

Crossing Boundaries: promoting cross-disciplinary projects in four creative arts faculties

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Abstract

This paper examines the process of creating a cross-disciplinary collaborative moving image culture within a number of faculties at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. Students and staff from the areas of Film Production and Animation at Griffith Film School (GFS), and Music Technology and Composition at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU), have been integrating creative practice and artistic outputs in order to foster new multi-platform exegetical artworks. This process encourages students to gain insights from practitioner-lead action based research. Consequently, this paper also responds to the inherent opportunities within such collaborations that enable students to develop a deeper understanding of relevant art practice, allowing an integration of professional traits into the practical aspects of the learning landscape. This paper therefore includes a brief description of process, project development, successes, shortcomings and insights, leading to plans for the future development and continued expansion of the project.

Keywords

Learning and teaching, cross-disciplinary, music, film, animation, moving image, collaboration.

Introduction: Background and Context.

This paper reports on a learning and teaching initiative between the Animation department of Queensland College of Art (QCA), the Film Production department of Griffith Film School (GFS), and the Music Technology and Composition departments of Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU). The project involves final year students in all programs. All three schools are faculties of Griffith University, located at the South Bank Parklands in Brisbane, Australia. QCGU and QCA were institutions in their own right until amalgamation with Griffith University in the late 1980s as part of the Australia-wide Dawkins tertiary education reforms. GFS was created in 2005 as a specialist arm of QCA.

The three faculties occupy two locations on South Bank, with GFS as part of QCA at one end of South Bank, and QCGU located toward the middle of South Bank, a 15-20 minute walk from QCA / GFS. This is pertinent to this report because, despite the close proximity of the three Griffith University constituents, there has traditionally been minimal interaction

between them. Academics at both locations are known to each other and interact at semi-regular intervals. However, very few formal opportunities exist for academics to engage at deep levels, and until recently, no embedded opportunities existed for students to work collaboratively on group projects. There is certainly a long-standing desire on the part of key academics at all locations to combine forces. However this has proven much more difficult to achieve than good intentions afford. The reasons for this are multi-various.

It is recognised that tertiary education is under a huge strain. Examples include pressures related to student intake, massification of education systems, decreased overall funding, the devolution of administrative responsibilities to academics, expanded responsibilities within workloads and the increasing requirement to rationalise and streamline academic-student interaction. As a result, Western tertiary institutions have had to embrace pedagogical models that serve to compartmentalise, pigeon-hole and separate students' educational opportunities (Rothery, Dorup & Cordewener, 2006; Dagger, Connor, Lawless, Walsh & Wade, 2007). That is, degree programs are divided into year level and course codes both on-line and off, by school-like timetables, discipline-based groupings and even into class groupings.

The tertiary education environment is also recognised as being increasingly populated by drop-in style students – those who spend a significant amount of time off-campus, dropping into campus to come to classes or visit facilities when required or convenient for them. Therefore, in university education, students may well be separated from the rest of the cohort and the ambience of social and intellectual communities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004).

Further, and perhaps more importantly, academics may be just as removed from important peer and professional networks within their own institutions as a result of related pressures. The overarching importance of academic networks is in relationship to the creation of a learning environment where inter-departmental collaboration sets a model for all levels of interaction, and where students are exposed to the shaping of social and community structures born from the sorts of passion-based and intrinsically motivated interactions commonly found in professional communities (Hitchcock, 2009a).

However, notwithstanding any silos that exist between the Music Technology, Composition Film,

and Animation programs, there is a common emphasis on problem based learning (Sweller, 1988; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007), scaffolding (Brown et al., 1989; Rogof et al., 1996), and collaboration and mentoring from industry aware and capable staff. The curricula are designed to prepare students with awareness and skills to seek both jobs and careers in related disciplines in order to improve their ability to achieve long-term and successful careers in changing market places. Herein it is important to understand the distinction between jobs and careers, as the distinction is philosophically central to the epistemological development of creative professionals. Hitchcock (2009b, p. 3) proposes that:

A career indicates a concerted and long-term series of endeavours undertaken over a significant period of a person's life where there is opportunity for advancement and progress. In contrast, the term job is more suggestive of short-term employ, and an often pragmatic rather than passionate means of earning.

Regardless of any distinctions between the two however, the workplace opportunities that graduates can expect to move into are still largely project based, with intense pressures to be self-driven, proactive, confident and innovative in recognising and creating opportunity. Professional careers in many music, moving image and gaming related disciplines have long been mobile, transitory, project based and network driven with considerable advantages for those individuals who can cross disciplinary boundaries. Students cannot expect to walk into careers or career-related jobs with easily-framed responsibilities where employer direction is constantly provided and daily context decided within simpler long-term frames of reference. As Brown (2006, p.49) observes:

The workforce is increasingly consisting of individuals who are pursuing portfolio careers as self-employed, freelance, casual or part-time, not with a single employer or even industry.

