

The AQA GCSE D&T Textiles Specification

Julie Boyd is an experienced textiles teacher and Assistant Principal at Lutterworth College, a large 14-19 mixed comprehensive school in Leicestershire. She shares with J4T her take on the implementation of controlled assessment.

In September 2009, the revised GCSE specifications for D&T were used by schools for the first time. The Textiles department at Lutterworth College chose to continue with the AQA specification as we have always liked the content and structure of the course, and feel it is versatile enough for our intake.

The new specification is not dramatically different in terms of general content but the biggest difference for us is the change from coursework to controlled assessment. As a department, our biggest success has always been supporting students in producing high quality coursework – but in many ways this is also our biggest challenge.

The department has 320 Year 10 and 11 students and a further 50 AS/A2 students, so for us the logistics of producing, marking and moderating are a real challenge. We therefore decided to use the introduction of the controlled assessment as an opportunity to reflect on our practices and systems, and perhaps try a different approach; not an easy decision but one we all agreed with.

As we take students from

14+, we recognise that our approach needs to also take into consideration what is being taught at KS3, and with this in mind, we liaised with our lower school contacts when rethinking what direction we need to go.

A new approach to controlled assessment

Our departmental review indicated that there was a lot we were doing right in terms of coursework. As a department, we decided that we could use the introduction of controlled assessment to our benefit, mainly to address any areas of weakness that had been identified in the review. Despite already teaching in a focused way, it was felt that too many students still used lesson time badly as they expected that they would be able to complete or redo work at home. It was also felt that too many students focused on presentation, believing time spent on this would give the impression they were working hard!

As controlled assessment is being used in a wide range of subjects, some of which are under very tight conditions, we have been able to use this to our advantage. The team regularly refers to controlled assessment as 'an exam where you can talk'. This has enabled us to be much stricter about a variety of other things without students complaining too much!

One of the issues our review raised was that over the last few years we had started coursework earlier and earlier in the GCSE two-year course. We did this for a variety of reasons but particularly because the large number of students makes troubleshooting problems near the end of a coursework project a real challenge.

Each year we also found an ever-increasing number of interruptions to learning across the school

As a department, we decided that we could use the introduction of controlled assessment to our benefit

which dramatically reduced the amount of time available, resulting in stress for students and teachers. Finishing coursework earlier made moderating such large numbers of student coursework easier, giving us an added bonus of being able to spend longer on preparations for the written exam.

Through the introduction of the new specification, a radical decision was taken to start the controlled assessment in the first term of Year 10, which was very early even for us. The key aim of this wasn't to spend longer on the work, but simply to use the time in a different way. Of course, as a department, we had significant reservations about this, in particular as to whether students would have sufficient skills and knowledge, and understand how to apply these.

Skills Modules

With this in mind we began the year with a skills module where students completed an intensive first half term focusing on hands-on use of equipment, construction and decorative techniques alongside focused product analysis activities, with the emphasis on looking at what they had learnt in the context of real products.

The key samples that were produced during the skills

sessions were saved and used in the controlled assessment lessons as evidence of prototyping.

Introducing controlled assessment

After the first half term, students are then introduced to the controlled assessment in detail. All controlled assessment lessons were presented to students as being different to other lessons. Students are given, on average, one controlled assessment lesson a week (1hr 15mins). The second lesson was then spent working on key theory areas relevant to the focus area in the controlled assessment lesson.

This broke down theory work into small manageable chunks that the students saw as being relevant to their next lesson, which encouraged independence. It also helped them to see the link between controlled assessment and the final written exam.

This pattern of one lesson of controlled assessment and a related theory lesson then continued for much of the year. Where necessary, we increased the number of theory or controlled assessment lessons if more taught input was needed or if a section of controlled assessment needed more time than we had originally anticipated.

To comply with the 45-hour rule, (the time period specified by the exam boards as being required to complete the assignment), we logged hours in our schemes of work, working out the taught content/controlled assessment content.

By the end of the summer term, students had completed the research and development work, fully prototyped their final product using toiles and planned production of the finished product.

The parallel theory lessons meant that we had also already covered much of the theory work needed for the exam. The aim is for the final product and evaluation to be complete by the beginning of November therefore leaving a significant chunk of time for preparation for the written exam.

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No Homework

Another significant change with the introduction of controlled assessment was that students no longer take any work home and are allowed to do research and collecting work only. In the past, students used homework time to do additional work or to catch up and finish lesson work. As teachers, this added to our workload with the constant checking and chasing of work that hadn't been done. We found many students did nothing of significance when they took the work home apart from the holiday before the hand in! Indeed all too often students lost work or redid things unnecessarily.

