



# Fostering an interdisciplinary learning environment through core 3rd-year courses in a revised BCA

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## Abstract

This case study describes the role of a number of core courses in the third year of a Bachelor of Creative Arts degree at the University of Southern Queensland. In a major restructure of the Bachelor of Creative Arts degree, the disciplines of Music, Creative Media, Theatre and Visual Arts are linked into a single degree program and students have the opportunity to choose courses and majors across disciplines in consultation with program staff. The core third year courses described in this case study provide opportunities for students to work with peers across disciplines and to explore pathways into the profession. A strategy for encouraging hybridity through cross-disciplinary collaboration in the production of arts for public consumption is the focus of this innovative curriculum design.

## What's in this case study for you?

This case study will be of interest to you if you are involved in the process of restructuring a Bachelor degree in the creative arts, or if you are looking for ways to create core courses within a program where students in different discipline areas work on hybrid projects that contribute to showcasing their practice outcomes. It will also be of interest if you are looking for ways to make students' pathways into the profession more explicit in your teaching. This study describes methods used by one School of Creative Arts to

capitalise on studio teaching and the cultural products developed in practice as a way of not only promoting the degree, but for anchoring practice as a key trajectory into a career in the arts for graduates (the three key trajectories are: industry, teaching, postgraduate study).

## Student learning issues addressed in this Studio

In the first year of the new Bachelor of Creative Arts program the coordinators of the degree became aware that students responded very positively to being able to choose courses from two or more discipline areas. That is, they often came to University with a number of strengths and were pleased to have the flexibility to incorporate two or three creative disciplines into their degree program.

School leavers tend to be the main group to enrol in the creative arts, so we have made in-kind partnerships with schools where we do specific arts experience and practice with them across all disciplines, resulting in a greater focus upon USQ as a viable and dynamic place to study creative arts (this is absolutely paramount in a regional setting).

Often students in creative arts programs are not clear about the professional opportunities available to them after their degree. One of the



core courses offered in the third year of the degree program (Arts Business Practice) explicitly addresses professional pathways for students. That is, it is designed to develop the skills (academic, organisational, planning, initiative etc.) associated with various professional pathways e.g. pathways into industry, teaching and research.

Budget tightening continues to affect how studio teaching is presented and modelled for students. Creative Arts folk realise this and work to the strengths of this where possible by employing innovative strategies such as peer mentoring and staff demonstrations of practice. For example: students undertaking a studio in first year will be timetabled at the same time with corresponding 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year studio courses that use the same lecturer/practitioner. What is encouraged here is peer mentoring across the year levels so that studio time is enriched by multiple voices and reflections upon the work in progress. This also models collaboration and micro-networks in the industry and resists the often upheld (but misguided) arts practice of isolation in art making. By 3<sup>rd</sup> year, these networks and collaborative practices are more specifically directed towards inter-disciplinary connections with students in their core courses (those mentioned in this study).

## Strategy

### Background to the Bachelor of Creative Arts

The restructuring of the Bachelor of Creative Arts at the University of Southern Queensland took place across 2007 and 2008, with the degree being offered for the first time in 2009 in response to economic issues and a major review of the University. The previous model of funding (that favoured conservatory-style studios that championed practice above theoretical rigour, therefore creating a 'silo' mentality between disciplines) had become unsustainable, and as a result, the new degree structure needed to

maximise commonalities across disciplines and focus on an interdisciplinary framework. That is, a more effective and sustainable model had to be created.

The restructure involved merging 13 different degrees in the Creative Arts (including diplomas, honours etc.) into one Bachelor of Creative Arts. The enrolment pattern that was created allowed students to choose courses in two or three creative arts disciplines. In addition to protecting the creative arts disciplines and retaining as many staff as possible, a key aim of the restructure was to reduce the siloed structure that resulted from the previous arrangement.

In the new structure, the 24-credit point degree contains a number of discipline areas – Theatre, Music, Visual Arts and Creative Media. There are 16 courses in each discipline area (8 theory and 8 practical) and students can elect to do 16 courses in the one discipline, or divide their courses across two or more disciplines. For example, students might elect to enrol in 8 courses in music and 8 in theatre, and their third major can also select from another creative or arts/humanities discipline (depending upon the student's own career aspirations).

