

Evaluating the online studio as a retraining ground for mature-age graphic design students

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Biographies

Patrick McNamara has been a lecturer for over 20 years in higher education spanning the digital revolution and instigating the introduction of a fully online degree in graphic design. Previous to that he worked for 10 years in a number of government and design enterprises in areas of graphic design, public relations, advertising and education. He is now a doctoral candidate with a thesis title of 'Situating the online design teacher: perception vs. actuality'.

Belinda Paulovich a lecturer in graphic design in the School of Communication and Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University. In 2014 she completed a PhD in Visual Communication exploring ways in which designers can collaborate with professionals in health, medical, and scientific domains to produce communication solutions that are visually appealing, functional, accurate, and user-centred. Her current research interests include ethnographic research methods for designers and interdisciplinary collaboration for innovation.

Abstract

New technologies have transformed the way many industries operate, including higher education. Combined with an unpredictable economy where employment is often impermanent and industries are volatile, we have seen an increasing cohort of students seeking to reskill to ensure employment or to capitalise on emerging opportunities as industries change. This paper explores Charles Sturt University's Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design (Graphic Design) online course as a means for retraining in the graphic design discipline for mature-age students who often balance

their studies with competing demands including family and work responsibilities. Access to online education provides a flexible avenue for these students to explore new directions in their careers, convert TAFE qualifications into degrees, turn art and design passion into profit, or convert the wealth of knowledge they have gained from different jobs into a career in the graphic design industry. Many of our students already work in and around the creative industries and are able to take advantage of this immersive workplace learning experience, often outstripping many internal students' learning outcomes.

While the affordances of new technologies have allowed us to open up design education to a much larger, more geographically diverse demographic, online education is not without its challenges and problems. This paper explores the successes, failures and challenges we have encountered as graphic design educators in the online space, and provides insight into the ways students engage (or disengage) with the online studio. We are particularly interested in the engagement of mature-age students who are undertaking the course for retraining purposes. This cohort will be the primary focus of the paper.

Keywords: Career transition, creative arts, graphic design, higher education, online learning

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Introduction

Online learning is often promoted as flexible, accessible, self-paced and as an activity that can fit in and around everyday life. While it *can* be these things, the push toward online learning requires us to examine the implications of providing education in this space more critically. This paper will discuss the impact that new technologies have had on employment opportunities within the graphic design industry and on the way in which we deliver design education online. It focuses specifically on mature-age students who have prior or current work experience that informs their learning and how we, as academics, must integrate diverse experiences and levels of expertise into online teaching and learning through scaffolded approaches that

facilitate engagement with former learning whilst encompassing the diverse skill base of the entire cohort.

Changes in production methods and the influence of the global economy have resulted in an increased need for life long learning and retraining to stay relevant to changing needs. Many students are opting to undertake study for retraining purposes in the online space. Throughout this paper we explore the issues and prejudices mature-age students sometimes face when they come to higher education, and we discuss this specifically in terms of the student experience in the Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design (Graphic Design) online course at Charles Sturt University (CSU). We provide an overview of the technological affordances we use to facilitate engagement in the online studio detailing what has been successful to date, where the problems lie, and the pedagogical considerations we need to respond to in the future in order to improve the mature-age student experience, and to improve employment opportunities for students who are entering an increasingly transient and disrupted workforce.

Impact of the digital revolution on the creative industries and design education

Many people believe we are currently experiencing a fourth industrial revolution driven by the ongoing development of digital technologies (Australian Government, 2016, 13-14). While the digital revolution and the pace at which it has progressed has posed a threat to some sectors of the creative industries, it has also created more efficient processes and new possibilities, which have opened up employment options in the graphic design field. According to Job Outlook, an Australian Government initiative, employment for graphic designers, web designers and illustrators to 2020 is expected to grow strongly with future job openings predicted to be above average (Department of Employment, 2012). In addition, contemporary society, with its growing demand and preference for visual culture and entertainment, has embraced the move towards the digital supporting employment growth in this area.

