

After you have gone: Un-disciplined knowledge and new value/s, one year on

Abstract

In 2017, The University of Tasmania introduced new core degree structures reflecting major curriculum renewal across art and music and their multiple sub-disciplines. In 2019, further new curricula in design and interdisciplinary creative arts will be rolled-out, expanding the core and widening study options for our diverse learners. As part of the University's broader curriculum renewal agenda, these changes reflect a radical overhaul of a set of value propositions for the creative arts disciplines and a commitment to social engagement, sustainability, the ethics of practice, and enterprise skill development.

Following ACUADS 2016, in which colleagues reported on the curriculum design phase, this paper reports on aspects of the initial delivery of Critical Practices – the rollout of the first of the core unit sequence of the BFA (Hons). With an entirely new, co-taught structure drawn around praxis and blended learning, challenges and discoveries arose every week. We are learning from our development of a distributed teaching model that spans sites in the north and south of the state, digital platforms, and sub-disciplines. Our particular reference point here is the 'Manifesto' module in which teaching staff employed the manifesto form to encourage learners to establish and declare their own value propositions. As a critical and diagnostic form, the 'Manifesto' module sought to identify and build value from the ground up, through instilling highly responsive and reflexive learning practices.

Our reporting here offers some consideration of the role that 'un-disciplinary' thinking has played in the development of our new degree structures, and the contribution it makes to our core disciplinary expectations. We highlight some of our efforts to create porosity and osmotic potential in the context of the new institutionally-mandated degree structure we are working within, and its emergent value schema that we are hatching in this phase of curriculum renewal. Far from negating or even ameliorating the former disciplinary model, we aspired for our new units to create conditions for developing critical and reflexive thinking and practice and points of ideational interchange.

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Introduction

The University of Tasmania (UTAS) is undergoing considerable restructuring in parallel with curriculum review, as are so many similar institutions. The changes pose new challenges and opportunities for teaching and research development in art and design. Driven by sets of internal and external changes in funding and quality assurance, these changes pose significant demands on communicating the value of art and design in a higher educational context that appears to be, but is not conclusively, arranged around STEM (Burnard 2016; Davis 2017).

In September 2017, the Tasmanian College of the Arts (TCoTA) was renamed the School of Creative Arts (SOCA). At ACUADS in 2016, UTAS colleagues from TCoTA reported on a number of changes as they unfolded at an earlier stage of curriculum re-design. Colleagues reflected on our collective work by identifying social motives for the demand in art and design courses at a time when many courses are contracting. We reported on student demand to communicate the value and application of art and design in a range of different contexts (Fountain and Wise 2016). These included dementia care, popular genealogy, and resilience in a specific regional community. Through diversifying the curricula, we sought to re-orientate them around a set of common values that were not driven by, but rather underpinned, by disciplinary excellence. We referred to this in critical terms as the 'un-disciplining' of our curricula. In this earlier paper, we emphasised the impact of open educational structures in transforming disciplinary thinking. Through our un-disciplining, it was argued, the historical underpinnings of disciplinary thinking - with the institution as gatekeeper - were being replaced by open and community-sourced networks of knowledge production and exchange in which skills are established with co-engagement from learners. Further to this, and more recently, the un-disciplinary has shared the commitment of co-engaged thinking through emphasis in developing agile creative producers, able to move fluidly between disciplines without compromising depth of knowledge (Haider et al. 2017).

One re-orienting approach such un-disciplining forwarded was a drive for 'porosity' in the degree structure and its articulation: we planned to diversify entrance points and allow for flexible study plans whereby learners would be able to infiltrate disciplinary borders. In formulating new curricula around social motives we effected a shift in thinking from 'curriculum for the community' to 'community as curriculum' (Cormier 2008). This semantic shift connotes shared values and the embedding of learning within real-world actions. The expanded field of 'community as curriculum' permits fluid movement of knowledge to and from the academy via community networks. Thus, it does not mean, as some might read it,

developing curricula around what external agents *want and think they need*; rather, it sets the agenda for creating porous boundaries between discipline and practice areas that allow what sector leader Su Baker describes as, “intervention and infiltration by other cultural influences, to the extent that new knowledge configurations will be formed” (2009, 39). In our case, ‘infiltrators’ include academic leaders, museums, galleries, NGOs, community leaders, professional and technical partners and, of course, learners for vocation and leisure.

