A Head Start: Using Theme Based Journals in the Classroom
Setting a 'theme' to increase the use and understanding of journals as part of the creative process.

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BACKGROUND
As in many Art and Design Institutions, students of the South Australian School of Art have always been encouraged to keep journals. In the Bachelor of Visual Communication program this practice is instilled by the compulsory use of journals in first (and sometimes second) year. While some students find this quite productive and consequently a journal becomes a creative tool they use for the rest of their careers, most just participate because they have to - once assessment is complete the journal is abandoned. Some even go as far as to resent the journal and wage a constant battle with lecturers to do very little in their journals as they see no connection what so ever with the creative process. A small fraction do not even keep a journal at all and are prepared to sacrifice 15-20% of their grade as a result.

At the beginning of the 2002 academic year it was decided that a different approach was needed. It was hypothesised that if the students could make a stronger connection to journals and the creative process they would be more motivated to keep a journal. Further if the students could use the journal as a form of personal expression they might 'bond' with the journal and hence increase the chances of them adopting this as a life long learning process. This would further reinforce the learning and depth of concept development as students had more ownership of the project. This corresponds with elements required for successful student learning as identified by Biggs (Biggs J, 1989) as key features to achieve a 'deep' level of learning.

As a result the 'theme' journal concept was developed. Each student would chose a theme for their journal and explore that theme as they saw fit for the entire academic year. They would still be required to keep a separate 'class' journal, in which normal notes, conceptual development (of other projects), observations and some small projects would be kept.

AN OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT
After some discussion and debate, it was concluded that a list of predetermined themes would be provided from which the students would select one (see appendix 1). This was decided for a number of reasons:

1. To let the students pick a theme entirely on their own would lead to difficulties as they would probably pick something they liked (such as the inevitable sports cars from boys) rather than something which presented a challenge and encouraged 'deep' learning.

2. The themes needed to be broad concepts such as 'love' or 'juxtaposition', rather than specific such as 'Dalmatians' or 'telephones'. This would give the students flexibility to find something they might have some passion about within the theme.

Our original list of themes has since been reduced to exclude the themes of fairy tales, gender, and culture as these were consistently popular but problematic.

To further create enthusiasm it was also decided to give an introductory lecture focussing on Artist and Designer journals from history. It examined the rich

tradition of the artist's journal in history. Examples were presented from Duchamp, Jerningham, Kieffer and others.

After choosing their themes, students were encouraged to research their theme as widely as possible. This was reviewed every few weeks in class. Students were also given some group projects linked to their themes in order to boost the cross fertilisation of ideas.

After about 2 months, each student was required to focus their theme and explore some refined aspect of it. For example if their theme was 'water', they might explore 'water pollution'. This would lead to further detailed exploration. In the second half of the academic year, students were then to develop their specific focus into a finished piece. The final piece did not need to necessarily be a written journal. It could be a painting, a poem, a sculpture, a video – whatever best expressed the focus.

Students were advised that the final piece should accomplish two things:
1. The viewer must be able to tell what the theme was;
2. The viewer must be engaged and able to identify (at least broadly) what the focus of the theme was (ie. communicate something).

In order to facilitate more ambitious journals we also ran a one-day book binding course, and a two-day 'ideas generation' work shop. In the second year of the project the workshops were further expanded to include stencilling and 3-D construction.

In the second year of this project we were able to introduce the Theme Journal as part of the first year visual communication camp. During this camp each student was given an A6 size diary of about 80 pages and asked to complete a series of studies based around the 'essence of place'. The project had to be completed within 24 hours. The studies could be as free ranging as the students wanted. They were encouraged to examine the local environment and use appropriate mark making and observation to develop a series of the images. The imagery could be quite experimental and abstract, traditional drawing skills were not necessarily needed to complete this project.