The restructure resulted in the course load being reduced from 117 courses across all of the different degrees, to a total of 67 courses (although there are currently 75 courses to accommodate students enrolled in the old degree programs). Of the 16 courses offered in each discipline, three are common courses.

While the inclusion of core courses in first year was considered, evidence suggested that students preferred to concentrate on their chosen discipline areas when entering their degree. For this reason, the first and second year of the degree focuses on building relevant skills,



experiential learning, and critical reflection (reflexivity), and the third year of the program introduces core courses that are completed by students across the four discipline areas.

### **Description of the Studio Practice**

Studio practice in third year is both individually and collaboratively driven through encouraging independent creative enterprise that anchors itself in the relationship developed with a practicing supervisor. The issue that has arisen with this is that the practical staff (and the ones who are the most engaging as practitioners and teachers) are over-utilised and very busy with students because they are also connected to their arts industry/sector in a desirable way and can connect students to other studio practitioners beyond the university. Staff who are deemed less successful in these areas, or who are unable to develop a trusting rapport with students are under-utilised, thus affecting workload equity across the School.

### **Core courses in third year**

The core courses offered in the third year of the program include Arts Business Practice, BCA Project A, and BCA Project B. Each of the three courses can be done online through the university-provided Study Desk.

#### *1. Arts Business Practice (assignments 56 hrs, lectures 26 hrs, private study 70 hrs)*

Arts Business Practice is run in the first semester of third year. The course recognises that the modern professional artist requires a sound working knowledge of business practice, industry protocols and the diverse range of government obligations pertaining to their work. As such, it introduces students to procedures for planning, funding, managing and marketing their arts practice.

Students are required to demonstrate:

- Academic and professional literacy through interpreting and applying the professional and governmental responsibilities appropriate to their practice
- Organisational and planning skills in developing an industry-level competency in pursuing funding and properly managing the commercial outcomes of their practice
- Creativity and initiative in appraising and modifying a comprehensive business plan for launching a career in the area of their discipline
- Skills in problem solving in order to develop greater levels of interpersonal and professional development

Assessment for the course involves an archive, a logbook and a practical project component.

This course is specifically designed to help students:

- think beyond purely making art work in a studio i.e. encourage them to think about how they will carry this into an external environment;
- think about how they describe their art and how they might get others to invest in them as artists.

The course provides deep self-reflective guidelines that aim to better prepare students to talk in a commercial way about their practice/work.

Through grant-writing, business planning and product promotion, students are asked to develop objectivity about their work/practice and its significance in the sector. This course is offered in the same semester as *BCA Project A* in order to best develop creative projects and to



ensure they have longevity beyond the final year of study. Students have developed a sense of how to use other discipline areas in promoting and capturing their work. Multimedia, creative media, and the “performative” nature of gallery curation and musical performance are all discussed in terms of methods of encouraging innovative practice.

*2. BCA Project A (practice 80 hrs; private study 57 hrs; seminars 28 hrs)*

*BCA Project A* is also run in the first semester of third year. The course focuses on the intersection between theory and practice in the creative arts, and is specifically designed to place students on a pathway to research, practice, performance and industry connection. The emphasis of the course is on practice with a view to identifying and articulating the discoveries made through experiential methodologies in order to develop discipline expertise.

Through this course students are required to demonstrate:

- Self management and utilisation of cultural and critical literacies that can: identify, locate, access and utilise research and source materials/requirements for theoretical and/or applied projects
- Academic written and oral communication through engaging in scholarly approaches to articulate a coherent approach to the development of particular theoretical and/or applied creative arts projects
- Evaluate and engage discipline and professional literacy in the identification and articulation of diverse approaches to contemporary theoretical and/or applied creative arts practice.

Topics for the course are determined in consultation with staff from the various discipline areas. Topics are based on actual community

and/or artistic projects taking place during the semester, or designed to generate experimental applications of practice. The assessment for the course includes practical project work and critical reflection.

