

Enhancing capacity for success in the creative industries: Undergraduate student reflections on the implementation of work-integrated learning strategies

RYAN DANIEL¹

LEAH DANIEL

James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

This article reflects ongoing research-led teaching in the area of creative industries in higher education. Specifically it reports on key work-integrated learning strategies designed to better prepare graduates for the employment sector. The creative industries sector is complex and competitive, characterized by non-linear career paths driven by the individual. Following contextualization of the key issues, a core creative industries subject and curriculum is described, which requires students to engage directly with industry practitioners via internships or case studies. In order to interrogate the impact of these activities, a sample of final reflections as well as formal student feedback on the subject were analyzed in order to draw out key themes in relation to student learning and understanding. Analysis of these data propose that direct engagement with practitioners assists students in developing new knowledge of the capacities they will require for a sustainable career. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2015, 16(3), 199-209*)

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Despite the various difficulties that artists face when seeking to establish viable careers and ongoing employment, students around the world continue to engage in focused study and training in the creative industries at the higher education level (Ashton, 2013, 2014; Bridgstock, 2011; Brown, 2007; Harbour, 2005; Jeffri, 2004). In fact, growth in tertiary courses in the creative and performing arts has increased significantly in such countries as the United States, with 60% across 2000-2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012); in Europe, with 14% across 2004-2007 (Eurostat, 2011); and with 5% in the United Kingdom across 2008-2013 (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2013). As a consequence, the global cultural sector includes highly trained practitioners, with a significantly higher number of university graduates compared to other areas of practice (Bauer, Viola, & Strauss, 2011; Jeffri, 2004; Potts, 2009). Therefore, graduates from the creative and performing arts inevitably enter a highly competitive environment (Ashton, 2013, 2014; Haukka, 2011) 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, which since the turn of the 21st century has been widely referred to as the creative industries (e.g., Flew & Cunningham, 2010; Flew, 2014), includes core creative arts (visual arts, creative writing, performing arts), wider cultural industries (e.g., film, television, radio) and related creative industries (e.g., design, software development) (Throsby 2008). As an employment sector, it is very different to other areas of economic activity (Ashton, 2013, 2014; Bennett, 2007; Bridgstock, 2011). For example, reputation and track record can be more influential than qualifications (Bennett, 2009; Towse, 2006), while the sector is also characterized by “part-time work, marginal employment, short-term employment and employee-like pseudo-self-employment” (Ellmeier, 2003, p. 10). These various realities continue to be referenced in

¹ Corresponding author: Ryan Daniel, ryan.daniel@jcu.edu.au

recent research, with Bridgstock (2011, 2014), and Mould, Vorley, and Liu (2013) continuing to refer to non-linear employment patterns as common to those in the sector. Further, sustained employment and employability in the creative industries is also reliant on individual and collective capacities to establish and maintain networks and employability over employment, and to display enterprising or entrepreneurial practices and behaviors (Beckman, 2007; Bridgstock, 2011, 2013; Ellmeier, 2003; Peltz, 2011; Pollard & Wilson, 2013; Throsby & Zednik, 2011; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014).

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES: TERTIARY ENROLMENTS AND EMPLOYMENT REALITIES IN AUSTRALIA

Australia has for several decades graduated higher education students towards the creative industries sector and particularly so since the amalgamation of colleges of advanced education and universities in 1988 (Davis, 2013; Wilson, 2011). In 2010, university graduates in the broad field of creative arts were just under 20,000, representing a 22% increase from 2007 (N. Herd, personal communication, 11 June, 2012). Recent research by Universities Australia reveals that this pattern is continuing, with the total undergraduate creative arts load increasing by 11% across 2009-2011, slightly higher than the overall average of 9% and significantly higher than disciplines such as Law, Education and Information Technology (Universities Australia, 2013). While there has been growth in employment in the creative industries sector overall in Australia, at 2.8% during the period 2006-11 compared to the national average of 2% (ARC Centre for Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation 2013), the increase in the number of graduates outstrips this growth thus is likely to lead to increased competition for employment. Further, the majority of employment growth has been in related creative industries, such as design, architecture, advertising/marketing and software development, with music and the performing arts in fact declining by one per cent across this five-year period (ARC Centre for Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation 2013).

