Some Positive Developments in a Professional Practice Program

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How visual arts graduates fare in a post university environment is of foremost concern for their teachers. It is of increasing concern for university administrators, coordinators of teaching and learning and of course of great concern to parents, particularly of school leavers. On the other hand, however, most fine art students (with the exception of mature age students) are not very interested in preparing themselves for their future through professional practice studies. In their report Destinations and Reflections: Careers of British Art, Craft and Design Graduates (1999), Blackwell and Harvey note that it is often only in retrospect that graduates consider business or professional studies valuable for their career development. Further, the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA) 2000 report, indicates that it is only ‘incrementally’ that graduates realise they need specific information and skills to work both in their preferred field and in the ‘changing world of work’. Maria Menidis (2006) in her review of Professional Development options for the visual arts and craft sector for the National Association of Visual Arts, says it is ‘principally through work that real professional needs become evident’ (p.4). Further confirmation of this is given in Jude Adams’ 2005 ACUADS paper, where she identifies (among other outcomes), a widening conception of the arts sector to students participating in the University of South Australia, School of Art Industry Internship Program.

Internships in arts organisations would be the most desired preparation for employment for final year visual arts students. However in a city with a small arts infrastructure, internships are not available for the 50 + final year students each year. Were there ways then, to increase the relevance of the content of professional practices lectures to students? Were there ways to involve students actively in aspects of the arts sector?
there ways that meaningful work-based projects could come to the students? Could the artist workplace be created anywhere?

In Semester 1 2009 I developed a pilot project and along the way, I discovered that it did provide many possibilities for developing strong professional artist skills and as well as transferable skills. I have also discovered opportunities for deep level learning through students’ critically reflecting on their activities, stimulated through the sounding board of group interaction and the feedback and involvement of mentors.

The pilot project consisted of a weekly lecture (a change from two hours a week to one hour a week), with a weekly tutorial (a change from one hour a week to two hours a week) for Fine Art third year students. In the tutorials, facilitated by a postgraduate mentor, the students were to develop an art project, which as a group they wished to realise. Each tutorial group were required to apply for a grant (using the Arts Queensland’s under $5,000 project grant application), for $500 (funds I had been able to source through the university), and use these funds to develop the project during the semester.

The program has created extraordinary enthusiasm from the students participating and a great deal of interest and excitement from their postgraduate mentors. In this paper I will discuss the four different projects developed by students with their mentors, and identify the broad and specific learning outcomes I believe took place using the developing analysis and theorisation of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) pedagogy.

Jude Adams in her 2005 ACUADS paper suggested that students were becoming ‘commercial’ in their desire to understand the elements of self-promotion in the art world. She believed this interest marked a change in priorities in art school education with ‘career-based knowledge and skills’ gaining ground over ‘the study of art (its practices, histories and theories)’ (p.1). This however is not a new anxiety for educators. Lee Harvey in his paper ‘New Realities: The Relationship Between Higher Education and Employment’ (2000), says that discussing the relationship between the academy and employment is to risk ‘being seen as ...proposing that higher
education should be about training graduates for jobs rather than improving their minds...’ (pp. 3-4). The argument Harvey develops in this paper is that the interface between higher education and employment should not be seen as an ‘add-on’ to the academic program. On the other hand, he emphasizes, employability should not be seen as the prime focus of higher education. Rather the prime focus of higher education should be to enhance student knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while also ‘empowering them [to be]... lifelong critical reflective learners’ (Harvey 2000, p.3). Employability he says ‘is a subset of, and fundamentally contingent on, transformative lifelong learning’ (ibid, p.4). Harvey identifies that in the 21st c organizational change has made it less clear what are graduate jobs, it has removed a definite sense of career progression and above all it has identified a need for greater flexibility (2000, p.5). So then, rather than the loss of ‘commentary or critique’ through the introduction of ‘market driven initiatives’ that rightly concerns Adams (2000, p.2), Harvey sees that there should be a new emphasis on continuing, critical reflective learning and practice because all graduate employment will be dependent upon it. Harvey calls this emphasis transformative lifelong learning and recognizes that there are no obvious or easy means to do this (2000, p.6).

