

Actor training in portfolio careers: Flourishing in a creative career beyond “luck”

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Abstract

The Dramatic Arts is often viewed as a high-risk option due to low job security. As Creative Industries evolve contemporary performers are confronted with an even larger gap between supply and demand. This article discusses existing research relating to the notion of student agency in designing a creative portfolio career versus the narrative of the lucky break so often associated with acting careers. It outlines the process of review and design, underpinned by notions of portfolio training, in a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, at a private Higher Education Provider in Sydney. It concludes that it is possible to design a degree that prepares students to practice decision making, flexibility and weighing risks – key skills required for a portfolio career.

Keywords

Drama Training; Portfolio Career Training; Active Learning; Curriculum Review

Introduction

There is a view of the actor’s career characterised by the unending, single-minded struggle to get that “lucky break”. However, the reality of a career in the Creative Industries is that it is complex, multi-faceted and diverse and requires a broad range of skills and knowledge (Bartleet et al. 2012) rather than simply one road to success. The role of tertiary education institutions hoping to produce artists with lifelong sustainable careers in the arts must then include training for this type of complex career. The need for tertiary education providers to do more than simply teach the skills of a profession, but also to develop students into effective industry personnel has been gradually becoming a significantly greater focus in curriculum development (Harvey, 2000). Tertiary institutions must invest more seriously in graduate employability and this requires deeper application, adapting whole teaching methods and curriculums to cater to the ever changing Creative Industries, rather than superficially addressing the issues in specialised units at the end of their training.

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Although course reviews are regularly scheduled events in the life of tertiary education delivery, the 2017-18 review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts at a Higher Education Provider in Sydney also involved a significant structural overhaul to better facilitate the concept of portfolio careers into the curriculum. In addition to the new, alternate structural features, professional development units were designed in response to concern amongst both permanent and casual staff that students should be better equipped to deal with life post-graduation. The following article reports an analysis of the review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts in which subjects and overall course structures were reassessed and redeveloped with the portfolio career in mind. The goal of the College in this review was to provide a Bachelor's degree that produced dramatic artists with the necessary skills and understandings to engage in a sustainable, resilient, lifelong career in the arts.

Context and methods

The current Bachelor of Dramatic Arts has three majors: Performance; Theatre Practice and Production. Like many intensive theatre training programs, the degree was designed with theoretical, skill based and professional development units feeding into a core pillar of productions. Students are involved in a diverse experience of acting and dramatic art production. The percentage of the Bachelor's degree devoted to the different skills was determined by the student's choice of major with particular units becoming core or elective. These core components of the degree were retained and expanded upon following the review process.

The review process involved two phases of collaboration. The first were weekly meetings between the Head of Performing Arts and staff to analyse the previous course structure, discuss concerns that could be addressed within a review and to examine the course through the lens of both portfolio training and student wellbeing. The second phase of the process involved collaborating in a work in progress course design with a focus group of seven current sessional lecturers within the Bachelor of Dramatic Art who also teach at other tertiary institutions and work currently in the Creative Arts Industries. It was particularly important that staff were able to communicate their areas of concern and ideas as anecdotal evidence of issues arising from the old course both to ensure that the new degree had as much input as possible for quality purposes but also to facilitate a smooth transition as staff would feel that they were active members of its creation.

In informal staff preliminary discussions there were concerns, anecdotes, suggestions and research findings about the prospective features and direction of the degree. Whilst these concerns were far reaching in subject, what they essentially boiled down to was that the performing artist's career is constantly changing, and we needed to keep changing with it.

The four major concerns that presented themselves as relevant to this article were:

5. Our current students were experiencing a disenfranchisement with the arts sector and their degree due to a feeling that they would be unable to sustain themselves financially with the skills they have learnt upon exiting the degree.
6. Many of our alumni were lacking a certain resilience and creativity in finding employment and constructing their careers.
7. The production stream was not as popular as the other streams, possibly due to a disconnect between its structure and the industry into which students would head upon leaving the degree.
8. There was a need to ensure we were preparing students realistically for the portfolio career they were most likely to create for themselves on graduating.

In our formalised collaborative research, the focus groups conducted with staff and the student feedback from unit evaluations further illuminated the need to address these issues not just as extracurricular and voluntary, but seeded deeply within the central narrative and curriculum of the Bachelor degree. This would ensure that all students, not just the highly motivated ones, would come out of the degree able to conduct a healthy, life-long career in the arts. The new learning environment would connect theoretical and methodological considerations of active learning and portfolio career training in the design.

Our broader research produced a key study in the UK showing that there is a perception by students that their educational credentials have had a progressively declining impact on their prospective employability when graduating even outside the arts sector due to a “congested and competitive graduate labour market” (Tomlinson, 2006). Encouraging students to see a connection between their studies and employment then becomes a key concern of all tertiary institutions, not just arts-focused ones, and early awareness of the career outcomes as aligned to the learning outcomes becomes more relevant. This would address the issue of our alumni’s prospects and provide a solid framework for post study pathway to help the psychological wellbeing of our current students as our degree greater reflected the ever-changing arts sector. And it is here that the concept of the portfolio career training took central focus.

Defining a portfolio career

The concept of portfolio training was first coined in the 1990s but has gained popularity with the examination of successful artistic careers becoming a greater focus of learning institutions, as student graduate employment rates become a focal metric of educational success. It involves the concept that artists working in the industry are more likely to achieve financial stability and creative fulfilment by working several jobs for a number of employers. It is arguably the next step in the divergence away from organisational career development, as a sub category of the Protean Career or “self-managed career” that has become progressively more dominant since the 1970s

(Bennett, 2009). The 2017 Australia Council for the Arts' study by Throsby and Petetskaya confirmed that for most professional artists in Australia, achieving professional stability required exploiting multiple income streams. Whilst it is a concept usually associated with musicians' careers, the similar patterns in initial career trajectory in the findings of Bennett & Bridgstock (2014) by musicians and dancers could reasonably be extended to actors and theatre makers.