The key elements of this 'mini-journal' project were to loosen up students and open their minds to the journal as a creative tool. It was also an accomplishment they could all achieve as we focussed on creative and expressive mark making and tried to lose the 'preciousness' of drawing that intimidates so many students. This project not only turned out some great expressive work it was a confidence boost to all students as they could feel a real sense of achievement. In order to demonstrate our commitment to loosing the notion of preciousness I started my 'mini journal' by tossing the blank diary in the sink with all the dish slops and coffee grounds (much to the delight and shock of the students). I then dried it out and completed the project along with the students.

In the second year of this project we also tightened the focus of the final piece. In additional to the original criteria, it also was to accomplish a number of things. The final 'piece' had to:
   a) tell a story (to encourage a narrative approach);
   b) tell us something new (to encourage an 'original' approach) ; or
   c) evoke a response (to encourage an emotional or personal approach).

The final outcome could accomplish one, some, or all of the above. Students would generally select one of the above as a focus, but most had at least some elements of all of these criteria.

The final completed pieces were set up as an exhibition at the end of each year. Family and friends were invited to attend. Assessment followed over three days. Each student was allocated an appointment and we assessed in two teams of two. Assessment was recorded on a standard sheet in order to improve efficiency and consistency.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY
As this is an ongoing project it may be too early to have comprehensive and conclusive results, however, there are many matters flowing on from this project worth discussing.

One of the most important and desirable outcomes would be that the project has influenced the students and their approach to design and problem solving. There is anecdotal evidence that the journal and creative thinking introduced through this project has flowed on to second and third years as the original participants continue their studies. We plan to survey these students soon to get a better indication of this process.

The most common criticism of the project is that the finished pieces are more like 'Art' than 'Design'. This Art/Design nexus is often the source of healthy debate. I would not pretend to have a definitive answer but in this particular project I feel that the debate adds little value to the teaching and learning outcomes. The critical factor is to engage the student in a process which moves them towards effective visual solutions. We encourage them to use whatever manner and media they feel appropriate – if some then have the appearance of 'Art' rather than 'Design' I do not see this as a problem. This project is about a process more than the finished piece. Also in first year many projects focus on principles such as contrast, harmony, symmetry, pattern, negative space, and texture – principles which cross art and design boundaries.

While many students, staff and others often indicate to us that 'this looks more like art than design', ironically, some mean it as a compliment while others mean it as a criticism. This certainly reflects the fine line we tread in Art and Design.

ASSESSMENT
Assessing the work became one of the hardiest aspects of the project. One practical issue was determining an appropriate grade weighting for a project that lasts a whole academic year. This was a bit difficult as the grade was attached (due to the structure of the program) to their second semester studio grade and not spread across the year.

The assessment was also very time consuming. The first year we marked the research and final piece together and it took over 3 days of intensive student interviews to complete. We were always running late and did not have time to give adequate feedback for a project of this size. To help alleviate this in the second year of the project we marked the research separately at the beginning of semester 2. This made the final marking easier and also made the students focus their attention a little earlier – giving them more time to develop the final piece.

The most challenging aspect of assessment was determining the level of 'deep' learning. It was very difficult to prevent yourself from just assessing the final outcome (the artefact). This is a common problem in assessing creativity.

One of the difficulties in assessment in art and design is in being able to differentiate between the quality of a student's product of a particular project and the quality of learning as an outcome of the making of that product. There is no

inconsistency in a student producing an aesthetically elegant design solution but having learned little or nothing as a result. Equally, a student may well have learned a substantial amount and taken a deep approach in a project but the material outcome in itself does not reflect the learning.
Davies, A.

In order to determine the level of 'deep' learning we needed to ensure we were familiar with the student's background research. This was assessed in the following ways:

1   Each lecturer held periodic reviews (about 4 across the year) of the student's progress and made notes as to the amount of work they undertook.
2   Formal assessment of the student's background research in week 8 of semester 2.
3   Interviews with the student during final assessment.

Even with this level of review and assessment many students found it difficult to make the move from research to a considered physical outcome. They learned a great deal about their particular theme, and may have even had plenty of notional ideas of where to proceed, but fell down when it started to get 'too hard'. There was a real tendency to get anxious about the outcome – 'what if it does not turn out?' They became self-conscious and intimidated by the idea of having their visual communication talents on display – a sort of design stage fright.

