ABSTRACT

In 1998 the School of Design (SoD), University of Western Sydney Nepean (UWSN) began running an offshore articulation program in graphic design in partnership with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, Singapore (NAFA). The successful completion of this one year program built upon students three year diploma studies and resulted in the awarding of a Bachelor of Arts (Design) from UWSN. Our primary focus in this article will be on the curriculum and pedagogical challenges that we faced in developing and implementing this course. The most significant aspect of this program was the relative freedom we had in moving away from the studio based anecdote of design learning that dominates many post secondary design programs and the implications this has more broadly for design education.

INTRODUCTION

The UWSN School of Design has been offering post secondary studies in design for some twelve years. Students enrolling in the four year Bachelor of Design (Visual Communication) degree can opt to graduate after three years of study and receive a Bachelor of Arts (Design). It is regarded within the school that four years is the standard length for a 'professional' degree in visual communication, conforming in length as it does with a number of similar courses in Australia. While identical to the BDes up to the end of third year, the BA degree is considered to be professionally and academically less demanding than the BDes, though two thirds of our students choose to graduate with the former and seem to have little trouble obtaining work.

Numerous changes to the funding arrangements of Australian universities under successive federal governments since 1988 have seen the sector increasingly forced to develop revenue streams beyond government grants to maintain operational capacity. The tuition of overseas students in Australia has been one of the more obvious means by which universities have been able to generate income. As competition in this field has increased many institutions have sought to establish offshore courses, particularly in Asia, as a means of maintaining a competitive advantage (See Smart & Ang 1992). It is in this context that the SoD has established a one year degree conversion program with Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA).[1] It would be fair to say that whilst there are some similarities in the educational systems between Australia and Singapore, based as they both are on the British education system, there are some significant differences.

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[1] A similar program has been established with a prominent Malaysian institution and is due to commence in 2000. Negotiations have begun with one of China's pre-eminent Art academies for a similar venture.

The education system in Singapore, and access to it, is much more highly regulated by government than the Australian system, to the extent that curriculum, though not week by week outlines, requires Ministry of Education approval. In the past few decades Australia has seen the development of mass, as opposed to elite, higher education and the concepts of flexibility and lifelong learning embraced by all sectors. Singapore on the other hand has a relatively rigid system where demarcation between post secondary educational institutions is a key feature with the flow on effect of a clear hierarchy between qualifications existing. This has come about through the implementation of the 'New Education System' (NES) in 1980 which involves the process of "streaming" students into different educational pathways based upon the measurement of their academic ability in primary school (Goh 1994: p 59). It would be fair to say, however, that this rigidity is currently, though slowly, being relaxed.

Design education in Singapore draws upon the Confuscion tradition of master scholar and pupil (See Altbach 1989a & b) whereas the Australian tradition is based more on the liberal humanist tradition of critical inquiry and debate. What they share is that both are also shaped on the British model of design education. The nature of interaction between these educational cultures presented a number of hurdles in running the program and many issues that arose as a consequence have yet to be fully resolved. It is not within the scope of this essay to explore these issues but a number of chapters in both Brislin (1994) and Paige (1993) deal with them. Other hurdles associated with running offshore programs (such as legal, financial, administrative and staff development) were encountered but adequate coverage of the pitfalls in these areas has been given elsewhere (Lines & Clarke 1996). Despite this there were some important educational outcomes from running the program and it is these we shall focus on in due course. Most noticeably the benefits relate to the opportunity to reflect back upon the curriculum at UWSN.

EVALUATING THE DIPLOMA

With the exception of architecture and disciplines such as engineering design, all design education in Singapore is to diploma level only and is located in various government funded polytechnics or subsidized private colleges (Law 1989). Historically, students wishing to take a degree in design have been required to study offshore. In recent years a number of, mainly Australian, universities have formed partnerships with the private colleges in Singapore to offer degree conversion programs in graphic design for diploma holders. Our course is one such program. More recently a government revue has recommended that the Singaporean tertiary sector should develop and offer degrees in graphic design. [2] This effectively recognises the changed nature of design at this point in history, domestic demand and therefore the need to reclaim control over design education in Singapore. This is in itself a reflection of the "almost insatiable demand for higher education" and the relatively high status of a degree in Singapore (Smart & Ang 1992: pp 6-7).

