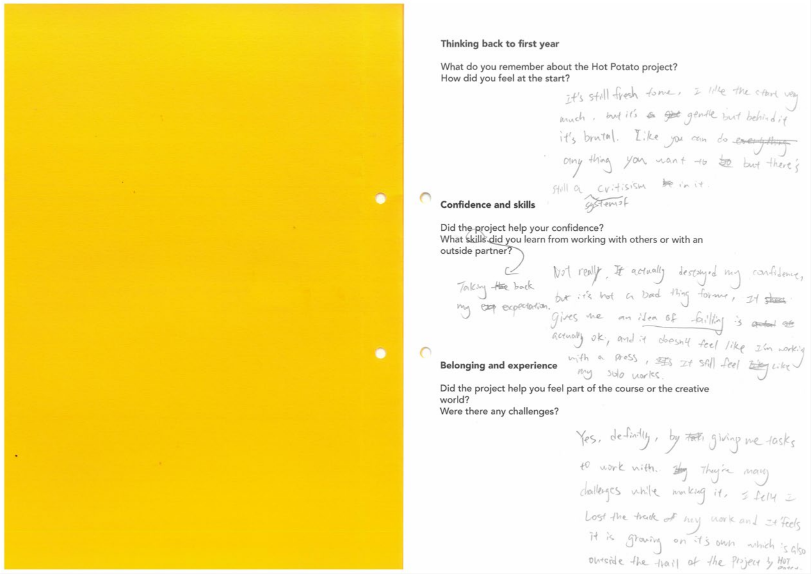
麦克斯

The system is where we judge our work more AND Sometimes It feels its killing the drive to produce things because ~~you~~ ~~I~~ It makes you think too much? Questioning.

开火车 开飞机 开汽车 开大巴车 开轮船，开地铁

Cooking consumes time. Time is slow and both

The school is more like an ~~illusion for~~ fake. illusional playground for International students.



Thinking back to first year

What do you remember about the Hot Potato project?
How did you feel at the start?

It's still fresh to me, I like the start very much, but it's ~~a~~ ~~gut~~ gentle but behind it it's brutal. Like you can do ~~everything~~ any thing you want to ~~do~~ but there's still a system of critisism ~~be~~ in it.

Confidence and skills

Did the project help your confidence?
What skills did you learn from working with others or with an outside partner?

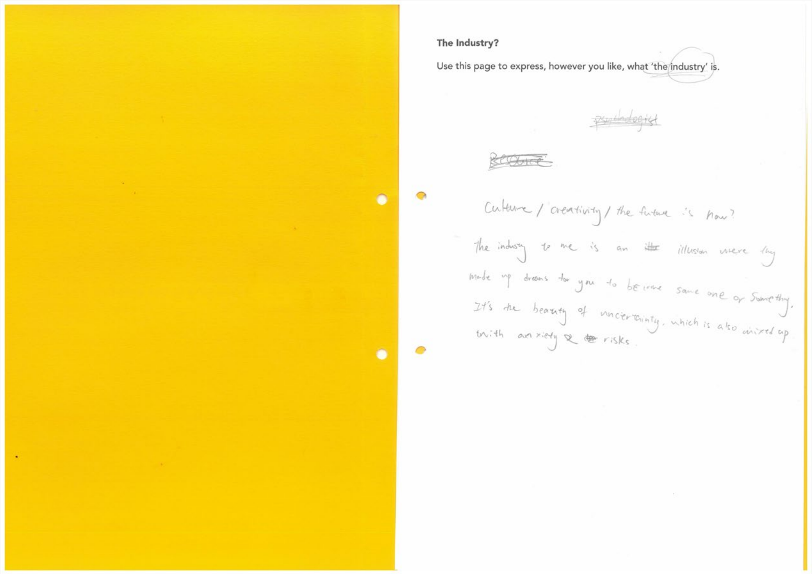
Taking ~~the~~ back my ~~exp~~ expectation.

Not really, It actually destroyed my confidence, but it's not a bad thing for me, It ~~shows~~ gives me an idea of failling is ~~actual~~ ~~ok~~ actually ok, and it doesn't feel like I'm working with a press, ~~It's~~ It still feel ~~like~~ like my solo works.

