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From Tinkering to Meddling: Notes on engaging first year art theory students

Abstract
This paper considers the two-year-long process of redesigning Art Theory: Modernism, the initial core art theory course at The University of Newcastle in Australia, with the aim of increasing the academic engagement of first year fine art students. First year students are particularly vulnerable to dropping out if they feel disengaged from the University. This paper does not present any grand solutions for teaching today's first year students. It does, however, consider ways of designing authentic assessment items that acknowledge the new conditions of pedagogy today. This paper offers ideas for engaging first year students, by creating multidimensional resources that include online material that supports yet provokes students; by challenging them with assessments that demand students produce knowledge and not simply retrieve information and; by reconsidering how faculty present information in lectures. The redesigning of the Art Theory: Modernism course was informed by current and ongoing research in teaching and learning and guided by student feedback administered by the Planning, Quality and Reporting unit at the University of Newcastle.

Keywords
Art History, First Year Experience, Teaching Approaches, Online Learning, Assessment

Cover Page Footnote
Dr Kit Messham-Muir is a Lecturer in art history and the Convenor of Fine Art at the University of Newcastle in Australia. Dr Messham-Muir joined the University of Newcastle in 2008, and over two years redesigned a number of the art theory courses. He implemented new approaches to engaging students and supporting the development of students in their critical first semester at university. This study is drawn from the process of redesigning the first semester first year art theory course, Art Theory: Modernism, for which Dr Messham-Muir received a University award and citation in 2010 and an Australian national citation for outstanding contribution to student learning in 2011.

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Introduction

In 2008, I took up a position lecturing art history in the Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) program at the University of Newcastle in Australia. I had come from the New South Wales Government, where I had managed the State's grants for museums and galleries for three years. When I re-entered academia after this hiatus, all of my comfortable preconceptions about teaching were still happily intact. During my first year, one of my colleagues decided to move on to the more exotic climate of Queensland, leaving me to pick up the first-year core art history courses, *AART1210 Art Theory: Modernism* and *AART1220 Postmodernism and After*. For reasons I will elaborate, it became necessary to redesign the first-semester *Modernism* course; the process began with some minor changes, some tinkering around the edges. As this paper shows, however, these initial minor changes highlighted the need for a more fundamental rethinking of the course, particularly in relation to digital technology, assessments and approaches to delivery.

This paper offers a brief auto-ethnography of certain key aspects of this two-year process. The redesign of *Modernism* was based firmly upon ongoing scholarship in teaching and learning, so that the lessons I learned in redesigning this particular course may well be usefully adapted and applied in other contexts. This paper does not present any grand solutions for teaching today's first-year students; however, it does attempt to offer some suggestions of how art-history educators might approach some of the current challenges in teaching art history to first-year university students. I will provide some context, then discuss the main course aspects that were redesigned: specifically, the online component, new and more "authentic" approaches to assessment and a new feedback regime for students. Finally, this paper discusses the changes in approach to teaching *Modernism*, addressing the fundamental changing role of the teacher and ways of presenting information that are "performative, and not just cognitive" (Felman 1995, p56).

Background and context

The initial impetus for redesigning *Modernism* was actually something minor. The university was moving in 2009 towards a mandatory requirement for all courses to have a presence on Blackboard, the online learning and course management system; this became compulsory in 2012. Before 2009, the course material for *Modernism* had been distributed to the students on a CD-ROM. Moving this material to Blackboard for Semester 1 2009 would involve some minor tinkering – essentially, shifting from the electronic format of the disk to that of the online environment. The move to Blackboard opened other opportunities for students' online engagement with the course: they could submit essays through the Turnitin portal, download Lectopia audiovisual recording of lectures and weekly readings as PDFs and post to an online Discussion Board. Reflecting on these small changes, I realise that I was trying to engage students by making their learning materials more readily available and more contemporary in their presentation.

After these changes in 2009, the student feedback on the *Modernism* course suggested that the students' overall satisfaction had increased (up 0.34 to 4.59, out of 5.00). It must be made clear here that student feedback surveys are a flawed research instrument. I do not put forward student feedback here as "proof", as such. They are, however, accepted within the sector as an indicator by which universities commonly measure the satisfaction of students. Across the sector, they perform a very real internal function in quality assurance, and certainly within faculties, student feedback has a concrete function in determining whether a course may need some kind of intervention, such as redesigning. Indeed, it can determine the ongoing survival of a course. To that extent, while

firm claims of causality cannot be convincingly extrapolated from student feedback, they do function as an important factor within the context of curriculum design.