Work Integrated Learning (WIL), underpinned by experiential learning pedagogy (Weisz & Smith 2005, p.605) and created through the interface of academic and professional learning in a work environment—has grown in significance in the last two decades and includes a wide range of activities like work-based projects, unpaid work placement, apprenticeships, practicum and field experience. (Franz 2007, p.1) Educators interested in developing this approach argue that the work environment can be a place of ‘authentic’ learning (ibid). Formerly workplace learning focused on the development of the practical and technical skills of professional practice. (Franz 2007 p. 2) More recently, Franz identifies that the ‘workplace has been conceptualized as a setting for the integration of theory and practice...’ (ibid). Research and literature support ‘the view that students learn in a deeper, and more meaningful way and are better prepared professionally when theory is integrated with
practice’ (ibid). Central to implementing this, is the development of a WIL curriculum in context —’a cultural context that acknowledges all the stakeholders and newly emerging philosophical, educational, social and economic needs’ (Franz 2007, p.3). In a similar way to Harvey, Janice Orrell (2004) in her paper ‘Work Integrated Learning Programmes: Management and Educational Quality’ uses the descriptor ‘a transformative ‘stakeholder ethos”, to identify the long-term view of learning where teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills are developed, using a holistic rather than a task focused approach (np). Emphasising this point, Orrell states that ‘the experience of work [alone] is not enough to produce transformed learning’ (np).

Weisz & Smith further identify that the key to deep level learning, is through developing in students an ability to reflect on their work experiences; to integrate the understanding of these experiences into their academic studies and through this process to conceptualise their learning. Ultimately the aim is to bring together their work and their academic experiences to solve problems in unfamiliar environments (2005, pp.606, 607).

The academic and personal benefits of these processes and experiences to student learning are compelling. Weisz & Smith identify a wide field of research that identify a range of benefits. These include increased focused thinking; increase in motivation to learn; increased problem solving skills; an ability to apply theory to practice and improved academic results (2005, p.607). Central to all of this is increased self-esteem and confidence that I have identified in students involved in the pilot program, through observation and discussion with the postgraduate mentors. Harvey also identifies increased self-esteem and confidence, which he describes as empowerment. Learners are empowered he says through ‘critically reflective learning’ (2000, p.13) and it is through facilitating learning, rather than teaching that critically reflective learning is built.
Facilitation was central to the way the mentors worked with their tutorial groups. Ideas for two tutorial groups formed quite slowly. One mentor spent time encouraging the students to consider where they imagined themselves in the art world; she asked the students what activities did they think would help to give them more ‘control and agency.’ As this mentor noted from the start, out of a group of 15 students only two wanted to be artists, three wanted to be teachers of art, a few wanted to be curators, one a tattooist and the rest didn’t know. This revealed such diversity and made finding agreement quite difficult in the beginning discussions. Eventually this group decided to put together a CD where, through interviews with a number of art practitioners (artists, curators, art facilitators and a tattooist), the breadth of art world activities was explored. The tutorial group decided to find out what they thought they didn’t know and what they knew they wanted to know. They identified who they thought could help with this, arranged interviews and filming and then conducted the editing in class. Finally 300 CDs with laser printed labels were burnt and a launch arranged where the CDs were given out to other students.

The other tutorial group who moved slowly to develop an idea came up with a very different project—they created an organization called The Institution, a body to research and critique existing institutions. Describing the process of getting started the postgraduate mentor said:

...discussion was directed with the goal of creating a project everyone could and would contribute to, and could sense they belonged to. My strategy was to get everyone, especially those who seemed resistant to contribute, to contribute something, even if it was negative, I found saying nothing in this situation to be more destructive.

