BDM Coursework Review Stage 2 Proposal Response

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The reflective institution

A number of points have been raised in the proposed coursework review for the Bachelor of Digital Media at COFA, some of which are either contradictory or fundamental misreadings of the structure and culture of the degree. In conducting any coursework review there would appear to be two key questions to be answered from the outset. These are

1. What are the teaching and learning activities that result in desirable graduate attributes?
2. How can the current course be improved to facilitate this?

John Biggs (2003), one of the seminal researchers of educational speaks of the *reflective institution*, that is, an institution that is reflective of its own structure and teaching practices as much as the individual teachers. Biggs describes a number of factors that inhibit good teaching, one of which is a quantitative mind-set. He argues that, whilst the quantitative approach suits administrators, it is a major source of mis-alignment within teaching.

> "Quantitative assumptions reduce complex issues to units that can be handled independently, rather than as a part of the larger interactive system to which they belong. Thus, the curriculum becomes a collection of independent competencies, basic skills, facts, procedures and so on; passing becomes a matter of accruing sufficient independent correct answers." (Biggs, 2003, p.278)

Biggs contrast this "measurement model" in which "performances need to be quantified, so they are reduced to correct/incorrect units of equivalent value that can be added" (2003, p.278) with a "good teaching" model. In the "good teaching" model "students need to learn holistic structures *that cannot meaningfully be reduced to units of equal importance.*" (2003, p.278. my italics)

Understanding the current BDM structure

The structure of the BDM is the most recently conceived within COFA. It has the benefit, therefore, of hindsight from the other degrees . Rather than being opposed to change, the staff within SOMA have actively challenged existing degree structures within the rest of the faculty. Our 2003 graduates produced the best work seen so far in the BDM and were at the very top of the rest of the students in other degrees. This is something we should both be proud of and aim to nurture. An important reason for this success has been the careful way the degree is structured.

Digital production is a relatively new process – unlike more traditional subjects (which may have been introduced at school levels) many of the tools and techniques are often new and complex to most students. The learning curve is steep and this can account for some of the dissonance of learning and what Stephen Brookfield (1998) calls "the certainty of public shaming" or "just not getting it". This feeling of discomfort is often an important aspect of the

learning process. Teaching the technique, however, forms only a small part of our process – our true task is to guide our students through that technical minefield so they can emerge as intact creative beings.

One of the ways of managing this, sometimes painful, learning process is to sequence the initial teaching and learning structures. The first two years of the degree are carefully planned to be constructively aligned with the learning process. We then gradually release the hand of the student until, by the third year, they can explore their own ideas and processes – within *any* media form they desire. The Digital Studio and Digital Portfolio core components of the third year allow students to specialise if they wish or to work across a range of disciplines, which many choose to do. They are not coursework-based modules.

Deep generalists for an uncertain future

A common misconception the BDM (in part to do with the word digital in the title) is that it is a heavily specialised technical degree. In fact, it is the opposite. Digital production techniques can be complex and technically demanding, but the result of these tools within the creative workflow is that they require a creatively generalist approach to accomplish the results our students have demonstrated this year. Only by maintaining a high number of core disciplines within the degree can we privilege the *creative processes* that are the fundamental learning outcomes of the BDM. It is important that our students are not just software jockeys – they can learn those skills in TAFE evening classes – but they do need to get on top of their digital craft skills. Like a concert pianist, they are taught to look beyond the mechanics of playing the piano and concentrate on expressing the music.

Anyone involved in any kind of media production needs to understand digital video production, from planning and shooting to editing, post-production and sound. They need to understand digital compression, interactivity, programming, image manipulation and asset management. All of these processes – whether making a piece of still work, an album, a website, DVD or film – involve the bringing together of multiple, multimedia assets to serve the realisation of an idea. The revolution of the digital production process is that these can all be done on the same machines within the digital environment and that the *overlap of skills allows this free-flow between traditionally disparate areas*. The description of the BDM as a "specialist" rather than "generalist" degree completely misreads the content and context of the pedagogical theories employed.

This approach of creating "deep generalists" is crucial for our future graduates and the changing world they face. Boud (1998) suggests

> "It is not necessarily desirable that teachers construct courses which always allow for the maximum exercise of autonomy on the part of students. If students have little experience of making decisions about structuring their learning on such a scale, the activity may be counterproductive and the course may simply give the appearance of promoting autonomy while actually inhibiting it. The criteria which should be used are that students ultimately become more effective learners and more able to respond to the variety of environments with which they will be faced during their lives." (p. 25)

This approach also consistent with UNSW's "Generalist Undergraduate Single Degree Programs – Model Requirements" cited in the review document, but erroneously applied to the BDM. To reduce to the degree to a number of mix-and-match units fails to understand or acknowledge the issues and constructive alignment outlined above.

Lastly, forcing students to choose a major and thus "increase the degree of specialization" flows against every notion of a generalist program. Many of our students believe, when first entering the degree, that software skills in a certain area are all they need to guarantee them employment when they leave. As both professionals and educators, the BDM staff are very much aware that the opposite is the case and teach against this preconception accordingly.

The decision to major in one subject area is not only detrimental to the complete education that we should be offering students, but is also an impossible choice for students to make so early in their degree. By the second semester students will have barely scraped the surface of many subjects and have not experienced some others at all. They will have also experienced some of the dissonance described earlier and may tend towards the safety of subjects they already have knowledge in. Thus we would end up with narrowly focussed students whose degree education has contracted rather than expanded their field of knowledge. Both of these are sorry answers to the questions of graduate attributes and teaching processes that should form the basis of this review.

References

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