Changes in workforce structure and patterns as a result of the digital revolution have governments searching for ways to ensure the sustainability and growth of Australia's economy. Paul Keating's 'Creative Nation' in 1994 (Office for the Arts), and Julia Gillard's 'Creative Australia' in 2013 were put forward as economic policies that would generate jobs in the creative industries. In 2015 Prime Minister Malcolm

Turnbull launched the 'National Innovation and Science Agenda' with an address that proposed a strategy to:

ensure that our students are graduating with the skills and the agility to identify opportunities and embrace risk... Our universities, our research organisations like the CSIRO... and our workforce are world-class but, Australia is falling behind when it comes to commercialising good ideas and collaborating with industry (Turnbull, 2015).

Higher education has an important role to play in these policies, but it is under pressure, like most industries, to do more with less. Financial restrictions hamper many aspects of day-to-day subject delivery for academics, which can make it difficult to deliver education that meets broad societal and government aims. As an example, graphic design education is finding it difficult to maintain a studio-based learning pedagogy as 'university administrators struggle to justify the resource allocations needed for successful studio teaching... (at the same time as) academic workloads are believed to have increased to an unsustainable level' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2014). As a result, we are seeing conventional design education becoming more 'distanced'. Students are spending more time working at home, sending in their work electronically, and communicating online with fellow students and staff. The studio-based educational model of the past is slowly being eroded, as design education progressively becomes more of a virtual activity (Lloyd, 2013, 753).

The challenges of online education for mature-age students

Online education is often promoted as an attractive alternative to on-campus learning and is sometimes seen by institutions as a more financially viable option. Online classes can be delivered to very large numbers of students without the need for repeat lectures or tutorials, decreasing reliance on sessional staff.

Institutions often claim that distance study and the increased use of technology overcome barriers of space and time. Distance study, with no requirement to attend a campus at specific times, *theoretically* makes it easier to fit study into everyday life. However, findings from a study conducted by Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke (2014) suggest it merely changes the nature of those barriers. The ideal space and time for these students lay at the intersection of three, sometimes competing, demands: study, self and family (523). Traditional on-campus study on the other

hand, provides students with appropriate learning spaces and scheduled time, which allows them to step away from other commitments to facilitate deep engagement with their study (Servage, 2007 cited by Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2014).

The Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design (Graphic Design) online course at CSU attracts a large proportion of mature-age students who are at different life stages to many of our internal students. Our online students are typically older, have significant employment experience, a sophisticated way of looking at learning, and are often undertaking the course for retraining purposes. They have acquired skills including time management and the ability to prioritise tasks through prior employment and as such they are able to relate their learning to the 'real' world of work (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2013, p. 800). The cohort is reflective of higher education trends more broadly where we are seeing 'an increasing proportion of tertiary students ... aged 25 and over... [who] choose to study at a distance to more easily combine their studies with their family and work commitments' (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2013, 791).

A large proportion of students who are utilising the course as a retraining option have disrupted or alternate pathways into the degree and sometimes lack certain skills like computer literacy or academic writing. This can be problematic as cognitive overload caused by the need to learn course content as well as technology skills can lead to early attrition (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Furthermore, mature-age students often struggle to engage due to feelings of alienation, anxiety and fear of failure. Key barriers to online learning for mature-age students include:

- Lack of recent study experience
- Lack of academic skills
- Low self-efficacy
- Sense of isolation
- Fear of being negatively judged due to being older
- Tendency of subject being carried by a few core people
- Not finding time
- Feeling intimidated about putting their writing up in a public space
- Technical issues
- Absence of a learning atmosphere
- Too autonomous

(Kahu, 2014, pp. 50-51; Lewis, 2009, pp. 26-27).

These deficiencies, fears and barriers have to be balanced against the strengths that many of these students bring to their studies including life pathways, work experience, and diverse social identities, which are valuable learning and teaching resources (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2013, 800).

