Technology-Enabled Curriculum for Transnational Education in Art History and Theory

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Abstract

The landscape of tertiary education has significantly changed in recent years with increasing pressure on universities to "globalize" and expand their reach internationally. In this context, there are a range of pedagogical and cultural issues to consider when designing curriculum to address the needs of students taking courses in different geographical locations. In addition to ensuring equivalence and quality, developing context-specific learning resources is a critical part of international delivery. Providing flexibility and autonomy to meet specific geo-cultural teaching and learning needs is vital. Programs and courses benefit from

collaboration and connectivity between students and staff in all locations to ensure meaningful global learning environments. This paper focuses on a case study from an Australian University and examines how curriculum and delivery modes can be adapted to address the changing needs of transnational education a global context. The case study involves the renewal of a core undergraduate art history and theory subject that is offered in art and design programs across three different locations (Melbourne, Hong Kong and Vietnam). A series of learning materials and assessment tasks were designed to maximize a blended learning environment comprising face-to-face workshops, lectures, and online components. The result is a technology-enabled, common curriculum framework designed to allow for content to be adapted for local delivery.

Introduction

The landscape of tertiary education has significantly changed in recent years with increasing pressure on universities to 'globalize' and expand their reach internationally. At the same time research shows that students in higher education are increasingly meeting their learning needs by attending university campuses less and going online more (Gosper et al. 2010; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). This changing dynamic means that we need to harness the expanding role of technology and recognize the increasing need for promoting flexible, collaborative, contextual and technology-enabled learning. Furthermore, a focus on what the student does is important so that "deep learning," the academic ideal, is fostered regardless of location (Biggs & Tang, 2012, p. 11).

Traditional modes of delivery and assessment in humanities courses, including art history and theory, rely on a face-to-face lecture/tutorial delivery structure, and essay/exam-based assessments (Leedham, 2009; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). These modes of delivery still have a place in 21st-century learning but online technologies are now widely operating as part of blended learning models that incorporate face-to-face and online components. Successful integration of blended learning requires flexibility in assessment and modes of access to learning materials (Ogunleye, 2010).

Flexible assessment practices are the first step towards a student-centered pedagogy because they provide choice and encourage ownership (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2011; Lantolf, 2009). Moreover, matching assessment to industry-relevant activities is critical for enabling students to translate their study experience into real-world scenarios (Craddock & Mathias, 2009). In addition to the traditional essay, lecturers might consider a range of learning activities to help progressively build knowledge and skills in critical thinking. Activities might include mock grant applications, critical reviews, catalogue essays, curatorial scenarios, artist profiles, data visualisations, graphic visual displays, concept maps to name a few. These

activities require skills in critical thinking and can be adapted for local particularities. Some of these suggestions might also provide opportunities for students to play to their strengths and utilize their visual arts knowledge and skills. When redesigning curriculum for a transnational context, adaptability is an essential criteria (Clarke, Sharp & Johal, 2012).

To facilitate adaptability, transnational curriculum can also be improved by the development and support of "broader, more inclusive professional communities of practice" (Dunn & Wallace, 2005, p. 3). Working collaboratively with teaching staff in all locations ensures curriculum materials are able to meet the learning needs of diverse geo-cultural and technology savvy cohorts.

This paper presents a case study that involves the renewal of a core undergraduate art history and theory subject delivered in an Australian University context and offered in art and design programs across three different locations (Melbourne, Hong Kong and Vietnam). It is also offered as a university-wide elective open to students across a range of disciplines including Business and Media Studies. This diversity in offerings means there is an ongoing need to ensure cultural translatability and adaptability whilst ensuring equivalence. Renewing a subject that is to be delivered in diverse contexts, particularly when the content is predominately Euro-American, highlights the need to consider issues of power and authority and leads to questions about "what and whose knowledge is valued and not valued" (Leask & Bridge, 2013, p. 82).

The process of renewal allowed us to work inclusively with academics in all locations so that diversity and translatability could occur in the selection and ordering of content, organization of learning activities, and ways of assessing achievement. We also worked with the educational technology group at our university to help develop and test the online materials. An anonymous qualitative survey was conducted at the end of semester to evaluate the pilot implementation in Melbourne, and the material was then implemented in Hong Kong the following year. The process has been complex, non-linear and iterative but the outcome is the design and delivery of a new core art history and theory subject that has, on the whole, been well-received by students and staff. This paper reports on the development and pilot stages of our renewal process.