Belonging and experience

Did the project help you feel part of the course or the creative world?
Were there any challenges?

Yes, definitly, by ~~tak~~ giving me tasks to work with. ~~they~~ They're many challenges while making it, I felt I Lost the track of my work and It feels it is growing on it's own which is also outside the trail of the project by HOT



The Industry?

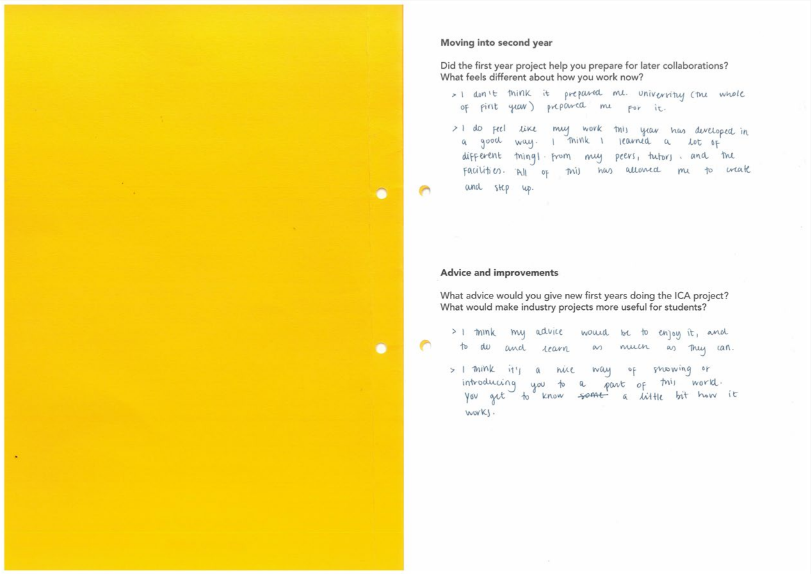
Use this page to express, however you like, what 'the industry' is.

~~psychologist~~

~~Resource~~

Culture / creativity / the future is now?

The industry to me is an ~~illu~~ illusion were they made up dreams for you to become some one or Something. It's the beauty of uncertainty, which is also mixed up with anxiety & ~~the~~ risks.



Moving into second year

Did the first year project help you prepare for later collaborations?
What feels different about how you work now?

> I don't think it prepared me. university (the whole of first year) prepared me for it.

> I do feel like my work this year has developed in a good way. I think I learned a lot of different things from my peers, tutors, and the facilities. All of this has allowed me to create and step up.

Advice and improvements

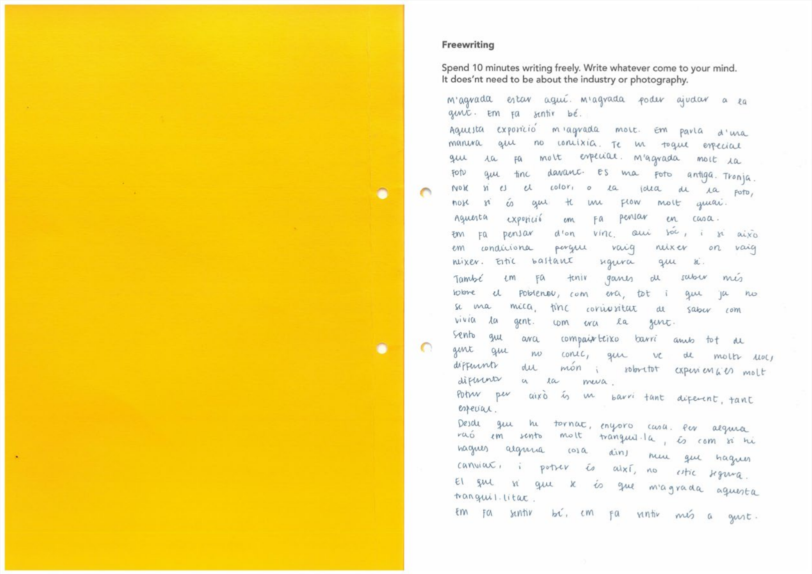
What advice would you give new first years doing the ICA project?
What would make industry projects more useful for students?