Bearing this in mind, the students' feedback on Blackboard and Lectopia was curiously lukewarm, rating both the Blackboard online learning site and its Lectopia recordings in what is known rather ominously amongst my colleagues as the "sub-fours": "The Blackboard site assisted my learning" rated 3.90; "Lectopia video recordings of lectures help me to understand" rated even lower, at 3.80. This unenthused response to the introduction of the Blackboard site for *Modernism* was curious particularly because these online components had not even existed prior to 2009. The students' responses might suggest something about their general expectations of an online learning environment. Many of our first-year university students were born in 1993 or later: they are *younger* than the World Wide Web. For these students the internet is native technology in the same way that my generation never knew a world without television. One might assume, therefore, that the new 2009 Blackboard would meet their expectations; yet, once the online elements of this course were introduced they immediately fell short. Regardless of its online information, lecture recordings and Discussion Board, the Blackboard site I had designed provided little opportunity for students to interact with the course and each other. In essence, the site was a broadcast, like an online version of a classroom handout, and not an online social space, like Facebook. Many of our first year students are the "millennials", "digital natives", "the net gen" (Krause 2007, 126) and are used to the easy access to information via online search engines (Bell 2005, 68). The implications of information technology are farther-reaching than merely changing online habits – they have created, to take from the title of Daniel Pink's 2005 book, a whole new mind. Information flows quickly and from point to point in ways that may seem tangential or random to previous generations. The information age of the last two decades is natural for this generation of students – they multitask, make lateral hypertextual connections, slip with ease between disparate points of information. To these students entertainment and information are hybridised, and knowledge and information have blurred definitions (Frand 2000, 18).

In 1999, John Biggs wrote that "education is about *conceptual change*, not just the acquisition of information" (1999, 60). If this was the case in 1999, when the World Wide Web was still in its infancy – before the internet's evolution into a social space – it is most emphatically the case in teaching today. In this decade, students' approaches to learning have been shaped in the augmented reality of the online social space. This socio-technological dimension of our students significantly shapes their habits as learners: as Erica McWilliam says, "active engagement, rather than listening and regurgitating, reflects the learning preferences of the present generation of learners, who are more likely in informal environments to try things out rather than follow instructions 'from above'" (McWilliam 2009, 290). Indeed, these new learning preferences are a good fit for the directions in which education has moved recently. Mark Pegrum comments that "it's often argued that the newer web 2.0 technology is an ideal vehicle for the social constructivist approaches that have shaped Western educational thought over the last few decades" (Pegrum 2009, 5).

The 2009 students' half-hearted response to the introduction of Blackboard and Lectopia thus prompted a more thoroughgoing reconsideration of not only these new online components of *Modernism*, but the overall approach of teaching this course. We as educators would be mistaken in thinking that our response to the expectations of this generation of first year students should be limited to just "keeping up with technology". Redesigning *Modernism* meant rethinking it from the ground up, from the course objectives, through the assessments, right up to the face-to-face teaching.

Online social space

The 2009 Blackboard site for *Modernism* had introduced the Discussion Board facility with an open discussion, but no students had used it that year. Krause et al.'s report into first-year experience found that the majority of first-year students access online course resources such as Blackboard, but only a small minority use online discussions (2005). Elsewhere, Krause says, "[i]n a world where technology is increasingly perceived as a one-stop convenience shop for information 24/7, the challenge for educators is to find creative and authentic ways to create a sense of community online" (2007, 129). So, in preparation for the following academic year, Discussion Boards were structured more strategically. Rather than an open forum for discussion, which no one had used in 2009, the Discussion Board was designed with a clearer sense of purpose, to "scaffold" learning – moving from a high level of staff support towards more peer- and self-directed engagement.

