‘Identifying Essential Ingredients for Future Focused Art and Design Courses’

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Introduction

We are now operating in a world of accelerated change and challenge.

The landscape of Higher Arts Education has altered dramatically in recent years. There are many complex factors that put pressure on a degree courses ability to provide an exciting, challenging and ultimately relevant environment from which an individual can best prepare themselves for a future in the creative arts.

During this last decade my role as course director has predominantly focused on a major re-think of an established ‘traditional’ Theatre Design degree and ultimately its transformation into the successful BA (Hons) Theatre, Performance and Event Design (TPE) course in 2006. This consisted of a radical shift in both course content and delivery along with a major revision of the course philosophy.

The purpose of this paper is to use the TPE course as a conduit from which to highlight and discuss a number of fundamental ‘ingredients’ that I feel could now be essential for ‘future focused’ Art and Design Degrees.

Background

The opportunity to study Theatre Design in Birmingham has been available for the past 70 years. During this time the course has evolved and developed in response to changes in academic and industry requirements. Theatre Design at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) has contributed to the continued development of Theatre Design practice and education within the UK and has maintained a highly successful recruitment and graduate profile.

For many years the course specialized in scenic and costume design for a variety of live performance contexts. Traditional in its delivery, content and craft based studio culture the pedagogy remained unchallenged as standards remained high. However around 2004 it was becoming increasingly clear that changes were occurring, in particular the range of outputs being produced by the students. Specialist Theatre Design was still central to the course but individuals within the final year were becoming increasingly ambitious in their thinking making connections and defining practice that were challenging the perceived parameters of the discipline. Engaging with emerging technologies and alternative creative solutions that had arisen from the wider Entertainment Industry. These expansions although healthy and in response to a changing professional climate were no longer fully represented by the title ‘Theatre Design’.

The question then was were we able to design and deliver a curriculum that addressed the social, cultural, educational and professional changes that were placing enormous pressure on the established course. It was a time for radical re-invention requiring a fundamental re-think of the course philosophy and our operating practices.

The solution was the BA (Hons) Theatre, Performance and Event Design degree (TPE); that is based on an ideology that places student choice at the heart of the program. The course was simplified and broadened and is now based on a first year of spatial, figurative and performance design principles, that then allow students to tailor their second and third year to areas of design practice that are specific to them. Importantly there are no subject routes or specialisms, all students study the same modules but negotiate how they will evidence the learning outcomes specific to their individual requirements. This fosters a studio culture rich in diversity and collaboration that includes design and production of theatre,
dance, puppetry, museums, concerts, award shows, festivals, exhibitions, conferences, nightclubs, music videos, film, TV to name a few.

Where are we now? In short although a gamble, it was absolutely the correct decision.

Since its launch in 2006 the Theatre, Performance and Event Design course has gone from strength to strength, increasing the cohort to around 100 students over the three years. Graduates through the completion of the National Satisfaction Survey consistently award the course 95%-100% overall satisfaction. The outputs produced by the students are considerably higher in conceptual depth and quality of realization compared to the previous course. And TPE is now recognized by the university, as an exemplar of an innovative, future-focused degree program.

So what might these ingredients be, that have proved so useful in helping us get to this position? The combination of the following sections is what I believe make the TPE course so successful and although linear for the purpose of this document in reality, each aspect is of equal importance.

1. Simplicity

‘We provide the structure, the students define the content’.

Where possible we keep the structure and content simple, thinking of modules as ‘Big Tins with Simple Labels’. An example on TPE would be at the end of L5; we want the students to reflect on their journey and take real responsibility for choices leading into L6. With this in mind the final module at L5 is called ‘Identifying Personal Direction’.

Consider what are the fundamental principles that underpin the discipline. The TPE first year students explore The Space and the Figure rather than scenic design and costume. Subtle differences you may think but ones that have made a real difference.

We have no more than four learning outcomes per module, the learning outcomes need to be of a sufficient standard, but are of no value if they are impenetrable and lack clarity for the staff and students.

We align one brief per module and where possible use an umbrella brief that can be interpreted in a number of ways in order to focus the student on the requirements laid out as part of the learning outcomes.

‘The more we can constructively align assignments with planned learning outcomes and the curriculum taught, the more students are likely to perceive them as worth bothering with’

(Biggs 2003)

In my experience the students will bring the complexity to the task through their own interpretation and aspirations. With this in mind the curriculum needs to be focused and clear.

2. Levels

It is important to recognize that each student will engage with the course at different speeds. For some the journey will be a steady measured, incremental slope, for others short bursts of intensity followed by periods of ambling might be the norm. Whatever the case the levels of the program have to act as a standard for all students explicit in their intention. However we need to accept at this point that many students arrive on a HE course as passive learners, an issue not of their own making.

‘We are now running national education systems where mistakes are the worst thing that you can make. The result is we are educating people out of their creative capacities’.

(Robinson 2006)
Most will arrive having experienced a grade chasing culture. ‘What do I need to do to get a top mark?’ is a common question that I suspect many of you have heard or can relate to. The journey for many young students can be vast and over a relatively short period of time. Within TPE we have identified what we consider the standard at the start of the course, the level that our graduates should be acquiring by the end of the course and the distinct steps ascended through that journey.

L4 - Prescriptive Learner > Active Learner
L5 - Active Learner > Autonomous Learner
L6 - Autonomous Learner > Independent Practitioner

Each level seeks to transform the individual and being explicit in this manner allows us to design the learning experiences very specifically in order to assist with this transformation.

3. Ownership

By actively allowing the student to ‘own’ their course the value of their learning quickly becomes clear.

