What Can We Say About The World Out There?

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Abstract

Over the last five to ten years Professional Practices has become a required subject of study in most Australian university visual arts programs. If not a required subject, it is up there as an identified elective study. NAVA and ACUADS teamed up in 2001 to produce a range of topics, outlines and tutorial tasks for use by tertiary art lecturers to ensure that information given to students 'accurately reflects the realities of the industry…' These were available on-line from 2003 and revised again in 2007. The topics identified are very appropriate and the content is thorough and concisely organised.

With the increase of commissioned reports and research projects into the visual arts and the widespread development of cultural policies, the problem is certainly not the availability of accurate, relevant information (as it once was), however, I have come to believe there is another problem. From viewing university course outlines Professional Practices appears to be taught in very similar ways across art schools— general issue discussions complemented by visiting lectures on specific small business and art sector topics.

I have been teaching Professional Practices in Fine Art at QCA since it was introduced as required study eight years ago. In each year, I have looked for a different focus or central emphasis drawn from local or national events or developments, or changes in arts policies, or new publications. Each year I have shuffled the guest lecturers eliminating poor presenters and identifying better presenters. However, on reflection I have serious doubts as to whether this method of subject presentation is the most effective way to impart knowledge and professionally prepare students for the range of opportunities in the sector.

This year (through a glitch the system), I have a small group of 15 students enrolled in Professional Practices. It was a chance to embark on a very different way to deliver the

subject. In this proposed paper I would like to discuss the approach I've used and to look at some of the results from the very open-ended assessment items I've set the students.

What Can We Say About The World Out There?

Over the last five to ten years Professional Practices has become a required subject of study in most Australian university visual arts programs. If not a required subject, it is up there as an identified elective study. National Association of Visual Arts (NAVA) and ACUADS teamed up in 2001 to produce a range of topics, outlines and tutorial tasks for use by tertiary art lecturers to ensure that information given to students 'accurately reflects the realities of the industry they are aiming to be part of…'[i] These were available on-line from 2003 and revised again in 2007. The topics identified are appropriate and the content is thorough and concisely organised.

With the increase of commissioned reports and research projects into the visual arts and crafts and the widespread development of cultural policy, the problem is certainly not the availability of accurate, relevant information. The problem is rather determining effective ways that this knowledge, know-how and general sensibility about the arts sector can be taught, or given, or somehow transferred to students. Maria Menidis in her review of Professional Development options for the visual arts and craft sector for NAVA in 2006,[ii] identifies a major stumbling block that many of us are likely to have experienced. This is, that undergraduates are generally not exactly enthusiastic about the subject matter of Professional Practices. Menidis also notes that:

> [T]he content provided is not always sufficiently substantive or relevant because it is not grounded in real practice. It is also frequently not well taught, as delivery does not adequately bridge the theoretical application of knowledge stimulated by real circumstance. circumstance.[iii]

There is a wide recognition that there is a need for students to develop an understanding of the art world,[iv] its mechanisms and mysteries, the challenge is how this broad bank of knowledge can be much more effectively relayed to students.

Interviews of graduates conducted by myself as part of The Big Picture —A Planning Matrix for the Australian Visual Arts and Crafts Sector[v] study between 2001/2002 reveal overwhelmingly negative responses to the question whether art school studies prepared graduates for the range of options in practice. In fact it was often said that 'learning took place after the study'. This was particularly so at the undergraduate level. At the postgraduate level there was a more positive response, though respondents indicated 'this was largely self initiated'. At the undergraduate level professional practice was either 'non existent' or 'barely mentioned' or 'a bit hit and miss', or not effectively delivered. Many echoed the belief that they left arts school believing 'good art would save the day'. Respondents indicated that art school felt very separate from the arts sector as a whole and there was little idea of what the 'art world would be like'. A very prevalent philosophy in art schools was that it was up to the individual. Two respondents indicated that perhaps it was almost impossible to teach all that is needed. Scenarios people encounter are all so different. One respondent pointed out that the fields of work within the industry itself are so specialised, like working within commercial galleries, article writing and grant writing, that they need specialist training. Nevertheless this respondent concluded that away around this could be by 'encouraging a method of research and professionalism, that is equally interested in management issues as creative issues'.