Academics are also cognisant that the more successful graduates tended to be the ones that could apply themselves to multiple projects, often working in roles they did not anticipate on entry to study. Further, successful graduates seemed to have the ability to rise above any penchant to compartmentalise facets of their learning experiences, and to defy influences to rationalise the division of important synergies into discrete pigeonholes despite systemic and sometimes subliminal influences to the contrary.

With this as a provocation, there was a need for the creation of cross-disciplinary collaborative projects in an effort to integrate professional traits into the practical aspects of the learning landscape. Accordingly, the need was to create opportunities that would reflect the sorts of transformative knowledge sharing structures occurring in professional workplaces. These structures were intended to nurture

sharing of cultural norms, vocabulary, and form and function as a “community of learners” (Short & Burke, 1991) where learning was explicitly an integral part of the practice (Wenger et al., 2002), and participants would be afforded the opportunity to create and decipher community patterns. They would also experience a form of situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where the focus of literacy was transposed from one of individual expression to one of community involvement (Jenkins, 2007). Importantly, two central goals were (a) to foster engagement in intellectual and practical pursuits that may be unfamiliar to them, but which they are likely to encounter in their professional careers, and (b) to reflect aspects of professional communities where the responsibility for knowledge creation is shared or socially constructed among the students (Bandura, 1977; Lave and Wenger, 1991) rather than ‘delivered’ to students by a lecturer.

To this end, a project was initiated in 2005 by Matt Hitchcock (QCGU), Paul Draper (QCGU), Andi Spark (QCA) and Trish Fitzsimons (GFS), which has continued to expand and morph as an action research project over the last five years. What follows is a brief description of process, development, successes, shortcomings and insights leading to plans for the future development and continued expansion of the project.

Phase 1: 2006 - 2007

Attempts were made in 2005 to bring groups of students together. However some significant challenges associated in getting multiple cohorts of academics and students from different programs in different locations together in one spot at the same time meant that the first time this collaborative project gained some real traction was in 2006. As a result of the 2005 experiences, strategies were put into play in 2006 that created a mutually agreed time where third year students from all participating programs were simply asked to drop all other commitments in favour of a single four-hour combined workshop. This workshop occurred at the start of the calendar year in the third week of teaching. Lecturers from Music Technology, Film and Animation introduced the workshop by briefly recounting some key experiences of crossing boundaries as a creative professional. This provided context for the workshop as well as a relevancy framework for the students.

Following the staff presentations, students from Music Technology, Animation and Film were then asked to present, or pitch, a five minute exegesis of their current and proposed work in mind of selling the idea to the larger talent pool. Summary information about each pitch was recorded in text format along with contact details for each group or individual. Students were then encouraged to communicate with each other to collaborate on projects, with academics advising on managing timelines, expectations,

problem solving, networking and crossing boundaries as students brought these to the attention of academics.

What became evident at the end of the first two years, however, were some trends that were emerging over time despite interventions and encouragement from academics. These included:

- A core misalignment (which was easily addressed once discovered to be an impediment for students) between the Film and Animation programs and the Music Technology program in terms of assessment design. This is where Film and Animation students had a single year-long project with very late submission deadlines at the end of each year. Conversely, Music Technology students had faster turn-around projects with deadlines for multiple completed projects at the end of each semester.
- Film and Animation students leaving their collaborative approaches until the end of the academic year as a result of their work consisting of a single large-scale year-long project. Many Film and Animation students were therefore focussed on everything other than music for most of the year, often approaching Music Technology students in the last two weeks of the year for collaboration. This would include requests for a composer to compose a full score, a producer to organise and rehearse a full ensemble, the sourcing of studio time, recording of the ensemble, mixing the score and sound tracks, post-produce the overall result and finally combine the sound with the vision. This meant that outcomes were often not being realised except for those students with already high levels of organisation and detailed project awareness.
- Due to negative word of mouth feedback, Music Technology students were becoming reticent to undertake film projects, consequently missing out on beneficial opportunities for learning and network development. This was therefore a “failure of potential” rather than a “failure to produce”, where failure of potential is more easily counteracted through intervention by academics.

