

Data Collecting & Research #1

How traditional and non-tailored project briefs can be distressing or confusing for ND students.

My aim is to make a simple, reusable and reliable project brief template to help reassure and settle a neurodiverse, anxious, or otherwise confused student body. I've started my research with data about how *non* tailored briefs can be a point of distress for students.

I found this study, "*The Assignment Brief (Graphic Communication module, architecture students)*" (ResearchGate)" which explored the outcomes for students and how they perceived the brief and learning outcomes. The study gave students two briefs - one traditionally academic with the expected jargon (Brief 1) and the other with tailored, simplified language (Brief 2). Once given, the students filled out a questionnaire with the results below:

Table 1: Questionnaire Data Returns - 1 / subjects

Assignment Brief 1	YES	NO	%+	%-	S/D
Do you find the information easy to understand?	14	3	0.8	0.2	0.5
Do you find the learning outcomes helpful?	4	13	0.2	0.8	0.4
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	15	2	0.9	0.1	0.5
Assignment Brief 2	YES	NO	%+	%-	S/D
Do you find the information easy to understand?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6

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Do think you will find the self assessment helpful?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6
Do you find the typefaces easy to read?	17	0	1.0	0.0	0.7
Do you find the layout easy to navigate?	17	0	1.0	0.0	0.7

Table 2

	Brief 1	Brief 2	Poisson	Correlation
Do you find the information easy to understand?	14	16	1.0	1.0
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	15	16	1.0	1.0

The highlight for my research here is that the learning outcomes seem to be the issue of highest concern for the students in the non-tailored brief (brief 1). The paper also explored the feedback from the students, with the sentiment being:

- The learning outcomes were confusing and vague
- The document was 'set out in a confusing way'
- The structure of the document did not highlight task importance
- The assessment structure was vague
- Assessment weighting for each item was not included

Key feedback for the development of my simplified project brief template. The data so far seems to be in favour of simple language, careful use of text presentation (bold and italic to emphasise importance), and assessment weight. I need to research further into colour, precise language, and possibly font choices as I go ahead.

The feedback from the students after Brief 2 (the tailored one) was as follows:

- Contact details useful
- Percentage breakdown helpful
- Makes the project easier to understand
- Self-assessment is very helpful – almost like a checklist
- Bold sections mean that you understand the important points and don't focus on the wrong things
- Gives a good overview
- Good to have itemised weighting

I especially appreciate the first item here: Contact details being useful - an important note for future development. The data here backs up the previous comments about what the students found to be helpful.

The second piece of data I found was a series of templates made by the University of Bath **"Improving clarity with structured assignment brief templates."** This is a developed set of templates that are open to be downloaded for teachers to tailor for their courses. The templates were made as a collaborative effort throughout the university to help reduce the 'cognitive load' on students, foster better independent learning, help clarify expectations between teachers and students, and create a sense of continuity between courses and disciplines.

The student union also played a part in the development of these templates. The templates are designed in such a way as to inform students of key marking criteria, what is expected of them to hand in, what their educational goals are and to make sure that the lexicon isn't confusing or needlessly academic:

"In the example assignment brief given by Computer Science (see below) it was decided to redact the marking scheme given to students so they could only see the weightings in bold. This was because they found inclusion of the more detailed criteria inhibited creativity, distracting students from the skills the assessment was intended to develop."

A key takeaway from this data point was a continued theme from the previous study:

"Last but not least, the templates include information on where students can find support if they are struggling with the assignment, from contacting the unit convenor, to the Skills Centre, to applying for mitigating circumstances."

Whilst this isn't conclusive, it seems to be worthy of further research that clear contact information is important for students to feel supported during the delivery of a brief.

The last data point I'll use today is **"Understanding Difficulties and Resulting Confusion in Learning: An Integrative Review"** which is a large study that covers many areas but for my express purpose I'll focus on the concept of : *"Productive vs Non-Productive Confusion"*

Simply put it explains the difference in confusion that motivates independent research and sparks creativity (productive confusion) vs non-productive confusion, which causes a student to disengage and feel disconnected with the material.

"...for any particular learning or content area, the degree to which difficulties are experienced by a learner, and whether the experience of the resulting epistemic emotion will be productive or unproductive, is a result of a complex relationship between: (i) individually-based variables, such as prior knowledge, self-efficacy, and self-regulation; (ii) the sequence, structure and design of learning tasks and activities; and (iii) the design and timeliness feedback, guidance, and support provided to students during the learning activity or task."

"Finally, this review suggests that insurmountable learning difficulties may arise when students experience too much confusion or when confusion persists for too long ... Unresolved, persistent confusion leads to frustration, boredom and therefore is detrimental for learning."

And brings to the discussion "zones of confusion" which maps out confusion for the student and educator to understand, and how to bring students into "optimal confusion" which is the productive confusion mentioned above:

"Many of these features of confusion are captured in Graesser's (2011) notion of a 'zone of optimal confusion' (ZOC). Reminiscent of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, the ZOC suggests that it is important not to have too little or too much difficulty but to aim to have just the right amount."

My main takeaway from this study at the moment is how to use my verbiage to achieve this 'optimal confusion' and how to avoid the negative 'non-productive confusion' but also to use this data point as part of my argument for the negative outcomes for students when they aren't introduced to a unit in a concise and optimum way and how it could lead to negative areas of confusion which could potentially cause a forward effect of feeling disengaged with the course as a whole (potentially lower drop out rates).

I'll return to a lot of the research mentioned in the study above as my template develops.

- Lodge, J.M., Kennedy, G., Lockyer, L., Arguel, A. & Pachman, M. (2018) 'Understanding difficulties and resulting confusion in learning: An integrative review', *Frontiers in Education*, 3, Article 49. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2018.00049.
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- University of Bath Learning & Teaching Hub (2024) *Improving clarity with structured assignment brief templates*. Available at:
<https://teachinghub.bath.ac.uk/guide/improving-clarity-with-structured-assignment-bri>

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- [Author(s) Unknown] (n.d.) *The Assignment Brief (Graphic Communication module, architecture students)*. *Graphic Communication Studies*. ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248606760_The_Assignment_Brief