Research literature reveals that students entering the creative industries sector will, in general, face particular challenges in attaining and maintaining employment given the well documented oversupply of graduates and workforce capacity (Bennett, 2009; Bridgstock & Carr, 2013; Collis, 2010; Menger, 1999; Towse, 2006). Ashton (2014) describes how graduates not only “face an uncertain and challenging labour market” (p. 3), but growth in enrolments in higher education promotes “a far-ranging process of selection and recruitment in the form of extended ‘entry tournaments’ such as work placements and internships” (p. 3). Zelenko and Bridgstock (2014) add to this picture when describing how “graduates emerge from university into an increasingly dynamic, unknowable and ontologically unfamiliar world” (p. 212). The work sector for creative industries graduates is not only challenging but changing, in fact Zelenko and Bridgstock (2014) recently evidenced the fact that approximately half of creative industries graduates now work in embedded roles in other industries (e.g. a web specialist working in health services), with many also moving between embedded and specialist roles throughout their career. In fact, creative industries occupations now exist “across the entire economy ... deployed to create new services and products ... to develop process innovations, and to change the distribution thereof” (Hearn, Bridgstock, Goldsmith, & Rodgers, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, a creative industries graduate needs to be well equipped to respond to this rapidly changing and complex work environment.

Preparing Graduates for Careers in the Creative Industries

In order to enable students to better understand the nature of the creative industries sector, many Australian higher education providers of creative and performing arts programs are implementing work-integrated learning within the curriculum (Collis, 2010), in order to assist in addressing “an employability agenda in higher education” (Pollard & Wilson 2013, p. 3). Work-integrated learning (WIL) has gained increasing attention in recent years as a means by which to link theory to practice (Billett, 2009; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Patrick et al., 2008; Reddan & Rauchle, 2012; Xia, Caulfield & Ferns, 2014), indeed Costly and Armsby (2007) believe WIL in fact challenges “the idea of the three-year degree as theoretical preparation for work” (p. 31-32). 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 (2006) describe as the “sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (p. 2). By implementing WIL strategies and procedures, students enrolled in higher education programs are given the chance to learn “in and through work” (Brodie & Irving, 2007: 13), enabling them to experience and resolve tensions between formal study and the employment sector through explicit knowledge of workplace practices, via such methods as observations, project-based activities, site visits, mentoring programs, internships or work placements. WIL thereby supports and enables a shift towards experience-led learning with a focus on constructivism and the concept of situated learning (Brodie & Irving, 2007), creating opportunities for students to learn in a “deeper, more meaningful way” (Zelenko & Bridgstock 2014, p. 213). In addition to the benefits for students, Xia et al. (2014) also argue that WIL functions as a “platform for research-informed teaching [hence] is of particular value to academic staff and their institutions” (p. 1).

While it has been a feature of several higher education disciplines for many years, (e.g., Education, Nursing, Social Work, Hospitality), WIL has a shorter formal 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 architecture, interior and industrial design (Franz, 2007), music technology (Draper & Hitchcock, 2006; Draper, 2008), visual arts (Lord, 2010), creative writing (Hains-Wesson, 2012), theatre (Trede & McKewan, 2015) and performance (McKinnon & Lowry, 2012). While these studies reflect a range of emerging practices and pedagogies, they each provide some 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 creative work with industry standards. Despite this, most of the research and scholarship in WIL in the creative and performing arts is at an early stage, with Draper and Hitchcock (2006) for example discovering that while WIL was “an effective means to promote the development of transferable skills in students” (p. 36), the authors also argued the need “to get smarter about WIL” (p. 38) given the additional staff resources and workload implications involved in designing and delivering industry-oriented programs. More recently, Hains-Wesson (2012) argued that while WIL has a growing body of robust research in general, “minimal focus is placed on the research area of WIL activities in the Creative Industries” (p. 263), and further, “the educational and practical benefits of providing WIL opportunities within the Creative Industries should not be underestimated” (p. 279). Zelenko and Bridgstock (2014) also recently raised the fact that, given the rise in embedded employment outside the creative industries, traditional WIL programs with “predefined and predetermined roles and activities... do not yet fully