Background

Our case study renewal, *Art History and Theory 1*, is a standard first year art history subject focused on developments in European and North American Modern Art. It had not been significantly reviewed for many years. Based on feedback from staff in all locations and consistently lower than average student satisfaction surveys the following three needs were identified:

- local teaching staff in all locations need opportunities to make subject content contextually relevant and adaptable;
- the skills and interests of practice-based degree students need to be harnessed through flexible pedagogical approaches; and
- technologically savvy students and globally focused universities need more online learning materials.

A critical issue for students enrolled in creative disciplines is a perceived gap between their experiences of theory and studio practice (Camino, 2010). Students in creative disciplines often consider forms of assessment in theory courses, such as academic essays and exams, to be outmoded and unrelated to the realities of their practice. Essays are often the default form of assessment in theory. While they have an advantage of demonstrating deep thinking, critical analysis, research and communication, this format is rarely used after graduation (Leedham, 2009). The use of flexible approaches to assessment allows student resistances to be redirected into productive and innovative outcomes. Greater integration between theory and practice, as well as the academic recognition of non-conventional forms of assessment and evidence of research in theory subjects, is required to address the perceived gap between theory and studio practices (Melles & Lockheart, 2012), particularly for visual/spatial thinkers. This project examined how technology could be used to enable more meaningful connections for students.

Developing Alternative Delivery and Assessment. We made changes to how this subject was delivered over the semester, developed three online/in-class activities that became assessment tasks, and produced three ten-minute online lecturettes.

Changing the delivery. Our original design was to change the typical weekly lecture/ tutorial delivery pattern by reducing face-to-face lectures and using that time to extend tutorial sessions. This allows for a workshop-style environment in tutorials and shifts class time from being a "content dump" into an active peer-learning environment. Peer and self-assessment create a reflexive learner who is able to identify issues and develop constructive solutions to address them (Vickerman, 2009). Focusing on tutorials where discussion is actively encouraged also transformed the role of students, from one of being passive recipients in a one-way communication model to becoming active participants in the construction of critical discourse on course content.

The changed structure also maximizes the natural rhythms of student attendance over a semester, which tends to peak at the beginning, middle and end of semester (usually in relation to assessment points). Unfortunately, this structural change proved impossible to

implement in the pilot due to timetable restrictions. We are currently addressing timetabling constraints for future implementation. It is these practical obstructions to building flexibility into class delivery modes, which will remain a critical challenge for Universities as they adapt to providing a range of different learning modes for future learners.

Developing new learning and assessment activities. Three new learning and assessment activities were designed to provide an important scaffold for students in building their skills towards creating a sustained critical response as a final assessment activity. Scaffolded assessment processes build: academic literacies; an understanding of broader information landscapes; and an engagement with independent learning (Cleland & Walton, 2012). All activities are group-based, with individual roles and tasks. The activities are designed to be completed in-class through a customized online Modernism portal. The tasks maximize student autonomy and agency in selecting topics, groups and roles and in being able to complete tasks (i.e. flexibility is built into the design if students need or want to complete the assignment outside of class time).