The newly established institutional curriculum model titled ‘Degrees of Difference’ (University of Tasmania 2016) responded to perceived and received values held by current and potential students. These include flexibility in disciplinary terms and study volume (e.g. three or four years); wide-ranging choices of major/minor/elective combinations; the scope to specialise via disciplinary depth or pursue generalist breadth across fields of study, and the recognition of ‘experience and engagement’ activities such as volunteering, peer mentoring and study abroad. Through the application of design elements in the new degree model, key institutional values are expressed and developed: sustainability, ethics, entrepreneurship and creativity, wellbeing, literacy and numeracy, and experiential learning (e.g. via work integrated learning).

The tension we experience as we undertake designing our own ‘degrees of difference’ resonates with observations made by cultural economy scholar Justin O’Connor (2017) on the emergence of a post-capitalist agency within the creative arts that eschews conformity to the dominant ‘jobs and growth’ mantra of the creative industries. O’Connor writes, “the job of the creative sector is not to produce “jobs and growth”, but cultural value. Those long hours on low wages and short-term contracts are accepted (mostly) as the price to create something of cultural value, to alter the world a little bit, to make us see it in a different way, to critique and to celebrate ourselves, and to bind us together” (2017, para 21). As Scott Brook terms it, the ‘creative education’ is an expression of values articulated by the learner-producer who is acutely aware of the cultural value embedded in creative industries beyond monetary terms (2017).

We know however that young adults are acutely aware of their future employability and the need to distinguish themselves in the labour market. Corroborating the unpublished market research UTAS conducted in relation to its new degree model, Kate Oakley and Dave O’Brien (2016) highlight the penetration of higher education into the creative sector in order to ‘sell’ formalised work experience to students, and to seed networking opportunities to assist with distinguishing themselves and graduating ‘work ready’ – a heady value

proposition for many. As an institution with a highly diverse student population, enabling all of our students to explore their relationship to the creative arts community is crucial. It is also the value ground into which we welcomed commencing and some existing students into Critical Practices in February 2017.

We next reflect upon findings from the new Critical Practices units, to share the potentials and pitfalls of working in a new environment forged around distributed, co-teaching teaching models. Within this, a commitment to blended learning, and the challenges of multi-campus delivery remain core to new models of practice. In keeping with the theme of this year's conference, we focus on communicating the strong value propositions that have been generated so far through these models. In so doing, we argue that a commitment to establishing and sharing values beyond (and before) disciplinary borders enables a reorientation of the curriculum based around and from social motivations, collaboration, and resilience.

Manifesto Part One: To begin at the beginning

Critical Practices 1A is the introductory unit in a six-unit sequence (Years 1 to 3) within the four-year BFA (Hons) course. For the majority of students it is the first unit they encounter within their varied plans. The unit introduces students to the discourse of art via a broad ranging selection of short texts, and compact writing and making activities that connect the field of creative production with key art methods and thinkers, linked to topical issues and broader cultural and historical themes. The modules engage students in collaborative and cross-media practice as well as concentrated individual foci. Our ambitions for the module sequence within the two introductory units is to enable commencing students to experience the diverse practices and discourses of contemporary art and design, which echoes Mafe and Webb's (2009) foundational open studio, honed over many years at Queensland University of Technology.

The aspiration for our unit was to engage students in learning through an integrated introductory approach to theory and practice through a given set of problematics. Discussion of diverse cultural texts occurs alongside acts of making in guided practical sessions. This is a significant pedagogical and structural change for us, and a major departure from the previous art and design history and theory sequence that was segregated from studio activity. Taking on Ruth Bridgstock's (2013) challenge to engage students in disciplinary practices more meaningfully, vis-a-vis the early formation of artist/designer identities, Critical Practices is designed for exploration and integration.

Students are set tasks that encourage them to reflect on the ideas being presented and to generate practical responses to those ideas. For example, during an introductory task – ‘Making Manifest’ – students work in groups to adapt quotations from key historical texts such as ‘The Communist Manifesto’ to make the words (and their attendant meanings) visual through the use of expressive text and creative pictorialisation.

