"THE BIG AND THE SMALL: COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUALISM"

Biography:

Penny Bovell is a practicing artist and visual arts lecturer (Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts) at the University of Western Australia. She has held lecturing positions at Edith Cowan University, Curtin University and TAFE since the early eighties.

A sense of community can be understood from a number of fronts. Community in itself implies a complex network of people, of diverse backgrounds, and with different purposes and needs for belonging. Belonging demands certain expectations, obligations, and mutual responsibility and, in an ideal world, the coming together to discuss issues is commendable and desirable. Community Arts, on the other hand, aims to foster cultural awareness by engendering belonging and participation through art. Artists' communities are different again, being places that provide time, space, and support to artists for the creation of new work. In this paper, I will suggest that making art requires maintaining a critical distance, almost to the point of needing isolation and protection from the complexity engendered by community. 'Too much play makes Jack get the work done' could be the motto required for dedicated art practitioners. Whilst art schools need to foster engagement I believe that their first task is to foster independence and solid work practices, which implies managing the time allocated to community participation.

The rationale of the University of Western Australia's Visual Arts Degree is slightly different from that of other degrees. The ratio of unit points is split equally between history/theory and practice, attracting students curious about careers in both streams. The TER entrance score is slightly higher than that demanded of the other institutions in Perth and it does not require entrance by folio submission. This assumes a perceived intellectual bias, though I believe this is not the case as research undertaken by Dr Greg Marie acknowledges that one of the dominant reasons for student's first preferences is the institutions proximity to home. (Institutional Research Unit, UWA, Internal Report 2003). Whilst providing a boutique course offers familiarity and intense student/staff interaction, sustaining a cohesive community presents a challenge, particularly when fluctuating enrolments affects the quality of learning. The lecturers involved in the University of Western Australia's Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree have had to ask whether a lack of critical mass hampers a sense of community and if it impacts on the quality of work produced. I think there are also other issues at stake and these may not be different to the experience of larger departments; although they are more likely cushioned from the impact of attrition.

In July (2005) I curated a group exhibition titled GRIN at the Breadbox Gallery in Northbridge. This presented me with the opportunity to consider the issues for the ACUADS symposium as all the participants graduated from Central TAFE in 2002 and, interested in continuing their education, entered into the three different Perth universities to complete their degrees. They remain connected despite the responsibilities of participating in their separate programs. The relative diversity of the group was also significant because it proved their connection beyond the usual social groupings of age, gender and class. They understood that mutual support was necessary for moving forward in the broader artistic community.

Bonding through shared experience supports the notion that a sense of community is instrumental for nurturing creativity. Ricoeur (1995) calls sharing experience 'translation ethos' (or 'language of hospitality'), that is, an openness to engage with each other's narrative languages and the 'exchange of memories', that offer conflicting accounts of the same event. However, he also argues that the rigidity of collective identity can block open exchange. [Couldry: http://www.whitlam.org/its_time/19/cca.html] If a group does not want to listen, or does not choose to see then values are what clearly underpin Collective Identity. In general, diploma graduates raise the bench mark for other students within a degree program. They confidently bring with them pre-existing knowledge of art speak, materials and techniques and, coupled with an enthusiastic attitude toward expanding their knowledge, these sorts of students are invaluable for diversifying group dynamics.

On asking those involved in GRIN whether critical mass or collective identity in their institutions was important, they all, unanimously, said no. They already had developed their support network in the TAFE system which allowed freedom to nurture their peer group without the presumed competition associated with graded assessment. They were not contesting university assessment procedures but acknowledged doing well requires different behaviour. In their opinion success at university more likely relied on independence and the wisdom to manage extraneous obligations. Open exchange and competition appears to conflict in this sense when one of the few opportunities we have to foster togetherness (and therefore collective identity and sense of community) is during the review process which is usually linked to assessment.

The 2004 Hatched Forum placed emphasis on developing a community sensibility as paramount to an art schools success but the burden of responsibility and obligation creates added stress in times when lack of finances, time restraints and extra curricular responsibilities weigh heavily on students and staff. Few students dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their studies these days. Claims of being self-absorbed, politically apathetic and academically lazy could be points of discussion but as the students in GRIN explained, the restraints caused by external pressures are inhibiting factors in forging better relationships while undertaking study. This, of course, impacts on lecturers also, and unavailability is one of the major disheartening aspects for both students and staff. It seems that whilst the big eat the small and the fast eat the slow the most successful way to advance in the institutional system, glibly put, is to be single and single minded.

In one sense small departments can quickly adapt to the changing needs of its immediate community; less rules and individual attention are no doubt advantages but they cannot make up for the pressures on time. Whilst large departments have more students, which matches dollars to facilities; less students can mean more space but less facilities.

A shared ethos is central to creating community. However, in small departments, individualism often overpowers collective identity. Whilst participants may share norms that value learning and high standards, promoting a unified front or adopting a common artistic platform becomes somewhat problematic; after all, it is the idiosyncratic interests and different expertise of the staff that's important. Furthermore, challenging and resisting the dominant culture is one of the legacies of twentieth century art school training. Critical and experimental thinking, generally fosters suspicion of hegemonic values; particularly those espoused by the ideological frameworks of institutions and valuing pluralism fosters indifference to structures that assume knowledge is transferred between expert (lecturer) and novice (student). Therefore, reliance on informal ways for students to learn becomes essential. These issues become crucial with a lack of critical mass, but with organization this can be counteracted through articulation between the years and across disciplines, and through increased visibility, encouragement of alumni activities, internet and broader community activities and, dare I say it, open exchange between other schools.

This leads me to another point: Small departments are also at risk of marginalisation when measured against larger courses as greater visibility and larger alumni equates to perceived popularity and success. The recent UWA faculty benchmarking and review exercises raised the issues of visibility and critical mass as problematic. Lack of "critical mass" frustrates the sharing of ideas and informal learning but does it present a dilemma for quality production? The students participating in GRIN responded to this issue by acknowledging their inclination to 'belong' in the community beyond the institution. Public exhibitions, contemporary magazines, interstate travel and the web contributed to their awareness of quality. Again the sharing of ideas is expanded in this context.

It would appear that communities are not so crucial for working but rather useful for encouraging dialogue and maintaining audiences, which suggests that the major impetus in forging communities within institutional settings is in constructing the social, and what drives the need for community spirit in an art school setting is the need for spectators to ensure work becomes visible and validated. Doing, showing and telling, talking and watching are the bottom line concerns for the free exchange of ideas.

The problems that surface in the UWA degree are constantly changing with each new group of students. Surprising friendships emerge between the unlikely mix of students; forced together by a lack of critical mass. Sensitivity to competition was more evident in some years, at other times a sense of community is important and the lecturers must be adaptable to the dynamics. I would like to think that we present a real experience of what it means to practice art dialectically with real-world problems; and this makes us no different than any other art school which hopes to provide a model for practicing in the broader community; one that allows for difference and critical

questioning of the ideology that institutions and community put forward. Art schools encourage self realization and independent learning, balancing the nature of peer competition against the aspirations for individualism, so that students forge a space for themselves beyond their immediate relationships. Engaging openly in social practice, with respectful acknowledgement of difference makes transparent the limitations and possibilities, constraints and benefits of community. It is a delicate balance to be on the periphery without being marginalized, valuing isolation, without disempowering agency, in which case critical mass may be just a state of mind.

References

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