

Redefining Attitudes to Teaching and Learning Strategies in a Contemporary Art School Environment: (What Happens to Ideas in an Art School?)

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Abstract

This paper will consider the role of staff and student interaction in confronting the traditions of studio-based programs and suggests that there is an opportunity to redefine teaching and learning strategies within a dynamic environment of continuous, significant, structural and philosophical change.

The basis for this paper has arisen from conversations and memories shared between a supervisor and honours student about the notions of research as practice rather than practice as research. The use of 'we' reflects the collaborative nature of the paper other than the student's personal reflections of art school and we suggest that our opinions expressed here are seen not as criticisms of any particular educational setting, but are intended to contribute to discussion and create debate.

The ability to change has been a basic requirement for the Australian tertiary sector since the now much mythologized 'Whitlam years'. Whilst the majority of the *structural* change has been in response to the political agendas imposed by the particular government of the day (new universities, new funding models, amalgamations, quality audits, research performance indices, newer funding models), there is no doubt that many faculties, schools and departments of art and design have seen *philosophical* change as a more important strategy for survival within the sector. This is not to say that structural change, to a greater or lesser degree, has not been imposed on most of our art schools during this time (and that some schools are better for it!), or that the traditional studio based/fine art teaching models have been challenged in almost every Australian art school.

This paper will consider the role of staff and student interaction in confronting the traditions of studio-based programs and suggests that there is an opportunity to redefine teaching and learning strategies within a dynamic environment of continuous, significant, structural and philosophical change. In particular we are interested in developing an active place in the curriculum for the thinking process that occurs before, and consequently underpins the 'explore/investigate/make art' process.

The structural separation of disciplines or areas of studio practice in Australian art schools has been largely predicated on the historical model of the English Art School and on the general tenets of Modernism. Thierry de Duve says that art education has evolved from maintaining traditions and teaching skills to the Bauhaus axis of creativity, medium and invention. With the introduction of French theory, creativity decreased, and art education became dominated by attitude, practice and deconstruction. Further, that most art schools currently defend their position between tradition and modernism (2005, p. 19).

Whilst increasing interest in cross-culturalism, new media, installation, performance, photography and electronic art has seen the emergence of the multi-disciplinary art student and of hybrid art forms, it still remains for example that huge numbers of painting students make paintings in painting studios under the watchful eyes of painters employed as painting lecturers and so too for other disciplines.

Now this is not necessarily a bad thing in the scheme of things, but it is potentially self indulgent, even dangerous unless these teachers do more than just teach students how to make paintings, for there is something about the conservative approach to ideas and to intellectual rigor that denies interrogation of the idea. According to Baker, those who say that students aren't being taught traditional skills are nostalgic for the British academy of the 19th century or the Bauhaus of the 20th century (2004).

Forms of Post Modern theory still tend to dominate current art school theoretical discourse, but there is little evidence to support the view that the pluralistic nature of these theories has greatly influenced the structure and working methods of the art schools, or the context of their studio based courses. It is within the context of these recent histories and the consequent restrictions inherent in traditional art school values that interesting models of practice have emerged.

For example, the identity and context of an ideal BA Honours programme could be based on an inclusive and flexible approach to teaching and learning, integrating the best of art, design and craft theories and practice. The resultant academic and intellectual flexibility might enable marginal practice to be equally positioned within such a program. Frankham at the ACUADS Conference '*Thinking the Future – Art, Design and Creativity*' suggests that undergraduate programs should include adaptability and flexibility, resourcefulness, problem solving and creativity (2006).

The approach is based upon the notion that art practice is in some way a prime descriptor of the human experience in a range of historical and contemporary cultural and social settings. This belief encourages a shift towards a student centered learning environment, where non-hierarchical choice is the empowering element in developing each student's studio program. Informed, personal choice becomes the primary requirement for art making. Dally et al say that discovery and freedom of inquiry are guiding principles of scholarship and investigation (2004).

Diverse attitudes and sources contribute to the establishment of a pluralist framework for students in which to think and seek new alignments. Students are encouraged to choose a personal philosophy for visual art practice, acknowledging art, craft or design; taking strength from all areas, and not positioning their work in a predetermined hierarchical sense. An inclusive rather than exclusive approach to making and interrogating is a particular strength of this model. Krauss et al says that Structuralism declared art culturally autonomous (although this has been eroded by the commercial art market). Similarly, the chains of the institutional frame have been challenged since the 1970s (2004, p. 43). We suggest that post-structural theories have increasingly influenced contemporary art practice, yet there is still a tendency to

attach this theoretical privilege to selected studio areas and ideas whilst others are narrowly defined by histories, methods and materials.

Perhaps this has something to do with theory that currently pervades many art schools, prompting Weekend Australian journalist Luke Slattery to note, 'To those who are not philosophically trained theory reads like philosophy. It is not' (2004, p. 40). If theory has provided a range of possibilities for **what** to think, then the introduction of parallel studies in philosophy would enable students to better develop methods of **how** to think. Augmenting theory programs with appropriate philosophy units would provide thinking and learning 'tools' or methods that may equip students with the ability to develop and critique a more sustained and personal position toward creative practice and perhaps alerting students and academics to the dangers of imitating whatever intellectual fashion has currency.

