**Script presentation**

**1**

Hello everyone – and thank you for coming today to listen to this presentation.

I am Rujana Rebernjak and I work in the Design School here at LCC as Leader in Contextual and Theoretical Studies for all 7 of our undergraduate courses.

**2**

In the Design School at LCC, CTS has historically been delivered through a cross-school delivery. This has resulted in a curriculum that is often perceived by the students as a remote, or at the very least separate, from their ‘core’ design education.

This was my personal motivation to investigate how CTS is perceived, what its value is in the design curriculum and to question whether we can identify different modes of assessing what students learn in CTS.

This is also further supported by the ongoing efforts to improve attainment which is often perceived as being low or dragging students down, even though this is not always true/supported by data

**3**

So, across the UK higher education, many tutors and students will have experienced the tension or split between practice and theory, studio and CTS (or CHS or CCS, as it may be known in other institutions).

The researcher Jenny Rintoul has written that there is a misleading hierarchy at play here that sees theory more rigorous than making, thinking separate from doing, arguing: “The idea of ‘rigour’ in art and design education has historically been aligned with CCS, as though this ‘academic’ element holds art and design afloat within the education system”.

This view stems from the Coldstream reforms in the 1960s which recommended the introduction of complementary studies as a requirement within an art and design diploma.

However, this has resulted in many practitioners, lecturers and researchers asserting that ‘under the guise of providing students with contextual frames of reference, the scholarly was used to legitimate the degree status bestowed on the new DipAD qualification’ (Parsons, 1999: 149).’ This resulted in resentment towards CCS as an ‘unwanted adjunct’ and in it being delivered begrudgingly as though it should not be held in high regard for fear of it impinging upon the identity of the ‘real’ subject.”, p.3

**4**

One other misconception or resulting consequence of the Coldstream reports was the emphasis on writing as the main mode of assessment of CTS-related learning.

Indeed this is how things are still here at LCC.

However, the suggestion that students must write is, according to Julia Lockheart, one of the key authors working in this field, a complete misreading of the Coldstream recommendation from the 1960s. not only did the report make no suggestion that students had to write a dissertation or an essay, it made no recommendation as to how complementary studies should be assessed.

In the early 2000, Lockheart was part of a group of researchers who developed a very influential project called Writing Purposefully in Art and Design. In particular, they sought to question and explore how art and design students could engage with different forms of writing in a way that would be more responsive and iterative in relation to their design practice.

So, I wanted to understand what is going on here. On the one hand, I wanted to ‘defend’ writing but also ask ‘why’ writing? Why do we cling on to it?

**5**

So, this is how I came to frame my research question?   
  
What is the role and value of Contextual and Theoretical Studies in Design education, as seen from the perspective of design graduates?

How can CTS contribute shape critical and reflective practitioners, sensitive to the political, cultural and historical context of their work?

You will notice, in particular that I’ve used the word ‘value’ in my research question and in my title. And for me, this was particularly important when thinking about CTS in the broader purpose of the university. I struggle with the idea that the emancipatory potential of a university degree is solely that of social mobility – of getting someone a good job – and that, therefore, only “hard” design skills and a sleek portfolio was what mattered.

To give some context to these ideas, I read Stefan Collini who writes about the role of universities in society. And actually what he argues is that universities have always performed this kind of instrumental function of educating people for a job. They’ve never been these idealised spaces of exploration and production of knowledge that was divorced from the wider social reality. So this reframed my thinking about the idea of instrumentalization of a degree.

**6**

So, with all this in mind, this is what I did. This is an adaptation of the action-research diagram that shows what I did and roughly when I did it. Some of the process is not yet complete as the intervention into teaching will only happen in 2025/2026 academic year.

I decided to interview UAL graduates to get an understanding of what they feel the value of CTS was in their education and how that knowledge may be relevant to them now that they are in the industry, or post-graduate study.

I then used this data, together with some secondary data that I gathered from the NSS free text comments, to design an intervention. The intervention was not a teaching intervention, but with my CTS leader hat on, I intervened into curriculum design for the next academic year, 2025/2026. I ran a workshop with my colleagues to plan for how we are going to deliver the Design Cultures unit that is set to run for the first time next year.

This then gets to the tricky bit of the diagram: in essence the period of monitoring and evaluating and reviewing and reflecting is not yet done. I’ve done some of it – and some of it speculatively – but really this is piece of work that will have to carry on well into the summer and next academic year.

**7 Primary Research 1**

So for my primary research, I interviewed 4 graduates. My criteria for selection were that they had to have graduated from the 2021/2022 academic year onwards as this is when I started in the job and would not have had a frame of reference for how CTS was delivered before that. I also did not want to interview students that I supervised in the final year as I thought that this could make the conversation problematic as they might fear voicing any criticism. So, I asked my colleagues in the CTS team to suggest students.

Of course, this means there is a clear bias in my sample: all these students performed really well in their final year so might be seen as having a ‘positive’ view of CTS.

I conducted the interviews online via Teams. The interviews were semi-structured.

**8 Interview key quotes**

Some key findings that came from these interviews.Firstly, is that the critical distance from their studies allowed graduates to see the more intangible, long-term impact of CTS. They both see it as instrumental in their work, but also view it as more broadly transformative of the very way they view the world – so fulfilling a kind of enlightenment proposition of what education is about.

I’ve included two quotes here, edited for clarity:

**9 – Writing**

Secondly, the graduates really recognised the value of doing research, especially in year 3, and the freedom that comes from being immersed in a project.

But they did not recognise the value of writing per se as a kind of transferrable skill.

This graduate said:

**10 Secondary data**

In addition to the interviews, I compared this knowledge to NSS feedback – so the free-text comments that students write just at the time when they finish their dissertation unit, so they are in the thick of doing things.

This research was less informative as the comments about CTS were more limited, or CTS was only mentioned obliquely. However, there were quite a few comments that suggested that students wanted to have more theory and history as part of their degree.

**11 Intervention**

In planning my intervention, I wanted to embed some of the knowledge that came through in the interviews. So the intervention was a workshop with fellow colleagues to plan the delivery of our newly revalidated second year unit.

We did this work the last week of term in December, when we were all completely exhausted, so didn’t get as far as I would have liked.

But I tried to deal with this as a provocation: to spur my colleagues to think beyond what is in their comfort zone. I sought to question their attachment to academic writing – despite the fact that the word essay is in the unit spec. and to think about how could we delivery the unit in a way that gave more agency to students.

It was interesting to witness their level of ‘resistance’ to letting go firstly of the idea that there can be a different mode of experiencing the delivery that does not entail one tutor designing a syllabus and then leading students through it; and secondly there is a lot of resistance to the idea of letting go of academic writing as a tool through which students evidence their learning in CTS.

**12**

Finally, what is the outcome of this project?

Throughout this project, I’ve been oscillating around the value of academic writing. Why do we do it? Is it important?

So this project got me to question academic writing – and I’ve come to the conclusion that we need to think of it more as a tool, as a form of practice.

Secondly, the research also made me realise that we need to make the ‘work’ of CTS more visible in the school – making visible the research that informs a project, an idea, a perspective. So that it can be valued by students as they are going through their studies, rather than solely at the end of it.

**13**

So I’d like to finish with a quote and an image. The quote is from Jenny Rintoul, one of the key authors for my research project, that maps out the relationship between theory and practice: xxx

And this quote sits alongside this image of tools from Hans Hollein’s 1976 exhibition man transforms, that has kind of been a guiding image for my PgCert. And I see CTS as being a tool – a tool for manifesting expertise, documenting, communicating and sharing intangible knowledge about design practice.