Partly as a consequence of it only having diploma status, design education in Singapore has remained relatively static when compared to developments that have occurred in Europe and North America. In these regions the past two decades have seen design's intellectual and academic currency grow as reflected in its shift to degree and post graduate studies. However, to state that design education in Singapore substantially lags behind design education internationally would be to grossly overstate the changes elsewhere. Despite much rhetoric about new methodologies or pedagogies of design many programs are still rooted to varying degrees in the skill based/studio paradigm beloved of the Bauhaus; a consequence of design's historic link to art education (Margolin 1989: p 5).

MIMICRY OF ACTIONS

In reviewing, in detail, the curriculum of the diploma and examples of student work it was evident that one of the primary concerns of the course was for the mastery of discipline specific processes and skills. There existed in it no explicit design history or theory program and no evidence of an understanding of the role of research in concept development beyond photocopying designs out of books or magazines for the purpose of stylistic mimicry.[3] Creativity in this scenario, an overused term in relation to design at the best of times, can be equated to ones technical virtuosity in being able to mimic pre-existing styles in the service of commerce. We have described this as the 'mimicry of actions' which is the flip side to design's epistemological preoccupation elsewhere. This preoccupation pertains to design's adaptation of other disciplines ways of knowing best exemplified by design as 'art', design as 'business', design as 'science' and more recently design as 'sociology'. We have described this as the 'mimicry of attitudes'.

However, changes to the diploma program were being implemented as we entered discussions with NAFA. These included the introduction of a design history/theory strand and a research methods subject in the final year. In this context the establishment of a degree conversion program on campus at NAFA was seen as an important step in upgrading the teaching and learning of design. Despite these changes the fact that they were only just being implemented did mean that the impact of a significant pedagogical shift had yet to be felt in the diploma program or experienced by the first few cohorts of students we would take into the BA.

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[2]The report Creative Singapore written by the Committee to Upgrade LaSAlle and NAFA (1998) outlines the case for this.

[3]A condition sadly prevalent in many parts of our own degree program.

ACADEMIC CREDIT

In identifying the educational gaps between the two programs we were also faced with the crucial question of the appropriate amount of academic credit for the diploma as against our degree. Two concerns shaped this process. The first concern was entirely commercial: that is, for how long are students prepared to study in order to gain a degree? The second concern was to ensure that we adhered to various university and government guidelines on academic credit. The first point was the easiest to determine as our competition in the market had already established the precedent of a one year conversion program. To offer anything substantially longer would have made our program uncompetitive. Despite this commercial imperative we were mindful of ensuring the program was academically rigorous and conformed to established policies.

In the late 1980's the Australian Federal Government restructured the higher education sector which resulted in the establishment of the Unified National System of Higher Education (UNS) in 1989. This restructure was in response to the Government's commitment to providing access to higher education to students from a wide range of backgrounds (See Dawkins 1987). In this context guidelines were developed to deal with the recognition of prior learning and academic credit and were adopted as Federal Government policy in the Dawkins White Paper (1988). "Acceptance of the guidelines was a condition of entry into the UNS" (Ramsay et al. 1997). UWSN was established in 1988 as a consequence of this Dawkins induced higher education rebirth. It is located in the western suburbs of Sydney and has been historically characterised by low participation rates in post secondary education and lower socio-economic status. It is precisely the demographic that these types of policy initiatives were aimed at in an attempt to lift the educational participation of Australian

society. As such UWSN has readily adopted and applied the policy guidelines established by the AVCC regarding RPL and AC.[4]

