

Bachelor of Digital Media Coursework Review Stage 3

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Background

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. Coursework Review "Stage 1" was completed over a long period with the consultation of staff who have knowledge and experience of Digital Media and Media Arts practice. Coursework Review "Stage 1" represented the outcome of an ever-changing degree structure over the first three years of the BDM's existence, combined with a lengthy, faculty-wide examination of all degrees.

The Coursework Review "Stage 2" is a complete rethink that has not been envisaged, developed or revised with the assistance of any relevant consultation from the BDM staff. It applies generalist mathematical formulas on a faculty-wide basis, ignores the different aims (and strengths) of the BDM degree, and displays an unacceptable lack of knowledge of the reasoning behind the three-year BDM structure.

The reflective institution

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 theory, speaks of the *reflective institution*, that is, an institution that is as reflective of its own structure and teaching practices as 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 emphasis)

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 as a student-centred learning environment.

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. 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.

Majors and minors

Forcing students to choose a major and minor 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 sequencing and combination of the current BDM acknowledges the inter-relationships of skills in different practices as described above. The proposed early choice of major and minor components limits the student's abilities that are currently gained from the core.

The decision to major in one subject area is not only detrimental to the comprehensive 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 university 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.

Specific feedback to points in draft 2 of the coursework review stage 2

Page 1 – Opening paragraph – "Generalist Three-year programs":

*"At present student learning is largely structured along pre-set paths and directions, with either **no choice outside of the elective stream (BDM)** or choice only as to which major to undertake (BFA) "*

- Here, as everywhere else in the document, the open creative content and specialisation afforded in the 3rd year of the BDM (one third of the degree) is completely ignored. The quantitative formulas applied to the current and "Stage One" models treat BDM 3rd year subjects as if they are discipline-tied, which they are not.

Page 1 – 3rd bullet-point paragraph:

"Programs would have Introductory courses at Stage One would [sic] be prerequisites for entry into Majors, but would always have alternate pathways". This is later expressed as being 12UOC, and is suggested as comprising "Introduction to Digital Media" and "The Language Of Digital Media".

- It is not possible for a student to be adequately introduced to the various concepts and technologies involved in Digital Media practice at this sort of level. This is a sub-TAFE level of knowledge. This is not adequate education, and totally disavows the process by which students change their practise after experiencing new areas. How can a student choose "between" Digital Video, Digital Sound, 3D animation, Digital Composite and Multimedia Authoring on this paltry basis, and essentially rank their first two choices into "major" and "minor"? This would cripple the BDM degree. As mentioned previously, students would be forced into choosing specialisation in areas that they either have not experienced at all or have barely touched upon.
- There are no "alternative pathways" to basic knowledge within sequenced technological learning. The unfinished idea in this sentence also highlights an essential contradiction in the new "Stage 2" model – if degree structures are loosened and "discipline" areas refined, there will obviously also be less "alternate" ways to learn a particular practice, which is the strength of both the existing structure and the "Stage 1" revisions. For example, the teaching of Digital Composite courses within Digital Media and Photomedia differs according to the degree context, yet overlaps enough to allow these course to be used as pre-requisites for advanced courses in either degree. The "Stage 2" channelling of teaching into "disciplines" would have the effect of lopping off these degree-based differences, and result in bland channelling of diversities in a model to

suit all COFA students. This radically lessens the educational possibilities for all concerned.

Page 14 – Structure as defined on the lower half of the page:

This re-structure would require a radical re-structure of staffing levels across all disciplines across the faculty. While our discussion on restructuring at this stage is taking place on a purely ideological level, it should be noted that COFA must undertake a comprehensive analysis of subsequent *staffing* and *resource* implications before any implementation of the Coursework Review is scheduled.

Page 18 – "Possible Table of Major Courses"

It is fortunate that this table is marked "indicative only", in that it casually throws two of our discipline areas into the "upper level", presumably making the assumption that students could rank 3D animation or Digital Sound as either a "major" or "minor" or 'non' component of their degree without any direct experience of these disciplines.

2005 BDM schema and new elective percentages

The BDM is in its fourth year and continues to evolve, although the exceptional quality of graduating students this year and extremely low attrition rate is evidence to the success of the program. In the attached document, BDM Schema 2005, you will notice a change in the number of electives offered in the first year. This acknowledges the greater need for program flexibility in the first year, as recommended in the coursework review document. The first semester of the second year, however, remains free of electives as this is the core of the degree and enables students to make informed choices for their subsequent semesters.

The elective percentages grow in the second semester of the second year and third year to 50%. Note, that although Digital Studio and Digital Portfolio are core subjects, they are completely studio-based. This student-centred approach allows students to work across any disciplines they desire – this is only possible having completed the essential core skills and competencies earlier in the degree. The degree remains flexible and generalist, particularly towards final semesters, which reflects the students' growing maturity as creative individuals, fosters future research-based study and lifelong autonomous learning.

References

- Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd ed.)*. Buckingham SRHE & Open University Press.
- Brookfield, S. (1998). On the certainty of public shaming: working with students 'who just don't get it'. In Rust, C. (Ed.), *Improving Student Learning*. Oxford: The Oxford centre for staff learning and development.
- Boud, D. (1998). Moving towards autonomy. In Boud, D. (Ed.), *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning* (pp. 19-39). London: Kogan Page.