

Re-Forming Foundations: Exposure, Infection and Confection

Abstract

In 2017, the Queensland College of Art (Griffith) launched a new common Studio Foundations program across its Fine Art, Photography and Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art degrees. The initial premise was simple—transform sixteen courses and dozens of classes, previously regimented through strict disciplinary cloisters, into one or two coherent and dynamic courses that could reassert the value of the Foundations experience and better serve the mission of educating art students. This reformed first-year initiative was designed to have significant impacts on a host of issues in tertiary studio art education including: course loading, student experience, retention, staffing, space allocation, curricular alignment, graduate attributes, program learning outcomes and program flexibility. This paper will use the QCA model as a catalyst to examine teaching, learning and administration in the Foundations space.

Boris Groys (2009) and James Elkins (2001) have both deployed Kazimir Malevich's metaphor of 'infection' to frame critiques and revisions of Foundations teaching. The QCA Studio Foundations model extends the 'infection' metaphor into a motivated curricular plan that seeds the infection with 'exposure' and expresses through 'confection'. The brief work of Elkins and Groys, channeled through Malevich and QCA's Studio Foundations, will inform an argument for a Foundations model that reaches beyond Bauhaus and Post-War frameworks while maintaining strong emphases on the roles and responsibilities of contemporary art students. A detailed review and analysis of the Studio Foundations model's value, including its institutional obstacles and pedagogical potentials, will assist in mitigating the under-examination of the first-year experience and its outcomes.

Keywords:

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This paper addresses the implementation of a new Foundations curriculum at the Queensland College of Art. A few propositions that are implicit in this development should be disclosed at the outset. First, Foundations students don't make art. It is debatable whether any art students make art, but suffice it to say that first year students absolutely do not. It is not necessary to channel Joseph Albers' polemics at Black Mountain College and his excoriation of students who would refer to their 'art' (Harris, 1987), but it is necessary to relieve the Foundations student of this responsibility. The Foundations student's first responsibility is learning how to be a disciplined art student. To borrow Howard Singerman's assessment of his own MFA and apply it to Foundations, art students 'are both who and what is taught' (Singerman, 1999). Despite vague assurances that we are maintaining 'employability frameworks', students enter art school because they desire to be art students—cloistered in a potent environment of personal speculation and experimentation. In my Queensland experience, art school proffers an enticing alternative to a suburban Australian domestic lifestyle. The strategy of Foundations at QCA is to initiate art students through exposure, infection and confection.

Before squaring up to these metaphors, some of the administrative motives and particularities of the Foundations year should be outlined. The contemporary Australian art school must operate with some semblance of coherence within the multi-disciplinary research university apparatus. At QCA, the Foundations year delivery is part of a larger restructure of the Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA), Bachelor of Photography (BPhoto) and Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) degrees to bring them into alignment with the University's directives across all elements including: a transition to equal trimesters, reduced Major credit requirements, double degree offerings and staffing reorganisations. These changes have had significant impacts on: course loading, student experience, retention, staffing, space allocation, curricular alignment, graduate attributes, program learning outcomes and program flexibility. The Foundations experience seeks to mitigate some of the problems associated with real or perceived 'cuts' and to amplify the strengths of a more flexible and adaptable program architecture.

The Post-War Foundations model is rooted in the Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus instigated by Walter Gropius, developed by Johannes Itten and amended by Lázló Moholy-Nagy; and also in Albers' workshops at Black Mountain College (Bekkala, 2001, de Duve, 1994, Dockery, 2006-2007, Singerman, 1999, Tavin et al., 2007). A survey of top-ranked art and design schools, according to the QS World University Rankings (2017), evidences the sustained presence of the Foundations year and the value proposition that it has managed to maintain. It seems essential or economical — or perhaps a bit of both — to offer broad inclusive courses to mixed cohorts as the first steps in an art student's educational experience. It is not the purpose of this paper to re-state established and oft-cited enquiries and conclusions on the topic of Foundations education (Addison and Burgess, 2003, Buckley and Conomos, 2009, De Ville, 1994, Elkins, 2012, Madoff, 2009, Salazar, 2013, Tavin et al., 2007). Rather, the QCA's Foundations model can be used as a prompt for probing the Foundations experience and its administration.