The Boards were designed based on Gilly Salmon's progressive *Five Stage Model of Online Teaching and Learning*: 1. access and motivation; 2. socialisation; 3. information exchange; 4. knowledge construction; 5. development (2000). For example, for the Week 3 Discussion Board, students were asked to find current online examples of "the sublime", after reading the set text for that week by the 18th-century English philosopher, Edmund Burke. In previous years I had found that many students felt this to be a difficult reading. So that week's Discussion Board encouraged students, once they had read about Burke's idea of "the sublime", to "connect knowledge" (Kerns et al. 2005, p4) by asking them to "post an image (or the URL of an image on the net) that is 'sublime', given your understanding of the term." Then, as an exercise in peer information exchange, the students were asked to "come back to this discussion thread in a day or two and comment on at least one other person's posting. Have they captured the 'sublime', or do you understand it differently?" Thus, they were encouraged to read and comprehend the Burke article, then think *visually* with their initial posting of a "sublime" image, and finally engage with their peers in writing critically. With this new, scaffolded structure, the Discussion Boards became very active sites of online discussion and, just as importantly, seemed to form a sense of shared experience and community amongst participants.

Gaining a sense of community in the first year of university is an important element in the ongoing successful progress of undergraduate students. A 2005 Australian Government report on *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities* by Krause et al. suggests that first-year students' sense of academic *and* social engagement directly affects whether they stay for the duration of the degree (Krause et al. 2005, 38-39). Yet, only roughly half of first-year students in Australia (51%) feel that they belong in the university community (Krause et al. 2005, 36). Further to this, the University of Newcastle's socioeconomic context adds an additional pressure for many first-year students. The university recognises that its undergraduate catchment area contains a "higher proportions of low SES [socioeconomic status], high unemployment and low levels of transition to higher education in comparison with state and national figures" (University of Newcastle 2008b, p1). Low socioeconomic status correlates with low participation rates in higher education; as Bradley et al. find in their 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education*, "the current access rate for [the lower socioeconomic groups] is about 16 per cent, and has remained relatively unchanged since 2002. If students from this group were adequately represented, their access rate would be 25 per cent" (Bradley et al. 2008, 30). The Hunter region, which is the area surrounding Newcastle in New South Wales, therefore, has lower-than-average university completions, with 10.6% of its

residents holding a bachelor's degree or above, compared with 16.5% for New South Wales as a whole (Hunter Valley Research Foundation 2008).

While people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are "far less likely" to participate in higher education (Krause et al. 2005, iv), if they do, they are "more likely to be the first in the family to attend university" (Krause et al. 2005, p68). This is certainly the case at Newcastle, which has a high proportion of first-in-family students (Stone 2005, p3). These socioeconomic factors thus become cultural, as these students experience greater adjustments to feel accepted into the university community. Cathy Stone, a Student Counsellor at the University of Newcastle and former Director of its Student Support Unit, notes that first-in-family students have few role models available to them and "few supports to help them understand the different culture and 'foreign language' of university life" (2005). As a consequence, "a disproportionate low number of first-generation students succeed in college" (Pike & Kuh 2005, 276): in one study, 88% of students with parents who had degrees were still enrolled after three years, compared to 73% of students who were first-generation degree students (Warburton, Nuñez & Carroll 2001). As an art-history course, the *Modernism* course faced an additional challenge: as Penny KcKeon observes, there is a "common assumption that while the making of art is for everyone, art history is best regarded as the pursuit of an elite, academically able few" (McKeon 2002, 100-101).

In this social, economic and cultural context, it was important that *Modernism*, a first-year core theory course that is compulsory for students enrolled in the studio-based Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA), helped foster some sense of social and academic community. The first two steps of Salmon's *Five Stage Model of Online Teaching and Learning*, ' access and motivation' and ' socialisation' (2000), thus took on a particularly imperative role.

Assessments that produce knowledge

Beyond the more-supportive and interactive online component, *Modernism* needed to assess students in ways that were meaningful to them. In student evaluations for *Modernism* in 2009, 12% responded "neutral" or "disagree" to the statement "the assessment items in this course supported my learning", which meant that around 15 students of a class of 125 – a substantial number– could see no point in the assessment items. The new conditions of knowledge brought about by the internet are, according to Richard James, Craig McInnis and Marcia Devlin (2002, 3), responsible for a new era in assessment in higher education. Information can now be acquired easily and instantaneously, and in such volumes that surface knowledge is often obtained without deeper understanding. Therefore, assessment items need to give the students opportunities to go beyond simply collecting information, to let them augment their learning by taking a more active role. As David Boud says, "if, as teachers and educational developers, we want to exert maximum leverage over change in higher education we must confront the ways in which assessment tends to undermine learning" (1995, 35). However, before assessments could be redesigned, the fundamentals of the course needed to reconsidered from the ground up. Essentially, the course needed to recognise the new conditions by demanding that students become active in constructing knowledge, rather than simply retrieving information.