At the same time as completing the course, students are encouraged to do a secondment (e.g. at a gallery); develop a research project; or use their experience as a networking device for entering industry. Students wishing to do an honours degree are encouraged to focus on the research components of the course. For example, they are showed how to write a proposal. Students are required to develop three research-guiding principles and apply these principles to all self-reflection. Depending on discipline area(s), outcomes for students (which are decided with a supervisor) might include a draft proposal, a script, a film, staged readings for new works, recitals, drafts of scripts, rushes and pitches for films, lesson plans for workshops in schools or other community need, preparations for auditions, etc. This course is designed to be the process of collaborating on a creative project that leverages student knowledge of practice, coupled with their connections to theoretical works in order to develop new interfacing between the two. Outcomes in this course are mostly processural so that students may continue to work on these projects into S2 and *BCA Project B*. Alternatively, students may complete a project in S1 and start a completely new one in S2 (favoured by Music students who need to further push their skills sets in their particular instrument through recital work).

*3. BCA Project B (tutorials 28 hrs; workshops or rehearsals 137 hours)*

*BCA Project B* is run in the second semester of third year. It continues to explore the intersection between theory and practice and is designed to further develop creative ideas and work from the *BCA Project A* and *Arts Business Practice* courses. Students are required to



identify, research and articulate how practice and theory informs hybrid and/or discipline specific projects. The course seeks to increase students' ability to contribute to scholarly output by encouraging further practice, research and lifelong learning beyond their degree program.

Through *BCA Project B* students are required to demonstrate:

- Academic and professional literacy through applying, synthesising and evaluating the process involved in researching, collaboration and mentoring processes involved in creating creative arts projects
- Advanced management, planning and organisational skills to develop all production and rehearsal aspects of a production/project for public presentation
- A high level of critical and cultural literacies in the comparison and interpretation of the relationship between theory and practice in diverse contemporary creative arts practice.
- Creativity, initiative and enterprise in the development of connections with industry professionals via secondments and/or project application.

Assessment for the course ties in with *Arts Business Practice* and includes three components: an archive, a logbook and a practical project. As with *Project A*, topics are determined in consultation with staff from the various discipline areas and the projects aim for a public outcome at the end of the semester.

In 2008, an interdisciplinary "Tradeshow" was created to bring collaborative and discipline-specific works to Brisbane (90 minutes away) for alumni and industry invitees. This will be repeated in 2009 with a greater focus on creative

arts diversity and interdisciplinary opportunities at the more intimate Judith Wright Centre on the last two days of semester two. Actors will showcase their work, theatre studies students pitch their research and community practice models, and music students perform in and around the gallery space where visual arts students discuss their art work as part of their GraduART exhibition series. Students, staff, alumni and industry are invited to both nights and their evaluation of the process is requested.

Note that not all students' work can appear in the Tradeshow and the show is generally considered a "taste" of what students do. Students are assessed on their actual projects which may or may not be finished by the time Tradeshow commences; they are therefore *not* generally assessed on their tradeshow presentations, rather they reveal aspects of their work as works-in-progress where they may intermingle with industry, peers and staff to obtain a greater sense of their work and obtain feedback.

This project allows students in different disciplines to work together. For example, stage managers, visual arts and theatre designers, directors, musical directors, singing students and actors all work collaboratively. First and second year students are also involved where possible. This approach reflects the degree as a whole in that it includes a high degree of hybrid activity.

## Discussion

### (a) Benefits

Both the restructure of the BCA and the introduction of core courses in third year have resulted in considerable benefits for students and staff.

The key benefits associated with core third year courses:

- Students are developing skills through these courses that directly support



pathways into the profession;

- Students benefit greatly from working with students from other disciplines and this in turn benefits the arts industry/profession;
- Students often obtain agents during their work in these courses (the agents always come to the acting showcase and take their time talking to students and recruiting them); and similar
- Informal contacts and collaborations develop between alumni and emerging artists in this process.

The merging of the disciplines into a single Bachelor of Creative Arts has made it easier to market the degree. It has broken down the siloed structure that previously dominated, and has encouraged a workplace conducive to new apertures of dialogue between staff working across the various disciplines. A deliberate effort has been made to model collaborative working relationships, and to facilitate connections across areas. The new structure has also allowed a more efficient use of time and resources with staff and students working across four disciplines.

The new structure has necessitated a hybridity in studio work. It allows a cross-fertilisation of ideas and leads to a shift in the way students see art.

The BCA is intended to enable emerging artists, develop good solid teachers and community arts workers, and it focuses on these important parts of the arts sector.

The executive of the University are happy with the degree in which 75% of students enrolled in the degree are studying full-time. This is expected to sustain the degree program.