Within the online graphic design course at CSU students are encouraged to recognise the connections between their prior and current work experience and their goals. They are able to contribute experience from their everyday and working lives to many areas of design activity (Lloyd, 2013, 757). The projects in the course are structured to allow and encourage students to individualise process and outcomes, building upon their individual skill sets and aligning to their aspirations. In the following section we detail our approach to mature-age learning in the online studio in more depth.

Mature-age student engagement with the online studio

Learning within the Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design (Graphic Design) online course at CSU is based on a constructivist approach whereby the lecturer acts as facilitator with the students directing their own learning, both inside and outside of the online classroom (Kong & Song, 2013). We have observed that this pedagogical approach is particularly effective in the online course as the more mature and intrinsically motivated students have a greater capacity to take on some of the responsibility of learning. Digital technologies and the affordances they present are utilised with consideration given to student diversity, formal and informal learning methods and the opportunity for interim assessment.

One of the critical technologies is that of the Learning Management System (LMS) which gives the ability to communicate across distance. With students located in regional hubs, remote towns, and across the world, it is vital that communication technology is made available to foster connectivity, reduce isolation and encourage collaboration. To build initial coherence in the cohort, the students are asked to pin their location (town or city, rather than exact address) on a *Google* collaborative map (see *Figure 1*). While it is interesting for students to see the geographical diversity of our cohort, this icebreaker activity is also designed to initiate sharing and the potential formation of study or social groups.

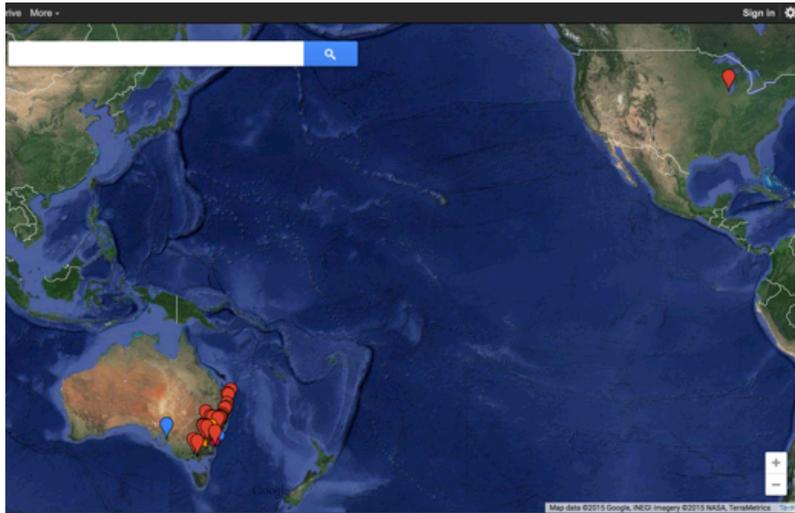


Figure 1 – Screenshot of Google collaborative map

Once a week we hold recorded online meetings with distance students using the Adobe Connect interface (see *Figure 2*). It provides an opportunity for students to ask questions about recorded lecture content and upcoming assessments, and to critique and debate work in progress. The online meetings offer support and a shared experience of investigating design, which we believe helps in reducing the isolation that is often experienced by distance students. However, as attendance is often carried by a small core group, we lack insight into the engagement strategies of students who do not attend these meetings.