One of the primary administrative efficiencies of Foundations is its massive reduction of course offerings, classes and staffing. Prior to 2017, first-year programs at QCA required sixteen studio courses and over forty studio classes (each with a staff member attached as convenor and/or lecturer). These have been reduced, in 2017, to two courses and less than half the staffing requirements. This has been achieved through team teaching and a modular approach to studio courses. Students enrol in a shell course with intensive modules in disciplinary studio areas. The previous first-year model employed at QCA depended on discrete studio courses taught in conventional semester-long classes. Each of the sixteen courses was independently planned and delivered with little or no correspondence with the other courses that comprised the first-year curriculum. Essentially, one of the Intros would 'win out' over the others, and the student would matriculate into an inflexible program of, for example, Printmaking. The modular approach to Foundations is not particularly innovative. Other schools in Australia and New Zealand employ a similar method. The compelling feature of QCA Studio Foundations is the system by which students migrate from module to module, the incorporation of a CAIA module, and the mechanism of exposure, which will be described subsequently.

To alleviate the significant pressure of timetabling and studio space, the QCA Studio Foundations model is based on a single studio course occurring on a single day each week, beginning at 8am and ending at 4pm. The entire campus is given over to Studio Foundations and no other undergraduate or postgraduate studio classes are scheduled. This allows the first-year student total access to campus resources and eliminates any schedule conflicts arising in the old model. This structure also allows for administrative programming aimed at the first-year cohort, as they are all on campus on the same day at the same time. Visiting lectures, openings, information sessions and campus life initiatives are easily programmed to coincide with the Foundations studio day.

Another of the significant problems in the previous QCA degree structure and first-year model was its extreme inflexibility. A student would need almost a full year of technical coursework before becoming eligible for a particular stream of classes in second year. The modular Foundations Studio equips every QCA student with the necessary prerequisites to enrol in any of the full array of further studio courses. This program allows for a far more customisable and personal approach to course enrolments. Foundations students also work in the Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art studios with CAIA staff and students — the first time this has happened at QCA. The modular model necessitates team curriculum development and team teaching across studios and thus creates a far more integrated experience for staff and students.

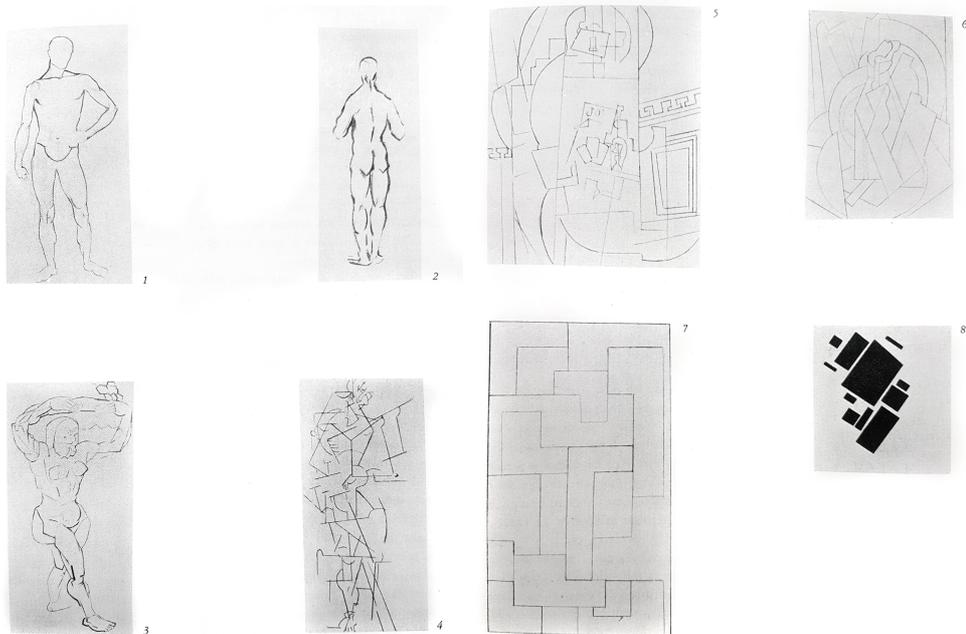
Finally, the Foundations model was designed to address program outcomes, student experience and retention (which had fallen below 70% for some programs with the greatest declines between the first and second years). The modular model creates a strong sense of community and continuity while maintaining a productive diversity of experience. It does this through two mechanisms. First, every four weeks the entire student cohort is re-shuffled into new modular groups. By the conclusion of the year, every incoming student will have been in a studio peer group with every other student. A customised piece of software had to be developed to cope with this shuffling of every student's schedule every four weeks. Second, as the students move through each module, all studios work simultaneously on common problems

and address common conceptual cores. When the students are shuffled from one module to the next, the common conceptual core also changes for the entire cohort, ensuring a variety of student experiences leading into second year courses. The teaching teams in each disciplinary studio module remain consistent, so the problems associated with multiple classes of varying qualities is mitigated. It is premature to measure the impacts of this system on student experience and retention, but early indicators are positive.