appreciate the need for students to have control over their professional pathway” (p. 214). They argue for a stronger focus on WIL experiences not only directly in the creative industries but also in other organizational structures and where the student has a stronger role to play in “assuming increasing agency” (p. 214) or autonomy. Similarly, Ashton (2014) in his analysis of 18 short films of creative students reflecting on their internship experiences in the creative industries, identifies “the importance of individual ability and responsiveness” (p. 15) in relation to employability and in developing transition strategies towards the sector.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers currently deliver a compulsory creative industries subject as part of an undergraduate degree offered at a regional Australian university. This subject is designed to provide students with a deeper understanding of the realities and complexities of the creative industries, with an emphasis on how students construct their own knowledge and sense of place in relation to the broader employment sector. In the context of ongoing and also recent research literature, which cites an oversupply of graduates amidst a competitive and changing work sector, the core theoretical underpinning of the subject is the notion of developing agentic qualities and attributes, or the ability to be self-regulating, autonomous, proactive, self-organizing and enterprising in mindset (Billett, 2009; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014). This is a critical focus of the subject, given the creative industries is dominated by freelance, project-based or short-term work as well as small to medium enterprises with frequent turnover of creative staff (Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014). That is, graduates rarely have direct access to large organizations and support structures that typically exist in most other professions (e.g. law, engineering, health sciences); rather they have to rely on their own opportunity-seeking capacities. Hence, this subject currently involves three key areas:

- learning about career theory and the different career types and paths in the creative industries sector;
- an industry research folio which requires students to interrogate the labour market specifics and future opportunities in their preferred area of employment; and
- a formalized and negotiated internship in industry under the supervision of a professional practitioner (minimum of 30 hours), or a set of case studies involving direct networking with practitioners in the student’s chosen area of practice, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of careers in creative industries.

In order to continue to deliver this subject from a research-informed basis (Xia et al., 2014) and ensure the curriculum was as relevant as possible, the researchers set out to examine the extent to which the specific WIL activities (i.e., internship, case studies) were impacting on current students’ understanding and preparation for the creative industries sector. The research paradigm underpinning the study was therefore interpretivist or constructivist (Creswell, 2013). While pass rates would have been one quantitative measure of students’ capacities to successfully understand and complete the assessment tasks, this was deemed too limiting and lacking in depth, hence a decision was made to undertake a text-based analysis of students’ final reflections and for which ethical approval was obtained. This summative assessment task required students, in approximately 1,000 words, to reflect on their overall learning and insights into the nature of the creative industries sector, including the specific insights gained through networking and engaging with employers and/or industry practitioners as part of the internship or the case studies. Thus, it was the final piece

of assessable work they submitted and which took place after all subject activities were completed, hence a useful opportunity to explore their reflections and learning.

One of the issues to be considered when analyzing the reflections was the potential for students to fabricate statements “for the benefits of the assessment or task completion” (Maloney, Tai, Lo, Molloy, & Ilic, 2013, p. 618), hence as a means of triangulating the data, the anonymous formal feedback of this same subject through the university’s student evaluation system was also included in the data analysis. The sample of student reflections in the most recent offering of the subject was a total of 76. Given it involved students from five different discipline areas (music, visual arts, design, photography, theatre), it was decided to randomly select four reflections from each of these disciplines to explore any diversity amongst the disciplines; in total 20 reflections (26% of the full sample). As a first step, the researchers individually read and re-read the sample of reflections on several occasions, tentatively identifying key themes using the inductive reasoning approach (Saldana, 2013). The researchers then met to discuss their respective findings, resolving any issues in interpretation in order to develop and reach consensus in terms of themes/patterns relevant to students’ insights into the sector, and how their experiences of engaging with industry might impact on their career planning and goals. In addition, both researchers agreed that there were no obvious differences between students’ reflections from the five disciplines, hence the data could be viewed as one set. The broad themes and issues that were identified with exemplar student quotes to support them are discussed in the following section, after which an analysis of key elements of the formal student feedback is presented.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON PREPARATION FOR THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