This curriculum design supports the notion that having personal goals within a group-based setting increases motivation and self-regulation as well as the ability to engage in the social nature of learning (Volet & Mansfield, 2006). These group-based activities can be completed individually as well as collaboratively which goes some way to addressing the hesitations many students have about doing group work. The design of the online portal that students use to access the learning activities is based on Alfred Barr's 1936 diagram of European Modernism (Figure 1).
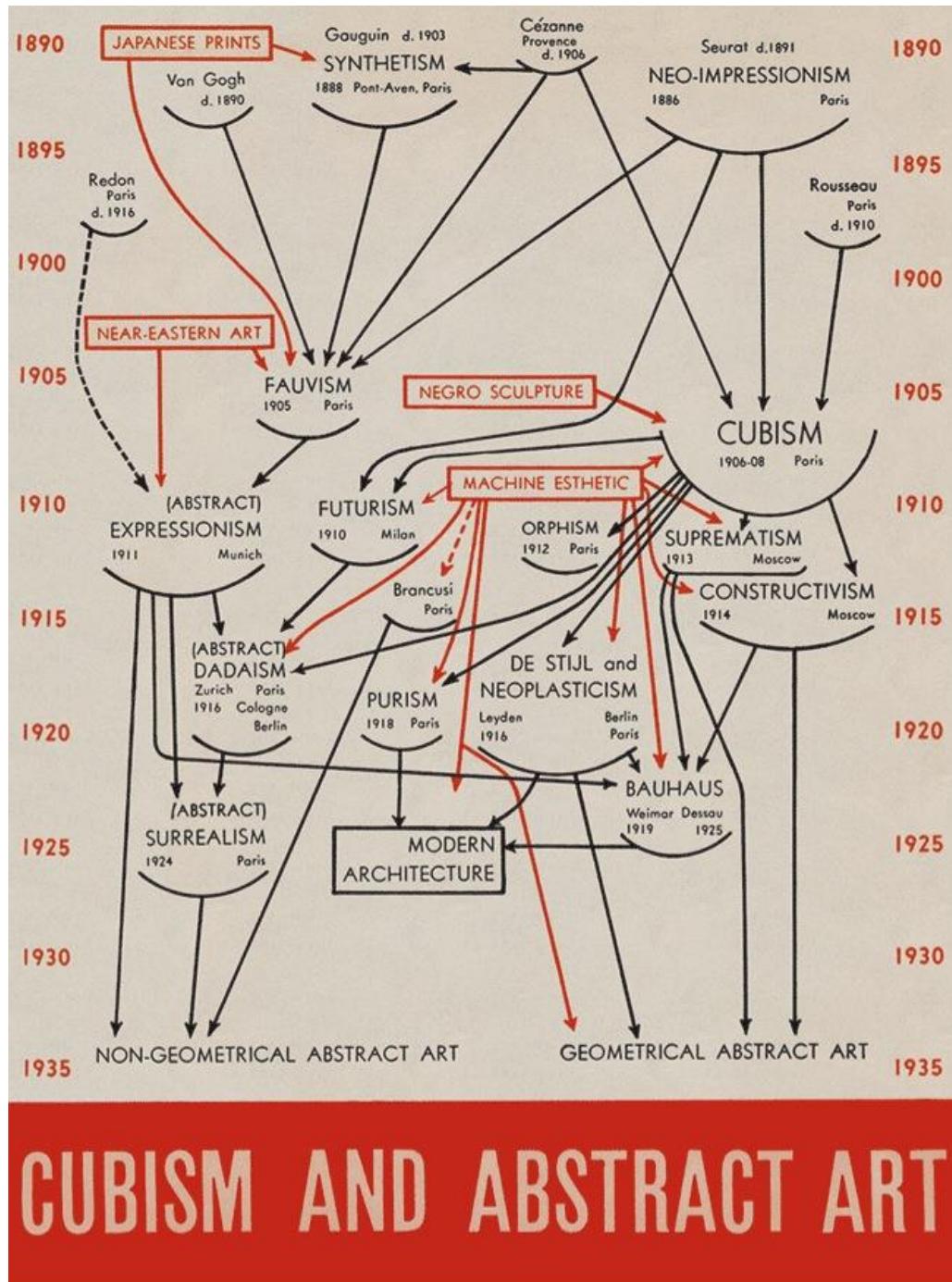
Figure 1. Alfred Barr Cubism and Abstract Art 1936. Source: MoMA Catalogue.
http://www.moma.org/

