2010 arts education

in the age of over-sharing & the death of shame

darren tofts: media education, digital media & social networking


Debates around nomenclature, the novelty or regressive nature of new formations are of course perennial, shifting with trends in industry, emergent communication technologies and constant updates within contemporary ‘app’ culture. The old chestnut “new media art” seems to have finally succumbed to the dustbin of history, absorbed into the malleable and apparently more robust discourse of “digital media” (though media or digital art doesn’t seem to trouble the attention of arts critics too often these days). Similarly, the pervasive formations of mobility, customisation and social networking have taken centre stage as inflections of the contemporary mediascape. The Web’s old hat, man.

new contexts

How has the higher education sector responded to these shifts? The fusion of different disciplines is a common feature of much recent and ongoing curriculum development throughout Australian universities. The University of Western Sydney’s recently accredited Master of Convergent Communications course is predicated on the “breakdown of traditional media silos.” Developed by media artist Kate Richards, the course is sensitive to the dynamic “transformation of media production and consumption practices” and the imperative that curricula, designed for preparing graduates to work in such a context, must also change.

Mitchell Whitelaw, who teaches in the postgraduate Digital Design program at the University of Canberra, is also interested in the “fuzzy areas between established practices,” a notion approaching the “hybridity” that RMIT academic and media artist Ian Haig values (though for him the paradigm of “digital media” is a “no brainer” and he dismisses it as “corporate, generic and uncreative”).

Chris Chesher, Director of the Digital Cultures program at the University of Sydney,
points out that the introduction of its Bachelor of Arts Informatics program in 2000 was in response to the interests of employers seeking graduates “with the capacity to combine techno-savvy with writing, research and the creative skills of an Arts degree.” In 2007 the program was relaunched as Digital Cultures, a change that reflected the “refocusing of the program around Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts engagements with cultural changes associated with digital technologies.” The Bachelor of Digital Media degree at the College of Fine Arts (UNSW) has also strategically positioned itself, in Ross Harley’s words, “across art school approaches to media production, communications-style degrees typically offered in humanities and social sciences, and design-centric approaches to the teaching of creative production and computing”.

So where will these fuzzy, techno-artistic hybrids find employment, having completed their digital media education? Whitelaw postulates the tantalising, yet not unproblematic idea that in this climate of emergent possibility his students “will have jobs that currently don’t exist.” This is indeed a notion that will detain the attention of critics and industry soothsayers for some time to come. Though a word of caution: multimedia graduates in search of as yet unimagined occupations ended up designing snappy promos for Foxtel or Val Morgan—hardly speculative industries or occupations.

multimedia tiredness

Both principles, of transcending definitional boundaries and blending media in unexpected ways, have clearly escaped the quagmire of ‘multimedia,’ with its reductive combination of audiovisuality and interactivity. It is indeed conspicuous to note that institutions that developed significant multimedia programs in the 1990s (such as Swinburne and RMIT) have moved towards the broader catch-all of Digital Media with its emphasis on a suite of production and conceptual literacies grounded in the principle of a utilitarian, digital paradigm that unifies domestic, commercial, industrial and creative activities. The University of Adelaide’s Graduate Certificate of Design in Digital Media also emphasises the “integration” of digital media into a range of practices and identifies its cohort as “post-professionals” seeking to extend their disciplinary knowledge through the use of digital media. Stephen Huxley, from Swinburne University of Technology’s Faculty of Design points to an overall “tiredness” associated with the notion of multimedia among industry and students alike. Huxley also points to the maturity of industries that developed out of the 1990s and were defined “under the umbrella term of multimedia,” suggesting that they “can no longer be addressed appropriately as a collective.”