Where then does the understanding of post structural theory currently place them? It is the fact that the tendency to marginalize *still exists* within a contemporary art school environment that is the issue. We are all familiar with power relationships, with academic hierarchies and the need for dominant structures to dominate something – the simple binary.

As academics and artists we are presented with the dilemma of how to facilitate a learning environment for the visual arts in a university culture redolent with an increasing expectation of creative research. We are by necessity and desire aware of the contemporary writings and theories of our field, yet much post-whatever notions are anything but expansive and inclusive when confined and defined to 'traditional' areas of art practice. For whether we like it or not, art is still narrowly defined.

Waiting and watching for the academic reality of the day to embrace plurality, and whilst the rhetoric of the recent past, our courses and their objectives certainly anticipate this end, we suspect that the old modernist dogma of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, still determine much of the content and context of what our students learn. Terms are still defined by the need to exist through an inverse relation to some other. We would surely reject this out of hand as culturally inappropriate, yet it still has credence in contemporary art education.

Is there an inherent contradiction in attempting to facilitate a learning environment devoted to arts education in a University? The art bit requires a philosophical breadth and tolerance that some contemporary universities may find strategically clumsy. How many art schools still use a form of negotiated study program, an individual study pro-forma, developed by students, and allowing for students to determine their specific art research and practice? Does academic guidance, usually provided by the coordinator and supervisor, determine context and content? Or is it the school or department ethos that frames the context and content? Where an 'ethos' or 'style' does exist it should do so by choice, not chance.

Pursuit of life long learning often exists in many university charters 'The disturbing thing is' Slattery says 'is that once theory poured into academy it set like concrete' (2004, p. 40).

What happens to ideas and critique when the emphasis is on the individual to develop a completely original research program for their field of practice? Perhaps too much emphasis too early on the original in art reinforces the belief that difference is more important than commonality of expression. Consider that by deemphasizing the importance of the individual in the early stages of the program common ground may emerge upon which to build ongoing critique and analysis of practice

What is yet to follow is real evidence that students and their staff are able to move outside both old and the new structures and embrace a genuine curiosity and respect for *different* approaches of practice. To demonstrate a passionate belief in one area of practice whilst teasing out the relationships that may exist across all forms of creative thinking. As reflective models, they may in time allow the *unnamed practice descriptors* to become the dominant space for contemporary art practice.

The answer lies in the development of the value of ideas in art school as a core proposal, by placing an increased value on ideas and intellectual pursuit and positioning this ahead of the making of art. We do not mean increasing the amount of visual culture or theory in a course. Art history, philosophy and theory are important for the development of context and historical significance. Though it is equally important for knowing and seeing **how** other artists have thought about and researched those areas relevant to the making of their art.

However, we are more interested in addressing here the question of improving the awareness in art schools of the process of developing thoughts and ideas that contribute to the way research is done. More particularly the acceptance of the belief that ideas are the underlying component, the supporting structure of art making whether art graduates or students admit it, recognise it or not. The acceptance by the art school of **how** ideas are developed as an essential part of studio based practice.

This is almost like learning how to build a structure by using research, before and during and after the making of art without imposing any strictures on the flexibility of the artist or the process. There is surely no question that more proficient thinking broadens the horizon and increases the scope and depth of problem solving and inquiry. So, why not for artists?

In a more personal sense, in my experience as an art undergraduate, there is a paradox in that you are expected to have ideas for project proposals and then there is a dismissal of them in favour of the actual art making when it comes to the review of outcomes. Almost like you can't have your idea and make it too! Inherent in this statement is the consideration of what knowledge and structure is appropriate in a three year undergraduate course in 2007 when staff/student contact time diminishes, class sizes get bigger and funding models are driven by economic rationalism

Compounding this is the lack of encouragement for, and the absence of even basic training in how to think, how to logically investigate, how to integrate suggestions from teachers and colleagues. How to deal with originality from the initial thought through to the art outcome whatever form it comes in. We have often heard our peers say 'I can't think of anything to do' or 'why can't I just make stuff'. Nurturing these aspects of being an artist in a more focussed way will produce better research practices for art making. It's almost as if this aspect of existing as an artist has been seen to be denied and not worthy of exploring. It's always intrigued me that there is "conceptual art"- does that mean that ideas and concepts don't exist elsewhere in art?

Cross discipline comparisons may be odious, however, as a science graduate, there is considerable time spent in undergraduate years on the process of thinking and knowing what the building blocks of research are. This may be anathema to some in humanities, but thinkers, even in art, tend not to be contained by borders, and often work across rather than within disciplines; think of artists like Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp.

Research exists everywhere on our intellectual map. Inquiry, investigation and puzzle solving have similar processes in all disciplines, and require a similar preparation and education regardless of the specifics of curriculum. If intellectual life is supposed to encourage independent thought and intellectual pluralism then the primacy of ideas and the establishment of a visual arts research culture are critical if we are to have the strength and rigour required to produce great outcomes for individual artists, and to guarantee the continued survival and growth of art schools in today's university environment.

Slattery notes 'that we spend billions of dollars on public inquiries into the structure of the university system; why not spend some on an inquiry into the life of the mind within?' (2004, p. 40).

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Further Reading

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Biographies

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