

Training the new media artist: Managing multiple media

Mike Leggett

The survival of the term 'new media' confounds the 20 years the technology has been around in art and design departments of the tertiary sector—the term survives possibly as the 'old media' users resist a technology with which they are not comfortable thus prolonging the redesign of courses and the redefinition of tertiary education within the era of digital media. The AFC/ABC on-line documentary broadband initiative recently demonstrated that government cultural administrators still think it's a matter of converting filmmakers to 'content providers.' Though the education industry is at last moving away from imposing such conversion upon the mature student, it is the younger students who are often best equipped to absorb the potential of digital technologies and utilise them outside such notions of educational progression.

In an attempt to harness the many, often conflicting possibilities of information technology, there has been an exponential growth in public and privately funded tertiary level courses and subjects, particularly in arts, design, information and communication departments over the past 10 years. Only some of the issues are discussed in this article. Marketing courses, until the dot com bubble burst, had not been difficult and the income from overseas fees formed the financial bedrock of many an enterprise.

For many reasons education has more recently become accepted as a lifelong process affecting all those who care about extending their knowledge of the world and even acquiring new skills, experiences and thoughts about it. The formal system of subjects, courses, assessments and qualifications have been augmented by centres, institutes and various research units to attract the validated research dollar as part of the dynamic development of a technology and arts practice still possessing the properties of the rhizome.

Innovation

Hybridity is increasingly encountered in the arts, and in the convergence of previously distinct communication industries. With such a flux, how do tertiary media arts course managers strike a balance between providing vocational skills and developing creative and aesthetic options within the contemporary discourses of commerce, design and the fine arts? Where providing competency training has been widespread, incorporating recent technologies into existing courses and curriculum has marked the secondary stage of realising digital medias' specificities

Martyn Jolly, Head of Photomedia at the **ANU School of Art** in Canberra says, "We have tried to integrate the teaching of new technology as quickly and as closely as possible into our existing curriculum. The distinction between the 'traditional' and the 'new' means much less to our students than it does to us. Specific vocational skills are redundant in 2 years. If you teach new technology 'workshops' isolated from the rest of the curriculum, you end up with really clichéd, superficial gee whizz results."

Josephine Starrs at **Sydney University's College of the Arts** aims "to familiarise students with the language of new media arts, some history of the area and the contextualisation of interactive media within screen culture." A broad approach to the subject in the tertiary sector usually includes a general first-year introduction to the visual arts, then becomes more focussed as options and electives are taken, as course strengths are identified. Starrs says that "students are asked to give seminars on current trends in digital cultures incorporating virtual communities, tactical media, mailing lists, moos, computer games, and internet radio. We examine different conceptual approaches to making use of the 'network', including issues to do with browsers, search engines, databases, shareware, social software and experimental software."

At the **Faculty of Arts, Victoria University**, **Sue McCauley** and **Michael Buckley** "do not tie course content to industry requirements as these are constantly changing. Rather we try to get students to critically engage with content issues for specific projects...industry placement for final year students is a part of the academic program."

The new **Faculty of Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology** indicates the pedagogic direction now beginning to show using teaching technique and program innovation specific to the perceived potentials of digital media. **Keith Armstrong**, a freelance multimedia and multiple-media producer and artist, lectures in the Department of Communication Design where the broad curriculum, as opposed to the mouse-jockey paddocks of the computer labs, is likewise central to the program, but with performance added. "We draw widely upon multidisciplinary sources and get the students off their computers wherever possible, lead them through simulation games and exercises set in contemporary environments. For narrative-based works we model through role-play where possible and development through interpersonal dialogue."

"We insist on lateral approaches, reward risk, develop marking schemes that take account of short term failures...a potent means for making students realise their deeply important role as designers/artists working within communities evolving within designed environments... [We] insist they can write text fluidly and cogently, persuade them that reflection is almost always a vital design tool, [teach them to] recognise, critique and steer well clear of multimedia's endless seas of entrenched clichés...[and] force deceleration so that they can listen and reflect more effectively and work slowly towards ideas of substance."

