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# Making History Relevant for Designers: breaking down barriers in the mind and across disciplines

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## ABSTRACT

A new course meant an opportunity to rethink how history is introduced to first year students in four disciplines: architecture, industrial design, interior design and landscape architecture. The teaching team was drawn widely from QUT staff and practice, and we worked together well, collaboratively preparing program, content, and final delivery. We aimed to make history relevant and interesting to everyone, avoiding the usual errors of deluges of dates or complicated historiographical or design theories. We told stories; we entertained; and we got the students thinking while they were enjoying the ride. The lecture content was structured by themes – simply named (what, when, why, how, who, where, heritage, four discipline specific reviews, and future history) but resonating with complex ideas. Tutorial exercises and larger assessments tied into these themes and encouraged students to get active in thinking and discussions. Getting design students to read and write about their ideas were key targets in this process.

Our first delivery of this new unit 'Introducing Design History' in 2006 was successful: students became hooked on history. And the teaching team are still excited about the future and eagerly teasing out improvements for 2007. We know why it worked: the content and delivery worked in tandem. The teachers were enthusiastic and sincere. And the teaching approach was well prepared: providing tutorial teaching guides that ensured consistency across 16 tutorial groups; providing essays and lecture notes in various media for students and tutors to access in advance; and encouraging feedback from staff and students that helped steer the program during the semester. Keeping it real and vibrant are the recurring goals for effectively teaching history to designers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

For history teachers and researchers, the belief in the importance of this subject area is typically ardent and wholehearted. However, the outlook of most design students is typically the opposite – unenthusiastic, indifferent and even antagonistic. Perhaps the notion that the students are subjects to be converted to be true believers in history is too extreme, but to make history real and useful for design students requires a high level of passion, from all concerned.

We were the team leaders for a new first year unit in the new course of Bachelor of Design at QUT in 2006. Jean Sim has a landscape architecture background and Alethea Blackler has an industrial design background. Our students were drawn from all four disciplines in the School of Design – architecture, industrial design, interior design and landscape architecture. We planned ahead early, beginning the process of preparation in August 2005 to be ready to teach in late February 2006 to a large cohort of 400 students. Through a process of collaborative efforts from permanent staff and outside professionals, we refined all aspects of the unit's goals, content, delivery and assessment.

This paper examines how we approached creating this new unit and relates the various successes and stumbling blocks we encountered. We are still learning as we prepare for the next delivery in 2007.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

We began our unit development collaboration by getting together an interdisciplinary team of interested colleagues from all disciplines in the school and agreeing on this list of objectives. We stressed the importance of reading and writing skills, as well as analytical and investigative skills, while developing these:

- Getting students excited about their future in design by celebrating the wonders of the past
- Giving them a framework of historical understanding within which they could position their future studies of design and design history
- Promoting books as treasures to hold, look at, and read from; getting to know libraries and archives and other repositories of knowledge; putting the Internet in its place as ONE option for reference (not the only way)
- Promoting respect for historic places and things, recognizing the values of cultural heritage and natural heritage
- Establishing respect for differing points of view, other design disciplines, other cultures, indigenous Australians, other economic classes, other genders, different physical or mental abilities, etc.
- Getting them passionate about design and about history as a way of understanding and improving practice today

Reflecting on our approaches to developing and delivering this unit we sought out several educational authorities. Biggs (2003), acknowledging the problems of new style university teaching – less academic students and larger classes – discusses ways in which university teachers can ensure quality learning. He describes the deep and surface approaches to learning. Deep involves theorising, applying and relating, not simply memorising and note-taking, which are surface levels of engagement.

When students feel the need to know, they automatically try to focus on underlying meaning, main ideas and themes. This requires a sound foundation of relevant prior knowledge so students needing to know will naturally try to learn the details as well as the big picture. This is a deep approach. We tried to instill this need to know through enthusiastic and interesting lectures and plenty of relevant examples.

However, there is more to encouraging a deep approach than simply motivating students, as levels of motivation and interest will vary along with academic ability. For deep approaches the students typically need to be more active in their learning, so we needed to encourage a deep approach through appropriate learning activities. Biggs recommends using constructive alignment to ensure more students adopt a deep approach.

All components in the teaching and learning system need to be aligned to work properly. These include us as lecturers, the students, the curriculum, teaching methods, assessment procedures, climate created through interactions, and institutional climate. Imbalance will lead to poor teaching and surface learning. Particularly important are curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment procedures. When there is alignment between what we want, how we teach and how we assess, teaching is likely to be more effective. Criterion Referenced Assessment can help to achieve the alignment between objectives and assessment, but Biggs believes teaching methods must also be appropriate to the subject matter. This is where constructivism comes in

Constructivism proposes that what the learner has to do to create knowledge is the important thing. The acquisition of information does not change the students' world view, but the way they structure that information and think with it does. This is conceptual change. Meaning is created by the learner and constructivism focuses on the nature of the learning activities that students use.