In light of this, the articulation model that was developed was premised on the fact that NAFA students were as highly skilled in the production of design outcomes as UWSN students but lacking a theoretical and methodological framework in which to apply those skills. It is worth noting at this point that in the 3 year BA(Des) offered by UWSN students are required to undertake a minimum of 25% of their studies in a sequence of subjects called Design Issues. These subjects cover the history and theories of design as well as the methodological base of design concept development and practice. Whilst theoretical in nature and requiring students to write essays and undertake analyses of texts and designed artefacts the students have the opportunity at numerous points to submit design based work as assessment tasks for these subjects. On this basis both NAFA and UWSN students completing the 3 year BA (Des) undertake 25% of their studies in design issues style subjects.

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[4] These guidelines are promulgated in UWSN's Policy and Procedure documents 02:03 and 02:07:06.

For example:

Domestic BA(Des)	Offshore BA(Des)
3 year degree = 24 subjects 18 subjects = studio education + 6 subjects = design issues 6 subjects = 25 % of 24 subjects	3 year Diploma = studio education + 1 year BA Conv. = design issues 1 year = 25 % of 4 years study

In this scenario UWSN granted two years of block academic credit against it's three year

BA(Des) for eligible students completing NAFA's three year Dip VC. This conforms to

UWSN's policy which allows for a maximum of 2/3rds of a three year course to be granted in

academic credit.

Anecdotal evidence on the nature of other design degree programs running in Singapore

suggest that the curriculum used is moderately modified material drawn from undergraduate

programs in the relevant Australian institutions.[5] These other conversion programs largely

involve a number of studio based subjects which deal with discipline specific projects and the

acquisition of more skills plus a few history/theory style subjects which involve seminar

presentations and essay writing. The approach we took is shown above. We identified the

gaps between our own and NAFA's curriculum. As a consequence we developed new

material that was based upon the integration of historical and contemporary issues and

theories of design into 'studio' projects. Little or no skills based tuition was built into the

program since the diploma students were as skilled as our own BA graduates. The primary

emphasis in all subjects in the conversion program was research and concept development.

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[5] This is based on conversations with a number of Singaporean design academics and the perusal of brief subject descriptions from two programs. Despite the methodological limitations of such an anecdotal survey it is indicative of the nature of the programs but not conclusive.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

A more conclusive analysis of the other design programs running in Singapore was not possible given the commercial imperative of protecting ones intellectual property (IP), in this instance what was thought to be detailed curriculum material. This issue highlights the tension between the increasingly commercial world higher education finds itself in and the traditional concept of the 'uni'-versity for the free exchange of ideas. By contrast, our initial concept of intellectual property was modified by the experience of delivering the material. What we discovered was that we were not protecting the curriculum material. Rather we tended to structure the delivery of this material to staff in a manner that protected not what we said, but where we were coming from – in other words, the value system that drives the curriculum, or our position in relation to theirs. The apparent prevailing logic about intellectual property in the education sector seems to presume that course material can and should be owned. This material is really just the vehicle in education. The real issue is the creation of strategies for the development of sustainable edges to the notions that drive these vehicles. By delivering this material, and using the terminology of IP, immediately we were in a better position to distinguish the 'product type' we had invented. We could 'add value' to the edges of the curriculum, and a strategy began to emerge to make the subject more effective, and therefore more competitive. Sadly the benefits to be realised by design as a whole from any pedagogical experiment, such as this, are limited when short term profit is the key motivating factor.

THE CURRICULUM

Research Methodologies

Having identified a coherent and rigorous approach to research and concept development as being the major gap in NAFA's diploma, as compared to Nepean's degree, we premised the

curriculum of the conversion program on research as a guiding principle. To be fair though, this probably overstates the degree to which a rigorous approach to research is widespread across the UWSN design curriculum. However, it does exist there, in pockets, and its development is of general concern. In the first instance we developed a subject called Research Methodologies which was placed in the 5th semester of the diploma program.