> I think my advice would be to enjoy it, and to do and learn as much as they can.

> I think it's a nice way of showing or introducing you to a part of this world. You get to know ~~some~~ a little bit how it works.

2025 BAP1 / ITP / ICA

student three responses



Freewriting

Spend 10 minutes writing freely. Write whatever come to your mind.
It does'nt need to be about the industry or photography.

M'agrada estar aquí. M'agrada poder ajudar a la gent. Em fa sentir bé.

Aquesta exposició m'agrada molt. Em parla d'una manera que no coneixia. Te un toque especial que la fa molt especial. M'agrada molt la foto que tinc davant. Es una foto antiga. Tronja. Nose si es el color, o la idea de la foto, nose si és que te un flow molt guai.

Aquesta exposició em fa pensar en casa.

Em fa pensar d'on vinc. Qui sóc, i si això em condiciona perque vaig neixer on vaig neixer. Estic bastant segura que si.

També em fa tenir ganes de saber més sobre el Poblenou, com era, tot i que ja no se una mica, tinc curiositat de saber com vivia la gent. com era la gent.

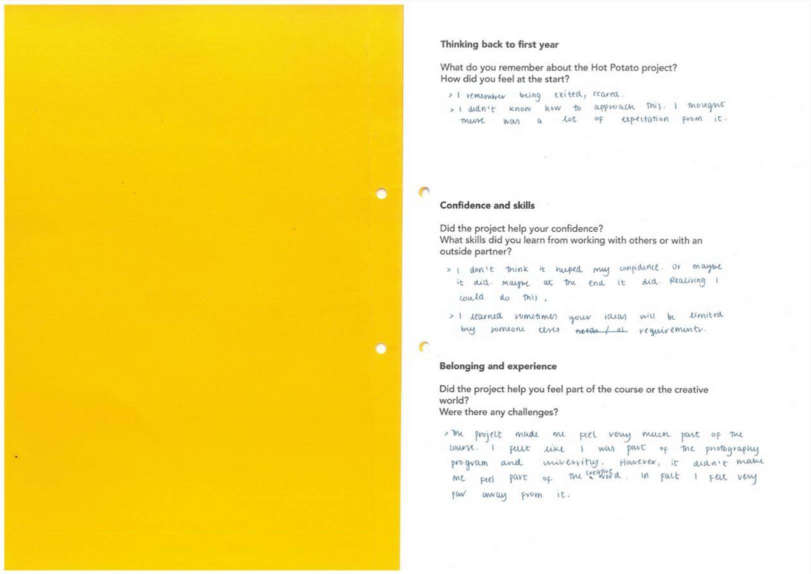
Sento que ara comparteixo barri amb tot de gent que no conec, que ve de molts llocs diferents del món i sobretot experiencies molt diferents a la meva.

Potser per això és un barri tant diferent, tant especial.

Desde que he tornat, enyoro casa. Per alguna raó em sento molt tranquil·la, és com si hi hagues alguna cosa dins meu que hagues canviat, i potser és així, no estic segura.

El que si que se és que m'agrada aquesta tranquil·litat.

Em fa sentir bé, em fa sentir més a gust.



Thinking back to first year

What do you remember about the Hot Potato project?
How did you feel at the start?

> I remember being exited, scared.
> I didn't know how to approach this. I thought there was a lot of expectation from it.

Confidence and skills

Did the project help your confidence?
What skills did you learn from working with others or with an outside partner?