Through emails and group discussion, each of the 15 students decided how they individually or in a group would contribute a project or projects to The Institution. There was a group who decided to take their art on sandwich boards into the city mall and botanical gardens and to document this, one person set up a ‘zine’ and brought out two issues which she distributed
through the website and in art supply shops and galleries. Another decided she wanted to find out all she could about *droit de suite* legislation, which at the time was at the stage of release by the Federal Parliamentary Committee report. This student wrote articles and interviewed gallerists and put, for those few who agreed, the recording of the interview on the Institution’s website. A larger group were involved in museum intervention activities which involved seeking material on gallery protocols, finding out exactly what could be touched and exactly how close one could get to view an art work. One activity was to get their own work into major public galleries. This they did by inserting small plasticine objects into museum displays or wearing their own artwork around their neck and revealing it when they took off a coat or shirt. These interventions were all documented and added to the Institution’s activities. After each venture the students would assess the value and purpose of what had just been done, then strategise for the next intervention. The students supported these activities with readings they were doing on institutional critique.

Two of the student groups formed the idea for an exhibition quite quickly. One was to be a one-night event in an old house a student lived in, which was due for demolition. For the other exhibition, it was decided to take a longer period to plan for it, and thus have the exhibition after the semester finished. With each student contributing another $50, this group had an expanded budget of $1,200 to use on their project. With the additional time, the group was able to find an old warehouse and run the exhibition for 10 days. As the mentor said in an email to me in Week 4:

...enthusiasm is apparent throughout the classroom. Everyone is being level headed and sympathetic to everyone else's contributions and systematically developing the project through discussion. This week students presented examples of their work so we could all become familiar with each others’ practice - great to see everyone so willing to share. No one appears to be dragging the chain or taking a free ride - the group is a strong one - certain individuals are enjoying
specific tasks that need extra work such as the secretarial team, but I believe that the group is a symbiotic unit and everyone is contributing to it in their own ways.

By the middle of the semester each tutorial group was required to prepare an assessable Arts Queensland grant application with an expenditure budget of $500. To achieve this the student projects required clarification, with an articulated sense of purpose, enabling among other things, the projects to gain traction to be able to be realised within the next seven weeks. These were marked within a week and students given feedback on how they might have improved the application. Emerging very early on was a distinct sense of ownership across all the projects. The facilitative approach seemed to be galvanizing and empowering the students. Group discussions with the mentor as sounding board, led the way to critically reflect on aspects of the students’ projects and importantly to give them the means to conceptualise their projects through example, questioning, and by placing the project in a wider context. The sharing of the mentors’ individual art and life experiences were an important part of the overall learning experience for students. A decision that mentors were not to be involved in any assessment, was made for financial reasons. I came to believe this was a good decision, confirmed by the mentors who said they could feel much more part of the group and that this seemed to be important in the development of trust within the group. One of the mentors said to me that what he liked so much about working with the students was participating in the students’ development and ‘learning as much as them.’

A component of the overall assessment was that students were to keep a journal to enable them to document and also reflect on their learning. While I saw evidence of the benefits of critical reflection taking place within the group tutorials, I hadn’t recognised the need for developing a clear understanding of the way students might go about creating evidence of this in a journal. I have since located Merrelyn Bates article ‘Assessment of Work Integrated Learning: Symptoms of Personal Change’ (2003). Bates, using an analysis of ‘how students make sense’ of
experience (p.303), which she calls “symptoms of learning’ in experiential contexts’, (p.304) has created criteria for assessment of journals. It is this that has given me insight into how to better prepare students for the creation of reflective journals that identify how the project has stimulated learning and ways the student has created active involvement in the project. Bates’ criteria I believe will encourage each student to think holistically about the project, as well as identify the social learning that has taken place, particularly, what he or she has learnt about themselves and others.

This pilot project has been a different kind of work experience for students. In a way, the workplace has come to them. In doing so it has probably replicated something close to artist-initiated projects and current models of artist organisations. There is evidence that deep learning took place, that students were active learners and participants, that the students were empowered by the experience. The pilot project certainly brought a new interest by the students in seeking to understand the complexity and diversity of the visual arts sector. Students seemed to be genuinely more interested in the lecture topics, displaying a growing confidence in discussing art world issues. Communication between students generally seemed far more positive than previous years. I am eager to try the project again. This time I want to trial a systematic process of assessment using Bates’ ‘symptoms of learning’ in experiential contexts’.
REFERENCES