Therefore, Biggs' whole system is called constructive alignment, as it is based on the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching. Constructive alignment means using constructivist theory as a theory of learning to help decide what teaching methods to use. In aligned teaching there is maximum consistency throughout the system. The curriculum is stated in clear objectives, including the level of understanding required, teaching methods are chosen to realise those objectives and assessment tasks address what the objectives state the students should be learning. Because of this consistency, there is greater likelihood that students will engage in appropriate learning activities, constructing their knowledge their own way. This is deep learning. However, constructive

alignment is not spoon feeding – they are doing the work for themselves.

### III. CONTENT

The first breakthrough with the determination of content was to reject the chronological narrative as the structure for lectures and tutorials. A historical review of any one of the disciplines takes more than one semester to be reasonably comprehensive; covering all four design disciplines together is impossible. With the knowledge that later units in second or third year would provide this depth of understanding of their own profession, our goal was to introduce the basics of history. We began with the traditional journalist's search goals (answer the basic questions of What? When? Why? How? Who? and Where?). We then added a touch of more detailed insight into each of the four disciplines with one session for each under the banner of 'Design Heroes.' Lastly, we added the topics of heritage conservation and speculative future history. These themes provided a very effective platform from which to build theory and practice covering visual design forms and historiography.

#### A. *Vital Themes*

The six journalist's questions were ways of presenting core ideas about history. 'What is history' introduced historiography, different types of history and historians, and varying viewpoints of interpretation. 'When is history' included marking time with historical eras and periods, using chronologies and timelines, and understanding 'modern' and 'contemporary'. 'Why change happens' examined influences on design (ideas behind ideas) including cultural mores and customs, philosophy, spirituality/religions, politics, economics, science and technology. 'How is history' included concepts of stylistic categories, movements, typologies, innovation. 'Who in history' stressed that people matter, as designers, users, makers and keepers. 'Where is history' stressed the importance of place, such as different climatic or geographical influences, attitudes to nature, availability of materials, differing cultures, vernacular and craft design. Illustrations – evocative images and stories – of these ideas were of crucial importance, to keep the students' interest and to help them relate the theory to their own disciplines and experiences.

The selection of three or four influential designers from each discipline was aimed at revealing how design history is interrelated and generating better appreciation about each discipline. The heritage topic was another way of presenting history as real and relevant, by applying the theory to the practical management of historical items and sites. This served as a useful method of introducing historical buildings, gardens and items and how these places and things are valued. Finally, the future history topic was the closing lecture of the semester and presented some speculators and speculations on design futures. Interestingly, it revealed how much of the future speculation is about lifestyles and products.

## *B. New Outlooks*

In line with the constructivist principles, we wanted to change the way the students see the world. Our aim was to give them a historical framework on which they could subsequently build an understanding of their disciplines. We felt that many students are missing enough understanding of history to allow them to hang facts, images, names and dates on, to be able to look at something and have an idea of its style or era and how that related to others. Therefore, they need a chronologically-based framework where they can relate eras, styles, movements, people and cultures to each other and start to understand how they all inter-connect. Although we did not teach with a chronological approach, they did need to end up with some chronological understanding, so the way we attempted to do this by asking students to construct a personal timeline on which they would include the eras, dates, designers and designed objects they felt were relevant to them. Getting them to go deep on this was hard. For example, some students simply downloaded existing lists from the Internet while others included minimal information. This task has been given greater emphasis in 2007, with a template timeline provided, more structured timeline activities built into the program and continual reminders to students to update their timelines.

## IV. DELIVERY

We arranged the unit to be a combination of lecture (2 hours) and tutorial (1 hour) per week during the 13 week semester. Lecture notes were supplied in the form of essays and illustrated PowerPoint presentations were also available for students to copy from several sources (the online teaching resource and CD-ROMs). We set three short texts as mandatory: Heskett 2002 (141 A6 pages), Ballantyne 2002 (126 A6 pages) and Cope 2005 (78 A5 pages). We also expected students to read from several other sources to successfully carry out the tutorial activities and other assessment pieces.

### *A. Lectures and Notes*

While these aspects are traditional forms of teaching and support materials, the content was what made them more effective. While maintaining a sense of enthusiastic authority, we spoke entertainingly in lectures and notes with interesting stories and tidbits of trivia that awakened the students' alertness and left them craving more. Encouraging student responses and discussion during these large lectures was a challenge and usually rested with short answers to direct questions. Similarly, some of the tutors and both of us were present at all lectures so some interaction between staff (with off-the-cuff asides and embellishments) proved a successful break in the typical monologue approach to lecturing.

