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# Creativity, Innovation and Change: A faculty-wide first-year course still waiting for lift off

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## ABSTRACT

All undergraduate degree programs in the Faculty of the Built Environment (FBE) at UNSW (Architecture, Building and Construction Management (now Construction Management and Property), Industrial Design, Interior Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Planning and Urban Development) were reviewed in 2004-2005 with the twin objectives of finding ways to strengthen the separate programs, and also to identify opportunities for greater cross-disciplinary learning and teaching. One response to increase the Faculty's cross-disciplinary experiences was to form a First Year Common Course (FYCC) Group. The eight-member group met on a regular basis during 2004 and 2005 to develop a course proposal (*Creativity, Innovation and Change*) that made it through each of the necessary committee levels of approval within the faculty. At the final hurdle when the degree programs had to agree to adopt the new course (or not) a majority of the Heads of Program decided not to incorporate the new course in their degrees.

This paper outlines the rationale for having a FYCC, the process involved and the proposal that emerged from the work of the FYCC Group; and reviews reasons the proposal was not adopted faculty-wide even after receiving formal approval as a new course from the appropriate Faculty committees.

## INTRODUCTION

Identifying ways to improve first-year curricula is hardly a new fascination. It has been on the agenda of the FBE (formerly the Faculty of Architecture) since its inception over 50 years ago, just as it has for most faculties and universities around the world. In the early 1970s the Faculty of Architecture spawned a series of independent disciplines (e.g. Town Planning, and Landscape Architecture) to accompany Architecture and Building, and the Faculty's initial response was to continue with a common first year for all incoming students. By the mid-1970s, however, centrifugal forces came more strongly into play as the separate disciplines began insisting that each required its own first year curriculum. With the exception of a Computers and Information Technology course (a 3 UOC out of 24 UOC course in Session 1 that maintained its faculty-wide, first year status for over a decade), the clear tendency in the FBE has been to assert disciplinary control of first-year curricula, a situation that has been re-affirmed with the inclusion of Industrial Design and Interior

Architecture as independent disciplinary programs within the Faculty.

Because each of the FBE's programs orient themselves toward professions and professional practice, most are required by professional bodies to go through re-accreditation reviews on a regular basis. These reviews serve to focus each of the programs on a range of issues, including the first-year curriculum and the quality of their students' first-year student experience, but they have not led to recommendations for faculty-wide common courses -- continuing emphases on multi-disciplinary/interdisciplinary content and appreciation, yes; faculty-wide common courses, no.

## I. THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

A number of factors rose to the surface in 2004 which suggested that the time might be right to reconsider first-year curricula in the Faculty, a window of opportunity that could also include developing a faculty-wide common first-year course. Most notable in the UNSW context were two publications of the UNSW Learning and Teaching Unit: *First Contact: The Challenge of Integrating Graduate Attributes from First Year. Proceedings of the First Year Forum 2003* (2004a), and *Guidelines that Inform Teaching at UNSW* (2004b). In addition, and in some ways an even stronger incentive to plan a common first-year experience, were discussions within UNSW aimed at a range of "Enabling Skills" such as IT literacy; familiarity with library resources; familiarity with UNSW guidelines on ways to avoid plagiarism; academic English language skills, and so forth (Starfield *et al.* 2004). These discussions were strongly supported by the University administration and reflected the fact that issues having to do with literacy in its various contexts were not limited to one or two faculties or degree programs, for example, and might well be best addressed at the faculty level, and possibly in faculty-wide courses.

2004 discussions of the FYCC Group were also informed by the experiences of other universities. Radloff (2004) provided a pertinent overview of experiences at Curtin and at RMIT in Australia. And in the process of trying to discover what the best practice might be elsewhere, other starting points were the widely available (if also criticized) tables generated by U.S. News & World Report that identified, among "America's Best Colleges" those that were reputed to have exemplary "First-Year Experiences". (The U.S. News &

World Report 2007 web site is listed in the references for this paper. We worked with the 2004 version three years ago.) That starting point led to a review by the FYCC of several North American examples of first-year programs around that time. See Wooster (2002), Princeton (2003), UC Irvine (2005) and Duke (2005). Each of these universities featured a strong suite of freshman seminar courses that attracted students across a range of disciplines, frequently had strong interdisciplinary foci, and invariably were seen as one of the ways in which a range of university-level skills could be developed and honed, most notably those of writing, critical thinking, and of speaking in the context of seminar discussion.

It is appropriate to note that a key predecessor of a resurgence of interest in the first-year experience in the last seven or eight years -- reflected in the references above -- is the Boyer Commission Report (1998). The work and recommendations of that Commission in terms of an "Enquiry-based Freshman Year" and the need to "Build on the Freshman Foundation" flow most directly to discussions of desirable student outcomes and competencies, and have continued to reverberate in other quarters as well (Flacks *et al.* 2004; Huber *et al.* 2005; Miller 2005).

