

REDEFINING THE BACHELORS CURRICULUM IN DESIGN AND MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Nearly one hundred years after the Bauhaus, design and media education has evolved, keeping up with advances in science and technology, and broader and deeper insights into humanities and social science, from a focused, practice-based study to the dynamic interdisciplinary approach of today. This paper presents the strategy taken by a school of art, design and media, of an established technological university located in Southeast Asia to redefine the six different Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degrees they are presently offering into two distinct BFAs; BFA Design Art and BFA Media Art. The strategy and the design of the curriculum had to be in such a way that the two new BFAs are attractive to students who want to be a generalist, while offering pathway for those who want to specialize in, say, product design or animation. The paper discusses how the curriculum has been redesigned to be flexible and transdisciplinary while allowing for the BFAs the possibility of getting accreditation from international bodies such as the NASAD (National Association of Schools of Art and Design).

The author, who lead the curriculum revision team will share how he conceptualized and rallied the faculty to work out the structure and the key courses and the efforts the team took to present the revision of curriculum to the university's upper management to get their support and endorsement before getting approval from the Ministry of Education.

Keywords: Undergraduate programme, design, media, redefine, curriculum development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The School of Art, Design and Media (ADM) was founded in 2005 as a part of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, with a clear mandate to provide unique educational experiences in applied art for Singaporeans and students from the region at the undergraduate level. ADM houses various labs and workshops, including a rapid printing shop, model making shop, professional grade sound stage and motion capture studio, recording and editing suites, a fully stocked library with over 20,000 titles and more than 3,000 movies and an auditorium that seats 450, besides the many teaching studios. At present, ADM offers a four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts in six different majors:

1. Product Design
2. Visual Communication
3. Interactive Media
4. Digital Animation
5. Digital Filmmaking
6. Photography and Digital Imaging

ADM has graduated eight batches of students in these six different majors to date. To many outside, ADM's degree programme and its curriculum seem to have all the ingredients of successful undergraduate education in design and media. Then why propose a new curriculum? This paper presents the context from which a complete revision of the BFA programme was initiated by ADM, and how the author, was given the freedom to imagine and strategise a new structure for the BFA programme that needed to navigate through several levels within ADM and NTU till final approval to start the programme in August 2017 by the Ministry of Education (MOE)

2 THE NEED TO REDEFINE: MOTIVATION

There were three major reasons for redefining the existing curriculum:

1. As years went by, each of the six majors had started developing courses within their own areas, creating six ‘tunnels’ within the school losing the original intention to build interdisciplinarity in the curriculum. This was evident in the number of new modules being added to satisfy the many specializations that each of the faculty brought with them within the major as the faculty size expanded.
2. Built around a tight curriculum that underwent a major revision based on the recommendation of the university wide Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) in 2010, the present BFA programmes were not offering opportunities for interdisciplinary courses even within the six areas at ADM.
3. With the result, graduating students were being seen, more and more, as specialized, many times too specialized, predominantly in their major by potential employers¹. ADM alumni who were potential employers themselves or working for ones felt the same as well.

The BRC’s recommendations had only reduced the total credits (Academic Units, AUs) required to graduate with a BFA from 144 AU²s to 131 AUs, keeping the six distinct majors intact without considering recent developments in art, design and media education as well as the industry requirements. A second curriculum review committee was formed under the author’s chairmanship with a mandate to consider possibilities of paradigm shift in recommending solutions.

2.1 Studying credit distribution

In post-BRC revision BFA in ADM, the first year of is a common Foundation year and from Year 2 onwards, students embark on studies in their major, culminating in a year-long final year project (FYP), in Year 4 before graduation. Over the course of the four years, students also take courses offered by the university through various schools and colleges as General Education Requirements (GERs). A break up of student study requirements in percentage of total AUs (131) is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of AUs in present BFAs over 4 years

| Description | Foundation | Art History (core and prescribed) | Core Major | Prescribed Electives | Unrestricted Electives | GERs (core and prescribed) | Total |
|-----------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| AUs | 21 | 13 | 36 | 9 | 24 | 28 | 131 |
| Percentage of Total AUs (%) | 16 | 10 | 27.5 | 7 | 18.3 | 21.3 | ≈100% |

Based on Table 1, students spend only 27.5% of contact time on the major he/she is studying. Adding the 7% of the contact time on prescribed electives, the student spends a total of 34.5% of contact time on their core major over four years. How does this compare with the course breakdown recommended by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD)? Table 2 shows the consolidation of the guidelines for course breakdown taken from NASAD Handbook, 2015-16 [1];

Table 2. Percentage Distribution Range of Courses Recommended by NASAD

| A. History and Theory | B. Core Major | C. Supportive Courses | D. General Studies | A+B+C |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| 10 - 15 | 25-35 | 30 - 35 | 25 - 35 | ≥ 65 |

¹ While this was an area for attention by employers, students who moved on to pursue post graduate education found this to be an advantage signaling a need for focused specialisation as well.