### *(b) Challenges*

One of the key challenges related to the new

degree structure is ensuring that the collaborative culture can be maintained regardless of staff changes. It requires building a sensibility and ability for people to make change part of their everyday working lives. One approach is to encourage and embed positions of responsibility and leadership, support academic promotions, and make sure that the success of the degree isn't dependent solely on the Head of School.

The biggest challenge is equity; making sure that certain staff are not inundated with requests for supervision while other staff are avoided. This is a difficult one to overcome. By 3<sup>rd</sup> year, students know enough about the staff to understand which staff are connected to networks in the sector, as well as those who give detailed, regular, and constructive feedback.

Studios also continue to be under the spotlight for how they perform in terms of student numbers (not only in these core courses). There is a sense that certain studios may still need to be cut due to low enrolments and no project outcomes. This will affect staffing and choices for students in 3<sup>rd</sup> year courses.

## **Student feedback and improvements**

### *(a) Feedback*

As the restructured course is being run for the first time in 2009, much of the feedback on the course is still in the process of being collected. It is anticipated that while comprehensive quantitative data will be useful, it will be particularly important to gather qualitative data to provide feedback on specific aspects of courses, teaching, and the degree as a whole, and to support staff with promotion applications.

Since the Student Evaluation forms became digitised and not formally undertaken during



class time, there has been a distinct lack of student evaluation of courses. In order to correct this, the HoS has initiated a program appraisal of the degree that features focus groups of students from all year levels and disciplines in the Bachelor of Creative Arts, as well as surveys of staff and industry networks. This will cast a wide net, but will be undertaken in conjunction with a new course monitoring system being put in place by the university to harvest digitised data on all courses (including qualitative data)

While it is still a bit early to get the results from Student Evaluations (as they are still being processed), informal feedback from students has revealed the following:

- Students found the courses hard work because of the time and effort involved in independently focussing and implementing their own projects;
- Studio staff have commented that these courses very much separated students into 2 distinct categories: those who are self-motivating and focussed, and those who wait to be directed. The greatest satisfaction was from the former group.
- The way that the supervisor couched the work and the development through the work is essential; some were highly motivated and modelled excellent problem-solving skills, and others did not return contact.
- There has been an increase in the number of students who have indicated they may like to continue into Honours in order to continue their work in studio practice in more depth.
- There has not been a lot of sharing of strategies between staff, however, staff did talk to each other across disciplines about their hybrid students. The outcome is that there is an improved understanding of the different studio processes and skills that each discipline engages with, and the

possibility of collaboration between staff in the future.

### *(b) Improvements*

The biggest one is an immediate addition of classes for students in BCA Project B (first time offered this semester 2, 09) – which is in direct response to staff and students wanting to “touch base” in the early stages of developing a proposal. Staff will meet with them in a one hour lecture per week to help anchor and translate the expectations in the online course material (that all students, oncampus or externally enrolled) must use as a guide to fulfilling their assessment requirements.

Further improvements to the course will respond to student feedback. It is likely that improvements will address issues of access to their secondments placings and improved communication with supervisors.

### **Guidance for colleagues**

- Make sure all staff feel some ownership of a new course that asks them to supervise individual students in their studios.
- Make sure everyone has read the online teaching material and are aware of due dates and the schedule for the course over the semester.
- Promote the course with students as an independent study, that *they* are in the driver’s seat and that they will get out of it what they put into it – no matter whether the result is a positive or negative experience. The students who grew and were stretched the most tended to be the ones who went out for projects that were way too big, and some crashed and burned – but all these students have recognised the learning that they have undertaken through experiencing this.



- That students need to be treated as colleagues to staff in these courses, that they are modelling best practice and how to negotiate artistic choices and changes with a mentor; that they are in control of how and what they learn, and that you can show them this at the end of the semester.
- Encourage moderation and discussion of marking and grades by staff across the discipline areas so that they can appreciate the kinds of varying efforts and methods used across the disciplines.
- Respect and dignity in all feedback from staff to students and students to staff
- Increase your media coverage of what you are doing and the volume of projects that have been undertaken through talking with staff from the marketing unit at the university – that these courses are really incubator courses for young emerging artists.

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innovative practice that will help engage and enable young emerging artists.

## More information

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