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# Making Connections between Teaching Practice and Learning Experience in First Year Design Education

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## ABSTRACT

At the College of Fine Arts (COFA), School of Design Studies we offer a four year, integrated, Bachelor of Design, where design is the discipline, not the individual studio practices. One of the challenges in designing the First Year Design Studio Curriculum is that it is necessary to prepare students for six possible studios in years 2 and 3, and they are:

Applied/Object, Environments/Spatial, Graphics/Media, Ceramics, Jewellery and Textiles. The first year also includes a number of contextual courses, Computing 1 & 2, Design History and Interactive Systems.

How is it possible to incorporate into 2X14 week sessions all that is required?

The first year of the Bachelor of Design, integrates theory, conceptual development and studio practice. As first year is the time to establish independent and critical ways of thinking, an integrated approach in the First Year is constructed to introduce an integrated approach.

The current structure has been in place since Session 1 2005. This structure introduces students to a mix of experiences and diverse values:

- A diverse range of skills
- a diverse knowledge base
- Global thinking patterns
- Effective problem solving skills and
- Learning transfer, where connections are made

During the continual development of first year studios the aim has always been to develop ways to teach critical and independent thinking skills, a design process and the practical studio skills needed to achieve innovative design outcomes.

Three key questions arise within an integrated design program are:

1. What does integration mean in design?
2. What does integration mean in a First Year design education?
3. How does integration translate in the upper years of a program when studio courses are specialised?

## INTRODUCTION

“Interdisciplinary is necessitated by complexity, specifically by the structure and behavior of complex systems”.(Newell 2001)

Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands responsible design that integrates understandings of appropriate ethical, social, environmental and cultural values with the knowledge and skills necessary to undertake work in a broad range of design areas. Therefore, design education requires teaching practices that lay the foundation for the education of professional designers who have the flexibility to practise their profession with appropriate knowledge, skills and values.

Traditionally, specialist design education has focused on materials, techniques and a list of elements and principles as the rationale for understanding design practice. By contrast, contemporary design practice emphasises the integration of these components with all of the values listed above, to position design as a truly effective activity in shaping contemporary life.

This conceptualisation of design practice means that design education must focus on modes of thinking that spring from an integration premise.

## STRUCTURE AND REASON

How is it possible to incorporate into 2X14 week sessions all that is required?

In first year Design Studios, we seek to integrate theory, conceptual development, and studio practice, establish independent and critical thinking patterns, students are introduced to an integrated approach to their learning.

First Year Studio comprises two, three-hour blocks of time each week for two sessions, the first studio is made up of a one-hour lecture and a two-hour skills workshop/studio, the second three hour block is a studio where integration of the skills and knowledge are brought together with the students concept or ideas and developed around a set brief.

**The Design Studio Lecture** supports studio practice by creating context and connections. It introduces the idea of a relationship between theory and practice, the elements, principles and language of design, so that the development of a design process and a visual language may begin where the emphasis is on the ability to communicate design intentions within the studio environment. The lectures introduce the idea of analytical processes whereby theoretical and philosophical understandings are applied to the possible creative solutions of a design problem.

Discussion revolves around concepts, ideas and issues, including;

- Issues – constructing and deconstructing Structures and materials  
Planar and linear elements  
Understanding space, form and volume  
Communicating ideas
- Theory - examines a broad range of theory in art, design and literature and how theory relates to what we do as designers.
- Philosophy - interrogates a range of philosophies and ideas.

**The Design Studio Workshop/Studio** is designed to locate and extend knowledge of the technical aspects of Studio, and the skills necessary to communicate design intentions, fulfill the aims of a brief and demonstrate the multi-disciplinary and integrated nature of the design process. Students are involved in a variety of projects, which facilitate the transition process through the First Year Studios to the more daunting process of Fourth Year Studio. The acquisition of these understandings is a continuing part of developing a design process and a visual language, which will enable students to effectively communicate their intentions.

**The Design Studio** locates and extends students knowledge of both the conceptual and technical aspects of the studio. It brings together the information derived from the lectures, drawing and making skills and an understanding of structure and form from the workshop/studio. Emphasis in this Design Studio is on the development of an integrated design process and the understanding of the concept as a tool and how a concept can work. The projects developed for the design studios encourage students to undertake extensive research, to experiment with their ideas, conceptualising the development processes that will contribute to the design outcome, building from project to project.

