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Generic Attributes and Curriculum Strategies for Successful Transition to Professional Practice. From Tertiary Study to Practising Artist.

Abstract

In this paper I report on the progress of my investigation into the kinds of skills developed in the classroom that contribute to 'being a professional'. Reflecting on my discussions with different focus groups my paper examines three interrelated parts. The first part outlines the kinds of skills professionals identify as contributing to 'being a professional'. The second part examines elaboration of graduate attributes in the context of the discipline. The third part looks at studio teaching as a learning environment in light of feedback from the focus groups.

Through engagement with key stakeholders in the profession, I aim to improve my studio teaching by elaborating on the 'graduate qualities of a student of the University of South Australia' in a way that 'brings to life' these generic attributes. The goal of such an approach is to contribute to the success of graduates making the transition from study. The key vehicle for change that emerged from my discussions with the focus groups was the argument for better connections between undergraduate students and practicing artists, for example by using professional practitioners to mentor students using portfolio reviews.

Biography

Andrew Welch is a lecturer at the University of South Australia where he is currently the Studio Head of Jewellery + Metal, a specialisation within the Bachelor of Visual Arts at the South Australian School of Art. A graduate from the University of South Australia's precursor institution the South Australian College of Advanced Education, (Bachelor of Design (Jewellery & Metalsmithing)) Andrew has recently completed a Master of Design.

My research interest as a teacher focuses on the use of studio teaching or problem-based learning as a method of teaching and learning in the specialist areas of the South Australian School of Art. As a teacher my aim is to provide a workshop experience for students in jewellery + metal that takes into account that students learn different things in different ways and that encourages students to adopt a 'deep' approach to their learning. I am committed to studio-based teaching that is student-centred, supported by learning materials that can be accessed by flexible methods and that values the experience of learning by doing. As a practicing craftsperson my work reflects a career-long interest in the crafting process, respect for the qualities of materials and a commitment to fine design.

Generic Attributes and Curriculum Strategies for Successful Transition to Professional Practice.

Introduction.

As a teacher I am keenly interested in the success of my students as graduates. In particular I am interested in how my teaching can help students make the transition from student to practitioner. I contend that this transition is more problematic in the creative arts than in other fields because there is, more often than not, no job for the graduate to go to. This successful transition from study to work is also an important measure of our capacity as teaching and learning institutions and for the continued funding and viability of our programs.

In this paper I reflect on my discussions with various focus groups from the field and report on the outcome in three interrelated parts. The first part outlines the kinds of skills that practitioners identify as contributing to 'being a professional'. The second part examines elaboration of graduate attributes in the context of the discipline. The third part looks at studio teaching as a learning environment in light of feedback from the focus groups.

An important teaching and learning strategy at the University of South Australia is the 'Graduate Qualities of a student of the University of South Australia' (GQ's). Through engagement with key stakeholders in the profession, I aim to improve my studio teaching by elaborating on the GQ's in a way that 'brings to life' these generic attributes. The aim of such an approach is to contribute to the success of graduates making the transition from study to professional practice. The key vehicle for change that emerged from my discussions with the focus groups was the argument for building better connections between undergraduate students and practicing artists.

Practitioners can identify factors that contribute to 'being a professional'.

The literature tells us that the kinds of skills that employers identify as important for graduates to have are the ones that enable them to apply their knowledge to new problems in appropriate ways.

Emerging results also demonstrate that what is central to effective practice is not the possession of specific skills and knowledge but something far more integrated and complex, something more emblematic of a university education than an industry training program.¹

Biggs calls this 'functioning knowledge' describing it as 'a performance of understanding' that is based on a foundation of 'declarative' knowledge (knowing-about or knowing-what) but also requiring 'procedural' knowledge (knowing how to do things) and 'conditional' knowledge (knowing when and why to do things).²

My challenge was to discover how this generic attribute - applying knowledge to new problems in appropriate ways - can be elaborated in the context of my discipline, jewellery and metal. In order to do this I surveyed a number of focus groups using a standard set of questions to guide our discussions. These groups included emerging and established practitioners from both 'contemporary' and 'commercial' fields as well as other educators and an industry advocacy group (CraftSouth). The aim of these focus group discussions was to identify the kinds of discipline-specific skills that are valued by practicing studio jewellers, and other industry stakeholders, as important to the success of emerging artists.