A diagnostic approach becomes key, making demands of the student as to who, what and how they will ultimately fit into the creative world. Within TPE this diagnosis happens throughout the course, with students not only defining their practice but also the skills required specific to their needs; which maybe very different to the needs of another student on the course. Ownership is also about the implicit ‘struggle’ that all students should go through in order to fully understand their subject. After struggling for sometime a resolution that is theirs has far more power than an answer provided by a tutor. The responsibility for learning is placed firmly in the student’s hands.

‘Dispositions for learning; for a world of challenge’

1. A will to learn
2. A will to engage
3. A preparedness to listen
4. A preparedness to explore
5. A willingness to hold oneself open to experiences
6. A determination to keep going forward

(Barnett 2012)

4. Relevance

Where possible relate the course to the real world, intentionally blurring the boundaries between what is seen as formal education and their life outside of university.

Live projects are a staple part of the TPE course with a variety of exciting ‘real world opportunities’ occurring every year. Some are assessed as ‘live project briefs’ and others used simply as ‘enrichment projects’. As an example Merlin Leisure – specifically Madame Tussauds set a brief that is used as the basis for the Design in Context module. The students are required to work with the client in a professional capacity and in doing so fulfill the assessment requirements of the module. In comparison the students also have the opportunity to work with Livenation – specifically Download Festival; which although not assessed provides a real world engagement that enriches their understanding of the discipline.

Professional practice and employment strategies are embedded within the course, whilst retaining a flexibility that allows students to negotiate external opportunities as a means to fulfill the program requirements. In this manner students develop advanced networks; that strategically position themselves for employment after the course and are often used to influence the content of the projects devised by them in their final year.
5. Integration

Theory and practice should be fully integrated into the module content. Within the UK many institutes (including BIAD) delivered or still deliver theoretical and historical studies separate to the studio practice. By embedding theory into the studio curriculum it forces the student to make the connections and address how the formal scaffolding can not only support, but also help to define their practice. The written outputs within TPE are intentionally varied and include reports, case studies, essays and seminars; formats that are interesting and reinforce the importance of contextual studies.

We have taken the step to address student's perceptions of and engagement with published reading lists. However valuable these may be from an academics point of view, if the student does not use them, then why validate them as part of a module template? Instead we have selected three readers that specifically support the different levels of the course. Incremental in their difficulty they provide a broad yet focused guide from which to base our discussions and critical thinking for all modules at that level.

6. Dialogical

Students like to talk about their work.

By developing a learning community, dialogue becomes key to the students defining themselves, their practice and the facilities in which they operate. Advocating an experience that is clearly diagnostic is best supported through discussion.

Dialogue is at the heart of the TPE course to such an extent that we no longer provide written feedback. Instead we now use a system called ‘Scribe Buddies,’ (Barrett 2012). Using a tick box form for assessment; which is then expanded on through discussion with the student. The students are required to bring a ‘scribe buddy’ who is responsible for typing up the conversation. Crucially feedback in this manner is acutely focused on the individual with students having a much clearer understanding of their assessment. It provides an open platform for peer learning with students being aware of each other’s work, individual assessments and alternative approaches to the learning outcomes other than their own.

‘All feedback needs to be personalized and in a language the student can understand…to be effective it needs to occur as part of an ongoing dialogue with the student...’ (Craig and Glover 2009)

7. Balanced

We are very mindful of striking the right balance on a number of issues within TPE. The nature of design for performance has always required a distinct balance between individual input and collaborative engagement. However for many students collaboration can be incredibly daunting and needs to be addressed early in the course. Students are astute at communication particularly through social media, but less conversant with the dynamic nature of collaboration, that often requires considerable compromise. A comment from the advertising executive Trevor Beattie at a recent Awards event highlighted the importance of collaboration.

‘It’s about teams, it’s about collectives now, it’s not about individuals, that’s the future.’ (Beattie 2012)

The course structure also allows true specialism to occur whilst embracing the approach of the trans-specialist. The recent digital revolution has dissolved many of the accepted subject boundaries, developing for many a shared freedom of engagement that allows exciting new connections to be made. The TPE students are encouraged to seek out the solutions specific to them and are only limited by their own parameters.

‘The most effective scenario is when Monodisciplinarity provides the foundation for Transdisciplinarity’ (Hagoort 2012)
8. Facilitation

I don’t presume to know everything about my subject and I’m very clear with my students that my role is not to lecture ‘at them’ but to facilitate their learning ‘with them’. Three academics and one technical member of staff deliver the TPE course. It would be utterly impossible for us to lecture on all the subjects found within the world of entertainment, however by embracing a constructivist approach to the course delivery we can, through shared endeavour assist the students on a one to one basis. All of us have a broad range of knowledge but don’t feel at all weakened by acknowledging our limits. A colleague within my faculty has long advocated that we are now in an age of ‘knowledge acquisition and knowledge application’ rather than learning and teaching.

‘Universities need to concentrate on the importance of Teaching the Art of Learning’
(Shaughnessy 2012)

Conclusion

By highlighting these ingredients my intentions are less about defining a prescriptive list, instead I hope they will provoke opinion, stimulate dialogue, provide useful pointers and perhaps identify some common denominators that transcend subject specialism’s and countries.

This distillation of a decades worth of observations and experiences is no more than a snapshot and like any approach to education is constantly evolving. I have to believe though that when asked ‘Why bother going to University?’ it has to be because you will engage with an experience that is truly transformative and one that you can’t get in any other environment.

‘Education should aim at long lasting learning that forever alters our grasp of the world, deepening it, widening it, generalizing it, sharpening it.’ (Finkel 2000)

References and Further Reading


