MAKING UNNATURAL CONNECTIONS

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Abstract

At the opening of the Griffith Film School, George Miller made the observation that the placement of a film school in the midst of an arts precinct was one of the wisest decisions a university could make. His own tertiary educational experience was in medicine but he took one elective in film which was powerful enough to change his professional direction. The lesson here is that interdisciplinary options can lead to innovative connections which expand the horizons of visual and performing art. However, this is always a two way street with conflicting arguments on the benefits of such a practice. The revision of the structure of programs within the Queensland College of Art has opened the door to what was a siloed curriculum that for a large part provided cloned graduates. By providing a structure which incorporated the option for two distinct majors, students are choosing to form combinations outside the College which are both natural and unnatural; photojournalists are choosing Spanish, fine artists theatre, and designers marketing. The push is now on for conservatorium (music) students to combine with visual artists to create a hybrid skill mixture. On the other side are the academic traditionalists who see any “watering down” of the curriculum as detrimental to the industry readiness of their graduates. These are not the students we need for postgraduate study. What we need are the original thinkers who are willing to take risks. The fostering of innovation and originality has more to do with combining the unexpected than with the expected, as was shown recently when a research proposal was put forward combining photography with plumbing. This paper discusses the restructure of an undergraduate art and design curriculum which erodes the previous structural boundaries. Not only does this give students choice it also attempts to change the student’s mind set to problem identification rather than just problem solution.

This paper sets out a curriculum model which has been adapted by the Queensland College of Art to cope with the emerging changes in the relationship between the
visual arts and the society in which we live. It is a model which still requires some refinement but has already shown some interesting developments.

The raison d'être of art colleges has been basically the same for many years. They were the educational factories that serviced the growth of the creative economy. A considerable part of the teaching was identified as “applied”, and to a large extent our undergraduate programs operate under the same premise. This is a reference to the practice based orientation of many teaching and learning activities which have a professional orientation. Lecturing staff who themselves studied under this system are often opposed to interfering with an undergraduate curriculum which has served to produce a consistent product. This is a system in which the categorical boundaries tended to segregated much of the content, with the role and identity of the graduates being institutionalised by the colleges and professional organisations to which they were affiliated. Paul Rand, one of last century’s best known designers writes in *Design, Form, and Chaos* that a “student whose mind is cluttered with matters that have nothing directly to do with design . . . is a bewildered student”1 (Rand 1993, 217).

What Rand is describing is the traditional way visual arts education has been taught where specialised training in a particular discipline starts at year one and it is only in the last part of the program that students can take an elective to broaden their scope. What is being described is vocational training rather than art and design education. This goes against the traditional pattern of university education which starts broad and then specialises in the final year of study. So how do university based art and design colleges create a new identity which ticks the boxes of fostering innovation and originality? The answer I believe lies in the erosion of the studio boundaries within the undergraduate program so it can foster innovation in postgraduate study.

There is a statement made by the French sociologist Claude Fischler which neatly summarises the process of art and design creation. Although here he is talking about the creation of haute cuisine the analogy to visual art and design disciplines is clear.

“The art of the cook consisted in accommodating, in transforming, in metamorphosing the raw material, to put it from nature to Culture.”2

The evolution of culture requires more than just the ingredients identified by Fischler it also requires the correct conditions. George Miller recognised the necessary conditions at a speech given for the opening of the Griffith Film School in 2007. He
identified the “concatenation of disciplines coming together” and “it is when people collide together that ideas flow”.

An external review had identified that the rigid siloing of the studio programs had limited the student’s ability to take courses across programs and to experience other creative disciplines. The segregating practice of much of the curriculum development had established boundaries. Hannan and Freeman had identified institutionally driven segregation as one of the most important mechanisms for maintaining boundaries. The boundaries were both structural and attitudinal. Enrolment gates were in place to keep students from one studio discipline entering another, and students manifested an attitude of difference and tribal groupings. The expectation is that students completing their third year of study would all result in folios of similar material. The creative processes were controlled by the acceptable limits of each studio discipline. Often visual cultural discourse crossed over these imposed boundaries, but the opportunities to explore them were restricted. Swindler noted that “culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a toolkit . . . from which individuals select different pieces”. This is the context which was used in the design of the undergraduate curriculum.

The primary consideration in the design of the new curriculum was choice. Students were given the opportunity to construct a visual arts degree which was not based on predefined notions of content. A typical semester’s work consisted of 40 credit points which was made up of four 10 credit point courses. Under the new curriculum model program courses were divided into four blocks of 60 credit points of value. These blocks represented generic courses, which were common content areas for all programs, studio foundation, studio major, and elective major. The elective major could then be populated by any other program’s studio foundation or two concentrations of 30 credit points each (see Figure 1). This not only allowed for the mixing of studio areas but opened up the possibility of incorporating other disciplines from outside the visual arts disciplines. Part of the issues with electives was that students often picked courses in a scattered approach which meant there was little or no depth in the study of another discipline. Under this arrangement students had to choose concentrations which were 30 or 60 credit points in value, therefore ensuring some depth in their study. We started to note that students had begun to create
interesting combinations of study which often ventured outside the visual arts. We had photojournalists taking majors in languages and journalism resulting in students with skills in both the visual and written language. Some of the more common choices were product designers taking jewellery or graphic designers taking marketing concentrations. There were also fine art students taking a theatre major.