One of the concerns with this decision was the knock-on effect if students fell behind or were absent and could not catch up at home. So far however we have not found this to be a major issue. Our focus on the controlled

assessment being an 'exam' has got most students on board with attending after school and lunchtime workshops if they fall behind. Interestingly, as a department we are not putting on any more of these workshops than in the past, it's just that students are using them more effectively.

Speed Designing®

As well as starting the controlled assessment earlier and running parallel theory lessons, we have also been further developing a technique we have used in the past that we call Speed Designing®. This is a technique that increases the pace and creativity of students' work and which gets most students producing at least a C grade within around 30 minutes for many sections of work. The focus is on the teacher being the pace setter during the Speed Designing® part of the lesson by giving students timed slots to complete particular tasks. Timings can be as short as a couple of minutes or as long as an hour. This strategy works particularly well with C/D borderline students and boys who are really boosted by the sense of achievement they get using this technique.

This technique does come with a health warning however, as it requires both the teacher and students to work at a faster pace than many are used to. At first, more able girls in particular find this difficult because they want to achieve perfection immediately and don't like being encouraged to think outside the box before they have coloured it in!

The fast pace of Speed Designing® encourages students to see mistakes as part of the design process. Students also learn to think quickly and not to spend too long focusing on one idea while in the meantime ten others

are lost. Students don't get time to compare their work and then to rub it out therefore having wasted valuable time. They are encouraged to draw using fine liner drawing pens which not only copies industrial practice but means they can't rub anything out. Many students are reluctant to do this at first but most are pleasantly surprised how much more professional their drawings look if done in pen. You do, however, have to be careful of the student who draws in pencil and then goes over it in pen. This means the 'sketchiness' is lost but importantly that the student has effectively done the same thing twice which is not an efficient use of time.



Note that in Speed Designing® the teacher is not telling the students what to do but encouraging them to draw on knowledge from the parallel theory lessons. They are organising the students' time for part of the lesson and thereby role modelling how time should be used when the students work independently (usually the second half of the lesson plus some additional whole lessons at key points in the work). When combined with the 'exam' nature of our approach to controlled assessment, Speed Designing® has helped us to increase the pace of lessons which has greatly reduced staff and student stress levels.

As part of the Speed Designing® strategy, students are taught how to think and act independently. In particular they are taught how words can help them access and demonstrate higher level thinking

(eg the use of Bloom's Taxonomy and De Bono's Thinking Hats). The classroom walls (and ceilings!) are also covered in resources that support and develop theory and controlled assessment lessons and often students don't need to ask the teacher a question as the answers are around them. In this way our classrooms have become independent learning resources rather than just a space to work.

Giving feedback for controlled assessment

The final area I want to mention in relation to controlled assessment is feedback. Teacher feedback in particular must now be general and recorded for the examiner to see. This doesn't mean teachers can't give feedback; as educators it is our responsibility to guide students and certainly in our school, like many others, we are very much target driven. Every student is expected to know their target grade, their current grade and how to bridge any gap. This therefore makes good teacher feedback essential.

We have found it useful to use the term 'working towards' when doing interim markings. We also only review work at the end of whole sections rather than as the work progresses (eg after all research work, after generating and developing ideas etc). Teacher feedback generally uses a generic tick list that links to the theory lessons and this gives students general guidance on what their work should include. It also helps students know how to focus on different grades as they can see the bigger picture and identify the work they feel will help them reach their personal target grade.

Peer and Self assessment

Peer and self assessment is also a useful tool to help students identify ways of improving their work with the added bonus that it

reduces the teacher's workload! Students do however need to be taught how to give effective feedback and how to know what to look for. Interestingly one might assume weaker students will give less effective feedback but this is not always the case. Often they can recognise higher level work but simply don't have the skill to work at that level yet.

If you do what you always do you get what you always get – dare to be different!

- In summary, our department feels that controlled assessment has given us the power to get students to focus more on effective use of time.
- Treating controlled assessment like an exam has made both students and staff view it differently.
- By reflecting on and questioning how we approached controlled assessment rather than just doing as we had done before (even though much of it was already effective) we have identified even better ways of doing things.

Only time will tell if these strategies will work but feelings all round are positive at the moment. As a department we certainly felt that stepping outside our comfort zone and daring to do things differently has been very beneficial.

More information on Speed Designing® and resources to support the new specification can be found on my website www.textileshotline.co.uk and in the resource 'Flexible D&T for AQA GCSE Textiles Technology' ISBN 9781850084310.

Email contact textileshotline@hotmail.com.