Its location in the program was significant for a number of reasons. Firstly it introduced all diploma students to the idea that research was an important pre-condition for successful project development. Given that all students undertook a major project in their 6th and final semester we felt that such a subject might provide a more sound platform to do this than their dependence on the mimicry of action. What became apparent was the difference in both institutions between the point at which imitation was applied in the design process. Whereas, NAFA placed great emphasis on imitation as the beginning point of design and UWSN stressed commencement with an idea or concept, both institutions failed to follow this through to its logical conclusion. NAFA failed to use the outcomes of imitation to derive new ideas, and UWSN failed to stick with the modernist logic of its position, and derive any typological consistency or things worthy of imitation from its concern with ideas. The UWSN position is consistent with the mimicry of attitude – this time the adherence to its modernist inheritance (Nicolin 1999).

To claim though that one subject could be successful in shifting the habits of a student's design education lifetime would be an overstatement. More importantly however, the presence of this subject in the diploma acted as a kind of product sampler for the students and an evaluative mechanism for us. Students gained a sense of what the degree might be like and we could evaluate their capacity to succeed in the BA program by charting their academic

performance in Research Methodologies. With this in mind any student achieving 65% or better in that subject and graduating from the diploma was eligible for entry into the BA program.

The emphasis in research methodologies was to a large extent an instructive, as opposed to a critical, examination of research in design. This was done for pragmatic reasons. As the student had not been exposed to research in the way we conceived of it, it was necessary to provide them with a grounding in some basic research methods in order to develop a more critical perspective later. This shift from the instructive to the critical took place in the degree conversion program itself.

The premise of Research Methodologies was simple. It put forward the proposition that since design existed in the social world, then that world was potentially one of its richest sources of information for innovation and development. Furthermore, whilst design exists within the social realm, and our engagement with it is experiential and often functional, our first contact is primarily visual. In considering these factors we identified observation as being the key though not sole focus of the research enterprise. Another important consideration was to recognise that though students would be looking at the social realm for their source of information they were not undertaking a sociological inquiry. Their inquiry necessarily had to be praxiological, in essence: as designers, 'what use could they make of the social information they were analysing'? Since design can only respond to the question 'what next', in the fashioning of the world, they were required to put forward a design proposition that was generated through that enquiry rather than just telling us what they observed. This is significant for it moves the research enterprise away from being concerned with what is

perceived and understood here-and-now, the sociological task, to being about what-might-become, which is central to transformative nature of design.

In practical terms this methodology was implemented through a series of research tasks that were iterative in nature and covered a range of tools of inquiry. They covered techniques such as literature reviews, analysing media forms, photo documentation, observing physical traces, semi structured interviews, visual surveys, and so on. Critical in the success of the process was the idea that after the use of each method students would reflect back upon the situation they were researching and their understanding of it as a consequence of new sources of information. Essentially they had to ask themselves how this technique has expanded or focused their understanding of what they are researching, and how might this be used in design.

At several points in the semester students were required to present their findings thus far for feedback and assessment, again an iterative mechanism. In doing this students were encouraged to present their findings in visual rather than textual form. Given that much of what they were looking at was visual material, not only did this seem an obvious strategy, but also it had the advantage of drawing upon the visual skills they had already developed in the diploma making them more confident in dealing with a somewhat alien process. However, it was essential that rather than describe what things looked like, they articulate an understanding of what they observed both in verbal presentation and the configuration of the material itself. That is, what was observed had to be transformed into design information – information that can be used by designers. The integral use of visuals as a way of knowing, and the communication of the research enterprise is a critical component of design. The

reliance on a text only account fails to provide a sense of the richness, complexity and

potential of the information being examined (See Ireland 1998 & Prosser 1998).