² AU stands for Academic Units, which is equivalent to credits as used in most of the American universities. 1 AU equals to 1 contact hour per week. A standard 3AU course will have 3 contact hours x 13 weeks = 39 contact hours over one semester. Hence 144 or 132 AU signifies the credit required by a student to graduate over 4 years.

Referring to Table 1, if Foundation, Art History, Core Major and Prescribed are considered equivalent to **A + B + C** of Table 2, then (A + B + C) in ADM’s present BFA would be 62.5, which is less than that recommended by NASAD as shown in Table 2. This gap needs to be considered if the proposed curriculum could be accredited by NASAD in the future.

2.2 Emerging Trends in Art, Design and Media Education

Requirements in the creative arts industries changed, especially in the last ten years or so. Professor Alex Coles of the University of Huddersfield in his recent book titled *The Transdisciplinary Studio* [2] opens with a statement, ‘We have entered a post-post-studio age, and find ourselves with a new studio model: the transdisciplinary. Artists and designers are now defined not by their discipline but by the fluidity with which their practices move between the fields of architecture, art and design’. This means that education needs to embrace the conceptual, imaginative, and interpretive human qualities of art, design and media on the one side, with technology and science on the other, while ensuring that creativity and innovation ties these two sides together throughout the students’ education. Are there any examples from around the world that this is being tried? The BXA program by the Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU) [3] and Bachelor of Art + Design: Animation + Interactive Media and the Bachelor of Art + Design: Fibers + Surface Design at the College of Design at the North Carolina State University (NCSU) [4] are two unique courses that the committee studied to seek a direction. Table 3 highlights the unique features of these two programmes. The result of this study was a realisation that the new BFA curriculum must be more than liberal education and should focus on imparting knowledge and skills in a very cross disciplinary manner with options for choosing free electives across schools and colleges.

Table 3. Bachelors Programmes from CMU and NCSU

| | CMU | NCSU |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Programme | BXA actually is three bachelor’s programmes, with several colleges collaborating with the College of Fine Arts (BHA, BSA, and BCSA) – All three 4 years duration | Bachelor of Art + Design: Fibers + Surface Design Bachelor of Art + Design: Interactive + Media Both 4 years duration |
| How does it work? | Students chose concentration separately from a) Five schools in the College of Fine Arts and b) from the other participating colleges | Quite a complex group of modules to be taken + Free electives + General Education Program (GEP). Quite similar to ADM in approach. |
| Advantage | Students get to take courses in several schools in the two collaborating colleges. Liberal rather than a profession centred curriculum | A cross disciplinary approach to undergraduate education within a school itself. Could point to a way for ADM. |
| Takeaways | College of Fine Art is able to work with College of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Science and College of Computer Sciences to create hybrid programmes | Students are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual Storytellers • Entrepreneurs • Experimenters • Makers |

2.3 Thoughts from the Industry

Armed with the result of a survey which showed 60% of ADM graduates land in jobs related to their majors and 20% take up jobs that are on the periphery of their majors, the committee initiated conversations with the local design and media industry in Singapore; some home-grown and some international outfits. Detailed discussions revealed the following:

- In general, they are quite happy with the knowledge in art/design/media histories that the graduates bring with them, seeing it as an advantage to themselves.
- There is a gap in the ability of the students to grasp and connect the different areas of design and media.
- They felt that more attention needs to be given for supportive courses to the majors for the students to be well rounded.
- The industry also expressed that while specialisation in a major is respected, there is a need for ‘generalists’ in design and media.

- Many of the captains of local industry felt that there must be formal opportunity for them to part take in seminars to get the students ‘work ready’.

2.4 Identifying improvements needed

Deciding to make changes in the present BFA education based on the motivation is not a basis for ‘a’ change to be introduced. Several meetings with the committee members were required to compile the most compelling improvement based on problem areas that were identified as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Problems and Proposals

| Description | Result | Proposed Solution |
|--|--|---|
| Year 1 Foundation courses do not prepare students adequately | Each of the six majors have to fold area specific foundation into core classes in Year 2 | Semester 2 of Year 1 need to be redesigned to offer specific foundation modules |
| Core courses and prescribed electives at Years 2 and 3 are very focused without any flexibility | Students from each major get segmentalised into their corners | Offer more options/ flexible prerequisite requirements for students to take core and prescribed elective courses, from other majors within ADM |
| Student spend only 34.4% of contact hours on core majors and prescribed electives over the four years | A tendency for students to ‘touch and go’ rather than concentrate on subjects that are core and prescribed electives | Redesign the core courses to progressively increase the involvement required to reach around 40 % of contact hours. |
| Major specific histories, for example history of product design or animation, etc., are not compulsory | Students neglect to study the history of their specific major that is important to their professional development | Reinstate area specific histories pertaining to each area of study in ADM need to be reinstated within core art history |
| Industry pointed out on the lack of industry centred seminar or participation | Industry experts are brought in on adhoc basis by the instructors | Introduce a ‘industry seminar’ as core module to bring in professionals from the industry on weekly basis to help students under the industry and make more informed career choices |