The new course description, course objectives and assessment items also needed to adhere to what John Biggs calls the principal of *constructive alignment* (1999). In other words, the objectives of the course should be clear; the students' activities should follow these objectives; and the assessments should address the objectives. Therefore, we test students on those things that the objectives state the students should know (Biggs, 1999, 64). Thus the *Modernism* course

description was rewritten, new course objectives were designed to align with it and new assessment items were based on the new course objectives. The existing assessments had consisted of:

- Week 5: 500-word bibliographic exercise (10%)
- Week 12: major essay (70%)
- Week 13: slide test examination (20%)

These assessment items had no clear links to the course objectives and provided no assessment criteria or rubric, and the individual items had no relationship to each other. Furthermore, the majority of assessment items were due at the end of the semester. In other words, 90% of the course's entire assessment weighting was due in the last two weeks. Therefore the students' workload was vastly increased at the end of the semester, and they had no opportunity to receive worthwhile formative feedback during the semester. With this in mind, the assessment items were redesigned around the new course objective of developing "skills in the analysis of visual art and culture, which can be expressed verbally and in writing":

- Week 3 onwards: image-analysis presentation (25%)
- Week 5: image-analysis exercise (25%)
- Week 13: major essay (50%)

An effective way of creating more-authentic assessment items, meaningful within the broader context of students' ongoing development, is to create connections between the different items. The first two assessment items are aimed at preparing students for their final essay by developing their skills in analysing images. Importantly, whereas the old slide test assessed rote-learned facts about an image to be recounted at an exam and then forever discarded, the new verbal image-analysis presentations and the written image-analysis exercise in Week 5 directed the students to create knowledge by providing them with a basic three-step method for analysing *any* image, developed by Irwin Panofksy (1939).

While Panofsky's method of image analysis is now over 70 years old, developed in the heyday of modernist art criticism, he was cognisant of the broader social contexts into which his iconographical analysis took place; as W. T. J. Mitchell says (knowingly paraphrasing Rosalind Krauss), Panofsky had in mind "art history in an expanded field" (2008). Semiotics and structural-linguistics models would be more nuanced in the analysis they produce, but they are also more complex. The Panofsky approach is valuable in this instance for its simplicity. Panofsky's methodical, three-step process first looks at the formal properties of an image, then describes what is literally depicted in the image before applying a final interpretation of the image based on its broader cultural and historical contexts. The students were given a simplified diagram of the Panofsky method in Week 1 and were reminded that this is one of many existing and possible approaches to analysing images. The lecturer then modeled the use of the Panofsky method each week during lectures in the natural course of discussing the key images on screen. Because the students' presentations were not prepared, the aim was that students would develop the capacity to become active in constructing knowledge, rather than simply retrieve information from Google for their presentations. The written image-analysis exercise in Week 5 then complemented these verbal skills with a similar written exercise. Students wrote a 500-word analysis of an image using the Panofsky model and, in the process, demonstrated good referencing practice. These two assessment items used the same analytical framework but developed two very different sets of skills. In feedback, one *Modernism* student in 2010 said:

> The Panofsky image analysis was a great idea because it made me actually listen in lectures just incase [sic] it was my turn to do it in the following tutorial. Even after I had completed the analysis it was just habit to take notes and actually pay attention. (Student Feedback, AART1210, 2010)

Thus, these new assessment items encouraged independent learning and gave students an adaptable model for image analysis and literacy – tools to be *producers* of knowledge, and lifelong skills based on observation, synthesising, connecting and building on existing knowledge.