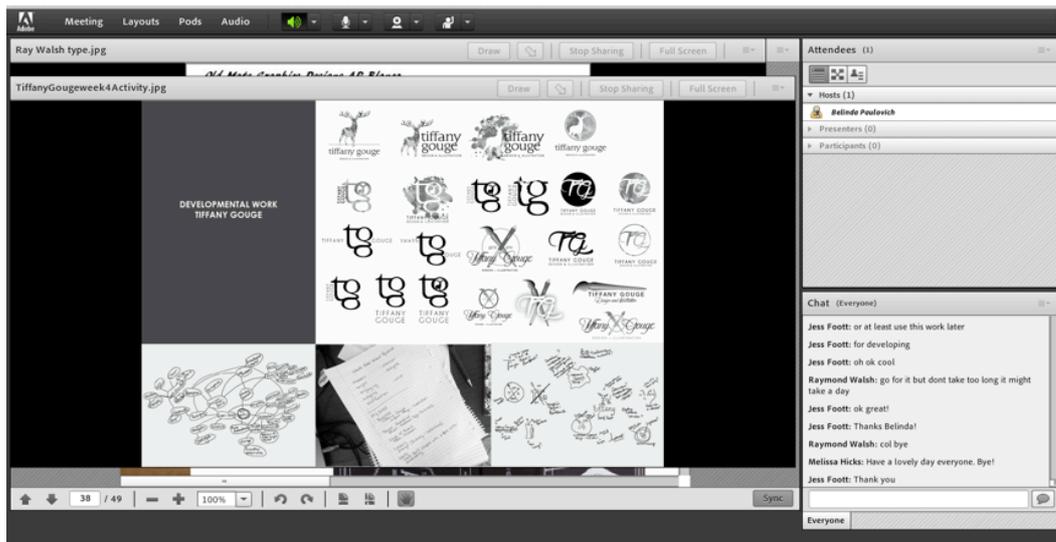


Figure 2 – Screenshot of Adobe Connect Online Meeting Room

The forums function in a similar way in that they facilitate topic-based discussion, student-led discussion, lecturer-led discussion around a selected topic, and social discussion to foster connectivity. This is one area where students answer peer questions through articulation of prior knowledge or skills (see *Figure 3*).

The screenshot displays the 'Discussion Board' interface within the Charles Sturt University Interact2 LMS. The interface includes a navigation menu on the left with options like 'Home', 'Subject Outline', and 'Announcements'. The main content area shows a table of forums with the following data:

Forum	Description	Total Posts	Unread Posts	Total Participants
<input type="checkbox"/> Main Subject Forum		38	0	16
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessment 1: Designer Identity	A place for questions and discussion around Assessment 1: Designer Identity	14	0	5
<input type="checkbox"/> Readings	This is place where we can chat about the content of our weekly readings.	0	0	0
<input type="checkbox"/> Activities	A place to ask questions, share and reflect upon our weekly activity tasks.	6	0	3
<input type="checkbox"/> General discussion	Let's talk about anything related to the creative industries.	1	0	1

At the bottom of the table, it indicates 'Displaying 1 to 5 of 5 items' with 'Show All' and 'Edit Paging...' options.

Figure 3 – Screenshot of forums

Another of the affordances of the LMS is the ability to provide feedback on work in progress. Students get to stretch their critique skills and prior knowledge and provide suggestions for improvement, promoting a culture of collaboration and critique with the aim of improving the collective quality of the work. This replicates an authentic industry model of working (work-in-progress meetings, peer-critique, self-critique, real client briefs), underpinned by a higher education model of teaching and learning (lecture, tutorial, academic literature) and emulates the desk critiques of the face-to-face studio in an asynchronous way (see *Figure 4*).