In their report Destinations and Reflections: Careers of British Art, Craft and Design Graduates (1999), Blackwell and Harvey[vi] note that it is often only in retrospect that graduates consider business or professional studies valuable for their career development. Further, the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA)[vii] 2000 report indicates that it is only 'incrementally' that graduates realise they need specific information and skills to work both in their preferred field and in the 'changing world of work'. And Menidis emphasises that it is 'principally through work that real professional needs become evident.'[viii]

When I first broached the idea for creating a program of professional practice in our courses ten or so years ago, my Fine Art colleagues thought it was unnecessary. They thought that anything students wanted to know could be addressed in the studio and it made sense for discussions to be closely tied to the creation and production of their own

artwork. This was a compelling argument. When I talked about ways for the students to become more cognisant of the wider art world that they would need to tap into as artists, my colleagues reluctantly agreed for me to put together a program of guest lectures that drew on local arts organizations and local artists. This was to take place outside studio time. In addition to this, 3rd year students were to undertake some work experience for at least 16 hours in a place of their own choosing and negotiation. They were to write a commentary on the experience, which had an assessment weighting of 10% of the studio mark. Quite readily students recognised this required considerable effort for only 10% of their studio mark and decided to put their energies into the other 90%. Not surprisingly attendance at the guest lectures dwindled gradually. I thought the lectures were terrifically interesting, but recognising something was just not working I conducted a survey among the remaining diligent students. A student summed it up perfectly. 'Its too passive' she said. I realised then I needed to specifically create a course for Professional Practices that involved as much active learning as possible. It needed to give students the means to develop a critical understanding of the complex inter-layering of the local and visual arts sector. It needed to give students the means to understand the relationship of art policies, the conditions of practice and the impact of the market place on the making and consumption of art. Above all the course was to enable the students as artists and artworkers to operate effectively in the sector and increase their ability to make a worthwhile contribution to the community.

The course ran for two years before it was agreed for it to become a core component in the Fine Art program. The assessment items were hands-on, like: investigate a local arts organization to develop an understanding of what people in organization do and the role the organization plays. Research was to be carried out by arranging interviews with individuals, visits to locations, reading annual reports, newsletters and speaking to members or users. This got the students inside organizations and meeting people, seeing behind the scenes and getting a sense of the pulse of the place. While it was easy to come up with this kind of hands-on project, it did require cooperation from organizations, which as we know, often operate with minimal staff. Some students found it difficult to get appointments with directors or executive officers. However, the on the whole, the project was well received by organizations themselves. Another hands-on project was to locate a public artwork of interest. Students were to identify, discuss and critically assess its

impact on viewers, users and on the surrounding city or suburb. Consideration was to be given to the issues surrounding public artwork, in particularly the question 'what can public art do?' This coincided with the introduction and initial years of the Queensland government's 2% public art policy. It was always an exciting project and the issues very relevant.

It became however, much more difficult to find active ways to transfer knowledge about research reports, policies, processes and procedures. Each year I looked for a different focus or central emphasis drawn from local or national events or developments, or changes in arts policies, or new publications. Each year I shuffled the guest lecturers eliminating poor presenters and identifying better presenters. While the course evaluation from students was always sound, lecture attendance was variable to say the least. Students did not appear to have a sense of the importance of progressively building up their knowledge, or ever seeming to worry if they had missed weeks. Because topics ran for only one or two weeks, students appeared to see each topic as mutually exclusive. Increasingly therefore, I have had serious doubts as to whether the lecture/tutorial method of subject presentation can be the most effective way to impart knowledge and professionally prepare students for the range of opportunities in the sector.

Last semester through a glitch the system, I have had a small group of 15 students enrolled in Professional Practices. It was a chance to embark on a very different way to deliver the subject.

So what did I do? I decided I would try and pull previously individual lecture topics together as one and call it *your art world*. I hoped students would begin to see elements or components mapping onto each other with links, overlaps and some internal logic. Where possible the class went to visit people and places. For instance rather than a leader in field Dr Barbara Piscitelli giving a lecture on Children and museums, why museums need children and children need museums, we met her instead at the Gallery of Modern Art and focussed on what the Children's Art Centre at GoMA had set up for the Warhol exhibition. Before we entered the gallery, Dr Piscitelli spoke briefly to the students about