### Emerging Questions and Dilemmas

The key questions that arise within what we call an integrated design program are:

#### 1. What does integration mean in design?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary says:

**In'tegrate**, a. (Of parts) components, making up a whole, whole, complete.

Within the context of this Bachelor of Design my use of the term integrate, refers to the bringing together of skills, understandings, thinking patterns, making skills, drawing, and helping the student to cope with the uncertainty and become a risk taker, this synthesis is important to the Students development as competent, flexible, innovative designers.

One of the real problems in design education is to teach students as if design were a linear process and expect that they will understand that the design process is anything but linear.

This was made very clear to me early in my teaching career when a student asked during a critique "so the process is more circular not linear, it OK to go back and re-look at the problem and bring in other stuff and start again".

What does interdisciplinary mean in design?

'E. M. Forster once stated, "Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon" (1951/1993). By engaging the student in the

complexities of the material, interdisciplinary study attempts to go beyond spoon feeding so that the student learns not only the shape of the spoon but the shape and nature of thought as well'. (Sill 1996, p. 291.)

In the same article Sill (1996) extends the idea and our understanding of interdisciplinary

"...Interdisciplinary studies involve higher order thinking skills such as integration, creativity, and evaluation. While these are all skills that we hope a liberal education will instill in students, the interdisciplinary studies course provides an opportunity for us to guide the students in developing those skills rather than relying on chance for the students to figure out higher order thinking skills on their own." (Sill 1996, p. 292)

#### 2. What does integration mean in a First Year design education?

The aim of First Year Studios is to introduce and demonstrate the multi-disciplinary and integrated nature of the design process by bringing together all of the elements and processes required to undertake a design project.

Students are involved in a variety of projects, which address the acquisition of basic design concepts and principles, the language, materials, techniques and processes by which they are expressed. In Session One these projects concentrate on the elements, principles and the vocabulary of design and the potential as design tools. In session two the projects are more abstract allowing students to develop and apply these basic understandings, subsequent projects incorporate 3D forms, and spatial and temporal considerations. The acquisition of these understandings is the beginning of the developing a design process, and visual language enabling students to effectively communicate design intentions.

### EVALUATING THE COURSES

The studio courses are under continual evaluation through a range of questionnaires I have developed for students and staff and that are used for evaluation and possible improvements. The questionnaires are a useful tool for evaluating where first year is heading and how improvements can be continually made.

Initially students are asked a standard series of questions each session:

1. *Please indicate the level of challenge and difficulty*  
*Managing Your Study*  
*Staying Motivated*  
*Your Presentations*  
*Project 1*  
*Project 2*
2. *Indicate what you found to be the most challenging **Content** aspects of the course*
3. *Indicate what you found to be the most challenging **Skills** aspects of the course*
4. *In the Design Studio course what skills did you find you needed to use*

5. *Is there any specific aspect of the session you would care to comment on?*

In Session 1 2005 there were some comments about the lecture series e.g.

“[I] Found lectures lacked when talking about people and watching too many videos in a row!!” (Student Comment, 2/6/05)

“The studio lectures often [at] times seemed basic + unhelpful towards the brief which required a higher level of thinking” (Student Comment, 2/6/05)

“The variety of different kinds of lectures was good!! i.e.: one week having a video, another wk a slide show, another a guest lecturer, another on models and projects etc” (Student Comment, 2/6/05)

It is sometimes difficult to decide what to do. In Session 1 2006 the lecture series was reorganised and a new question was added to the questionnaire

*How useful do you think the lecture series has been in developing your projects?*

“very inspiring and thought provoking”. (Student Comment, 26/10/06)

“They have been good for developing inspiration and find a starting point”. (Student Comment, 26/10/06)

“very helpful as it allowed us to understand what the design was about but too much information in the lecture and too quick”. (Student Comment, 26/10/06)

“I find the lectures interesting, but find it difficult applying these lessons to my projects”. (Student Comment, 26/10/06).

Lectures remain with continual monitoring and upgrading for relevance and the question will remain on the questionnaire.

Tutoring Staff are very generous with their comments and feedback; The Staff Questionnaire had seven questions, six of which required a written response. The questions are similar to those the students were asked

There was only one comment from staff in the Staff Survey, 2/6/05 related to the Lecture Series,

“Making links between lectures and studio exercises seems difficult for many students”. (Staff Comment, 2/6/05).

When the question was asked in 2006 the feedback was helpful.

“Very good lectures – I think (...) strikes a good balance between theory/concept/practical very well. Always well prepared”. (Staff Comment, 26/10/06).

Some of the how to lectures have been excellent. Many of the examples used to illustrate points are architectural. (need more graphics, object analysis. Lectures that relate directly to projects were really interesting and rich. Unfortunately, I suspect many students use lectures as the sole source of their “research” and not a starting point”. (Staff Comment, 26/10/06).