A final ingredient in the mix of factors that led to the FYCC proposal discussed here was a decision on the part of UNSW that starting in 2004 every faculty should have an Associate Dean (Education) whose responsibilities would include curriculum review and innovation, and academic aspects of the student experience.

The alignment of this range of catalysts -- the Boyer Commission (1998); the UNSW Learning and Teaching Unit publications (2004a, 2004b); the Enabling Skills Discussion Paper (Starfield *et al.* 2004); intriguing examples from other universities; and the new Associate Dean (Education) role in the FBE -- all contributed to a situation where trying to develop an FBE FYCC looked like an opportunity too promising to let pass.

## II. DEVELOPING THE PROPOSAL

The possibility of developing a First Year Common Course that might be adopted by the FBE's undergraduate programs was agreed upon by the Faculty Executive in April 2004 and received warm support at that time from the Dean. The next step was to assemble a working party (task force) to develop and refine a proposal. Given the already exceptional workloads of the Heads of the Faculty's undergraduate programs, the Associate Dean (Education) [this paper's author] asked for expressions of interest from across the Faculty. In general, and possibly not surprising, responses tended to come from younger staff and, with only a little further recruiting, the FYCC Group became a reality in May 2004. Its eight members (see the Acknowledgements) included two architects, a planner, a construction management lecturer, a geographer, an interior architect, a landscape architect, and the Associate Dean (a sociologist/planner). One FBE program, Industrial Design, was not represented in the initial FYCC Group.

The Group met on a weekly basis for much of 2004. Group chemistry was exceptional. Most members had had little contact with one another before this, and as differing viewpoints and priorities emerged over the following months, the group held together and kept its focus on the development of what it thought would be an ideal first-year common course for the Faculty. Lines of communication about the FYCC deliberations flowed back to other parts of the Faculty via the Associate Dean's fortnightly meetings with Heads of Program, via the Dean's Advisory Committee, via the Faculty Education Committee and occasional other Faculty forums, and via the FYCC group members to their respective programs (staff and students).

### A. Defining the parameters

The course was to:

- Have classes which would include a mix of students from all the FBE's undergraduate degree programs
- Facilitate the coverage of the range of "Enabling Skills" suggested by the UNSW Learning Centre
- Provide linked content-assessment-outcomes for students in line with UNSW's 'Graduate Attributes'
- Introduce and engage students in the use of WebCT(Vista).
- Be challenging for the students, and involve the best lecturers
- Not be solely a lecture-based experience (must include opportunities for discussion)
- Involve project-based (or problem-based) learning

### B. Starting to make progress

Two concepts for the basic structure of the new course came up for discussion in the first months. One saw the course as an opportunity for each of the FBE's undergraduate degree programs to have, say, two weeks to talk about and involve students in their discipline -- in other words, after an introductory class, the next two weeks might be allocated to architecture; the next two to landscape architecture; the next two to building and construction management, and so forth.

The other way the course was conceptualized was to have one or two major themes -- like "sustainability" or "creativity and innovation" or "globalization" -- run through the course to which each of the FBE's disciplines might reasonably be expected to contribute.

The Group tended to shift away from the first model on the basis that it could provide too superficial a picture of the different disciplines, but also that it might simply duplicate for architecture students what they would be getting in the first weeks of their first-year architecture courses...and similarly for the other disciplines. The message from this discussion was that the FYCC Group wanted to have a course in which students would be intensively engaged (for more than a week or two) in challenging topics/issues relevant to the built environment.

That way of viewing the course shifted the discussion toward some of the North American models of "Freshman Seminars" where the focus was on engaging talented

lecturers to teach about their specialities in a seminar setting which would be both challenging and (hopefully) exciting for the students. Seminar classes of 15 or so students as in many North American situations were accepted as unlikely to be feasible in the UNSW context, but including a major seminar (or similar) experience in the FBE FYCC had a clear appeal to the FYCC Group.

Suggestions, preferences and ideas flowed freely back and forth during the first four or five months that the FYCC Group worked together, but several points of agreement were emerging. First, it looked to us that the most efficient way to handle the range of “enabling skills” and WebCT issues would be to address those in a block at the start of the semester, with skill-specific tasks linked to a “hot topic” of the day. (We even considered which guest lecturers – including highly visible politicians -- might provide the best “hot topic” materials to get students engaged.) Second, most liked the idea of a significant “seminar” experience, probably commencing after the block of “enabling skills” had been dealt with. These seminars or mini-courses would follow the model of recruiting highly motivated FBE lecturers to frame intensive seminar experiences based on what most excited them (academically). We envisioned twelve or more of these separate seminars (mini-courses) -- possibly led by part-time lecturers if need be – with students having some choice of seminar, as part of the FYCC structure.