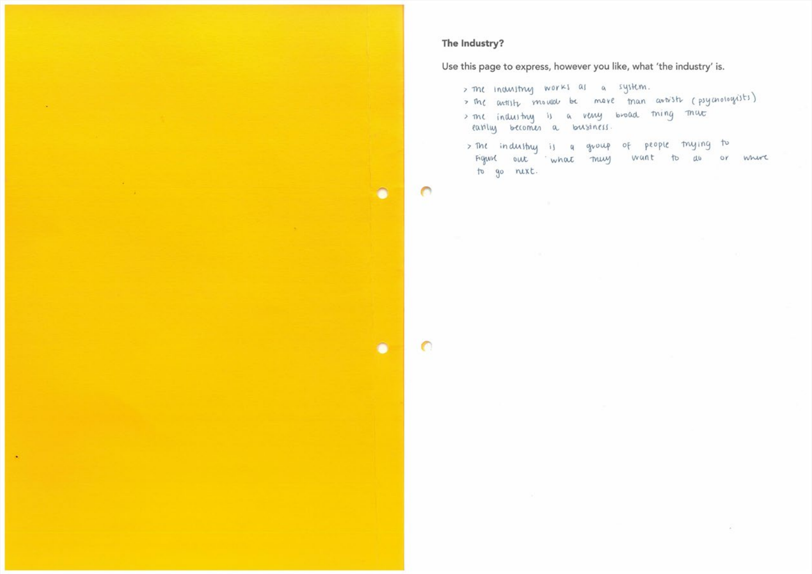
> I don't think it helped my confidence. Or maybe it did. maybe at the end it did. Realising I could do this.

> I learned sometimes your ideas will be limited by someone elses ~~needs / el~~ requirements.

Belonging and experience

Did the project help you feel part of the course or the creative world?
Were there any challenges?

> The project made me feel very much part of the course. I felt like I was part of the photography program and university. However, it didn't make me feel part of the creative word. In fact I felt very far away from it.

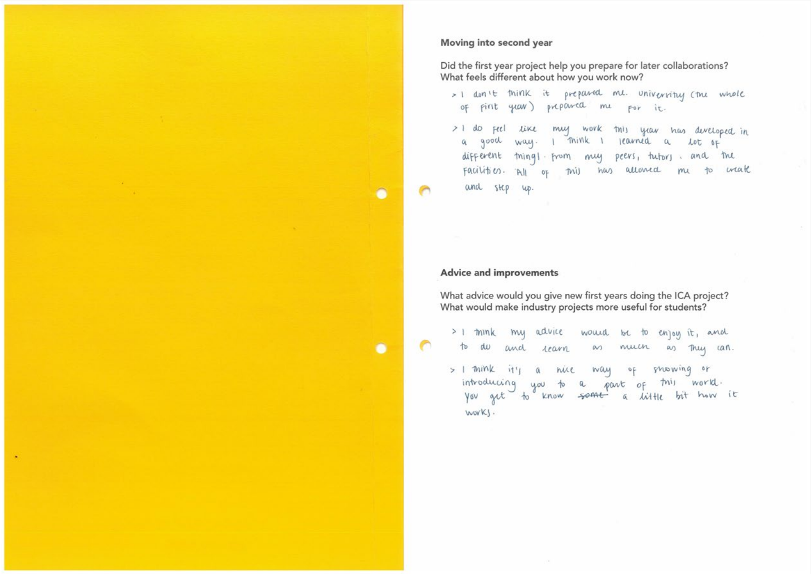


The Industry?

Use this page to express, however you like, what 'the industry' is.

> The industry works as a system.
> The artists should be more than artists (psychologists)
> The industry is a very broad thing that easily becomes a business.

> The industry is a group of people trying to figure out what they want to do or where to go next.