the findings from her research on what children get from visiting museums and how children learn in museums. We viewed the children's activities then discussed in what ways the exhibits met or didn't meet the list of criteria she proposed. I also asked her to talk about her perception of children's role within the art world. In other weeks we visited three commercial galleries where the directors spoke of the life of running a gallery and what they saw as *their* art world. We visited a huge array of public art work being installed in a vast new Institute of Technology. We talked with the curator of the project about how the selection of artists and art works took place. The curator spoke about *her* art world and what role she saw public art playing in both the art world and community life. We visited Urban Art Projects the fabricator of many local, national and now international public art projects. At this point the art world became decidedly global as UAP projects pushed from Los Angeles, to Singapore to Dubai, but the artists stayed local —some whom the students knew, most of whom they had heard. We went on location to view a local artist initiated gallery/café as well as a gallery/art supply outlet and talked of how these ventures figured in the art world. Instead of a writer or editor coming to talk with the class about art writing, we visited the publication *Eyeline*. We saw where it was produced and talked with the advertising and publicity officer and the editor about *their* art world, the business of publishing a local art journal and how this had changed over the 20 years of the publication. For issues around art and the law, namely copyright, moral rights, doit de suite, tax and art production we reverted to informal guest lectures. One of the presenters was a current student but also a lawyer who had undertaken a project on copyright, the other an accountant whose presentation was created entirely through personal encounters with particular artists or from his travels and adventures auditing indigenous art centres.

The first assignment was purposefully totally open ended. It was as follows:

You are to investigate and critically assess your immediate Art World. This can be done by gathering information through interviewing individuals who are part of the arts' sector—artists, gallery workers, curators, postgraduate students, and/or through reading reports and policies and/or by observing and documenting art world activities.   You will need to keep a journal of observations, exhibitions you have attended, newspaper articles on aspects of art or the art world, professional web sites etc.

I was very excited with the 1500 word essay outcomes. Topics ranged across:

- Income for artists looking at *Don't give up your day job*, Myer Report and the article

  'The Realpolitik of Selling Visual Art' www.cpd.org.au/node/3982

- An international student's comparison of the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane and its show of Warhol early this year and the Edinburgh Art Gallery, which showed a Warhol Exhibition in October 2007

- Public art initiatives

- Opportunities for involvement in art activities while students were still at art school eg. p/t tutoring and technician, JSO collective selling at local markets

- A booklet that mapped artists organizations in the regional area of Northern Rivers

- Discussion of the secondary art market

- A comparison between Gold Coast exhibitions and galleries and events and those in
  Brisbane

- A mapping of art exhibitions and events traced through newspaper articles

- A comparison of art worlds between a retired artist administrator, a Professor at the art school and a technician at the art school

- An international student's comparison between art experiences in a home town of Modesto US and Brisbane

- Examples of artists' support for each other in Brisbane and during a time of living in Dublin

- Experience of working on an art project of Lee Mingwei at GoMA

- Relationship between commercial galleries and public galleries

- ARIs

- A life of an emerging artist

The second assignment was as follows:

This is to be a small group project with the outcome a powerpoint or a (no more than 4 minute) video or animation or an illustrated handout or a small booklet that can be given to first year students in Orientation week 2009. It is to give the first year students background knowledge of the art world they are entering. It would contain information you think they should know or information you wish *you* had known when you came to art school. The focus of the item you produce is to be on the art world around the students or ahead of them. Students worked in groups of two or three.

The outcomes from this were not quite as developed as I had imagined they would be. Nevertheless there were highlights. One was a very accomplished website that showed significant commercial galleries, and public galleries mapped over particular areas of the CBD. I hope this will be able to be lifted onto the University's web site to be able to be accessed from the Fine Art page. Other students produced brochures on what first years should do or should know or organizations they should join; an international student and a local student teamed up to produce a guide and commentary on where to get the best art materials; there was a video on where to go and exhibit as an emerging artist; there was also a booklet made detailing national artist residences; and there was a rather hilarious questionnaire titled 'Which career for you?' using the multiple choice format of a fashion magazine. It asks probing questions like 'Which of these do you like best?' 'When you go to a gallery what do you think about?' 'When you are on a practical art project do you prefer working with people or not?' This was accompanied by a result sheet revealing if you chose mostly As 'You are very practical' etc You could have the qualities most suited to an Art Teacher, Artist Assistant, Stage Prop Designer. If you answered mostly Cs 'You are very analytical about art works', with possible careers as curator, art director, art critic. Then if you answered mostly Bs 'Sounds like you are where you belong! First year is about experimenting and trying out new things offered' etc. Finally it asks 'Did you think a quiz in the first week would determine your entire career path?'

From these outcomes the web site is the most resolved and will be a great resource for students. The list of the best suppliers, comments and address details would also be worth distributing, as would be the booklet on what first years should do or should know or

should join and yes the questionnaire would be a lot of fun to distribute during orientation week.