Phase 2: 2008 - 2009

As a result of the outcomes from Phase 1, a decision was made in Music Technology to create an assessment environment that explicitly set up the idea of multi-staged long-term projects. These had already existed in the area in other contexts. However it became apparent that there was a need to formally recognise and separate whatever stages were appropriate to their involvement in large-scale moving image projects. This resulted in Music Technology issuing learning contracts to participating students at the start of the year. These learning contracts allowed Music Technology students to take a more pro-active stance in the project stages because not only were they required to plan out how their year long assessments

would look at the end of each stage, they also had to communicate with their film and animation collaborators on a much deeper level in order to ensure that (a) there was an appropriate breakdown of stages, (b) the timelines were realistic and achievable, (c) all parties understood associated timelines and responsibilities, and (d) the overall plan would be approved by their academics.

An example of a Music Technology learning contract might therefore include four assessment submissions that could cover stages such as:

[1] mid-semester 1: story-board with musical genres / style examples;

[2] end-semester 1: animatic¹ with mocked-up original musical score using virtual instruments;

[3] mid-semester 2: recorded dialogue, sound effects, developed score with rough visual edits; and

[4] end of semester 2: finished product.

The contract is then year-long and allows for a single project to be tracked across multiple courses and multiple assessment items in order to align with GFS' single course / single project structure.

Yet there still existed a considerable gap between the collaborations being undertaken by undergraduate students and the demands of higher-end professional practice as understood by the academics. The gaps, however, were not only in the “know-what” or “know-how”, but also in relation to “being” someone, where “mastering a field of knowledge involves not only “learning about” the subject matter but also “learning to be” a full participant in the field” (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 4). In this context, learning to “be” is about knowing how to learn, negotiate and appropriate the “ways” of different professions (Wenger et al., 2002), where the establishment of a healthy collaborative culture plays an important role in relation to students “being” or “becoming” someone (Brown, 2006).

Until the adoption of collaborative GFS / QCA / QCGU ventures, Film and Animation students were forced to either compose their own music or to call on the services of musically-inclined friends to create music for them. Consequently, rather than situating their practice in multiple specialist contexts, the Film and Animation students were often primarily focussing on high quality visual aspects with sound

¹ An animatic is a rough cut of a film, pieced together from panels taken from the creator's storyboards using editing software such as Final Cut Pro. The animatic provides a quick and effective means of determining camera angles, action, shot length and overall pacing. This often takes weeks to prepare and extremely valuable for a composer and sound designer to work to. For animators, the animatic is something that is under continual revision for much of the pre-production and production phases of the film-making process.

treated as peripheral or ancillary. This may have occurred through an impression in some students that this approach would result in a less challenging path to completion, but at the same time negated any requirement for students to have to learn, negotiate or indeed appropriate the ways of other special sub-disciplines. Consequently, the results often included poor image / sound balancing and a general lack of musical coherence.

While collaborations occasionally took place between music and film students, the nature of these projects were student driven with minimal faculty support. This therefore resulted in lost opportunities for academic mentorship with regard to the creation of coherent and efficient workflows and appropriate levels of interaction between the project participants. This placed stress on tight production schedules and endangered the efficacy of creative outputs.

Of considerable significance in this phase was an alteration in the structure of assessments at GFS / QCA. In addition to the year-long projects, three minute fast turn-around projects were introduced in order to capitalise on the benefits of action research approaches to learning. These had a significant impact on the nature of collaborations between the students because they provided very tangible and short-term deadlines where students could form, develop and negotiate multiple ways of accomplishing tasks and mutual interaction. This could then form the basis for ongoing deeper professional relationships in year-long projects where students were learning to “be” and “become”.

Phase 3: 2009-2010

In 2009, a number of developments changed the context and nature of this collaboration. Both GFS and QCGU hired new permanent lecturers with a view to expanding project and interdisciplinary capabilities. In the Conservatorium, this included the appointment of a lecturer in Music Sound and the Moving Image, a response to developments in film music pedagogy in other territories. The result of this has been a deepening of exchanges.

The benefits of a new Conservatorium appointment included a more explicit inclusion of the Composition department at the Conservatorium. This was a result of Kim Cunio’s background and profile as a composer.

Subsequently in Semester 2, 2009, an informal series of lecture exchanges was initiated between QCGU and GFS. The philosophical and procedural domains included composition workflow to film students, and film aesthetics to composition and technology students.

These exchanges led to an increased awareness amongst each cohort about the complexities inherent in working collaboratively across the sub-disciplines, and the development of social and intellectual

communities. This was achieved through the sharing of cultural norms, vocabularies and a greater awareness of what disciplinary expertise meant to each group.