In this situation many would abandon all their great research and try for what they perceived as the quick, low level, safe option. This was clearly a strategic move towards a grade driven outcome rather than a personal learning outcome. This was quite surprising to the lecturing staff as some students presented final pieces that seemed to have no connection to the research undertaken for the several months proceeding. These 'pulled out of the hat' final pieces were usually very conceptually weak and poorly executed – some even confessed (or we otherwise determined) to painting it the night before. This is consistent with observations by A Davies:

There was a surprising number of students who were willing to vary their behaviour to satisfy the requirements of the innovations. It took some time to recognise that there were students who were willingly… and displaying behaviour appropriate to a deep approach who subsequently returned to the original closed conception of teaching and learning as the final examinations drew near. Differentiating, during the course or a project, between those students who have genuinely reoriented themselves and those who only vary their behaviour is not as straightforward as I first believed.

The assessment turned out to be problematic. The project developed many of the difficulties outlined by Davies, That is students started out engaging (or at least appeared to be engaging) in a 'deep' learning process but returned to a 'shallow/surface' and strategic process of learning as the project drew towards final assessment. They were trying to identify strategies to get the best marks, not enhance their knowledge and abilities.

The importance of the connection between learning outcomes, teaching methodology, and assessment became clear. The blend was integral as a mechanism to help students move towards 'divergent' rather than 'convergent' thinking (Davies, A). This is also important to improve retention of the learning skills.

Without a consistent and comprehensive package of methodologies and assessment it is very difficult to promote outcomes based on the acquisition of new skills and encourage 'deep thinking'. Students will fall back on being strategic grade warriors the moment they feel cornered. This then becomes one of the greatest failings of the project. In effect all the hard work and research, of some students, over a whole year, is wasted as it never gets the opportunity to coalesce. For these students, any adoption of 'deep learning' and creative thinking (some of the critical desired outcomes of the project) is tenuous at best. At worst, it has reinforced to the student that they are merely objects for lip service and they continue a grade focused strategy which only promotes 'surface thinking'.

Committed strategists, … continue their surface approach albeit in the guise of a deep approach. They are effectively taking a surface approach … to learning. They are continuing to ask the question, 'What do I have to do to get the best marks?' A. Davies

This reflects the very polemic nature of teaching in an institution. '*That we should learn and be taught in structured public institutions is not widely challenged in or society, however what is taught and how learning should occur forms a considerable portion of political and cultural debate.*' A Oaks

In particular, how do you teach and assess creativity within an institutional context with rules, regulations and political pressures to provide accountable and measurable outcomes? The very nature of these pressures drive the curriculum and assessment process towards *measurable* outcomes (even if not appropriate) as you need to assess 'measurable' qualities and establish 'measurable' criteria.

Finally, one feature, which is presently insurmountable, also seems to be the one that lets the strategist off the hook. The assessment procedure I have been using is criterion referenced… How can convince our students to accept an assessment procedure that is designed to promote learning through the negotiation of explicit criteria when the final award is focused on a distribution curve that has more to do with elitism than understanding? ' A. Davies

PROBLEM THEMES
The three most problematic themes over the first two years of the project were Fairy Tales, Culture, Gender. When we originally selected these themes we believed they would be quite rich in possibilities and exploration, yet the work developed by students addressing these themes has been consistently weak and very 'surface' (much to our surprise and disappointment). In the first year we assumed it was just the students who selected these may have not have put in sufficient effort. It was only after the second year when all these were very weak again (even with us trying to give extra support and direction) we decided that there was something wrong with the themes and we removed them. It is difficult to assess what was troublesome with these themes, each appeared to suffer from a different problem.