Was this then a more successful and effective way to conduct a Professional Practice course? Certainly students were more engaged and lively in discussion, they got to know each other more, they seemed to talk more confidently from the shared experiences, arguing their case using examples from the class visits. But what did the students think? All who made comments identified the field trips as a refreshing and a useful and great way of finding out about the art world and that talking to a range of people was relevant and useful. Going to galleries was an effective way to find out more about them. Nevertheless some thought there were too many field trips and there needed to be more classroom time for discussion and guidance. A useful suggestion was that there be material available on-line to supplement the field trips. However, this approach could only operate with a small cluster of students. We went on visits that were beyond a walkable distance in a maxi taxi and a car. Small groups can fit into small gallery spaces, stay tuned in, get into discussions, and are a manageable for outdoor dialogue. One student suggested that a better assignment might be interviewing an established artist and through that experience of devising questions and listening to responses come to understand some of the steps needed for artistic development. Testimonials and first hand experience as we know can provide the most effective form of teaching and the most heightened form of learning. It is to this end that I am now thinking of moving for 2009. With a larger enrolment size it wouldn't be possible to undertake as many field trips. However I am thinking of creating small tutorial groups to be conducted by postgraduate students where at least fortnightly visits could be planned. So there would be opportunities for the postgraduates to talk of their own experiences in their career development. I have recently come across a Professional Practices model from the Royal College of Art.[ix] Called FuelRCA, it is an Intranet site set up to assist current students and recent graduates. Its available on a self-help basis and staffed by recent and successful graduates as well as professional advisors. It sounds terrific. I've emailed to ask exactly how it works.

I am still trying to think up ways a program of lectures could develop the sense of an inter-connected art world. Maybe I should take *scandals* as an overall theme and see if a sense of the strange conglomerate art world can be unravelled through this trope. Ultimately the task of finding active ways to transfer knowledge about research reports, policies, processes and procedures in the art world remains challenging.   An approach that has been developed in a number of art schools in the UK through their focus on *employability* [x]is the development of work experience opportunities. In Australian with a much smaller art infrastructure, this is more difficult to realise but I feel it is the future direction for increasing relevance and significance for professional practice studies.[xi]

As a postscript I wanted to identify what NAVA (following the Menidis Review of 2006) has been able to initiate in partnership with Australia Business Arts Foundation (ABAF). This is the artist career website to be fully launched later this year www.artistcareer.com.au/ which does create a comprehensive approach to professional practice advice and development for students, and teachers and practitioners. It gives focussed advice across a range of specific topics with follow up web sites. There is a sense that the delivery is incremental, that is in small, regular and bite-size. Information is given by artists drawing on personal experience and the know how of other legal/financial/administrative experts. It also has the potential for closed social networks. ABAF have also sharpened up their web site and under Artist business, offering tips on business success as a visual artist .http://www.abaf.org.au

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www.rca.ac.uk/pages/study/professional_practice_529.html

www.artistcareer.com.au/

http://www.abaf.org.au

Endnotes

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i NAVA www.visualarts.net.au/

Learning Centre Professional Practice Unit

ii Maria Menidis 'Life and Learning after Graduation in the Visual Arts and Craft Sector' NAVA Report 2006

iii Ibid., 8.

iv Recommendations in the Report of the Contemporary Visual Art and Craft Inquiry 2002, 78-80 and The Big Picture — A Planning Matrix for the Australian Visual Arts and Crafts Sector, 27.

v "The Big Picture —A Planning Matrix for the Australian Visual Arts and Crafts Sector" (2004) available www.visualarts.net.au

vi A. Blackwell and L. Harvey, *Destinations and Reflections: Careers of British Art, Craft and Design Graduates*, (Birmingham: Centre for Research into Quality, University of Central England, 1999) , Executive summary available www0.bcu.ac.uk/crq/publications/dr/drexec.html

vii ELIA Toolkit for Innovation. Thematic Network for Higher Arts Education in Europe. Provisions in Higher Arts Education in Europe: changing structures, (2000) available www.elia-artschools.org/publications/archive_2

viii Maria Menidis, op.cit., 4.

ix www.rca.ac.uk/pages/study/professional_practice_529.html

x Sophie Harbour "Future Directions for Employability Research in the Creative Industries," *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education,* 4/2 (2005) 128-133.

xi See similar view by Jude Adams 'Projects, Placements and Participation: The Art Industry Internship Program', ACUADS Conference 2006.