A number of students underwent a paradigm shift in their understanding of creative potential and workflows, where individual student work was often significantly informed by newly found contexts. For example, Composition and Music Technology students were swapping skill-sets through passion-based and intrinsically motivated interactions. This often took the form of Composition students assisting Music Technology students with scoring and arrangement approaches, while Music Technology students assisted composition students with digital audio workflows and approaches. This also extended into all participants of the collaborations, with Film and Animation students similarly affecting and being affected by the Composition and Music Technology students. This can be seen as an example of students learning to “be” in cross-disciplinary contexts.

Further, it became apparent that film and music students were starting to co-own projects, as opposed to the former GFS model where the composer was brought in to work to a set music brief at the end of a film.

One outcome from the developing collaborations was the strategic use of a Conservatorium course which could serve as a structured base in which to house these projects with a more direct opportunity for staff to mentor students in the concepts of functioning as a community of learners. The course chosen was a third year Music Technology course called ‘Sound Composition’.

Sound Composition is a course designed to support and develop technology based and collaborative music making. Initially designed to facilitate sound art projects within the Conservatorium, Sound Composition also allows reflective project based work within the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre’s (QCRC) model of artistic practice as research. New compositions can be realised in multiple formats, which include installation, works for performers and live electronics, acousmatic works and computer generated scores.

In Semester 2, 2009, Music Technology students were joined by three animation students from the Griffith Film School. Collaborative works were encouraged and students responded to the challenge by working together from conception to realisation. There were three significant outcomes to this course:

- The presentation of a music theatre work realised with a combination of live performance and sampling. This work was composed by a Film School student who presented traditional scores to Conservatorium vocal students and instrumentalists.

- Real time VJ-ing within newly composed multi-channel surround sound installation works. These works involved the real time manipulation of animation as an essential part of the live performance.
- Improvised soundtracks to newly created animation works. This “comprovisational”² process has since been identified as an area of future collaboration between the Film School and Conservatorium by the Directors of both GFS and QCGU.

In Sound Composition 2010, Conservatorium students again responded to the challenges of working within visual media. In this case, the majority of students shot and edited their own film as part of the composition process. The Conservatorium purchased a number of portable cameras, which students were able to borrow for the duration of the course. These films were not framed as an act of reportage but as an attempt to create new music / image artworks for live performance. Although music technology students were able to quickly adjust to the demands of this new workflow, the aesthetics of film-making were understandably not mastered. However this experience provided a positive challenge to extend students’ skills by encouraging Conservatorium students to enrol in specific film courses.

Sound Composition and student music / film collaborations have contributed to a deepening of moving image culture within the Conservatorium. At the same time, an apparently simple software purchase effectively changed the nature of the creation of music to moving image at the Conservatorium, which, it can be argued, is the core business of this collaboration.

In 2010, Matt Hitchcock and Kim Cunio restructured the recording studios at the Conservatorium with an enhanced focus on supporting music for moving image. In addition to significant hardware purchases that are outside the scope of this study, a substantial investment was made in regards to sample based software, often described as ‘virtual instruments’. These can be triggered or programmed on a number of computers at the Conservatorium, and students have been encouraged to pre-compose instrumental parts at home before rendering a much higher quality product using the advanced instruments at the Conservatorium. Instrument collections include full orchestral libraries, ethnic instruments, percussion, keyboards and soundscape generators, making it possible for students to realise compositions within industry standards.

This has encouraged a number of students to enrol in independent composition projects whereby they compose music for film and write an exegetical work describing the outcomes of the music. This learning model, based on artistic practice as research, offers the

opportunity for project based work and critical reflection.

Similarly, staff and student led Conservatorium ensembles have also responded to this changing landscape.

An example of this is seen where Conservatorium students sought out recent film school graduates for the Sounding Out Composers Collective 2010 concert series, incorporating live image generation into performances. In the lead up to *Encounters 2010* (a multi platform festival highlighting the artistic ties between Australia and China), GFS graduates manipulated a newly edited film screened in the Conservatorium foyer with a live improvised student and staff soundtrack.

QCGU also presented two live soundtracks as part of its 2010 concert series. Both involved the real time performance of improvised soundtracks to silent films. These included the Rome-based guitarist and electronic musician Mike Cooper improvising a score for the 1924 underwater fantasia film *Venus of the South Seas*, and the world music ensemble DVA (Linsey Pollak and Tunji Beier) improvising the soundtrack to Frank Osten’s 1928 classic *Shiraz*.

Both films soundtracks included interviews for the Conservatorium’s acclaimed ‘Behind the Music’ Series and have embedded publication outcomes which will be realised in 2011.