3 THE APPROACH

The first decision that was made was to see how to reduce the number of BFAs that were being offered. Would that mean doing away with what are seemingly unpopular majors and only keep the popular ones? This is not what the university or the industry wanted. They were looking forward to a unique curriculum with emphasis on transdisciplinary education that could accommodate students who wish to be specialist or generalists. With ADM having invested heavily in the past ten years or so on equipment and infrastructure in each of the six areas, that could be the approach that would make use of this not dismantle it? After several rounds of discussions, it became apparent that there could be an opportunity that the six areas can be subdivided into only two BFAs could be offered as shown in Figure 1 below:

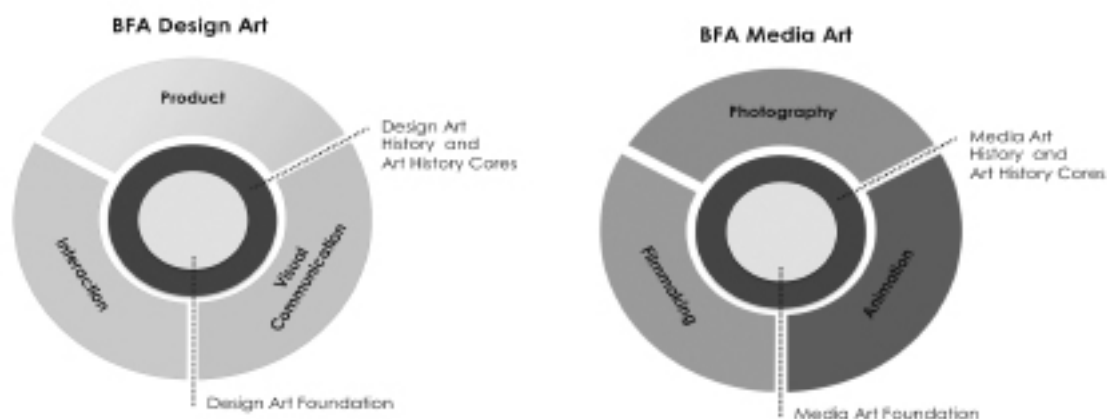


Figure 1. Proposed BFAs in Design Art and Media Art

4 THE NEW STRUCTURE

Based on the visual structure of Figure 1, the details were then fleshed out based on the following principles:

1. Year 1 Semester 1: foundation modules to be common instead of two semesters
2. End of Year 1 Semester 1: Students are given the opportunity to opt for Design Art or Media Art as major.
3. Year 2 Semester 2: foundation modules will be major specific, equipping student for the next three years.
4. Year 2 Semester 1: students must take first level core module (one each) from three of the areas under the major that they have chosen (design art or media art)
5. Year 2 Semester 2 to Year 3 Semester 2: Student who want to be generalist have the option of taking core modules from any of the three areas under the major they have chosen.
6. Year 4 Semester 1 & 2: specializing student will propose and carry out their Final Year Project (FYP) in the area they are specializing. Others can choose an FYP topic that they like within the major area that they have chosen.
7. Art history will be progressive and made relevant to the requirements both the majors. Design history and media history becomes compulsory.
8. Prescribed electives (PE) to be flexible for students from either major to take.
9. Unrestricted electives (UE) to be completely unrestricted to courses in HASS and the university.

Table 5 shows the distribution of AUs under the revised curriculum. This distribution is close to the expected distribution of credits recommended by NASAD (Table 2) and better than the present distribution at ADM as shown in Table 1.

Table 5. Distribution of AUs in the revised BFA curriculum

| Description | Common Foundation | Art History (core and prescribed) | Core Major (including specific foundation + major specific history) | Prescribed Electives | Unrestricted Electives | GERs (core and prescribed) | Total |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| AUs | 12 | 9 | 42 | 18 | 24 | 28 | 133 |
| Percentage of Total AUs (%) | 9 | 7 | 31.5 | 13.5 | 18 | 21 | ≈100% |

5 CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explain to the readers how a vision to review and make meaningful changes to an existing undergraduate programme, in six different areas in art and design, was strategised and executed under the leadership of the author by the curriculum review committee to align these areas into two distinct majors. It also explained how a visual structure was evolved and a credit distribution worked out to bring it as close to the recommendation of NASAD. It was also important that the committee considered the need to offer flexibility to the students to decide if he/she wanted to specialize or graduate as a generalist. The Ministry of Education (MOE)'s approval of the proposal on 02 March 2017, in many ways, shows the thoroughness with which the proposal was prepared and presented to NTU as well as to the MOE.

The author did not intend to write this as a research paper but a descriptive paper and has taken the structural reference from a paper titled *Reengineering the Curriculum: Design and Analysis of a New Undergraduate Electrical and Computer Engineering Degree at Carnegie Mellon University* [5]. In taking this approach, the author hopes to bring out the thought process and actions taken to put together a proposal from the first principles rather than give a discourse on how to redefine a curriculum.

REFERENCES

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