Bringing the theory or historical principle to life for design students is about making the facts relevant to them. We wrote in the week one introductory handout: 'Design history is not an obsessive checklist of dates and events, people and places. Understanding the history of design is like reading a good detective novel that has exciting elements of fantasy and philosophy mixed throughout. There are insights into why

things happened, how they happened and descriptions of what everything looked like. The best thing about understanding history is that you as a designer can make great use of this knowledge and appreciation. History can feed your creative juices and sustain your passion about design!' That message was stressed in all lectures and most tutorials. Our own passion in delivering talks and running tutorials reinforced these intentions.

### *B. Tutorials*

These more intimate gatherings (with 26 students maximum per group) enabled class activities that reinforced the information presented in lectures. Tutorial sessions involved activities that linked to the lecture content and the set readings, some completely discipline "free" and others (eg. those linked to the four discipline specific lectures) founded in one of the four disciplines. Students assigned themselves to tutorial sessions depending on which was most convenient for their individual timetables, and so each group had a mix of disciplines. Tutors were selected from all four disciplines and from art history, and were either active professionals or research students. We compiled a thorough briefing document (Tutor pack). The success of this 'Tutor's Pack' was proven when several lecturing colleagues adopted it for their units. We also prepared detailed tutorial plans in detail before the start of semester, and held several debriefing and assessment moderation meetings with these tutors. These meetings proved most valuable in troubleshooting – correcting glitches and reinforcing effective teaching approaches. Both of us also acted as tutors of one group each, which helped us be part of the process and understand better the difficulties and triumphs faced by tutors.

## V. ASSESSMENT

There were three pieces of assessment: a history journal (30%), an essay (40%) and a multiple choice examination (30%). The journal was intended as a record of the tutorial activities and to contain evidence of reflection by the student. The essay was aimed at testing investigative and analytical skills as they sought to explore ideas of values related to one of four 'iconic' designed items or places (British Houses of Parliament, Barcelona Chair, Hill's Clothes Hoist, or Central Park in New York). The four topics related to the four disciplines but students could choose any of them regardless of their discipline. The final examination was a check on overall absorption of key ideas and facts. Formative assessment by tutors was carried out on the journal and the essay preparation.

While this mixture of assessment was generally successful, we plan to fine tune some aspects, including changing weighting of the essay to 30% and the journal to 40% to more fairly reflect the workload. Further instruction in essay planning, writing, research strategies, referencing standards and plagiarism were found to be needed during 2006. So for 2007, short talks on these sorts of topics will be added to the general lecture time. The typical history lecture component rarely lasted more than one and a half hours so the extra ¼ or ½ hour on these technical matters will still be within the

scheduled contact time. Keeping the students' attention will be a challenge, so we plan to have one of us deliver most of the short-talks while the other continues with most of the history lectures, then we will swap when appropriate.

Moderation of marking was undertaken through tutor workshops during the marking process. General agreement was reached on the standards for the extremes of grades and interpretation of the criterion referenced assessment (CRA) sheets. During these workshops tutors could relate further information about the relative successes and setbacks from tutorial activities and how this transposed into the journal or essay. Overall these communication lines were most successful and we learnt much from the reliable and dedicated tutors involved, while they thanked us for our thorough preparation and support. However, we found that we overworked our tutors in the amount of formative assessment we expected, and a reduction is needed for 2007.

## VI. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Reflective teachers learn from their experiences (Biggs, 2003) and some of our proposed improvements have been mentioned already. Other things we have changed include fine-tuning the Tutor's Pack, Tutorial Plans and Student Guides for Tutorials for maximum clarity and ease of use; and improving or preparing new tutorial activities and 'homework' exercises. We also substituted Sutton (1999) (375 A5 pages including a lot more illustrations) for Ballantyne (2002).

However, our overall approaches have proved very successful, with a Faculty teaching award in 2006 and supportive feedback from students and tutors describing their enjoyment and appreciation. The average we got on the Student Evaluation of Unit (SEU) was 3.86 out of possible 5.

However, the online SEU survey achieved only 11.11% response rate. We are also pleased with the grades students achieved. The average student grade was a credit level of 68% In detail: only 6.1% of the student cohort failed; 26.7% gained a pass; 27% a credit; 24.5% a distinction; and 14.4% a high distinction.

The year 2007 involves an even wider audience for this unit, with extra students joining from schools of urban development, creative industries and information technology (approximate total of 530 students). It will be a challenge to make our core messages relevant to all the groups through the use of appropriate examples and stories. But we envisage the process as an opportunity to enliven our previous discussion and further broaden the awareness of every student

Developing and delivering this history unit has been a pleasurable challenge. Reflecting on our understanding of the educational principles and practice for this paper has only increased the positive outcomes.

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