Rationale

The rationale for surveying practicing artists about 'skills for success' is twofold. Firstly I believe it is difficult to ask practicing artists to examine and make comment on the structure and content of the program and its courses, particularly if the focus groups have little or no previous experience with the design of the degree program. This is not to say that industry cannot contribute to the design and content of degree programs - clearly their input into the design of programs is vital. My thesis is however, that for the purposes of my investigation the focus groups chosen are uniquely placed to offer insights into skills needed for success in the 'real world'. Secondly I believe that students might value gaining these skills, when the skills are identified by industry professionals.

The outcome of my discussions

A number of ideas and directions emerged from these discussions. The primary skills identified by the focus groups were 'attitudinal'. In other words practitioners identified that to be successful graduates need to take a positive and proactive approach to their careers as jewellers/metalsmiths. They noted that graduates needed skills to 'learn how to learn' to have 'drive, determination' and take 'pleasure from learning'. The stakeholders recommended 'commitment, passion' and to adopt the field as a career with a 'drive to do better' that comes 'from within yourself'. In addition to passion, a willingness to stick with it, tenacity 'to the point of stubbornness' was also seen as essential. Maria Hansen, an artist and teacher from the UK used the term 'bloody-mindedness'. A passion for the field and passion for the artists personal direction were the things that were identified as the main 'keys to success'.

This does not mean that the focus groups discounted the ability to perform. Good making skills and perhaps more importantly good problem-solving skills (for example being able to research new making skills) were identified as important. It was also recognised that a university program, particularly with only three years of study and with a broad curriculum could not produce highly skilled makers. They agreed that development as a maker continued beyond university. One stakeholder said 'it took me a few years out of uni to become fluent', describing this as 'like learning a new language'. Being 'fluent' enough that their work could communicate the desired message was seen as an important skill.

The focus groups recommended that teaching and learning in the studio could be improved by establishing better links to practicing artists and studios. In other words, in conjunction with studio projects the role of the teacher was to establish ways for students to be able to experience the working environment and for students to be able to better visualise the potential direction that being an artist might take them. Ideas raised during the discussions included:

- career planning - a sort of personal 'business plan.' One focus group described entering professional practice in the field as an important lifestyle choice.

- developing networks prior to the student's move from study to practice in the 'real world'. A member of a focus group also suggested that students/graduates need to be 'weaned-off the institution'.
- utilising practicing artists as 'mentors' and role models. The design associates at the Jam Factory suggested that as emerging artists they would find it mutually beneficial to be able to meet with current students and describe their experience.
- identifying successful graduates and applying their experience when developing course curriculum.
- exchanges of students and staff with other institutions. Field trips to creative communities in order to experience different aspects of working in the field.

Biggs argues that the process where students construct understandings is 'multidimensional' and 'learners comprehension of taught content is gradual and cumulative, more like climbing a spiral staircase than dropping chips into a bag'.³ The strategies listed above are among the 'horizontal interconnections' that Biggs argues are part of the teacher's task:

...the teachers task is not to transmit correct understandings, but to help students construct understandings that are more rather than less acceptable. Content thus evolves cumulatively over the long term, having 'horizontal' interconnections with other topics and subjects, and 'vertical' interconnections with previous and subsequent learning in the same topic. The process of teaching is to help the learner undertake activities that involve progressive understanding of the meanings.⁴

The Graduate Qualities of a student of the University of South Australia.

The 'Graduate Qualities of a student of the University of South Australia' (GQ's) are a key aspect of the University of South Australia's Teaching and Learning strategy. Indeed every Australian university has a generic set of graduate attributes.⁵ In the case of the University of South Australia, along with student-centred learning, graduate qualities are one of the two 'organising concepts' that coupled with flexible delivery – an 'enabling concept' - make up the teaching and learning framework used by the university.⁶

The arguments for adopting Graduate Qualities are well documented both as a strategy for the University of South Australia and as a partner Australian University Network (ATN) University - see '5 universities - one vision: Generic Capabilities of ATN University Graduates'. The University of South Australia weights each graduate quality within different courses that make up a particular program in order to achieve a profile of qualities for that program. It is up to the discipline to articulate how each of the graduate qualities applies within that program:

In considering such graduate qualities it was acknowledged that students, academics and their peers, and professional bodies and associations – our educational stakeholders – would be involved in deciding upon interpretations of these generic qualities so that they would become a vibrant part of the academic life of a discipline or interdisciplinary area. Such generic qualities would also assist the community in general – another of our stakeholders – to understand the benefits of a university experience.⁷

'Elaboration' (in the context of the discipline) 'gives life' to the generic GQ's. I contend that well considered elaboration of the Graduate Qualities in the context of the discipline can be one of the most important influences that individual teachers can have on the curriculum (apart from the actual 'delivery' of course!)

The focus groups noted a number of activities that are part of being a professional artist. These included regular public exhibition of the artist's work, the development of a personal voice' or creative message, establishing a workshop individually or in a cooperative, going to conferences and undertaking professional development, becoming involved with professional advocacy groups and having an ethical marketing and selling strategy. This kind of feedback provides the key to 'working backwards' to relate these to the UniSA GQ's.

The table below begins to explore these skills and their relationship to the generic GQ's.

<i>Discipline skills</i>	<i>Graduate Qualities</i>
Problem solving applied to materials, processes and concepts that lead to a body of work.	Body of knowledge
Proactive approach to working in the studio situation - understanding learning styles, tools, materials information. Critical appraisal through regular public exhibition.	Lifelong learning
Clear 'research question' that guides creative thinking.	Effective problem solver
To work on self-directed projects as well as collaborative projects with other professionals.	Work autonomously and collaboratively
Mission statement that sets out vision and ethical approach to practice. Personal creative voice.	Ethical action and social responsibility
Be able to articulate a personal approach to jewellery making. Produce visual material to market work.	Communicates effectively
Business plan that takes into consideration the artist's place in the profession with an international perspective. Think globally in terms of their audience Develop networks internationally. establishing networks and mentors.	International perspectives

Studio teaching - setting up a learning environment for students.

There are a diverse range of studio disciplines at the South Australian School of Art - ceramics, new media, drawing, glass, jewellery and metal, painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture and textiles - the approach to teaching and learning generally adopted is commonly described as 'studio teaching'.

Studio Teaching is a discovery or problem based approach to learning that Henry (1994) calls the 'project method' (p13) which is usually found in applied disciplines and professional training such as engineering, architecture, design and agriculture. Henry links the kind of project to the discipline, for example the 'case study' in social science and 'design projects' in technology, art and design (p21). Advocates of the project method (Henry names educationalist and philosopher John Dewey as 'one of the project approach's earliest champions' (p41)) argue that the self-directed nature, problem solving, decision making and communication skills encourage active engagement and motivation. Henry says the project method 'develops the higher cognitive skills of organising, synthesizing, analysing and evaluating' (p49), capabilities that clearly have a direct connection to the graduate qualities in their 'generic' form.

The literature on student learning (Biggs (1994), Ramsden (1994) *et al*) tells us that different students learn different things in quantitatively and qualitatively different ways. Martin (1999) notes that the research into student learning tells us that the quality of student learning outcomes is related to the approach they take to their learning and that such approaches can be described as either a deep or a shallow approach.

Studio teaching is an approach to teaching and learning which takes into account different learning styles and encourages students to take a 'deep approach' to their learning. The open-ended and self-directed nature of studio projects encourages active engagement by placing the knowledge in the context that it will be used (Boud and Felitti 1992 p17,18).

While studio teaching as an approach to teaching and learning in art and design is an appropriate method, in response to the feedback from the focus groups studio teaching could be improved through connecting teaching and learning in the classroom to 'real-world' practice.

Clinical placements.

Connections to real-world practice occur in other fields of study - health sciences for example - through clinical placements and in-house clinics where students assess and treat patients under the supervision

of salaried health care professionals. It should be noted that as a public sector practitioner this supervision is an expected part of the job.

In undergraduate programs in the visual arts 'clinical placements' happen on an ad hoc basis. A number of postgraduate visual art programs have internships, for example the University of Adelaide's graduate studies in art history incorporates an internship or curatorial placement in conjunction with the Art Gallery of South Australia, and the Bachelor of Visual Art (Honors) program at UniSA has recently established an internship with the CAC (Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia Inc).