We adapted this diagram to develop an online Modernism Portal for students to access their learning materials (Figure 2).
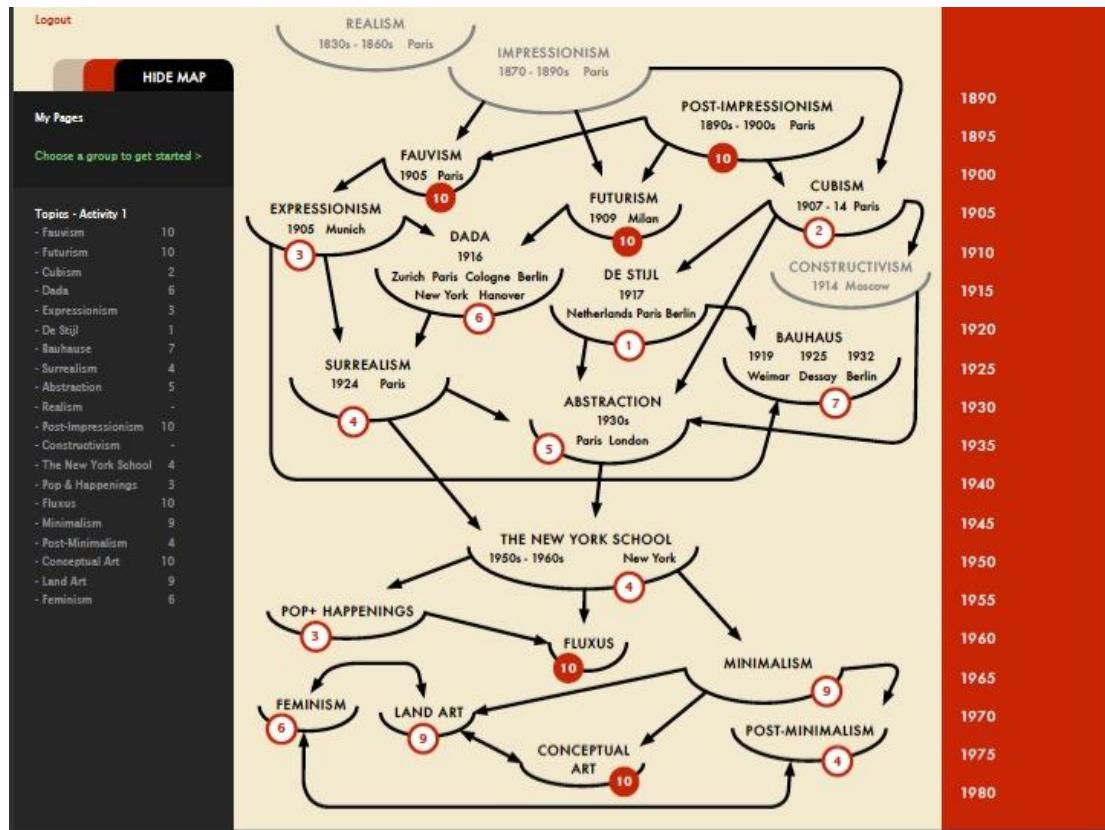
Figure 2. Modernism Portal - Art History and Theory 1

Activity 1 is designed to be a short and achievable introductory research skills task for early in the semester. It asks students to define key movements of Modernism, including socio-historical context, formal analysis of artworks, and annotated resource links (Figure 3).

Activity 2 is a repeat of Activity 1 but introduces more complex skills around contextualization of material and more challenging skills of research. Students extend the ideas from the previous task to their local content, e.g. looking at how Cubism was adapted in their local context (Australia, Vietnam or Hong Kong). Both tasks are done through the Modernism Portal.

Figure 3. Activity 1 - Defining Modernism

Activity 3 emphasizes independent and critical thinking, synthesizing a range of theoretical ideas and approaches, and skills of presentation. Students engage more critically with discourses of Modernism, particularly how it is mapped not only in Barr's diagram but others including the Tate Timeline of Artists. Students use Barr's diagram as a starting point and compare it critically with other maps of Modernism. The aim is to engage students in analyzing and critiquing how Modernism is defined through these diagrams/timelines, particularly through reference to local context. Students have online support materials (short papers which also critique these examples and artists who have also presented alternative timelines). Working together, students synthesize this critique to create their own map of Modernism and present it to the class, utilizing their fine art/design skills and discipline specific histories in drawing up a new map (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Activity 3 - Students presenting their Modernism Concept Map, 2014.

Using the core academic skills and literacies that have been developed throughout the semester students now put them to use in the form of a critical response to the discourses on Modernism as their final assessment task, which was presented as an academic essay. As a result of this incremental approach to building academic skills and literacies there was a marked improvement in critical thinking and engagement across the cohort.

Producing the lecturettes
Mobile technologies increase the options for flexibility and personalisation of learning because resources for students can be accessed anywhere/anytime (Squire, 2009). For this reason, we produced a series of four short ten-minute recorded "lecturettes" to complement in-class material (Figures 5 & 6). These resources were made available through the Modernism Portal to students in all locations. The lecturettes were presented by teaching staff from different locations to ensure that students were exposed to a range of cultural perspectives and a variety of individual voices.