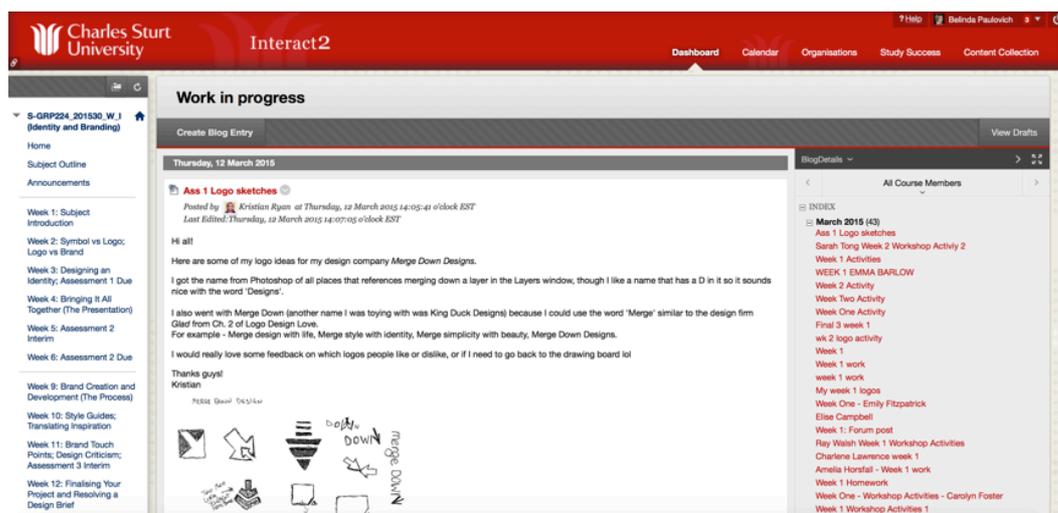


Figure 4 – Screenshot of Work in Progress blog

By making peer and lecturer feedback available through the blog, forums and the *Adobe Connect* online meetings we provide students with choices that suit their time commitments and learning styles. Garisson, Anderson and Archer in their *Community of Enquiry Model* (2000) emphasise social presence as a critical factor in achieving desirable education outcomes within a community. By encouraging students to critique visual work in progress we strengthen their understanding and commitment to the learning community and build their capacity to identify elements of successful design and to critically analyse visual materials.

Future pedagogical considerations for occupational mobility

Noting that a large proportion of students are undertaking the online course for retraining purposes, we need to be aware of how pedagogy and curriculum can enhance future occupational mobility.

Imbuing students with creativity, agility and entrepreneurial skills has been a goal of many design courses to a point where the new breed of designer 'consider themselves as creative entrepreneurs...' (Eldridge cited by Innovation and Business Skills Australia, 2015, 16). In order to facilitate employment mobility, it can be argued that the focus on specific hard skills should be reduced in favour of wider and more adaptive ones (such as design thinking and business strategy), framing those skills within the greater context of entrepreneurship:

It is maintained that specific hard skills are characterised by their lower level of transferability, whereas soft skills and generic hard skills are skills with high

transferability across sectors and occupations' (European Commission cited by Snell, Gekara & Gatt, 2016, 24).

It is a widely accepted belief that the average person will have many careers—seven is the most widely cited number—in his or her lifetime (Bialik, 2010). If this is true, then there are many people in deep need of retraining and upskilling. If industry continues to evolve rapidly, within design education we need to be preparing students for this type of disruption. One way we can do that is through designing curriculum for 'occupational clusters'. Degrees in graphic design or communication design are relevant to occupational clusters because they address a broad range of skills that result in a variety of employment outcomes.

It is important that as a part of the creative industries we make a 'greater effort ... to help workers identify and understand their transferable skills in order to find alternative employment' (Wibrow & Circelli, 2015, 1). We should design curriculum around occupational cluster framework which would 'enable units of competency to be more readily shared across occupations [and] allow for greater mobility between jobs' (Wibrow & Circelli, 2015, 1).

Conclusion

The Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design (Graphic Design) online course at CSU comprises a large mature-age cohort that bring different experiences and knowledge to learning than on-campus students. While they sometimes have deficiencies to overcome in their learning, they also have a great wealth of industry and personal experience that we need to engage in order to allow these students to take this alternative pathway to a design career. In capitalizing on mature-age student life and career experience and providing a flexible online studio where learning goals and processes can be customized to individual aspirations, we provide a valuable learning pathway for those that choose to retrain in a rapidly evolving digital world.

The next steps for us in evolving and improving the online studio experience for mature-age students include building on the flexibility, engagement and social connections facilitated by the LMS and examining the pedagogical potential of occupational cluster framework more rigorously in terms of the impact this type of learning design could have on future student employment outcomes.

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