It may yet be demonstrated that this modular Foundations model enacts efficiencies and enhances student experience and retention, but those features do not contend with the fundamental questions of value and purpose in an art school education. Although there is no consensus in terms of art school's mandate to teach requisite skills or concepts, there does seem to be some agreement that there are attitudes and behaviours that fertilise future art production. In Stacey Salazar's work on American Foundations, the three aims of studio teaching are: 'skills', 'concepts' and 'dispositions' (Salazar, 2014). She argues that, unlike skills and concepts, 'dispositions' are more universal. Dispositions may include: a desire for insightful experience, audacity, resilience, transgressiveness and self-discipline. Ben Shahn, in his Harvard lectures collected in *The Shape of Content*, implores art students several times simply to 'have opinions' (Shahn, 1957), a bidding that can also fit firmly under the rubric of dispositions. His other prescriptions for becoming multilingual or embracing a liberal arts education may be beyond our curricular capabilities, but certainly a dispositional bent toward conjecture is achievable. A spirit of enquiry about specific material skills and techniques is certainly dispositional, as is inquisitiveness around deep disciplinary knowledge, curiosity about ideas and epistemological systems, and scepticism. The dispositional approach may be productive and inclusive but it doesn't rise to the level of pedagogical method. Can dispositions properly be taught; and, if dispositions are ancillary or parasitical agents fed by the blood of studio contact and studio tasks, then how are they best nurtured in the art student? Can we assume that an art student's dispositions are, in fact, the most valuable outcomes of an art education?

The QCA Foundations model approaches dispositional teaching and mechanisms of studio initiation through a program best described as: exposure, infection and confection. This has emerged from three basic aims of the Foundations experience: (1) exposure to an extensive and eclectic group of students, artists and scholars; (2) intensive and immersive experiences that compel the student to actively cope with the unfamiliar, as in being confronted with a bacterial infection; and (3) space and latitude to experiment, speculate and confect. These processes and metaphors have their origins in Albers' pedagogies and Kazimir Malevich's teachings. Albers advocated for exposing his students to as many diverse staff and methods as he could attract to Black Mountain and resource on site, even if they opposed his own ideologies (Harris, 1987, Katz et al., 2013).

The revisions of the QCA first year program have shifted each student's exposure from six studio staff and a few ad hoc guest lectures to a motivated program in which every Studio Foundations student will study directly with over thirty artists and lecturers in two courses that will employ, in total, over fifty-five artists and lecturers. In the extreme, exposure may displace content. Channelling the vision of John Andrew Rice (founder of Black Mountain College), in an interview with Vincent Katz, the Black Mountain poet Robert Creely described his conversion to the exposure method: "Teaching...has nothing to do with the subject. It's a way of being with someone in an unpresumptive manner, as he or she learn to find ways to get to or to use or to recognise whatever it is that's being addressed"(Katz 2013, 225). 'Address' is a concept Thierry de Duve tackles in an essay that happens to immediately precede Boris Groys' essay 'Education by Infection' in *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century* (Groys, 2009). For de Duve, the transmission of art from one generation to the next is a 'mode of address' rather than a question of didactic content (de Duve, 2009). In Malevich's thesis, transmission occurs through exposure and infection.



1-4 Changes in the representation of "nature" under the influence of additional elements of the pictorial cultures of Cézanne and Cubism.

5-8 Changes in the representation of "nature" under the influence of additional elements of the pictorial cultures of Cubism and Suprematism.

Figure 1 Kazimir Malevich, illustrations of additional elements from *The Non-Objective World*, 1927.

Malevich's manuscript for *The Non-Objective World* was first translated in Germany and published in 1927. It became available in English in 1959 (Malevich, 1959). In his first essay, 'Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting', Malevich explicitly uses the metaphor of bacterial infection to outline his principles of art education and artistic evolution — a thesis that has been reinvigorated through the work of theorists Mark Cheetham (Cheetham, 2006) and Boris Groys. James Elkins has also deployed the infection trope in *Why Art Cannot be Taught*. 'My favourite simile,' he writes 'is that the art school is like agar-agar, and the students are like bacteria or fungi. They grow better on the controlled medium than they would on the real world' (Elkins 2001, 98). For Elkins, the spectre of infection reinforces his argument concerning intentionality and inspiration in art education. To paraphrase: spreading sickness, like spreading inspiration, can't be planned or programmed, or taught, meaningfully. In fact, the carrier and host are often unaware that the transmission is occurring. If art school is the Petri dish medium on which the students thrive or wither, we are left with something like the circumstance of the microbiologist: we can only observe activity (success) or non-

activity (failure) but we can't account for how or why some 'cultures' take hold and others don't (Elkins, 2001).