I would have thought that the overwhelming problem for students in the Survey would have been the issue of workload, but in fact, approximately 60% of students in the 2/6/05 Survey, and approximately 65% in the 26/10/06 Survey indicated that for them *Time Management* was the key issue with *Learning to Think* close behind.

From the last two Staff Surveys there are a series of problems, which will need to be addressed over the next

couple of sessions:

- One of the ongoing difficulties for me as Coordinator of First Year is difficulty in finding casual staff who are able to understand and teach the diverse range of areas and skills required
- Students are very resistant to becoming independent learner which is possibly why they don't get 'concepts'
- Students find it very hard to manage their time and to stay focused
- Students feel overwhelmed by the new content, which for most students is completely new
- Lack of studio space/state of studios, promotes sense of isolation, students are not collaborating or learning from each other
- Students have no exposure to near-peers i.e. senior students
- The number of students who hold down fulltime employment in order to support themselves.

## THE TRANSITION FROM FIRST YEAR

### 3. How does first year and the ideas integration and interdisciplinary translate in the upper years of a program when studio courses are essentially specialised areas of study?

When a student arrives in Second Year design studio, I believe they face some problems. Second year is where they must choose three of the possible six “areas of study”, these six “areas of study” are taught by specialists, expert in that particular field, we have integration within an area, bringing together skills, understandings of that area, but interdisciplinary, no. I don't believe we make any attempt in second year to integrate the studio areas. The expectation is that in year four students will know how to achieve the complexity we require.

Over the past two years we have returned, after some time (about eight years), to modeling an interdisciplinary approach to studio teaching in session 2 of year three of the program. This approach encourages students to interrelate aspects of each discipline studied into a cross- disciplinary skill and knowledge base from which to broaden and expand the potential of their own creative practice.

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The following two comments come from the Staff Surveys.

“Some students come better prepared [in terms of academic skills] but most have problems with time management, lack of independent research and further investigation of issues raised in lectures.” (Staff Comment, 2/6/05).

“Understanding how to use a visual diary as a thinking tool

- Thinking in the abstract
- Eliminating “excess” and getting to the core of the problem.
- Learning to think conceptually for themselves and not always with half a mind on what is “expected” or on “marks”

I guess that comes with increased confidence and the

confidence comes with the marks.” (Staff Comment, 26/10/06)

I believe there is a need for some specific Staff Development which could identify needs and encourage staff to move away from ‘chalk and talk’ to better coordinating learning.

We need to adopt interactive and facilitative approaches to teaching through more regular and formal debriefings and discussion, observations, identification and resolution of problems as a group with mutual support rather than going it alone.

There are some specific student needs. We need to develop ways, which will encourage and support students towards independent learning and build confidence. We need to help students, individually with time management issues and thinking processes.

My plan for next year is to set up an Omnium Site (Omnium is an online learning and collaboration environment) for First Year students and staff, which will clearly articulate the standards required not just in a group, but across the year, using previous examples of student work, the learning objective of the courses, briefs, preparation notes for classes, links to relevant design sites, readings, discussion pages and galleries so students can see across the year what others are doing and how.

The process of integrating all courses across the first year program, four courses each Session, will begin with the use of the Omnium Site, the courses need to be mapped to ensure all content and assessment tasks are relevant and not repetitive, are timely, and satisfy the requirements of others involved in the First Year.

The goal then will be to clearly map the year against the University’s Graduate Attributes.

## CONCLUSION

Schon (1987), in “Educating the Reflective Practitioner”, discusses the paradox of learning to design. “He finds the artistry of thinking like an architect to be elusive, obscure, and mysterious. (Schon, 1987. p. 83) The student has difficulty bringing together the conceptual and the practical. Here Schon quotes Plato;

“But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you

come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know? (Schon 1987. p. 84)

He discuss the idea of the student knowing she needs to look for something but knows not what that something might be or how to find it. (Schon, 1987, p. 84) The process or the relationship between the student and content for the coordinator and the tutors is much the same.

Time management and learning to think in a particular way, have become the key issue for first year learning and teaching.

Time management is an issue that we will deal with initially by making adjustments to the structure of project briefs, changing the way in which we time student presentations and assessment tasks throughout the session. Each project will be broken up into smaller parts so that students do not get behind and then are unable to catch up.

Learning to think is more problematic, as a designer learning to think is about process and experience. More emphasis needs to be placed on the way we discuss and model processes for students and how we assess process within a project.

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