Figure 5. Filming Lecturettes, Melbourne (Lecturer: Mikala Tai)

Figure 6. Contemporary Southeast Asian Art Lecturette, Vietnam (Lecturer: Richard Streitmatter-Tran), video still

Research shows that programs benefit from collaboration and connectivity between students and staff in all locations (Ziguras, 2007). Working collaboratively with all teaching staff in redesigning the curriculum to adapt to the different geo-cultural locations was integral to the development and design of our curriculum.

The Melbourne Pilot

The curriculum changes had two immediate critical influences on student learning: the ease in which the students gained critical academic skills; and, the extent to which the students became drivers in their own learning. Furthermore, sharing their work online with the entire cohort was, as one student noted, an advantage as it enabled them to "see other student's conclusions" alongside their own (Student Feedback Survey).

The early assessments in this subject comprised a series of short activities that built upon one another. The first task (with an un-daunting 150-word limit) encouraged students to: visit the library for the first time; confront the challenges of selecting useful research material from the wealth of available resources online; and begin to develop skills in discerning scholarly research sources. The small scale of the assignment kept them focused, eased them into research at an academic level, and allowed for discussions about concise writing skills. As one student remarked, "I liked the structure of this unit - having a combination of smaller tasks

with a major essay at the end. It helped to introduce me to academic style of writing and citing etc., before attempting the major essay" (Student Feedback Survey).

Academic literacies are best learnt when there is a direct application. As such, this assessment was presented early in the course. Creating and articulating criteria that is clearly mapped to learning outcomes is critical in increasing student engagement with flexible assessment and promoting deeper learning (Francis, 2008). This assessment fosters deep learning by enabling individual students to become a content expert. This early mastery of content combined with the establishment of basic research skills ensured that the students had early feedback that acknowledged both of these new skills.

The second task was, structurally, a repeat of the first but required students to research an aspect of Modernism within their local context – such as Australian Modernism. This activity consolidated the skills gained from the first task, allowed those that needed improvement to address their mistakes and, shifted the focus from developing research skills to building knowledge about the subject content, which in this case was Modernism. Students, now comfortable with the format and expectations, were encouraged to broaden their thinking and negotiate the modernism of their local milieu in relation to the canon of Modern Art. It was here that we began to see significant leaps in the student's critical thinking. Many reported that these "group orientated tasks enabled [them] to gauge perspectives other than [their] own". Others said they "were able to gain a broader perspective of Modernism as a global movement that varied between countries." Even more important for studio students, this subject gave them historical and theoretical reference points that were useful for their studio practice. As one student notes "this subject opened my eyes to where and what inspired me" (Student Feedback Surveys).

