

Navigating the culture of the faculty: Discovery Week in Art & Design at Monash University

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The Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University has adopted a week-long program at the start of incoming students' first semester as a means to introduce them to the culture of the faculty, the art-life of a major city, other students and the process of collaborative art making. Classes are suspended and students work in small groups, visiting the city and interpreting their experience in a visual form. In this presentation the fundamentals that contribute to the exercise are emphasised. The faculty's commitment and the resulting goodwill are reported. A short visual expression of the project will highlight the energy of students' contribution to Discovery Week.

The idea of Discovery Week

“We expect a lot of you. We expect you will become a part of our culture... Push yourself, take some risks.” Thus Foundation Dean of Art & Design Prof John Redmond welcomed commencing students this year. The Faculty of Art and Design at Monash University caters to students with major interests in studio work, art history and theory, design and visual culture, and architecture, with a strong academic emphasis that sees a high representation of students enrolled in higher degree study. In the following pages I will describe the faculty's experience as the issue of “enculturing” new students through a faculty-wide Discovery Week for first year students.

If students think they are valued they will stay at university (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). This is reflected in the retention rate in Art & Design which at 90% is among the best at Monash University (Devey, 2008). The program has had two iterations now, the first modified by a report, based on student and staff responses.

The idea of Discovery Week originated with the Dean's concept of a camp for first years. Horror at the logistics of the exercise led to a compromise week of activities with these objectives:

- To nurture a community of students embracing both International and local students;
- To lay the foundations for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary exchange within the student body and the faculty of Art & Design;
- To provide and intensive introduction for new students to the creative processes of art and design practice

- To familiarise new students with their peers, staff and resources of the Faculty of Art & Design.

A major thrust of the project was the integration of students not only of diverse interests, such as jewellery making, multimedia design, interior architecture or printmaking, but also from diverse backgrounds, including international students, practising artists and school leavers. Particularly, the problem of alienation and “ghetto”isation of international students was addressed.

The two principles expressed in the Dean’s opening statement underscore Discovery Week. Students are introduced to the culture of the faculty as well as being challenged in their first days in the faculty to collaborate to produce creative work.

The first version of Discovery Week

In 2008, after one week of classes, in which students attended introductory sessions in all their units, and first studio and drawing sessions, the teaching program was suspended for Discovery week activities. A complex timetable divided 350 students into five groups, each of which was subdivided into five-person work teams. The selection of the teams was deliberately mixed with local and international students and students from different degree structures collected together. A “passport” or workbook directed activities. Students had attendance confirmed by stamps in the passport.

The unifying activity was that student teams were asked to interpret their experience of an excursion to Melbourne city in terms of a visual response. The brief simply required that the exhibit be contained within a metre square table top. Some materials were supplied, but student were invited to go beyond conventional materials and develop a unique interpretation in words and images. The exhibit considered best was a whimsical video of a building’s visit to the city (a student in a decorated box took the viewer on a trip through Melbourne). Responses were varied in terms of work hours spent, finish, 2D-3D representation, and level of imagination. Yet the energy and pride in the exhibition was a crowning moment of the week.

The first Discovery Week schedule included OHS sessions, drawing studio related to the project, library sessions and art film presentations. Some sessions started at 8.00 am and some finished at 6.00 pm. Daily students gathered in their major groups, rolls were marked and activities for the day were described. A designated studio area, at first in a gym, then in a large exhibition/conference space, was available as projects were developed for a Friday morning display and awards. A lunch with entertainment was provided by the Faculty.

Group introductions began the first day before students were divided into activities and dispatched to sessions or excursion activities.

The second version of Discovery Week

Following recommendations from the first Discovery week, the timetable was pared down, but the intellectual input was extended with the provision of extra insights and paths for investigation. To avoid disruption to the set curriculum Discovery Week was moved to week one. The OHS, Library and on-campus activities were lessened, while multiple city trips were encouraged, first in guided form and secondly with self-directed visits by the small groups of five on days two and three. The scope for project work was extended in three ways with the inclusion of contextual material about indigenous relationships with the city;

encouragement to consider the local (suburban) environment and geography; and some specific questions to stimulate interpretation of art and design objects in the NGV and significant buildings in town. What began as a workbook in 2008, became a resource book with much information about art collections and significant city architecture. On the first city trip students were accompanied by staff guides who focussed students on a variety of important objects. Final products of project work were similar in both 2008 and 2009 with some exciting and innovative interpretations of the city.

Some materials were provided, but students were encouraged to work creatively and adapt found material or use their own material to build their product. Process was considered more important than product, yet some startlingly well finished projects were created. All 370 students worked together in a large conference room. And once again, an exhibition, prize giving and a faculty lunch finished the week. In administrative terms, this program is owned by the faculty and full resources of the faculty are applied. The Associate Dean (Teaching & Learning) plans and oversees the week, a vote of \$23,500 from the Teaching and Learning budget pays for room hire, train tickets, materials and the final day lunch. The Manager of Student Administration oversees the budget and the preparation of student lists, while key staff take on organising roles and casual sessional staff are rostered to assist during the week.

Why this program should continue

Discovery Week is important as it

- Brings the faculty's focus right onto their new students
- Puts students in touch with other students from day one of the academic year
- Provides semi-structured activity that allows for independent work
- Allows novice artists, architects, and designers to make visual art in week one
- Allows for a social working environment in which students and staff mix

Fundamentals behind the program

These include

- Faculty ownership through commitment of time, resources and staff
- Supervision from an academic position and support from student administration
- Compulsory attendance for students as the first week of semester
- Cross disciplinary involvement
- Commitment to evaluation and change on an annual basis.

References

Crosling, G., Thomas, L. and Heagney, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Improving student retention in higher education: the role of teaching and learning*. London: Routledge.

Devey, A. (2008) University retention project: summary hotspots report (internal discussion paper). Office of the Campus Director, Caulfield and Clayton, Monash University, Clayton.