

Breaking down barriers: the implementation of work integrated learning strategies to transition creative and performing artists to industry

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The creative industries sector is complex and competitive, characterised by non-linear career paths driven by the individual, thereby requiring participants to have strong networking and work creation capacities. This paper reports on key work integrated learning strategies designed to enhance the transition of graduates to the creative industries sector and increase their capacity to succeed within this rapidly growing area of the global economy. Following contextualisation of the key issues, data gathered from employers and graduates in regional northern Australia is presented. A recently developed curriculum task is then described, which requires students to research and network directly with professional practitioners in the creative industries. Feedback on the process is presented and which reveals that, while challenging, it assists students in breaking down conceptual barriers to industry and improves their overall preparation for sustainable work in the sector.

Keywords: Artists, creative industries, networking, work integrated learning

INTRODUCTION

Students around the world continue to enrol in higher education programs in the creative and performing arts (Harbour, 2005; Jeffri, 2004). The global creative and cultural sector includes highly trained practitioners, with a significantly higher number of university graduates compared to other sectors (Bauer, Viola & Strauss, 2011; Jeffri, 2004; Potts, 2009). In addition, graduates from the creative and performing arts will inevitably enter a highly competitive environment where there are “far more recruits ... than can be absorbed into available positions in the field” (Røyseng, Mangset & Borgen, 2007, p. 10). The sector to which they graduate, increasingly being referred to as the creative industries (e.g. Flew & Cunningham, 2010), is very different to many other areas of employment (Bennett, 2007). Ellmeier describes the sector as typically involving ‘part-time work, marginal employment, short-term employment and employee-like pseudo-self-employment’ (2003, p. 10). Success in the creative industries is also reliant on individual and collective capacities to be enterprising or entrepreneurial in practice (Bridgstock, 2010; Ellmeier, 2003; Peltz, 2011; Throsby & Zednik, 2011).

PREPARING GRADUATES FOR CAREERS IN THE CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTS

Work integrated learning or ‘WIL’ has gained increasing attention in the literature in recent years as a means by which to link theory to practice (Patrick *et al.*, 2008). One of the key theoretical principles underpinning WIL is the social process of experiential learning as outlined by Kolb (1984), or what Beard and Wilson describe as the ‘sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment’ (2006, p. 2). While it has been a feature of many higher education disciplines for many years, (e.g. Education, Social Work, Hospitality), WIL has a shorter history in the area of creative and performing arts in Australia. There is however an emerging focus on WIL and across a range of areas including Design (Franz, 2007), Music Technology (Draper, 2008; Draper & Hitchcock, 2006), Visual Arts (Lord, 2010), Creative Writing (Hains-Wesson, 2012) and Performance (McKinnon & Lowry, 2012). While these studies reflect emerging practices and pedagogies, they each provide evidence of the benefits that WIL brings to students, including knowledge of work practices, greater understanding of the broader employment context, or direct opportunities to benchmark their work with industry standards.

RESEARCH AIMS AND INTENT

This paper reports specifically on a second year undergraduate core subject designed to provide students with a deeper understanding of the complexities and realities of the creative industries sector in which they will seek to work, thereby increasing their capacity for potential success in developing a sustainable career. It involves three key areas:

- Learning about career theory, career types and paths in the creative industries sector;
- An industry research and networking folio; and
- A formalised internship in industry under the supervision of a professional practitioner.

To date, student engagement with and reflections on careers, career theory and internships have been investigated and reported respectively (Daniel, 2010; Daniel & Daniel, 2013), with both of these WIL-oriented strategies proving valuable to the majority of students. This paper therefore focuses on the industry research and networking folio, which is designed to connect students directly to the creative industries sector and to practitioners in the field.

METHODS

As part of a focus on research-led teaching and therefore the embedding of current industry knowledge and feedback into the subject curriculum, the researchers developed two online surveys, one for graduates of the school's programs and the other for employers in the region. The surveys asked participants to rate a series of skills and attributes that were regularly identified in the literature on employability issues for creative and performing artists (e.g. Daniel & Daniel, 2013; Ellmeier, 2003; Peltz, 2011; Throsby & Zednik, 2011), and to provide advice to students on how to best prepare for a career in the creative industries. In terms of the sample, 250 recent graduates and 120 current employers on the school's database were invited to participate. Participation rates were generally positive, with 91 graduates (36% response rate) and 51 employers (42.5% response rate) fully completing the respective surveys.

Table 1 below overviews employer and graduate ratings of selected pre-requisite skills or attributes required for success in the creative industries. The mean rating result is presented for each item, with participants using a scale of 1 – not at all important, to 5 – extremely important.