The third task extended students' critical thinking further. Students were asked to map Modernism in a manner that made sense to them (Figure 7). This was a group activity and therefore involved heated debate as students determined their own criteria of what was important to Modernism and thus what could be used to measure it.
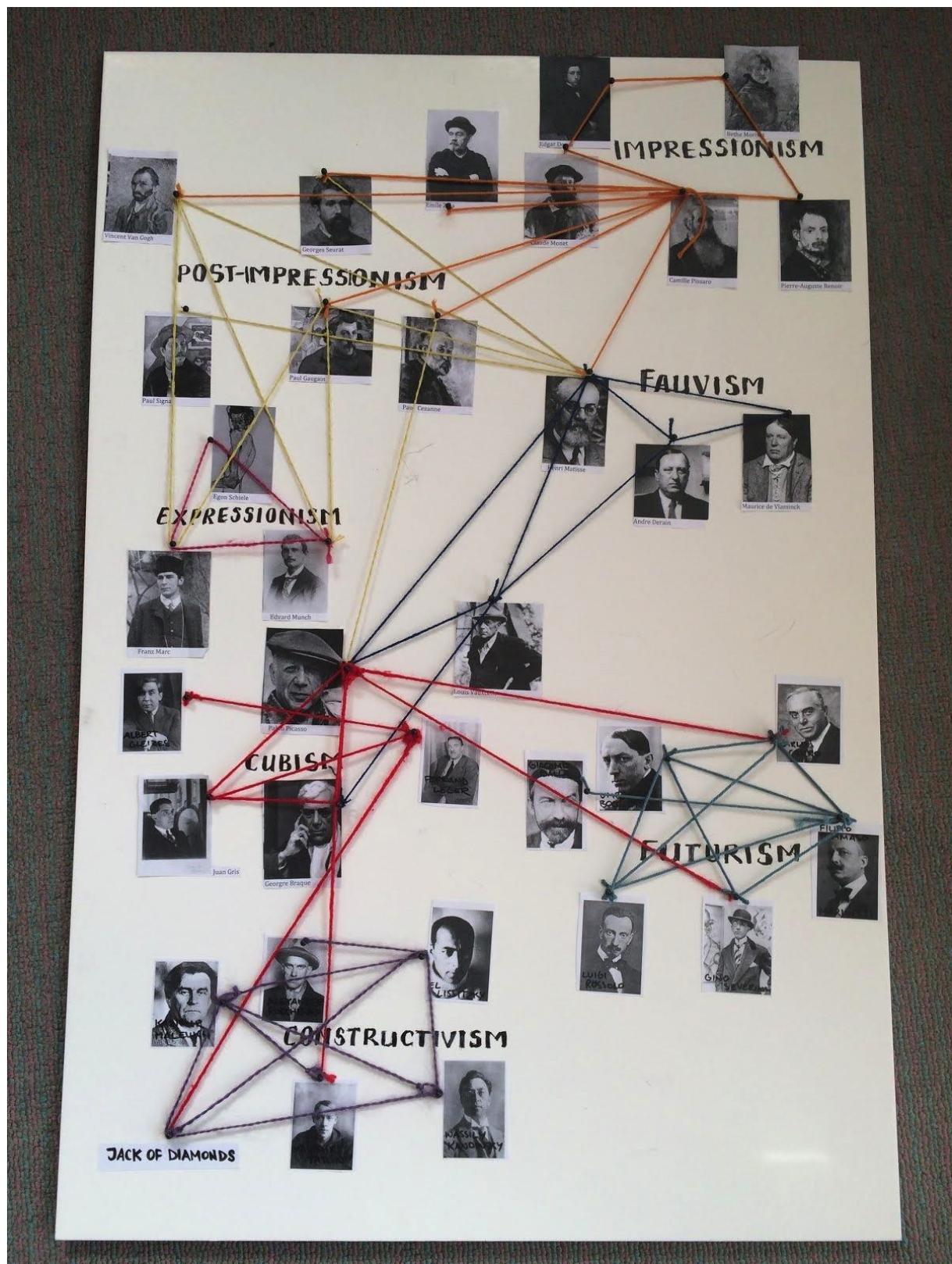
Figure 7. Student Concept Map of Modernism