The BA Conversion Program

The program itself consists of five subjects that have different weightings to reflect the

workload expected in each. They are:

Semester 1

- Advanced standing for Research Methodologies – equivalent to one standard UWS

    subject

- Issues of Design – equivalent to one standard UWS subject

- Project Development – equivalent to two standard UWS subjects

Semester 2

- Contemporary Design – equivalent to one standard UWS subject

- The Design Project - – equivalent to three standard UWS subjects

Issues of Design and Contemporary Design are both fairly conventional 'theory' style

subjects in that they involve a series of lectures critiquing historical and contemporary

anecdotes about design; require students to engage with set and sourced readings; and involve

tutorial discussion of lectures and readings. Similarly, the assessment tasks set are to a large

degree also quite conventional. Students are required to undertake seminar presentations and

write brief responses summarising their understanding of the material they engage with. One

key difference from the academic conventions of theory subjects is the use once again of

conceptual mapping. During the research and analysis stage students are required to

transform their understanding of the material they are examining into a series of 'maps'

which form the basis of their seminar presentations. This technique enables reflection upon their understanding at that point and the methods they have used to get there. In short it acts as a kind of guide to the student's intellectual development and is useful in identifying where students either might be going adrift, or the curriculum (in its trial run) could be modified.

Similarly students submit essays which are unconventional by the standards of more conservative notions of 'academic theory', though they also work in that more conventional genre. These essays take the form of multimedia pieces that draw together disparate sources of information such as sound, text, still and moving images and voice. In a sense these are an extension of the logic of the maps in that the complex interplay of disparate sources of information are drawn together to present a coherent argument based upon the students understanding of the issues examined. Thus the essay is not just written, it is configured, or designed. By drawing upon the students configurational skills in this way, we can see the possibility of developing knowledge through design and not just about it. This sense of knowing through the visual is not an entirely new concept, indeed Stafford (1997) chronicles the history of this approach. What is significant about this though, is that it points to a pathway that design academia can take in ensuring it has intellectual credibility. The path trodden thus far in the past few decades, the proverbial garden path, has been the path of conformity. It is the path of adopting the epistemological modes of academe's more established ways of knowing.

The project based subjects are more focused around the conception and production of a prototypical design outcome, but draw upon the critiques established in the 'theory' subjects as well as building upon and reinforcing the methodological framework established in Research Methodologies to drive the project forward. Again the mapping process is used as

an iterative device. In this sense, though the subjects are discreet on paper, the underlying framework of research and reflection that runs through the program reflects an holistic conception and provides a holistic educative experience. This is significant in that the ideas we have tested here cannot be implemented holistically across the program at UWSN as a consequence of the dominance of the mimicry of attitudes that prevails there.

COMPARISON

While delivering this program in Singapore we continued to teach in our more familiar context. This included the subject Research Methodologies with our own 3rd year students. The feedback results were very positive, with a significant number of them commenting that they would have liked to have seen the methods introduced into the course earlier. While affirming, we also noticed a paradox to this. Those of our students who went on to 4th year, then appeared to fail to make use of any of the methods they had learnt the previous semester. Instead, in most cases their research projects were dependent on advances in technology, or the idea that technology would deliver their idea. In other words, a form of mimicry of action (software actions) was the prevalent model for project development. The generative 'idea' was transformed to fit this model. We see this occurrence, in part, as a consequence of the work that we have developed existing only in isolated curriculum pockets within the UWSN program and as such only accounts for a small percentage of the students learning experience.

However, if all we did was establish curriculum premised on research rather than mimicry, it would be fair to say that this alone would not be enough to facilitate a shift in thinking and practice. In the context of learning, that can only be achieved by ensuring learning tasks are clearly written and have clear criteria. The dominant assessment criteria used in the UWSN program are vague terms such as creativity, skill, presentation, concept, originality and so on.