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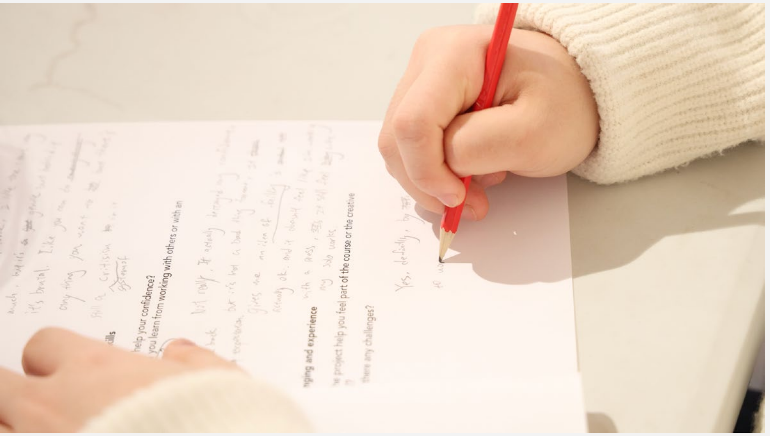
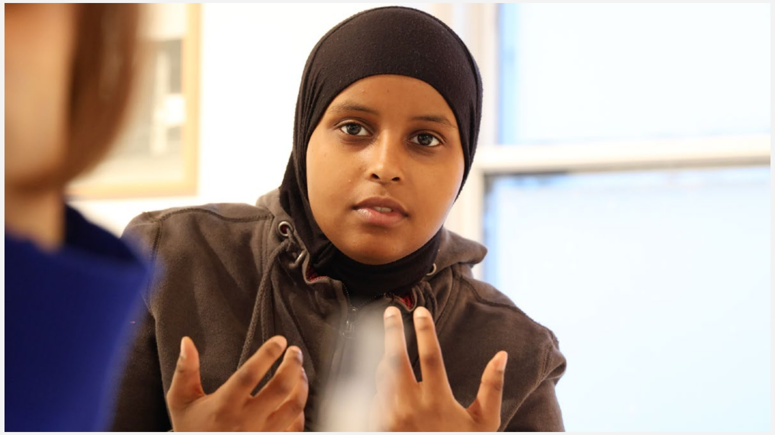
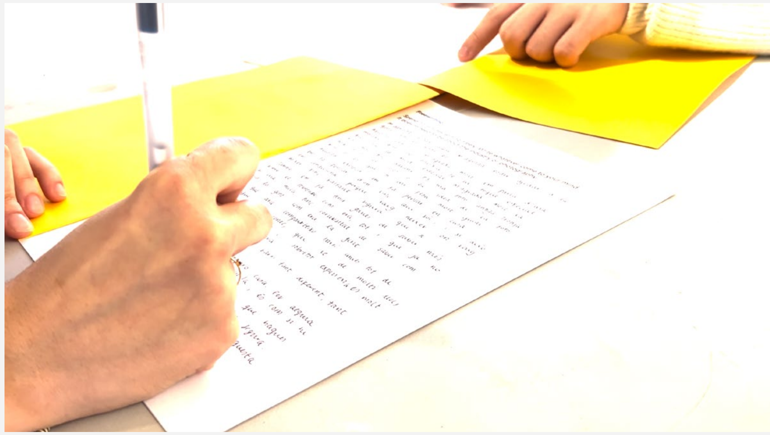
2025 BAP1 / ITP / ICA

workshop video and auriorecording



IVE BROKEN
EVERY PROMISE
MADE ON THE
NCEFLOOR





conclusions

1. “The Industry” as a Concept is Too Abstract

“The industry” proved too broad and abstract to be pedagogically useful. Students struggled to define what they were being asked to belong to, often describing it as illusory or vague. Future iterations should focus on specific sectors and pathways, helping students identify where their interests sit within distinct professional contexts.

2. Early Industry Exposure Prepares Emotionally Before Professionally

Early industry exposure appears to prepare students emotionally before it prepares them professionally. The intervention strengthened peer cohesion and confidence within the cohort, yet students did not necessarily feel part of the industry itself. Belonging developed socially first, suggesting professional identification requires sustained, repeated engagement over time.

conclusions

3. Students Are Critically Aware of Structural Inequality

Students demonstrated nuanced awareness of networks, resources, class, and international precarity within creative fields. Rather than idealising industry, they approached it critically. Industry preparation must therefore address structural realities alongside skills development, acknowledging uneven access while equipping students to navigate these conditions.

4. Scaffolded Exposure Balances Risk and Readiness

Students retrospectively called for greater intensity, yet the initial scaffolded approach likely reduced overwhelm in first year. The challenge is not simply increasing difficulty, but making professional expectations more visible without heightening emotional risk. Developmental readiness must remain central to curriculum design.