Insert fig 1

It has become apparent in the last number of years that digital technology is moving many of the visual arts disciplines together; animators are interested in design, fine artists in video and animation, photographers in digital video and internet technologies, and designers are entering the areas of engineering, computer science, psychology, management, and communication.

Evaluations of the new structure indicated some interesting results. Focus groups commenting on the generic courses indicated that working with other students from differing visual arts disciplines enriched the learning experience as it reflected different ways in which set problems were being solved. While the students found value in such cooperative arrangements the staff often had opposing views. Operating under the old program paradigm they were still trying to cram in the content of the old curriculum into the new structure. The notion of offering divergent experiences to visual arts students was still being restrained by ideas of vocational readiness based on observable technical skills. This to some extent is predicated by the fact that most of the staff were originally vocational education teachers. While there will always be a need for vocational practitioners, the future of art and design colleges lies with the education of creative industry entrepreneurs with vision rather than art and design workers with modest talent producing volumes of nondescript product.

Writers such as Richard Florida\textsuperscript{6} and Susan Greenfield\textsuperscript{7} describe creativity as the commodity of the twenty first century. This is where postgraduate education in visual arts needs to be orientated building on the broader undergraduate experience.

Pink\textsuperscript{8} had identified the value that corporations were beginning to place on the Master of Fine Art (MFA) qualification back in 2004. The growth in the creative industries, and the realisation that businesses needed to differentiate their products by making
them “physically beautiful and emotionally compelling” has resulted in MFA graduates being chosen over MBA graduates. The chairman of General Motors when asked to describe GM business remarked, “I see us as being in the art business. Art, entertainment and mobile sculpture, which coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation”.  

While the aesthetic outcomes might be front of mind for corporations such as GM, the result of postgraduate study in the visual arts after an exploratory undergraduate program lies in the quality of the intellectual thinking. Buchanan has noted that, “the most significant product of art is not the work of art, itself, but the quality of the artist’s mind that emerges from engagement with substantial problems”. The development of such a mind does not come about through a vocational orientated curriculum but through a program which cultivates “the sense of wonder and astonishment in students” and engages in a world social context. The difference in the two types of mind sets can be expressed in a comment made by Nils Bohr the Nobel Prize winning physicist to a student when he commented, “You are not thinking, you are just being logical”.  

Typically visual arts education has concentrated on problem solving. That is to say they produce volumes of work which is answer rich but question poor. The emphasis on postgraduate visual arts education should be on problem identification which has been based on an undergraduate program which has a foundation based on exploration and enquiry. This is not an easy proposition as it requires an understanding of how one should work with complexity. Often the identification of a problem is a multidisciplinary activity which crosses many disciplines many of which are outside the visual arts domain. Labelled as inquiry learning this activity is identified by a capacity to understand world complexities.

The traditional approach to visual arts problem solving is one associated with defining, analysing and resolving problems around a conceptual framework. This has been identified by Checkland as the “hard system” approach. The issue with a number of socially constructed systems is that they often do not fit this approach. Checkland identified a “soft system” approach which acknowledged complex problems.

A “soft system” view of the world accepts confusion, diversity and complexity and uses this as a resource and a source of inspiration to orchestrate enquiry and grow new learning. Soft systems theory does not see all new perspectives as problems to be solved. Rather, it sees different perspectives as routes that can be taken to open up and examine possibilities.
An example of the application of the soft system approach can be seen in the following example. An industrial design post graduate student from Iraq set out to define a building design policy which could be used for the reconstruction of the Iraq school system. The problem definition had to start with basic concepts such as; how do you start to rebuild something after the skill base has been wiped out? If you have to reconstruct a whole industry where does one begin, and which direction should one take? To answer such questions requires not only design skills but also project management, financial and economic, logistical skills as well as others. The eventual route the student will take will depend on the information provided by the research process which will cross many domains.

This approach in learning is marked by the following comparisons.

- The importance of process over content
- A focus on the abstract rather than the literal
- The deconstruction of multiple ideas versus a unilateral focus

These are the basic prerequisites identified by Susan Greenfield for creativity to occur.15

What I have tried to illustrate is that undergraduate experiences which are divergent in nature help to break up existing conceptual frameworks and allow postgraduate students to make novel connections which aid enquiry learning. These often challenge existing assumptions and practices by allowing one to observe a problem from a number of different standpoints. Postgraduate thinking should be about perspectives associated with clear problem identification as the social systems we have created by their very nature are complex.

It should be noted that social systems such as education are always evolving and as such one can never describe a definitive model for all times. It is important that mechanisms are in place that allow for these shifts to occur so that students attain the required knowledge to interact with a changing world. We no longer find it sufficient to educate our visual art students for an industrial age when the priorities and requirements are now focused on a creative age.

References

3. George Miller, Interview with George Miller by Griffith University, March 2007.


10. Pink, 22.


13. Buchanan, 45.