transmedial adaptation

Media artist Maria Miranda also describes the ways in which artists have responded to such enormous changes in the mediascape in the last five to 10 years. She notes accordingly that media artists are “increasingly working within social networking paradigms and a much more low tech approach” (personal communication). Miranda’s portrait of the contemporary media artist resonates with and sheds valuable light upon current trends in media education in the Higher Education sector, which is also becoming more nomadic and sensitive to the trans-mediated nature of quotidian life: she writes, “many artists are working in public spaces, and across sites both online and offline simultaneously.” Recent responses within the Academy towards the revival of frayed and fraught notions such as convergence (University of Western Sydney) and culture (AFTRS’ new Graduate Certificate in Screen Culture) suggest that program design and branding within the sector are pro-active, offering digital media education that critically assesses this transmedial reality, as well as adequately equipping graduates for working within its changing industries. In this, then, media education is visionary as much as grounded in the present. The University of Western Sydney’s rationale and approach in this context of dynamic change is made plain, in that it is predicated on the “uneasy fit between creative and mobile audiences.” In the assertive, second person vernacular that is de rigueur within academic program design, its projected outcomes for students are clearly forward thinking and innovative: “you will develop new digital content, build skills and resources and explore the industry’s future, while assessing how you can adapt your experience to this rapidly changing industry.”

Not surprisingly, Queensland University of Technology’s “cultural industries”-inflected Media and Communications program accepts that the mix of fixed and mobile media is simply a fact of life. Accordingly, its program is interested in the concept of the “distribution of creative content” through various and intersecting
media channels. Indeed, its Honours program in Technology Innovation (Digital Media) describes the "evolution" of the digital media industry (again understood as the dispersal of multimedia into more established practices such as cinema and performance) as "just beginning." This development of student literacy, informed by the connection between digital technology and 'creative' disciplines, is also a focus of the University of Tasmania's Masters in Creative Media Technology.

decentralised learning & working
If we accept that Digital Media is the new black and multimedia is so yesterday, how are Universities accommodating the voracious behemoth of social networking into the delivery of their curricula? The decentralising of learning and teaching has tapped into the social network's imperative of delivering, to quote Ted Nelson, "anything instantly." Lectures no longer have to be delivered, but can instead be pre-recorded and downloaded as podcasts to be auditioned at a time and place of the student's discretion using mobile media. Online resources of all kinds (such as blogs and Wikis) have become a staple and many apps and, not surprisingly, it is becoming commonplace for universities to have their own iTunes channel for archiving downloadable learning materials. Many campuses have also embraced the virtual space of Second Life, whereby islands cater for the transfer of knowledge as much as the fulfilment of fantasy. Facebook, too, has been colonised by universities in the name of ubiquitous presence in the mediated lives of their students. Even the linguistically challenged Twitter has become a curriculum resource, with Griffith University Journalism students among the first in the country required to tweet as part of their assessable work.

to tweet or not
What are we to make of this confluence of academic work and the wireless public domain, the creative commons and the social network? In a recent essay on the blurring of public and private spheres in the "Age of Always Connect," American writer Mark Dery discusses notions of "over-sharing" and the "death of shame" as the negative signs of the times we live in (http://trueslant.com/markdery). Written with his inimitable acerbic wit, force and invention the essay is a cautionary tale about the double-headed hydra of mediated solipsism (the silent fixation on screens that makes "solitude portable") and the unwanted broadcasting of privacy ("the stranger with the headset, chattering blithely about her irritable bowel as she elbows past you at the supermarket meat counter").

It is clear that the academy has already embraced the siren song of the mediated world of me (it is "trending" in tweet-speak), but does it follow that the social network and the ideal of a 'commons' should become part of the intellectual infrastructure of the university? And does such a suggestion make me a tweet-less dag? What is to become of knowledge (as something that precedes and must succeed me) in the confessional tweet economy when definitions of media art, discussions of the media sector and what I'm wearing at the time will be undifferentiated noise in the flow? Discuss in 140 characters or less.

*Image notes: Layla Vardo is a graduate of RMIT (2009). Her work O-bit was awarded a prize as part of the Dr Harold Schenberg Bequest presented at HATCHED 2010 National Graduate Exhibition, PICA, Perth.

"Chronicling the aging of the subject and the medium of television itself, O-bit is a single channel video installation composed of chronological jump-cut images and breath sounds of news anchor Richard Morecroft as he delivers obituaries and death reports during his 17 years presenting the ABC nightly news" (Hatched 2010 Catalogue).

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