In general, most students commented on how the subject activities, including direct engagement with industry, had an impact on their career planning and knowledge. For example, music Student 1 described how the subject “helped me establish a plan of action for the next 12-24 months”, theatre Student 3 intended to “create a viable plan and seek opportunities”, visual art Student 2 felt “ready to build a career”, photography Student 4 referred to “a keen understanding of the road ahead”, while visual art Student 3 stated “I am going to be more proactive about my career”. Several others commented on how the subject had influenced them to revisit their career plan(s), for example photography Student 3 described how it “has caused me to change the way I think”, design Student 1 identified the need for “some changes to how I am managing my career”, photography Student 1 indicated the need to “re-think my future plans”, while visual art Student 4 felt that “the extensive insight I have been given into the creative industries... has led my career down a different path”. Others reflected specifically on how the subject activities and tasks had led them to a better understanding about themselves, for example, “I’ve learnt a lot about myself and the career that I want” (theatre Student 1) and “I learnt a great deal about myself” (design Student 2).

The notion of agency and self-management skills also came through strongly in several reflections. Music Student 2 referred to the need to continue working on “sense-making skills to aid me when wanting to make decisions for myself and others”, photography Student 2 described the “need to be unique in a growing industry”, while theatre Student 2 reflected on “the importance of understanding how change can affect my career”. This same student then went on to describe the need to “have a range of skills including adaptability, resilience, determination and dedication” (theatre Student 2), a view echoed by design Student 4 who felt that “persistence, reliability, determination, initiative and passion are

what keep you in jobs". The notion of agentic behavior and skills was echoed by photography Student 1 who felt that "the ability to accumulate skills and adapt quickly will be crucial to my success", while visual art Student 1 referred to the importance of the "ability to handle and overcome any sort of issue that might pop up". Similarly, design Student 3 reflected on the fact that "adapting and keeping ahead of the times are invaluable skills" in the creative industries while design Student 2, when referring to rapid changes in technology, described how they wanted to "develop a process and system to cater for this". Ongoing learning and preparing for a complex industry continued to be referenced, for example music Student 3 commented on the need to "improve my skills and make more connections", while visual art Student 4 described their plan to "continue to learn... which leads to personal growth". Similarly, photography Student 3 described the goal to "ground myself in [the] profession" and theatre Student 4 reflected on the need to "gain experience and earn a name for myself".

The challenges associated with both starting out and maintaining a sustainable career in the sector were also recognized. Music Student 4 described the need to continue to sustain part-time work in a non-creative area following graduation given the "financial instability that is characteristic of careers in the arts". Others referred to the idiosyncrasies of a creative career, such as design Student 3 who described the sector as "volatile", theatre Student 1 commented on "the harsh reality of a creative arts career", while two photographers referred to the sector as "hard" (photography Student 3) and "fast paced and competitive" respectively (photography Student 2). This awareness of the challenge ahead was also referenced by two visual artists, one who reflected on "how difficult it is going to be to achieve the career I aim for" (visual art Student 2), while another felt that the "various employment avenues and working styles can seem very confronting" (visual art Student 4). Further echoing the theme of a competitive and individually oriented work environment, design Student 1 voiced concerns about the "oncoming flooding of the market with unskilled and over-expectant creatives", design Student 3 referred to "[limited] prospect[s] in gaining employment", while theatre Student 1 lamented the prospect of "a myriad of rejection and tedious amounts of time waiting for responses from auditions". An additional colorful comment presented by theatre Student 3 reflects the passion and commitment many artists display and despite the very competitive employment field awaiting them, describing how "it will be crap at first, but there is nothing else I would rather do".