The School of Visual Arts, Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts within **Edith Cowan University** is perhaps an appropriately named setting for a wider reappraisal of the approach required. Students are regarded rather more as researchers who bring with them a vision and, in collaboration with the department, develop it employing what the head of school, artist **Domenico de Clario** [see page 37], describes as a "perceptual matrix", encouraged during the early part of the course. Design, installation, sound and video then form the mentored streams into which the cohorts move, having access to a shopfront gallery in downtown Perth which, in accommodation above, houses an artist-in-residence. As with several other institutions, cross-overs with Information Technology and Multimedia faculty courses are being carefully negotiated, as well as closer links with community groups and the facilitation of community services, de Clario having acquired a old cinema building 2 hours out of the city.

Resources

Is it a constant fight to retain a workable budget? "Yes, yes, yes!" was the reply from one of the teachers, as all areas and departments skate the peaks and ravines of the bean counters' graphs. **Alisdair Riddell** of the **Australian Centre for Art and Technology** at ANU, while supporting cross-departmental sharing of subjects, has great difficulty meeting the demand that this creates. Most faculties have specialised marketing officers to promote what is on offer as well as seek out what prospective students are prepared to pay. "Relatively speaking, income from overseas students allows access to good equipment" is how another correspondent described it, though the interests of the students in this area, following some disgraceful scams, are now protected by the CRICOS Provider system and new Commonwealth legislation.

"One of the greatest challenges in integrating new technologies into current pedagogical practices is explaining to those in control of budgets that the technologies classroom is inevitably more time-consuming and expensive than the format of lecture/tutorial." **Lisa Gye**, Lecturer in Media and Communications at **Swinburne University of Technology** goes on to point out: "For example, in a number of subjects I teach, students engage in a moderated discussion list about new technologies. Most academic workload models are not designed to account for the time that is spent reading and responding to such a list. Last year, the group discussion for **Issues in Electronic Media** averaged 30 posts a week with each post running to approximately 300 words. Until workload models do reflect these changes, academics are

going to continue with pedagogical strategies that are less time-consuming, like essay production, regardless of the relevance of the strategy to the content of taught material.”

Research grants and graduate fee income help support on-going postgraduate programs and the creation of a cultural area within the Australian Research Council (nonetheless tied to the long-standing traditions of ‘investigation’ in science circles) have begun to increase the options for the development of digital media methodologies.

Antagonisms

Ted Snell is the Chair of the **Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools** (ACUADS) and in a recent advertising report he states that for some graduates “...their degree provides direct access to a range of professions such as design, fashion and the new (sic) digital technologies. Each year these new graduates leave art and design schools with the skills to contribute to the economy and to maintain their on-going redefinition of our community.” The arts, it seems though, still need champions. Following some recent comments made by the Prime Minister, Snell goes on to conclude that “We are fortunate that they now have the trenchant support of our senior political leaders...”

Though faculties or departments in institutions have been encouraged over the years to seek links or intern arrangements with commercial companies or not-for-profit cultural centres, it is within cross-media teaching centres rather than places of employment that the breakdown of barriers between vocational and non-vocational pursuits exist.

Martin Jolly argues that “art and commerce are no longer antagonistic—they closely inform each other. The distinction for our students is much less relevant than it is to us. But it is always hard to get commerce interested in what we are trying to do because they are working on really tight margins and struggling to keep up, just like us.” Keith Armstrong is wary: “Of course there shouldn’t be and aren’t antagonisms [but the] constant push for ‘entertainment’ as a key goal within outcomes and the sidelining of art as a viable vehicle for research [has] something to do with a lack of understanding of the histories and convergences of art and media practices.”

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European Media Academy Day @ DEAF03_ARENA Thursday February 27, 2003

Introduction

Featured Academies

School of Art & Communication, Malmö University

Dept. of Experimental Radio, Bauhausuniversität Weimar

Intermedia Department, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts

Interaction Design Institute Ivrea, Italy

New Media Dept , HGKZ - Zürich School of Art and Design

Selected Background Articles

Neither Bauhäusler nor Nerd: Educating the Interaction Designer
Pelle Ehn

Intermedia: The Dirty Digital Bauhaus
e-mail exchange with János Sugár by Geert Lovink

Media Education at the Bauhaus University, Weimar
Charles A. Wütrich

Media Skanzen (Media Amusement Park)
János Sugár

How Creative Industries evokes the legacy of modernist visual art
Andrew McNamara

Training the New Media Artist: Managing Multiple Media
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Biographies

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