In Boris Groys' 'Education by Infection', the infection metaphor is introduced through network and computer viruses. Viruses, though, differ significantly from bacteria in that they are inherently destructive. They require a host, and viral survival always damages the host organism. It is significant that Malevich specifies bacterial infection in his essay (referencing his own tragic experience with Tuberculosis) because bacteria can impact a host but they can also be quite effectively integrated into a healthy body. We know that, in a typical person, there are more bacteria than human cells, although the scale of the discrepancy has been disputed (even in ourselves, we're outnumbered). For Malevich, the information contained in those bacteria, our biological response to them and our assimilation of them into our functioning selves is elementary and thus exceeds the metaphorical — describing real processes by which art students are transformed. Groys, in his analysis, allows infection to become overly broad, using the word synonymously with transmission, dissemination and influence, exceeding Malevich's metaphor and suggesting that the proliferation of all communication and discourse in the 20th century is infectious. It is more useful, however, to narrow the focus of the metaphor to the studio environment.

In practice, art students are, for the most part, willing to be contaminated, and they do enter art school for some sort of transformative experience. Just as there isn't a set of accepted formulas or even a dominant model for inserting art into the art student, there is no single instigation or bacterium that can be guaranteed to achieve the necessary response and transformation of the student. It should be noted that the positive aspects of isolation and incubation often circulate in ideal scenarios of studio education, and that the element of cloister is significant. Art students can't be trusted to expose themselves to aesthetic and conceptual bacteria ex-studio. Foundations is built on the proposition that intensive shared experience is fundamental to the spread of infection. To alter Elkins' model, the studio is the pink slime on which the student-bacterium-collective burgeons.

Malevich viewed the bacterial infiltration of the student as a disruption of reactionary modes of learning and art practice. This is not to propose, however, that he desired a fragmentary or chaotic set of aesthetic and ideological practices. For Malevich, there is logic and order in disruption:

The (additional) element which insinuates itself into an organism — the bacterium...brings about certain changes in the organism. If one represents the normal condition of the healthy organism by a definite linear relationship, it would be possible to indicate the change in condition caused by the additional element by a definite displacement of the linear system' (Malevich 1959, 46).

Malevich describes the process by which a student is exposed to a 'bacillus' and is transformed into a new entity as one in which that additional element forms part of a unified being. He cautions his reader against generic societal or pedagogical attempts to extinguish potentially unforeseen or radical elements. He criticises society for its hygienic inclinations and argues that the sanitary impulse is simply an attempt by conservative forces to maintain 'the precedent', i.e. the status quo. At QCA, heterogeneous exposure and infection form the core of the Foundations model.

A problem: infection isn't explicitly assessable or overtly valuable. Again, the ideals of Black Mountain with its shared living and working arrangements and absence of assessments or transcripts cannot be reproduced in the contemporary Australian university, nor can a first-year student be assessed equitably on the basis of her receptivity to exposure and infection. The method of production and assessment most appropriate to a program of exposure and infection is confection — the bundling and compounding of various features, ingredients and attributes without the weight of sustaining a work of art. The confection is a constructed experiment in processing and reflection. It is often fantastical but always active. The art student's confection occupies a space Malevich frames as an 'intermediate' position between the true artist (inventive-creative-progressive) and the hack (imitative-common-reactionary). This position is structured as a 'combining, reorganizing activity...of an entirely progressive, variable nature' (Malevich 1959,

31). Students confection when they speculate, accumulate and combine rather than conceptualise, design and execute. The confection doesn't bear the weight of sustenance and thus enables the student to dismantle and reconfigure actively and without regard for resolution. The confection is synthetic: it considers the form of the combination and the selection of ingredients rather than the didactic content of the unit. In Studio Foundations, the confection is multi-modal, consisting of an installation of various components, a digital archive/process folio, a context survey and a diary of reflections. The implementation of this assessment model has been difficult in the revised curriculum and further training will be required to prevent a reversion to old models of judgement over the 'resolution' of discrete works.

The QCA Foundations model has been crafted with the aim of subtly transforming the qualities of studio experience, maintaining the value propositions of Foundations education in a contemporary art school and meeting administrative goals within the university framework. Although its sources are retrospective — Malevich, Bauhaus, Black Mountain College — its implementation and outcomes are progressive. Careful measurement of the QCA Foundations program over the next two years will provide further qualitative and quantitative data to be analysed.

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