As part of their preparation for graduation, many students included a focus on the need to learn and develop business skills, including marketing, and client and/or business management. For example, music Student 4 described how "solid business models are an essential component of a creative arts career", theatre Student 2 commented on their goal to study marketing in order to gain "the skills I need to run a business", visual art Student 1 planned to study entrepreneurship in order to help them "sell commissioned work", while design Student 3 felt that studying business management "would allow [them] to have a broader selection of work opportunities". Similarly, design Student 2 was aiming to complete a certificate in business studies on top of their current degree course in order to "learn more about running a small business" and which came as a direct result of networking with "freelance designers who operated their own business". Most design and photography students in fact commented on the client-focused nature of professional practice in their respective areas and hence the need to operate in a commercial manner, for example photography Student 4 commented on the need to "get business advice [and] begin developing business plans where I will charge clients for my time".

In terms of direct engagement with industry, the internship provided a range of benefits for students. Several commented on how it provided insights into the specifics of industry practice. For example, photography Student 4 learnt “a lot of skills needed for the news industry” while photography Student 1 was able to “interact with clients ... and learn how to be successful in getting the job done”. Other students reflected on how the internship impacted on their future learning goals, with theatre Student 1 describing the “need to expand my skill set and networks” and music Student 2 specifically aiming to participate in “additional work experience/internships”. Finally, others commented on the broadly positive impact of the internship, with music Student 3 describing it as “a great experience” and photography Student 2 feeling “empowered and optimistic about my future”.

Student Feedback on the Subject

The anonymous feedback presented in the formal subject evaluation system (voluntarily completed by 26 students) offers additional insights into the relative success of the subject as a whole and in terms of key tasks in particular. For example, three overall subject aspects (rated using a five-point scale with 5 indicating strongly agree) were as follows, with the second figure indicating the university-wide average during the same teaching period:

- The teaching and learning experiences of this subject were well organized (4.27/3.9)
- This subject helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work (4.20/3.9)
- As a result of this subject, I feel more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems (4.00/3.8)

Additional and optional qualitative comments presented by students support the real-world nature of the tasks. Direct contact with industry practitioners was cited as beneficial, for example, Student 14 found it a “very valuable experience” and Student 4 reflected on the fact that it “took me out of my comfort zone and out to make contacts”. While there were numerous benefits reported, a small number of comments reflected the difficulties and level of challenge that some students experienced in relation to direct networking with industry practitioners as part of the case studies. For example, Student 13 described how they “found it hard to contact so many people”, while Student 18 felt that the assessment should be revised in order to “allow for us to not get replies from industry practitioners”.

These comments reveal the particular challenges that several students experienced when attempting to network with time-poor and very busy practitioners, many of whom work freelance and/or as part of a small-medium business, hence under significant commercial pressures. In addition, the researchers regularly observed the difficulties some students had in finding the confidence to approach and network with those in the sector, with several appearing fearful of not only making contact, but of experiencing either no reply, a delayed reply or a response with limited detail or advice in response to their requests. In addition, many students received advice from industry practitioners that challenged their thinking and understanding. While students were provided with strategies to respond and adjust to these challenges, it is clear that the process of having them engage directly with those in the industry represents an ongoing issue for the researchers and in relation to how it is managed within the curriculum.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reported on a specific work-integrated learning subject designed to engage students directly with the complex realities of the creative industries sector. For many of the students involved engagement with professional practitioners through internships or case studies provides them with new knowledge relevant to industry practice, the opportunity to expand their network as well as a deeper understanding of how they might successfully plan for a career in the sector. As is cited in recent literature (e.g., Ashton, 2014; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014), success in the creative industries sector relies on an individual's capacity to display a range of agentic and self-management qualities. While in some ways these attributes and qualities are difficult to teach, the WIL strategies implemented in this subject at least provide students with further insights into the importance of pursuing, or of continuing to develop, these qualities or skills. In addition, the numerous references to the need to develop business and/or management skills reflects recent literature citing the need for creative industries graduates to be enterprising or opportunity-minded in nature (e.g., Beckman, 2007; Bridgstock, 2013). This mindset or approach is also heavily reliant on the capacity to display agentic qualities and attributes in a rapidly changing employment sector.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that in their final assessable reflections, students may have felt compelled to submit views and statements in support of the subject activities, thereby a potential limitation of the research (Maloney et al., 2013). That is, it is potentially the case that students fabricated statements in response to the task, or they were unwilling to present highly critical comments about the nature of the subject and the WIL activities within an assessable artifact. Nevertheless, the anonymous student feedback provided following the final grading and completion of the subject, and which is mostly positive, suggests that there was a degree of honesty and genuineness in the submissions. Further, while there is no guarantee that the learning that students identify from this set of experiences will in fact enable them to achieve success in what is a complex, changing and competitive work environment, the insights presented in final reflections and the formal subject evaluation proposes that the subject supports students to enhance their capacity for ongoing learning, professional growth and in theory, the goal of long-term, sustainable employment and career success.