Looking to the future

As the number of GFS scripts with animation and compositing content increases every year, and as the standard of artistic output is raised through greater inter-faculty collaboration, the role of workflow management will be increasingly crucial. The timetabling of film projects offers an ongoing challenge as most student edits are completed with a timeframe of three weeks for music and sound design.

Because such clear and ongoing communication needs to be in place between film makers and music students, the basics of aesthetics, cues, and styles need to be agreed upon much earlier in the project development and both parties need to maintain flexibility. For film makers, this collaboration has the potential to clarify communication and language – how the visual, musical and spoken languages combine in film. For young composers, film projects offer a litmus test of how they will function in the music marketplace, where the role of the composer is to fulfil a brief, something different from the creative licence of the concert hall.

There are a number of potential future developments pertinent to this article. A key area in fostering cross discipline creativity is the provision of appropriate physical resources. This has been responded to by both GFS and QCGU with the planning of new multi art-form moving image spaces

² “Comprovisation” is the fusion of composition and improvisation.

in both institutions. Both GFS and QCGU have applied for funding to develop and enhance existing facilities to foster large scale interaction between the disciplines. For QCGU, this involves the redevelopment of one of the rehearsal and performance spaces, the Basil Jones Auditorium, into a fully operational scoring stage, comparable to scoring stages in other capital cities within Australia. This would have the facility to record a full orchestra to moving image, work in multiple sound formats, and present public performances of live film soundtracks. For GFS, this involves developing the screening theatre into a purpose built space that allows live music to image, live manipulation of image to music and traditional music performance.

It is also pertinent that such developments be supported through the provision of staff resources. Possible future directions include the embedding of relevant academics within co-located faculties, having a composer in residence at GFS and a film-maker in residence at QCGU. Such medium term collaborations will allow a greater contest of ideas, practices and exegetical outputs, foster co-located research projects and facilitate project based interfaculty public works.

This is relevant to the careers of both academics and students. Students will not only benefit from mentoring by staff, but staff will also benefit from maintaining and establishing their own networks and opportunities for potential. As already mentioned in this paper, improvisation is an area of future interaction. This can take place in dual contexts, improvised soundtracks to set films, VJ-ing to set music works or hybrid real time works.

Possibly the most apparent future direction is the formation of a cross institutional ensemble, a semi permanent group that contains staff and students from both GFS and QCGU with a brief to make a number of creative works a year. Additionally, it is hoped that staff will be able to collaborate professionally as artists, providing a model of leadership for students, a process that relates not only to the making of art, but the mechanics of positions and job descriptions within creative faculties.

Conclusions

Artistic practice by its very nature a collaborative endeavour requiring complex and multiple forms of communication and feedback (Hitchcock, 2009a). Similarly, sharing through social interaction, social construction of knowledge and collaboration are integral to the creative arts professions. Exposure to complexity, multiple ways of accomplishing tasks, problem solving, and interaction with experts and peers therefore helps learners to understand that there is no one embodiment of expertise and encourages them to view learning as a continuing and reflective process, thereby offering students insights into what it means to “be” a professional practitioner.

John Seely-Brown (2006, p. 11), in discussing this transformation from student to someone who has insight into being a practitioner, proposes that:

We need to find ways that our students can learn more about learning-to-be much earlier in their education. Today's students want to create and learn at the same time. They want to pull content into use immediately. They want it situated and actionable—all aspects of learning-to-be, which is also an identity-forming activity. This path bridges the gap between knowledge and knowing.

The process of building student interactions within co-located faculties is hardly new, and this project owes a great deal to a number of dedicated academics and students. The practice based reflective learning model identified in this paper offers great potential for artistic practice, skills based education, exegetical output and creative confidence. It is hoped that it will lead to student and staff cohorts that learn to be full participants in their fields.

It is therefore important that arts institutions facilitate this process whilst providing clear structures and expectations for students on how to manage interdisciplinary media projects. Further, while this project has demonstrated some very positive outcomes for students and staff to date, providing these opportunities at an earlier stage in their degree programs should create a more sophisticated level of interaction by the time they reach their final year of study.

This then extends the framework for collaborative endeavours through the early creation of intellectual and social communities of like-minded participants with a focus around practice, philosophy and the underlying epistemologies. The benefits of multiple literacies being transposed from individual expression to community involvement are then manifested throughout the students' degree rather than just at the end, consequently providing a much richer experience by their final year. The hope is that this will further prepare students with awareness and skills to seek both jobs and careers in related disciplines in order to improve their ability to achieve long-term and successful careers in changing market places.

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