The poor responses to 'gender' was the biggest surprise. It was such a loaded theme and an area where there are plenty of writings and research. It could have been examined in terms of the feminist movement, sexuality, fashion – any number of great directions. Yet it was always explored in a relatively obvious way looking at what defined men and women. The final pieces nearly all ended up as a kind of cross-gender mannequin. It seems the young age and relatively naive sexuality of the students caught them out. It was clear that many explored quite deep (and sometime disturbing) angles of sex, sexual politics, abuse, rape and

pornography in their background research but failed to be able to engage and capitalise any of this when developing their final outcomes. Essentially they 'chickened out', they wanted to present confrontational material but did not quite have the maturity to do it without embarrassment or childish giggling. Consequently they fell back on shallow approaches which failed to engage the audience or present anything challenging or new.

THE OUTCOMES
Despite the various problems, I believe the project has had many good outcomes. For those students who embraced the project there was evidence of genuine and ongoing 'deep learning'. The project produced a series of quite imaginative and thoughtful works. Many of the participants have expressed that they now see the journal as a valuable part of the creative process. The initiatives taken between the first and second year of the project (such as the Camp) appear worthwhile as the quality of the students work was better in the second year.

The number of students who were able to successfully grapple with this project and not resort to strategic grade driven modes and shallow thinking was a credit to the strength and commitment of the staff and students. We achieved a higher success rate in the second year and there were fewer students who fell back on grade driven strategies.

Anecdotal evidence is that some of these skills are being carried by the students into later years. We are also discussing modifications to the program curriculum to continue some aspects of the theme journal project in second and third year.

There has been a great deal of interest from the Visual Art program in the Camp and the drawing skills fostered by the 'mini-journal' project. Changes to Visual Art curriculum may include incorporating some of this project. Further the idea of collaborative journals and drawing projects has been floated. There is also interest in presenting work as part of the international drawing conference being hosted by the University in 2005.

We also collected examples of the final pieces together in an electronic book which has attracted interest from within the university and even other national and international institutions. The South Australian School of Art has used some of the imagery for printed promotional material and their website. Not too bad for a group of students in their first year of study.

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If anyone would like copies of the electronic books, teaching materials or any other information about this project I would be happy to pass them onto you. Your feedback is also welcome.

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APPENDIX:

Journal Themes

Each student will need to pick one of these themes to use as part of their journal. You will be required to demonstrate the use of your theme when your journal is assessed. The themes can be viewed literally or metaphorical. They can be interpreted very broadly (or narrowly). They are designed to present you with a challenge and create interest. They are not intended to limit you, but rather to give you a conceptual focus.

Pick one from the following list:

Brown
Red
White
Texture
Circles/Curves/Spheres
Squares/Cubes
Lines/Planes
Hearts
Juxtaposition
Gaps/Negative space/Void
Ghost People
Contrast
Opposites
Place
Landscape
Material
Time
Space
Matter
Scale
Movement
Architecture
Shock
Ergonomics
Tools
Growth
Decay
Games
Puns
Politics
Rock, Paper, Scissors
Cooking
Taste
Metamorphosis
Culture
Travel
Gender

Nature (Pick one of)
 -Plants
 -Fruit
 -Animals (Pick one of Fish, Humans, or Insects)

Elements (pick one of Earth, Air, Fire or Water)
The 7 Deadly Sins (or one of) Sloth, Greed, Envy, Lust, Pride, Anger, Gluttony
The 7 Cardinal Virtues (or one of) Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, Justice, Faith, Hope, Love

Pure
Temple
Free
Prison
5 senses
Laughter
Humour
Fate
Chance
God
Gravity
Cup
Bowl
Plate
Chocolate
Things that make you go mmm…
Fairy tales
Glue
Wallpaper

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
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Professional experience includes appointment as Coordinator of Design Foundation Studies as well as Director and Founder of Mango Chutney, a professional design consultancy. Previous lecturing appointments have included TAFE and the Ngapartji Multimedia Centre. Mr. Hepplewhite has also run professional development programs examining issues in relation to curriculum development and the new media.

Mr. Hepplewhite has been an active member of the Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA) and the Adelaide Art Directors Club (AADC).

Research interests include: the use of learning journals; curriculum development in relation to the new media; motivation of students to achieve learning outcomes; and theories and of design teaching and pedagogy. His research has been presented and published nationally and internationally.