Assessment takes place via an end of semester folio submission. Students make a selection of work that includes both practical and written tasks, along with a supporting written statement that reflects on the reasons for their choices. The role and methods of feedback have been elevated, to move beyond what higher education scholar, D. Royce Sadler (2013, 62) argues often amounts to ‘telling’ or describing in response to standardised criteria, with limited utility to students’ development. In pursuing the constructive, holistic culture of critique that Sadler advocates, students will develop, trial and refine the skills of self- and peer-evaluation as ‘budding assessors’, over the full duration of Critical Practices 1A-3B.

Manifesto Part Two: Ethos and activity

‘Manifesto’ is the first in the sequence of three four-week modules. Students are presented with the definition of a manifesto as a public declaration of principles, intentions, motives and views, with the idea that artists often perform these principles through acts of making as well as through verbal pronouncements. By focusing on artistic manifesto-ing, students explore the links between intention and making and the role of the artist in society. The assessment tasks are:

- to write a short summary of an existing artistic manifesto;
- to write and publish a manifesto (present a manifesto with words and images).

The key driver behind this challenging module (‘you’ve just come to art school, now write your own manifesto!’) was the intention to reverse any expectation that students would simply sit back and listen as we relayed our knowledge. The invitational hope was that within their first four weeks at art school they would make us listen. Whilst the structure within which they could do this was tightly regulated (they were tasked with making a three-minute video or narrated PowerPoint slideshow that combines a manifesto with images) the content of the manifesto, and therefore its value proposition, was entirely of each student’s choosing. Students were guided through the potentially daunting task of writing and sharing a manifesto through examples both historical and contemporary, *focusing on issue and affect*, rather than historical chronology. Prior to making them visual, draft written manifestos were

peer reviewed in the workshop sessions. The teaching of technical skills was tackled through offering straightforward online guides to video capture via smart phone camera and use of PowerPoint. The guides provided a basic method for all students to record a manifesto with zero previous knowledge.

The majority of the work that was published at the critique was compelling because it was a powerful individual expression of contemporary issues and topics through the mechanisms of art. For example:

Student AP's manifesto advocated for the artist as a vital political agent operating outside the consumerist imperatives of capitalism. Her text was accompanied by deftly chosen video clips that amplified the expressive reach of the words. She taught herself the rudiments of Final Cut editing software to create the video.



Figure 1. Screenshots of student AP's manifesto

Student EW produced a narrated PowerPoint slideshow that used her voice as a third person 'she' to subtly state her case as a young female artist negotiating the complexities of a highly gendered art world. Each image in the slideshow was a unique and well resolved collage that opened up the poetic dimension of her text.



Figure 2. Image sequence from EW's narrated PowerPoint slide show. Excerpt of narration: "A creative being is an artist...an artist is a creative being... interchangeable... hand in hand." She takes many forms. She speaks through many mediums. She does not stay in one box." Student AS produced a complex, multi-faceted sequence of animated, collaged and self-captured video combined with inventive narrative that effectively conveyed her misgivings and experiences as a migrant and art maker.