Opportunities for graduates outside tertiary institutions include internships offered by the Jam Factory in their two year associateship program and Craft South administers a mentoring program where emerging artists have the opportunity to work with established artists. Private and cooperative studios provide a similar experience by offering workshop access or part-time employment.

It's the nature of the field that visual art practitioners usually work in small enterprises (in contrast to industry) or alone, and are to a greater extent self-funded rather than publicly funded. In this situation it is difficult for the practitioner or studio to properly devise an appropriate program or supervise students undertaking 'work experience'. This means that a professional experience similar to that provided by the 'clinical placement' is a difficult proposition and in my mind of questionable value for undergraduate students in the visual arts.

With this in mind the use of portfolio reviews is of a scale appropriate to the field. This kind of mentoring would reap great reward with a lesser commitment on the part of the practicing artist. By receiving feedback on their studio projects the student gains an insight into real-world requirements, reinforcing the graduate qualities being developed in the studio and at the same time building networks useful for them as emerging artists.

In the light of the focus groups' comments and the opportunities to elaborate on the graduate qualities in the studio, I propose to establish connections between my students and practicing artists through the use of portfolio reviews.

Where to from here?

The proposed project: professional practitioner mentoring through portfolio reviews.

The next stage of my investigation into 'skills for success' is to implement 'portfolio reviews by professional practitioners' as a part of Studio Specialisation. Studio Specialisation is the studio component of the final year of the Bachelor of Visual Art (specialisation) for students majoring in Jewellery + Metal.

The aim of such an approach is to develop graduate qualities in students by engaging practitioners to conduct 'portfolio reviews' of student work. Unlike an 'external assessor' the aim of the portfolio review is to enable students to gain formative feedback on a one-to-one basis outside of the classroom. It is expected that the reviewer act more like a mentor and that the practitioner's profile as a practicing artist further encourage the student to adopt a professional attitude toward their study. This is also an opportunity for students to develop networks outside of the university.

The focus groups expressed interest in participating in mentoring students, all expressed that it would be a mutually beneficial experience. Several focus groups stressed that a professional approach to the project would require that the practitioner would be paid for their time.

An important part of measuring the success of this project will be the development of methods for students to record their achievement of the graduate qualities as elaborated in the context of the practicing artist. This is also a student-centred approach that is an important part of 'embedding' the graduate qualities into the jewellery and metal courses:

Significantly, the University has moved beyond teaching interventions and added a strong focus on student involvement in their development of these distinctive learning outcomes. This has resulted in building linkages between the achievement of graduate qualities and using evidence of their achievement when students seek employment.⁸

Conclusion

While the idea of professional mentoring/clinical placements or the use of portfolio reviews as an assessment method in higher education is not new, I believe that studio teaching can be at times inwardly focused. A strategic approach looks both inward and outside, that is to the professional world, to elaborate on the generic attributes we require in our students. I contend that portfolio reviews by practicing artists bring a 'real-world' aspect to studio teaching that can assist the development of the kinds of skills essential to the success of graduates as emerging artists.

¹ G Scott, *Successful ATN projects & why they have worked*, ATN Conference 2003 Briefing Paper, 2003, p2.

² J Biggs, *Formulating and clarifying curriculum objectives. Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does* (Chapter 3, pp. 33-53). Buckingham, UK: Society for research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1999, p40.

³ J Biggs *Student Learning research and theory where do we currently stand?* In Gibbs, G (Ed) *Improving student learning : theory and practice* (pp20-37) Headington : Oxford Centre for Staff Development, 1994, p 4.

⁴ J Biggs *Student Learning research and theory where do we currently stand?* In Gibbs, G (Ed) *Improving student learning : theory and practice* (pp20-37) Headington : Oxford Centre for Staff Development, 1994, p 4.

⁵ G Scott, *Successful ATN projects & why they have worked*, ATN Conference 2003 Briefing Paper, 2003, p2.

⁶ (<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/flc/tandl/index.asp>)

⁷ H McCausland, *Teaching and learning at the University of South Australia*, UniSA Teaching & Learning paper 2000, p 3.

⁸ <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/gradquals/whatr/embedding.htm>

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