What was clearly missing from the course at that stage was a course-wide sense of closure and completion for the students. The suggestion that then emerged was that each of the seminars (mini-courses) would have the responsibility to provide a poster presentation of outcomes from their seminar that could be displayed to the class as a whole. That way of capping off the semester would provide an opportunity for students to become more acquainted with basic design and display skills that are fundamental to professional communication in their disciplines.

Diagrammatically, the course then began to take a clearer shape. It also took on a name: *Creativity, Innovation, and Change*. See Figure 1.

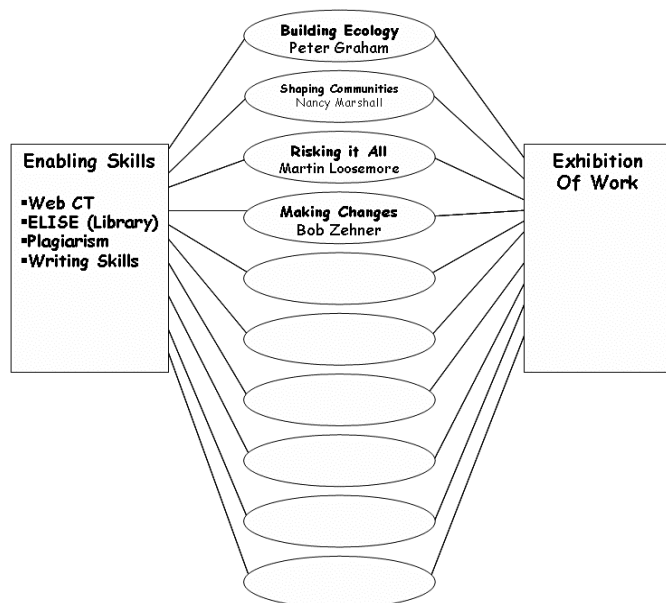


Fig.1 The FBE first-year common course structure

In addition to the diagram, a considerable amount of documentation was developed to obtain formal approval for the course from Faculty committees. Included here are paragraphs that were drafted to appear as part of an official course outline. Specifically:

### C. Course objectives and Handbook description

*“Creativity, Innovation and Change is a core course in Session 1, Year 1 for all undergraduates in the Faculty of the Built Environment. It reflects a commitment to cross-disciplinary perspectives in teaching and learning, and to multi-disciplinary approaches to the challenges faced by the built environment professions. The course has three identifiable modules. The first is structured around a series of five keynote lectures from prominent academics and practitioners focussing upon topics such as creativity, technology and change, and sustainable futures. Tutorials and tasks introducing fundamental skills and access to a range of library and other resources (e.g., Web CT) are interwoven around the keynote lecture topics. In the second module students are allocated (on the basis of preferences) into a range of six-week mini-courses run by separate lecturers where the emphasis is on a challenging topic of interest to the particular lecturer. This module includes the preparation of a student essay. The third module draws the course as a whole back together in an exhibition of the learning experiences of students in the themed mini-courses.*

#### Course Objectives

*All UNSW courses are expected to take into account a series of learning objectives, frequently phrased in terms of desired Graduate Attributes. Creativity, Innovation and Change has been expressly designed to address these desiderata, specifically, it aims to actively involve students in a range of skills needed for scholarly enquiry; to do this in a clearly cross-disciplinary and collaborative context; to enhance the capacity for critical thinking, creative problem solving, and active and reflective learning; to engage students in contexts that will encourage an appreciation of cultural diversity and societal change; and to provide a grounding in information literacy and in communication skills – visual as well as verbal and written.*

*Plainly said, the main objectives of Creativity, Innovation and Change are to provide an introduction to scholarly endeavour at UNSW that is challenging for students and staff alike, is interesting and enjoyable, and is relevant to contemporary society and the built environment professions.*

#### Learning Outcomes

*Students in Creativity, Innovation and Change will be provided with systematic opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving abilities through both individual and group assignments and exercises; to enhance communication skills (writing, electronic (WebCT), verbal and visual); and to become familiar with a range of UNSW Library and other resources, including those designed*

*specifically to address issues of appropriate referencing and scholarly research.”*

### III. STILL WAITING FOR LIFT OFF

*Creativity, Innovation and Change* successfully made it through the FBE's Education Committee, the Standing Committee, and the Faculty Board and was approved as a new course available to be incorporated into the FBE's undergraduate degree programs. During this process a request was made to fully develop formal proposals of examples of the seminar 'mini-courses'. Two such modules were developed, one on 'Building Ecology' by Peter Graham, and one on 'Shaping Communities' by Nancy Marshall.

At the end of the day, the Faculty chose not to adopt the FYCC, *Creation, Innovation and Change*. The best explanation is undoubtedly the simplest. Not changing degree programs is much easier than changing them, especially when professionally-oriented programs are feeling exceptional pressures from their professional bodies to incorporate more discipline-specific content. In that context, a faculty-wide "liberal arts" common course has limited appeal.