TABLE 1. Employer and graduate ratings of pre-requisites for success in the creative industries

Pre-requisite for career success	Graduates (n=91)	Employers (n=51)
Make and maintain contacts	4.6	4.5
Ongoing development of expertise and skills	4.6	4.6
Development of a Portfolio	4.3	4
Passion for the art form	4.5	4.4
Initiative, confidence and self-promotion	4.6	4.4
Persistence, determination and resilience	4.7	4.5
Acquire and develop business skills	4.3	4.2
Volunteer or complete work experience	4.2	3.8
Develop strong communication skills	4.6	4.4
Engage regularly in reflective practice	4.1	3.8
Create a niche market and specialise	3.7	3.3

The feedback reveals that graduates and employers regard a number of attributes and skills as very important. Graduates rate most items slightly higher than employers, which could reflect the fact that they are actively aiming to develop a work profile and/or gain employment. The data certainly point to the fact that success relies very much on an individual's capacity to be motivated, networked and knowledgeable about industry realities. These findings are presented to the second year students early in the semester, in order that they are given a foundation set of insights into skills, attributes and qualities they will arguably require for a successful career. Following this, they are provided with an overview of the research and networking folio assessment task. This folio requires them to:

- Research and identify a series of tangible opportunities that they will pursue in future and across eight areas: 1) grants, 2) competitions, 3) scholarships, 4) conferences, 5) courses/workshops/residencies, 6) representative organisations or associations, 7) key stakeholders and/or artists in your field, 8) other opportunities; and
- Complete a series of ten case studies of practitioners in industry, including a minimum of five working internationally.

The key objective of the second part of the folio is to enable students to apply theory and exploit data presented to them in lectures to examine how they link to contemporary practice. In terms of the specific process of contacting practitioners, students are introduced to ethics and communication protocols and provided with a range of strategies by which to engage with potentially busy and time-poor professional practitioners. For each case study, students are directed to work to a template which requires that they identify and document the reasons they have chosen the practitioner, the skills and attributes identified as needed for a career in the area, as well as general advice and suggestions. They are then required to summarise the experience of networking with this person as well as how they will apply this new knowledge to their career planning and development.

It is also explained to students how the case study section of the folio, in particular, is designed to move them out of their comfort zone into a learning zone under the guidance of staff, as per the educational theory of Vygotsky (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). Further, in addition to new knowledge, it is explained to students that this experientially-focused task will enable them to develop enhanced capacity through skills and attributes identified as significant by employers and graduates (as per Table 1 above), most notably persistence, resilience, networks, initiative and communication skills.

RESULTS

The anonymous feedback presented in formal evaluation systems proposes that students appreciate the real-world nature of the tasks and the benefits that they gain from engaging directly with industry practitioners. In the previous three years of feedback, the majority of student comments presented were favorable about the benefits of engaging with this task. For example, in terms of the most recent feedback presented on the subject as a whole (26 of 91 students voluntarily participated), several positive comments were presented, including:

- *The folio was an eye opener and helped me evaluate what I was doing in the arts.*
- *It has given me much more confidence ... I have met new people and discovered new work.*
- *A lot of work but I feel I know more about the industry and can have an intelligent conversation about it.*
- *Being made to contact professionals in our field was a very valuable experience.*
- *It took me out of my comfort zone and out to make contacts.*
- *I learned a crazy amount about life, difficulties, how professionals in my area work, and how to contact and talk to industry professionals.*

At the same time, the following comments reflect the difficulties and level of challenge that some students experience:

- *I found it hard to contact so many people.*
- *The network portfolio is massive - it could be broken up into easier parts.*
- *Portfolio was too extensive.*
- *There needs to be a change to the marking to allow for us to not get replies from industry practitioners.*

It is clear that some students will struggle with direct industry contact and also the fact that many practitioners are very busy and will simply not be in a position to reply. Indeed it is often the students' lack of confidence, fear of rejection or no reply, or concern that they won't be taken seriously that is raised during class workshops and is an ongoing issue for the educators.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reported on a specific work integrated learning strategy designed to engage students directly with industry, through both research and networking, the latter representing a challenging but rewarding experience for most learners. For most students, the task of having to engage with industry practitioners provides them with an expanded network that enhances their capacity for success in the creative industries sector. Further, it requires students to reflect on how these networking experiences enable them to link research and theory to practice, given they apply these insights towards their career plans and goals. The area of students' networking with practitioners in the creative industries is certainly an area with additional research opportunities, such as the issue of student confidence, with the researchers frequently observing several students who create significant barriers for themselves as they approach the task of networking beyond the higher education environment. Therefore, the next phase of research might involve an exploration of issues around confidence, initiative,

resilience and persistence, these no doubt highly complex and intertwined factors given the inherently personal nature of the creative process.

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