Feedback on assessments

Krause et al. found in their study that "fewer than one-third of students feel that teaching staff take an interest in their students' progress and give helpful feedback" (Krause et al., 2005). The new assessment items attempted to address that concern by creating some space in the structure of the semester for students to receive feedback that is actually useful *within* the course; as Scott argues, feedback to students needs not only to be constructive but to prompt (Scott 2006, p xvi). Feedback needs to be timely to be useful for the students. For the oral image-analysis presentation the tutor wrote feedback directly into Blackboard's email window and could hit "send" as soon as the presentation was completed. The student could then walk out of the tutorial and check the feedback two minutes later on their own laptops or a computer in the library. For the written image-analysis exercise the students received written feedback in Week 6, one week after they submitted, thus allowing them at least another seven weeks (or longer, depending on mid-semester recess) until their final summative major essay was due in Week 13. On the same day that they received feedback for the written exercise in Week 6, staff from the Centre for Teaching and Learning would deliver sessions in tutorials on the topic of preparing and writing an essay to help them prepare for the major essay; that way, students could use these sessions to immediately address any shortcomings highlighted in the feedback. The student feedback on the course in 2010 suggested significant improvement. To the statement "the assessment items in this course supported my learning", students in 2010 responded with 4.53 out of 5.00, up from 4.26 in 2008 and 4.31 in 2009 (University of Newcastle, 2008a). In qualitative feedback, one *Modernism* student commented: "I'm absolutely LOVING my first assessment task! Am I crazy?!" Students also gained a clearer idea of what was expected of them: responses to the statement "the requirements for studying this course were made clear" improved 0.41 from 2008 to 2010, a significant jump.

Meddling, narrative and tactical ruptures

In 2000, Jason L. Frand discussed "replacing the phrase 'sage on the stage' with 'guide on the side'", which "reflects the idea that the instructor needs to play a more Socratic role, posing questions and guiding the learning process, rather than taking an ecclesiastical approach, providing 'the word' on a subject that the student is to 'learn' (memorize) and repeat back in some format" (Frand 2000, p24). A decade on, however, McWilliam proposed that we need another model that fits the new conditions of learning. Taking from Pink's *A Whole New Mind* (2005), McWilliam says we need to think about today as the "Conceptual Age", *after* the "Information Age". The new pedagogical model McWilliam proposes is "meddling-in-the-middle" (2009). The Meddler teaches by "examining, questioning, doubting and reconstructing frameworks in a spirit of curiosity, playfulness and experience" (McWilliam 2009); the Meddler is playful but serious, unthreatening but challenging, interactive, rich in information and – above all – creative. For McWilliam, creativity is our capacity "to perceive a problem in two habitually incompatible associative

contexts... making it possible to select, reshuffle, combine or synthesize already existing facts, ideas, faculties and skills in original ways" (2009).

The redesigning of *Modernism* presented an opportunity to think again about how I approach teaching, to become less the Sage and more the Meddler: "Meddlers are clear about the importance of 'low threat, high challenge' pedagogy, and will pursue this end in ways that make active student engagement the norm in their classrooms" (McWilliam 2009). In the process of reconsidering my teaching, I found inspiration from a very unlikely source, in my own research area in museum theory: much of my research in the 2000s examined the vital role of affect and emotion in the interpretation of the Holocaust in museums such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC and the Imperial War Museum in London (Messham-Muir 2004). I had never considered the possible connections between that research and my approach to teaching; yet, emotionality is also a vital dimension of teaching, as Patricia Owen-Smith argues: "[T]he cognitive scaffolding of concepts and teaching strategies are held together by emotionality" (2008, p32). My research had considered the ways in which narrative functions in Holocaust museums to provoke emotional engagement (Messham-Muir 2004). In creating the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Jeshajahu Weinberg, the Museum's first Director, was acutely aware of the power of narrative: "Being gripped by the plot... we get emotionally involved. This emotional involvement opens us to educational influence" (Weinberg 1995, 49). According to Hunter McEwan, narrative "is a vital process in education"; he exhorts that "teachers should understand its role and nurture it in their students" (1997, 89). Narrative also creates involvement. We introduce personal narrative to minimise differences and build rapport, as well as connect new knowledge with existing lived experience (Rossiter 2002, 1). Consequently, the new *Modernism* course became emphatically narrative. The course had previously been organised around a thematic rather than historic rationale, with lectures like "Academy and Drawing", "Histories of Photography", "Status of the Artist" and "Surveying Sculpture". *Modernism*'s historical framework was revised to create a stronger progressive structure embedded in a broader social history of European modernity. This narrative began with "The Dawn of Modernity" and finished with American Abstractionists. Rather than an "autonomous" approach to art history, which sees art-historical development as largely independent of its time and place, the new course emphasised the clear connections between modernism in art and other cultural production and the development of modernity.