Even simple explanations can have depth and variety, and this situation is no exception. Just at the time that the Faculty might have made a decision to adopt the proposed FYCC the leadership of the two largest undergraduate programs in the FBE changed. The new Heads of Program were understandably looking forward to an opportunity to evaluate the degree programs they were moving into and to determine their own curriculum priorities. Their caution was taken up by the Dean and tables rapidly turned from a position where the adoption of the FYCC seemed to have a reasonably good chance to one where it was largely dead in the water.

It would be fair to say that not only the new Heads of Program were wary of the finalized proposal. Among the concerns that arose were ones about what would happen to the quality of teaching outside the FYCC if that course recruited all the faculty's best lecturers; and there were opposing concerns that the course would *not* attract the best lecturers it needed; there were concerns that the 'mini-courses' might overlap too much with core material that would eventually be taught; that students might not get into the mini-course they wanted; that there might not be a big enough lecture hall for the first stage of the course [there was]; that it would cost too much [our estimates suggested that it ought to save the FBE funds]; that Heads of Program should have been the members of the FYCC Group rather than the younger academics who were in the group; that the present system "ain't broke", so why try to fix it; and so forth.

All in all, the decision not to adopt the proposed and approved *Creativity, Innovation and Change* course was much the easier decision, and for this faculty at that point in time, probably the correct one as well.

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The outcome for the FYCC Group was certainly not one we were aiming for, but by the time (early 2006) when the decision was made not to implement the FYCC for the FBE in 2007, the Group could see the writing on the wall. Amidst the range of factors that came into play leading up to the "no go" decision, the primary theme tended to be the importance of curricular integrity within the faculty's disciplinary (professional) silos rather than strengthening connections between and across those curricula. It would be overstating matters to suggest that individual degree programs within the faculty were "broke" and needed fixing, but the advent of new Program Heads in two of the Faculty's major discipline areas did come at an especially propitious time for those programs when the expectations of their multiple accrediting professional bodies were evolving, along with expectations of students and of employers of our graduates in those fields. As a result, pressures to focus efforts on curriculum change within the professional degrees (rather than across the degree programs) were considerable and, in the end, these carried the day. As it happens, the changes that have occurred within revised professional programs have probably encountered almost as many implementation issues (availability of classrooms of the right size; providing enough choice for students; getting the best teachers in the right courses, etc.) as would have been faced with the implementation of the FYCC.

Even though a faculty-wide first year common course was not adopted by the FBE, incremental (or greater) changes have in fact occurred in each of the Faculty's degree programs in the last three years. One consequence of these changes has been an increasing willingness to look for ways to improve various aspects of program curricula, and an openness to further change. Of particular note, for example, are efforts to expand the number of cross-disciplinary electives (i.e., electives involving students from two or more disciplines) in later years of the Faculty's degree programs. (See Corkery *et al.* 2007; and Serle and Mate 2007.)

Although 2007 has not turned out to be the year the FBE adopted a faculty-wide common course in first year, members of the FYCC group continue to see the Group's collaboration and commitment well worth the time and effort. It is also encouraging to see that faculty-specific First-Year Common Courses are emerging elsewhere on campus – the Faculty of Engineering in particular – and that the model developed in the FBE is one of the inputs into discussions in the Faculty of Science. So, no lift off yet for the FBE, but.....

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The First Year Common Course Group met on a weekly or fortnightly basis from May 2004 on through the first half of 2005 when the 'Creativity, Innovation and Change' proposal was worked out in its essential details. The core group from the earliest meetings included Chris Gibson (Geography), Peter Graham (Architecture), Kate Low (Landscape Architecture), Nancy Marshall (Planning and Urban Development), Florence Phua (Building Construction and Management), Charles Rice (Architecture) and Bruce

Watson (Interior Architecture). The group was chaired by Bob Zehner (Associate Dean (Education)). Oya Demirbilek (Industrial Design) joined the group when Low left UNSW after Session 1, 2005. (Gibson and Rice left UNSW in 2006.)

Also to be recognized for their roles along the way are the Faculty's Dean, Peter Murphy, whose enthusiasm for the proposal in its earliest stages was crucial to getting things under way; Michele Scoufis, the Director of the UNSW Learning and Teaching Unit; Larry Hulbert, a Faculty consultant on curriculum development; Julie Sweeten of the UNSW Library, and Peter Murray, Presiding Member of the Faculty, who was instrumental in guiding the proposal through Faculty committees.

As FYCC convener and keeper-of-files, the opportunity to "write all this up" fell naturally to this paper's author. The structure and strengths of the proposal are very much the result of a genuine, committed collaborative effort on the part of all involved. Weaknesses of omission or commission in this paper are the responsibility of the author.

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