The insights gleaned through this study also raise specific issues relevant to the education of tertiary students in the creative industries area. On one hand, the completion of a tertiary degree provides students with the opportunity to access specialist training and infrastructure, to extend their knowledge and skills in a creative area and to be better prepared for work in the sector (Bauer, Viola, & Strauss, 2011). On the other hand, a tertiary qualification does not necessarily provide graduates with a competitive advantage, with reputation and track record playing a significant role in the selection of candidates for work (Towse, 2006; Bennett, 2009). In fact, the current growth in global higher education could be seen as a major contributor to the well-documented oversupply of practitioners for the creative industries sector (Menger, 1999; Towse, 2006). Hence, how educators achieve balance between providing students with a rewarding program of study that caters to their passion for creativity and individual expression, but that is also connected to and revealing in terms of the realities of the industry, represents an ongoing issue for those responsible for curricula. Work-integrated learning activities, such as those described in this study, provide an opportunity for students to link theory and practice and to learn more about future employment realities (Helyer & Lee, 2014). However, they are essentially introductory, with

the idiosyncrasies of the industry revealing that students will have to continue to develop strong self-management or agentic qualities and attributes (Billett, 2009; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014). It is therefore critical that those responsible for tertiary programs in creative industries set very clear expectations and provide significant support structures for their students.

The findings presented here also reveal several opportunities for further inquiry. The area of students' networking with practitioners in the creative industries is prime for additional research, such as an exploration of issues around student confidence, initiative, resilience and persistence, these no doubt highly complex and intertwined factors given the inherently personal nature of the creative process. In addition, and given students' comments that industry practitioners are often too busy to engage with them or they don't respond at all, how the curriculum might be adjusted to better support this reality remains in need of further inquiry. Interviews with industry practitioners about possible mentoring and/or networking schemes might also offer new insights and value for students and recent graduates. Case studies involving a sample of students who have graduated as they navigate through the sector would offer a range of insights into the particular issues they face, including the qualities, skills and attributes needed to respond to a range of employment and other sector challenges. Ultimately, given increasing enrolments in higher education programs and the relatively limited body of research to date regarding best practice within creative and performing arts curricula in terms of ensuring successful career outcomes, there remains significant potential for WIL to assist students who seek a viable career in creative industries.

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In this Journal, Co-op/WIL is defined as an educational approach that uses relevant work-based projects that form an integrated and assessed part of an academic program of study (e.g., work placements, internships, practicum). These programs should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program. These programs can be described by a variety of names, such as cooperative and work-integrated education, work-based learning, workplace learning, professional training, industry-based learning, engaged industry learning, career and technical education, internships, experiential education, experiential learning, vocational education and training, fieldwork education, and service learning.

The Journal's main aim is to allow specialists working in these areas to disseminate their findings and share their knowledge for the benefit of institutions, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that will lead to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of co-op/WIL, and promote further research.

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