This leads to another important lesson about narrative to be learned from the ways museums "teach" the Holocaust: narrative can be disrupted and, in breaking its flow, moments of surprise, tension and even shock can be created, which in turn have a certain pedagogical power. For example, the Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, uses a ruptured narrative in its permanent Holocaust Exhibition. The exhibition is split between two floors of the building; the upper floor begins the narrative with the rise of Nazism in Germany and the persecution of the Jews, while the lower floor deals with the horrific narrative of the Nazi concentration camps. This shift in both narrative and physical space is created by one particular object that punctuates the exhibition: a dissection table used in early Nazi experiments in euthanizing disabled people at Kaufbeuren-Irsee Hospital in Germany. Positioned at the top of the stairs that lead to the lower floors, the table combines the necessary physical rupture of the exhibition space with this object's capacity to shock visitors. Suzanne Bardgett, the Director of the IWM at the time of the Exhibition's opening, recognised that this "deeply disturbing object" provides a "physical and historical 'crisis point' between the Exhibition's two floors" (Bardgett 2000). This point creates a "tactical rupture", a calculated breakage in the expected flow of a narrative. Importantly, tactical ruptures are not necessarily moments of unpleasant disturbance, as in this example. Indeed, in teaching, a moment

of "crisis" in a narrative is often created by something astonishing, curious, or funny – the vital component in any tactical rupture is *unexpected provocation*.

In approaching teaching of the new *Modernism* lectures, then, I sought opportunities each week to disrupt the narrative flow of the lecture. For example, Week 3's lecture discussed Edmund Burke's notion of "the sublime" and its influence on the 19th-century Romanticist landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner. Many students found the language of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, difficult to read, yet Burke's ideas are actually quite straightforward: faced with vast natural phenomena, we are paralysed by fear and awe. I created a video, which I showed the class midway through the 90-minute lecture, in which I read some salient points from Burke's piece from the safety of my office, before reading more at Sublime Point lookout, then finally I jumped out of an aeroplane, freefalling from 14,000 feet while quoting from Burke. The video is five minutes long, light-hearted and entertaining; but the association between Burke, the sublime, fear and awe is absolutely clear. Along with the Burke text, the video created a triangulation, a parallax between an academic explanation and a contemporary point of reference. Burke's 18th-century prose, which often proved an overwhelming distraction for many first-year students, was stripped away, and his underlying ideas were shown from another angle. The lectures in *Modernism* were frequently tactically disrupted by videos or other in-class "stunts", such as changing into my pyjamas in the Surrealism lecture or performing George Maciunas's 1962 piece *Solo for Violin* (essentially destroying a violin with power tools) in the Fluxus Lecture.

These moments are not simply about entertainment. Placed midway through the lecture, they tactically disrupt the natural flow of the lecture, quite deliberately derailing the predictability of its narrative. These kinds of moments of "crisis" in a narrative generate what Ernst van Alphen calls "a new condition of knowledge that enables a production of knowledge that is first of all affective instead of cognitive" (Van Alphen 2002, p178). The cognitive dimension of the lecture's narrative is momentarily suspended. Shoshan Felman similarly argues for the value of such moments:

> [If] teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerable or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents (Felman 1995, p50).

Teaching, she suggests, "must make something happen, and not just transmit a passive knowledge". This approach is "performative, and not just cognitive" (Felman 1995, 56). Owen-Smith likewise argues for the effectiveness of such "affective" teaching, that for her "a classroom ethos that fuels 'disorienting moments' is a mandate" (Owen-Smith 2008, 32). I am careful to never create situations that may be unpleasant, but they often create a temporary moment of tension that is quickly resolved. The important point is that disorienting, unpredictable, provocative moments actually create a space for students to pause, to figuratively step back and to reorient their understanding of the idea being presented. As McWilliam says, "Meddlers create opportunities for hands-on, minds-on and, where appropriate, plugged-in learning collaborations" (2009).