These are attached to project briefs with % weightings and little in the way of clear explanations of what they mean. By contrast the criteria we have developed for NAFA, for example for seminar presentations, look something like this:

- your understanding of the issue as evidenced in maps

- your understanding of the issue as evidenced in presentation

- the extent to which your understanding of the issue has <u>developed</u> as evidenced in the maps

- the extent to which your understanding of the issue has <u>developed</u> as evidenced in the presentation

- your ability to outline the advantages and disadvantages of the methods used

- the professionalism of the presentation and the maps

and for a final design project look something like this:

- the extent to which the project has been modified, since prototype presentation, in response to feedback from staff

- how clearly your understanding of the issue is communicated through the final project

- how clearly you have identified the audience you are communicating to

- how appropriate the form of the final project is in communicating the issue to the identified audience

- how well you outline the methods used in completing the project

- the scope of the project as evidenced by the final outcome

- the quality of the finish of the project

Further to this the dominant subject structure at UWSN almost inevitably results in research, process and outcome being assessed at the completion of the project. This works against the iterative mode since reflection is not explicitly valued in either the structure of the curriculum

nor assessment weighting. Inevitably, in this scenario, most students leave everything to the last moment and rely on a huge effort and the 'intuitive moment of creativity' to get them over the line. By contrast the curriculum structure we have established at NAFA, explicitly values reflection by requiring students to present for assessment their research and development work during the course of the semester and their outcome for assessment at the end. Process is valued as much as outcome.

This mode encourages, though does not guarantee, a deep approach to learning and greater student independence in that endeavour. This learning framework parallels development in the field of teaching and learning studies, as exemplified by Ramsden (1992). It is an approach that argues that knowledge cannot be acquired, though information can, and is only developed through synthesis and understanding. Thus learning is largely a qualitative and not quantitative experience. As the astute reader will note, our criteria are predominantly centered around notions of quality, understanding, experience, development, and appropriateness; not around notions of creativity, skill, technique, concept, or originality, and other vague terms often used in assessing design material. Nor is undue emphasis placed upon how the project is crafted or how it looks, terms that exist largely in the realm of taste and are also commonly used, either explicitly or implicitly, in assessing design work. This is not to say that the criteria we use is perfect, only that it shifts the focus of what is required of a students, and thus design, significantly.

CONCLUSION

This comparative experience gave us a greater insight into design research and what it might have to offer design. Our experience revealed two dominant types of mimicry; the mimicry of action and the mimicry of attitude. We found addressing the issue of mimicry of action to be

reasonably straightforward. Its sources are causal and readily identifiable – that which is seen is copied. Research in this mode can be pushed into yielding aesthetic cues from sources other than those which tend to predominate; glossy art and design coffee table books and the latest round of hip magazines. The iterative nature of the methodology we have developed enables students to understand that taste and style change regularly and are the product of ideology and not natural. Once this point is realised a wider field of sources is opened up for students to mime; these include the social and fashioned worlds, not just their representation, and the users of those worlds.

Within the context in which we have been working the mimicry of attitudes, rooted as it is in the reliance on intuitive creativity, is harder to shift and more resistant to research. Coherent, rigorous and reflective research strategies are perceived to be the antithesis of this mode. Such strategies are seen to eliminate creativity altogether from the equation of cultural production for they rely on a conscious and conscientious effort. By contrast intuitive creativity is seen to exist almost exclusively in the realm of the unconscious. This conception of creativity is an ideological construct that has pervaded cultural production for several centuries and this too contributes to its resistance; it appears profoundly natural. [6] We would argue, on the basis of our experience, that successful and sustainable creative practices require a sound research methodology as a necessary precondition. Design's historic scattergun approach to 'research' for large scale industrial and post-industrial production, via its reliance on intuition can literally no longer be sustained given the current demand upon the worlds finite resources. The potential resource wastage of ill-conceived and executed design projects will undermine the quality of the very future that design, by its nature, shapes. The challenge for all designers is to take control of the processes to shape that future instead

of allowing themselves to be controlled by them. In this way we might arrive at possible

future scenarios we imagined and anticipated instead of arriving there by accident and

wondering how we got there. Sadly, as a consequence of its reliance on the dominant modes

of mimicry we have identified, this latter condition has been the history of much design.

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6 See Wolf 1981 & Bourdieu 1993 for a detailed critique of the of historical and ideological dimensions of this dominant understanding of creativity.

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