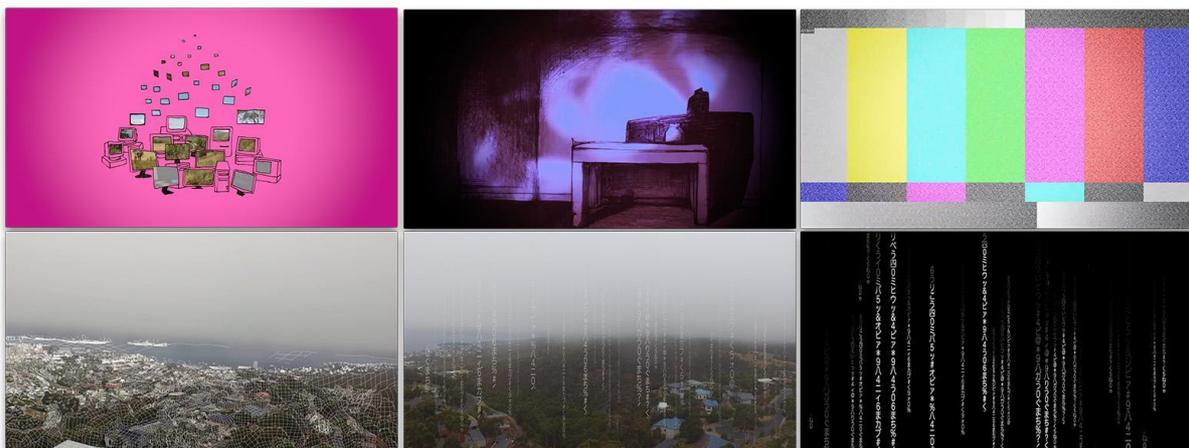


Figure 3. Screenshots of AS' manifesto video

Accounting for the preliminary 'warm-up' sessions and Manifesto Summary writing task, students had only two weeks to produce their videos, and many demonstrated a quality of work that would have required many more hours than those prescribed in the unit outline. Their extra commitment indicates that the module content and the invitation to espouse their view on their topic was eagerly embraced.

The 'Manifesto' module set the tone for the rest of the semester: that of excited, engaged participation in which the value of conceptual thinking was reframed through praxis.

Feedback received through student surveys supports this view. For example:

“In comparison to Art Theory which I found quite formal and intimidating, Critical Practices has been a great way to understand practical and contextual meanings in order to fully understand what is required to be an artist.”

“It seems so much more appropriate to teach artists through doing, not through sitting them down and going chronologically through art history and expecting them to take interest and remember it.”

A further survey response indicated that ninety percent of students agreed that the learning experiences in the unit helped them to achieve the learning outcomes. Teaching colleagues have also reported that the energised student engagement that we have experienced in Critical Practices has transferred into other studio areas, and have noted a heightened awareness amongst new students of discreet studio disciplines as a set of pathways within a much broader dynamic field of artistic discourse.

As we reflect on the successes and challenges of the first iterations of the Critical Practices suite of units, the expression of values afforded by Manifesto provide a reflexive model for future iterations. The elucidation of values expressed at the entry-stage of the Bachelor program enabled – and demanded – a number of reactive curriculum strategies that consolidated different positions (political, gendered, ecological, ethical and aesthetic). From these early expressions, we sought to further these value propositions through a closer examination of the values laid out. Our job, as unit leaders, was to reflect on the work of these early values and build content and experiences around these that furthered these areas but also sought to reform and reframe them.

Conclusion

Throughout the curriculum re-design process to date we have been using the term ‘praxis’ to signify the value-driven and un-disciplinary nature of our enterprise. This praxis has led a reorientation towards multiple excursions into different disciplines and into communities. We began using the word in its simpler sense to describe ‘thinking through doing’, and it has come to carry the idea of fluid and unimpeded movement and communication of ideas, concepts, practices through the expression of *values, motivations, and people*, rather than ordered according to specific disciplinary skills and formats.

We see this praxis-model as a multimodal approach, *the development of both an ethos and a sense of purpose*. These approaches drive the school across its pre-degree, degree, and

research agendas. In advocating for a curriculum driven by values and future needs, we seek to correspond with colleagues in other faculties who are also pursuing realignment and reorientation of their own disciplinary foci. Allowing for easier movement across disciplines through a shared sense of motivation and purpose, the aim of this common strategy is to allow for mobility and the possibility of new structures of content and context that develop new collaborative outcomes, but not to homogenise the curriculum.

Our hope in developing future subjects is that maintaining the spirit of value-led and community-as-curriculum would drive the content and experience delivery across common areas. We place greater emphases on cultural efficacy, geopolitical turmoil, and ecology, precisely because these are the values we share with our learners and our communities. In morphing the unit around shifting values, we recognise that the future iterations of the unit will be unique, being shaped by the values of the community forged by the unit. Next year's Manifesto-ing may yet reveal a set of different value propositions; the unit will respond.

The introduction of the new praxis-model for Critical Practices sought to enable and mobilise a set of value propositions that were led from learners and from communities. This un-disciplining of knowledge – focussing on future needs, building resilience, sustainable material futures – is not the erosion of the disciplinary but rather a new expression of its foundations. The critical content, the material skills, the technologies of expression, are mobilised in a different direction to before. Rather than the expression of internal values, the undisciplined approach seeks out the future-proofed 'discipline'. Critical Practices, and Manifesto, in particular seek out the means through which we, as a community, establish and express value, and how such values might be shared with expanded communities.

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