Of course, research needs to be methodologically sound to be in any way conclusive, but it is certainly my experience that these kinds of tactical ruptures have positive long-term impacts beyond simply catching the attention of the students in the immediate: in student feedback taken several months after seeing the "sublime" video, a number of students recalled not only the video but the underlying art-historical lesson behind it: "jumping out of a plane and videotaping his

experience to demonstrate the theory of the 'sublime'", "jumping out of a plane to demonstrate 'the sublime'", "sky diving to demonstrate the sublime" and "that sky diving video showing us what 'sublime' is" (Student Feedback 2009, 2010). As Patricia Owen-Smith argues, "we simply cannot teach for enduring learning without honouring (and I would argue privileging) the affective in our classrooms" (2008, 32).

Beyond the immediate lessons learned, *Modernism* students also gained a sense that their lecturer was enthusiastic for the course ("this lecturer shows enthusiasm for the course" rated 4.90 out of 5.00 in 2010), and there is a plausible synergistic correlation between this and their motivation – they all either agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (70%) that "the teacher motivates me to extend my learning" (Student Feedback, AART1220, 2010). In a similar vein, the new, constructively aligned objectives and more authentic assessments for *Modernism* seemed to positively affect students' perceptions of the helpfulness of academic staff: responses to the statement "when I sought help and advice from academic staff, it was provided" rose 0.27. I might add anecdotally, this not-insignificant rise is despite the fairly consistent attitude and level of attentiveness of that staff. This is probably reflective of the overall satisfaction with the quality of the course, which in 2010 was up 0.31 from 2008.

Where to from here?

The results are not all positive, however. While satisfaction across all indices is significantly greater than in 2008, retention rates are heading in the opposite direction. The "official" withdrawal rate measures student numbers on the "Census Date" (when new enrolments or withdrawals are no longer permitted) against the final enrolments; but a comparison of Week 1 enrolments with the final enrolments is more alarming. We know from Krause et al. that the number of first-year Australian university students withdrawing from at least one subject in 2004 was 18%. This had doubled since 1994, (Krause et al. 2005, iv), so withdrawal figures around 20% for *Modernism* would not appear unusual for a first-year course. Nevertheless, research needs to be done to properly analyse this rising trend in withdrawal rates, which ostensibly contradicts the rising satisfaction rates. To reiterate, Krause et al. suggest that first-year students' sense of academic *and* social engagement directly affects their retention (2005, 38-39). It is possible that while the new *Modernism* course engaged students academically, it still has some way to go to for fostering greater social engagement through collaborative learning and other academic activities that take greater advantage of the social dimension of online learning.

Indeed, the redesigning of *Modernism* is by no means finished. From Semester 1 2012 *Modernism* further evolved under the new name *Critical Studies 1*. In response to a recent review of the BFA program at The University of Newcastle, *Critical Studies* became the central pillar of the new theory-driven BFA. Until 2012, the BFA program had been studio-discipline based. Many art schools persist with this model, despite its being profoundly incongruous with the predominantly conceptual paradigm of contemporary art. It is clear from many of the contributions to Steven Madoff's recent *Art Schools: Propositions for the 21st Century* that it is time, as Ernesto Pujol says, "to open up old boxed up departments" (Pujol 2009, 5). Shirnin Neshat says "I don't believe it's any longer relevant to organise departments according to different disciplines because essentially it seems to me that what runs through all forms of art is a conceptual strategy, and that can be detected and discussed whether, for example, it's within a painting, a video or photography" (Neshat 2009, 325-326). Matthew Higgs likewise comments, "If art schools abandoned discipline-specific departments, it would encourage art educators (the faculty, artist-teachers, administrators and others) to reassess what they are doing at art school" instead of

perpetuating the "administrative status quo" (Higgs 2009, p308). The University of Newcastle has taken this leap in early 2012, which is a courageous step on the part of the School and Faculty. In the transition to degree programs that more authentically reflect the primarily conceptual and non-discipline-based reality of the contemporary art world, it is crucial that our students are engaged by the authenticity of our approaches to teaching art history. To achieve that, maybe we need to be meddlers, not just tinkerers.

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