Robust debates about Greenberg's idea of formalism were bandied around along with the question of the validity of chronology. There were numerous moments when students referred to their peers as "content experts" (based on their work in previous activities) to provide an informed assessment of the concept maps. The final concept maps were diverse and reflected how the students had not only understood the content of the subject but engaged with it in ways that allowed them to develop original conclusions (see Figures 8 & 9).
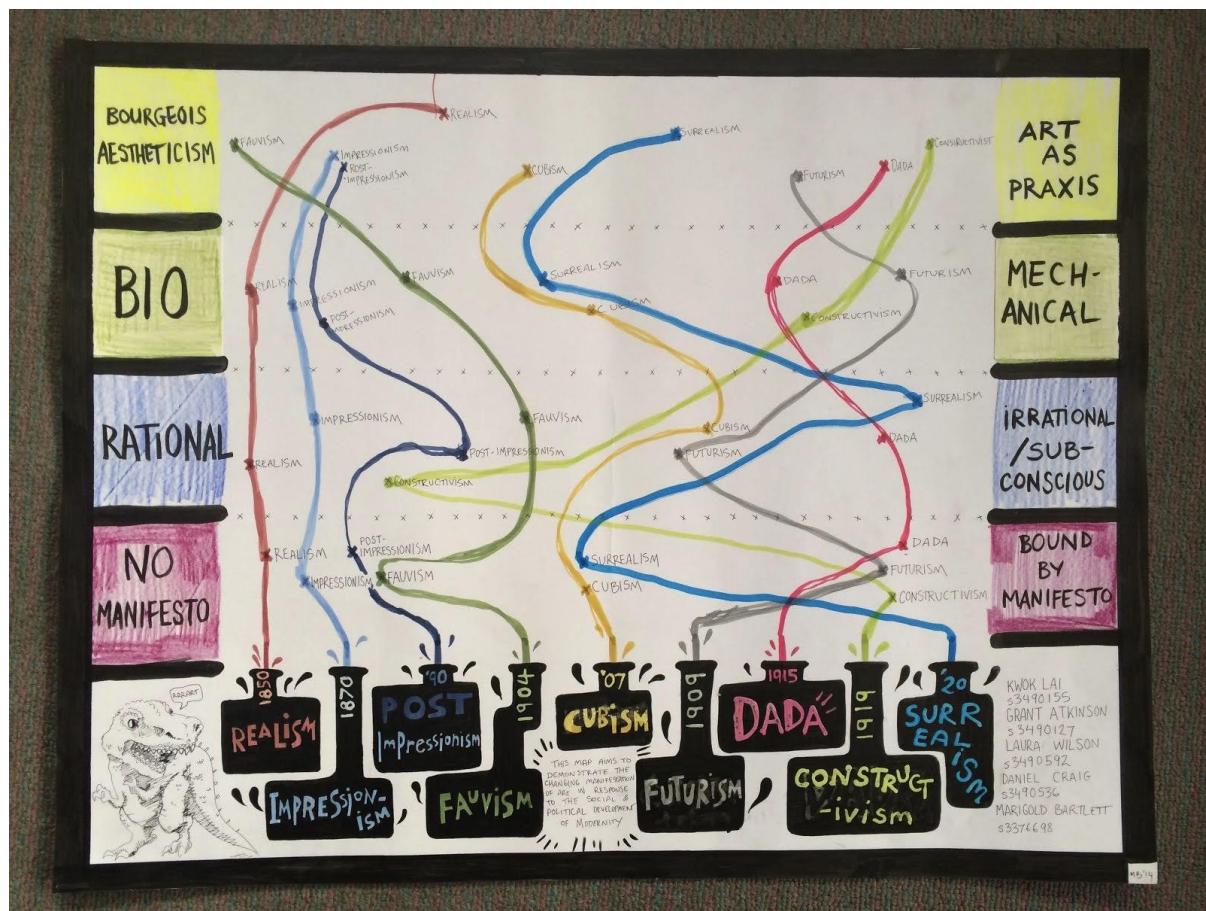
Figure 8. Student Concept Map
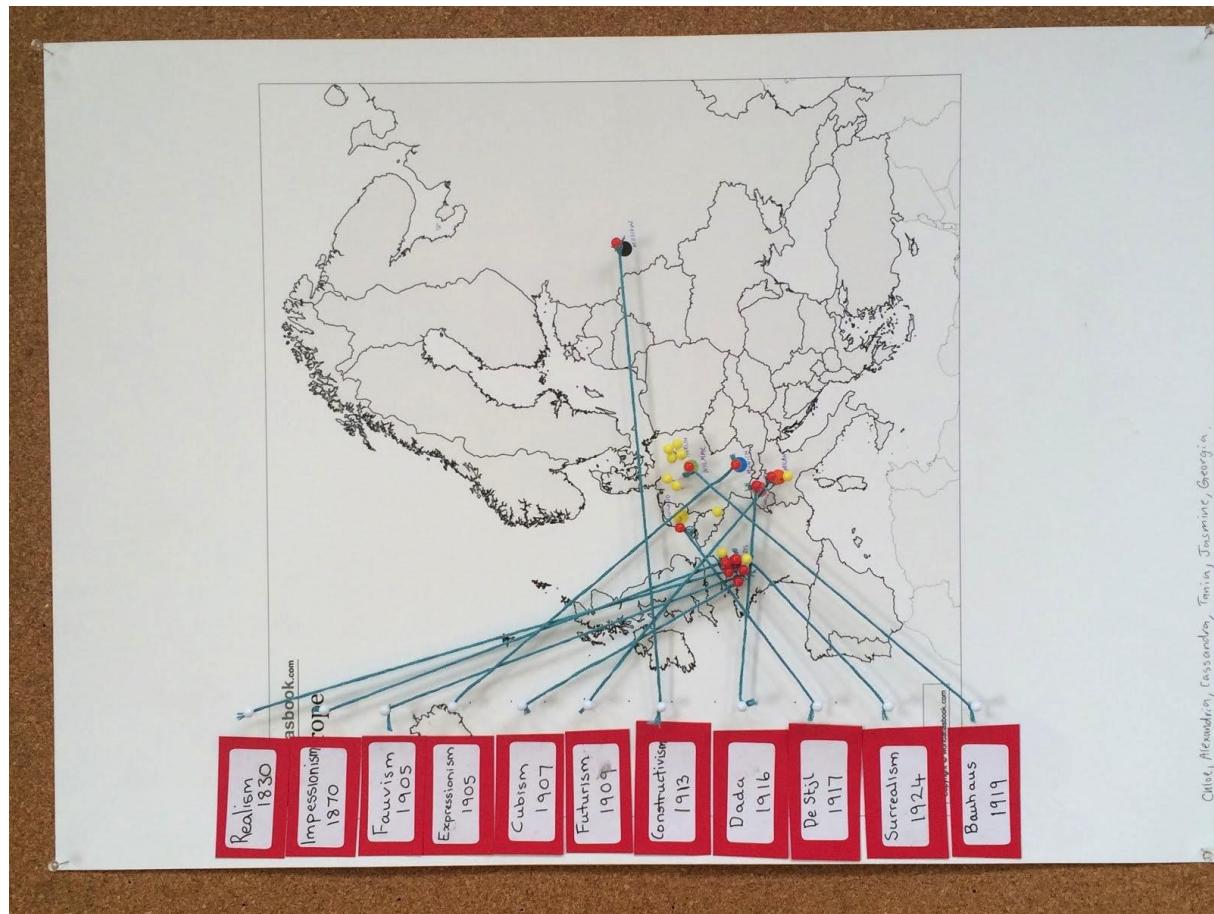
Figure 9. Student Concept Map

As students embarked on their critical response at the end of semester there was less anxiety on their part as to how to research, construct and argue their positions in the form of a critical essay. Students found this systematic accumulation of knowledge and skills helpful, as one student noted "smaller tasks are less stressful and are helpful as they are a good way of practising the process of researching" (Student Feedback Survey). The series of activities had not only built their skills and their content expertise but, most important, their confidence. As one student said, "Smaller tasks to build up to a longer essay was definitely the best strategy as it helped me gain confidence in my writing throughout the semester" (Student Feedback Survey).

Student feedback surveys revealed that this subject was, as one student said, "valuable not only for the research tasks but also in positioning myself and my practice in a historical context." Another stated that they had "learnt a lot this semester in art history and have taken that inspiration back into [the] studio." From a teaching perspective, it was clear that the

subject had equipped them with foundational academic literacies that would support them throughout their tertiary studies. One of the teaching staff in Hong Kong remarked; "The effectiveness of the module is two-fold; it allows students to contribute to the historical knowledge which is the core of the course content, but it additionally allows them to reflect and critique the very structure of the history which is being presented to them (ie. the very western 'map' of modernism). This opens the course up to exactly the kinds of discussions and research that we want - students are given access to history as it is accepted and taught, and then they are provided with the tools to critique that structure and reframe it (in the second assignment in which they make their own maps)."

Although there were inevitable teething problems with the use of technology, some reticence from the students regarding group work, and some concerns from staff about the nature of shorter learning activities, on the whole the changes were received positively by the students and staff. This was reflected in a 20% increase in the student satisfaction rate in Melbourne.

Conclusion: Learning Anywhere Anytime from Anyone

Sims (2008) puts forward a manifesto for the 21st-century learner that recognizes both the changes in student cohorts and shifts away from traditional delivery models. One of the proposals is that today's learners can learn anywhere, anytime, from anyone. Shifting some of the core content into an online format made learning materials available anywhere/anytime to be reviewed, if necessary, multiple times. This is particularly useful to students for whom English is a second language.

The development of curriculum materials by staff across the offerings meant that cultural diversity was and is still being addressed. Students identifying themselves and their peers as "content experts" through a progression of learning activities also suggests that students can "learn from anyone" and the importance of peer learning. Self-reflexivity and peer critique are core studio pedagogies; by harnessing this way of working within an art history and theory context, we are catering to our learning cohorts who are working in practice-based degree programs. This project has been a process of future-proofing a core art history and theory subject. Student feedback provides evidence that our students are being successfully prepared for an ever-changing globalized culture and are developing the transferable skills required to thrive in this environment.

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