In our development of portfolio training, it became apparent that defining portfolio career would be a key concern. Recent research outlines the difficulty in defining exactly what constituted portfolio training within a tertiary education setting (Latukeyu & Ginsborg, 2018). This research showed that there is some debate as to whether a portfolio career would entail working the same skill (such as acting) across multiple employment providers, or working several different skills (such as acting, teaching, stage management) and this difference in opinion could account for a tendency towards emphasising either deeply specialised training which develops one profession's skill to a high level or broad range training that provides training across a number of roles needed to create theatre. In the redesign of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, reviews of other similar courses and evidence presented by staff teaching at different institutions and universities found that both models involved significant shortcomings. The shortcoming of conservatoire training was that students lacked an ability to move across multiple employment opportunities and so were fairly brittle in response to arts industry fluctuation. By contrast, the shortcoming of broad range training was that students understood the fundamentals of multiple employable skills but had achieved none of them to an employable level. For the purpose of developing the Bachelor of Drama Arts, then, we worked with a framework somewhere between these two concepts by defining portfolio career training to require the attainment of one major skill, for example, acting or management plus at least one other skill to an employable level. In developing students for a portfolio career, it is necessary to build a narrative of progression for all skill areas, not just the primary one a student focused on.

Similar difficulties came from the complex series of needs for a prospective dramatic arts career as oppose to other disciplines due to the nature of the Creative Industries. Artists manage frequently conflicting paradigms due to the diversity of work undertaken during their career. Specialist and generalist skills are required within the same career, as well as skills in balancing the demands of autonomous working ability and social engagement factors and even the geographical contradictions require that dramatic arts makers are able to exploit domestic and international, urban and regional markets (Lingo & Teper, 2013). Similarly, even the concept of entrepreneurialism, which is so key to arts careers, is slightly different to other disciplines such as Business, so curriculum strategies cannot simply be pulled from the Business sphere into the arts but must be started from scratch with constant referencing to Creative Industry practise (Bridgstock, 2012).

What is central to the narrative of portfolio training, regardless of where on the spectrum the particular training fits in number of skills attained, is that the concept is radically different from the romanticised Hollywood version of artistic success where luck makes overnight success and the industry forgets the rest. In developing students

for this career type, then, it similarly became necessary to build a narrative of progression into employability for all skill areas, not just the primary one a student focused on.

Discussion

In applying these principles, feedback from staff during the review strongly recommended that the current actor training major remain almost identical. The degree also retained the central productions that the students worked towards throughout the year as the value of real world problem solving was so strong (Bal et al, 2015). The three major areas of change were in the overall progressive structure of the degree, the introduction of specialisations and the development of the portfolio career narrative into the curriculum.

In reviewing the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, the review committee utilised Lawson's (2015) steps of introducing, developing and assuring learning outcomes for the overall course design. These steps were introduced both into the individual units of study and a whole of course approach. This allows students to see the learning outcomes that they are being trained to achieve and be able to measure this achievement as they progress, making them agents in their own education and taking them from inexperienced novices (and often high school leavers) to entry level professionals by the end of their degree.

In the "Introducing" first year of the degree, students take units that address a broad range of knowledge and skills in Dramatic Arts (these will be discussed later in this article). The number of production units that students were required to study in first year were doubled and made equal in value to the performing units. This ensured that, unlike some music conservatoires where portfolio training is more lip service than reality (Latukefu & Ginsborg, 2018), the drama students will have genuine experience of a range of different roles and responsibilities that are part of making Theatre, not just being an actor.

The second year or "Developing" stage (Lawson, 2015) changed significantly from the old course. In second year, students elect to go into the Performance stream, Production stream or Theatre Practice stream. They then choose a pathway of particular skills of interest and follow that throughout their whole second year. This follows the specialisation strategy which will be discussed later. Performance majors maintain their heavy load of performance subjects such as movement, voice and acting, are introduced to the theatre productions and undertake two electives that are offered in a progressive set so that they are honing one particular skill in their second year alongside their performance skills. Production students undertake a series of technically focused core units and also have a progressive elective component of either more production or performance subjects. Theatre practice majors have the most choice with core management units and two pathways to choose so that they can choose multiple skill areas to hone. The second year involves a considerable learning curve as students progress from introductory subject styles to in depth skill development.

The third year or “Assuring” stage of the course involves students becoming more autonomous in their skill development. Performance third year subjects become more specialised and demanding to align with more difficult productions and the Production and Theatre Practice students complete directed independent projects that involve one-to-one mentoring with a staff member in their chosen field. In these projects students are encouraged by their mentor to make the shift from being students to being professionals with emphasis on being able to adapt to changing environments and multiple roles. This third year also involved the stepping stone “professional development” unit which deals with concepts around managing your portfolio career from financial management, health, goal setting, and developing a healthy sustainability in the career of the student.

Earlier in the article we discussed the notion of skill pathways and specialisations. During the review process staff involved in the design expressed opinions such as the importance for students to have an overview of all of the roles involved in dramatic art production. But, they were concerned that graduates would have a superficial level of knowledge insufficient to properly fulfil roles in the industry. The pathway units were designed to work together to give students a deeper understanding of the particular skill area that they wish to pursue. There are five pathways now in the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts; Acting, Story, Producing, Management and Design.

- In the Acting pathway students continue their studies of acting, voice or movement that introduced in first year. Students who choose this pathway continue classes throughout the second and third year.
- The Story pathway further develops introductory skills in directing and writing that students attained in first year. Second year students who choose a story pathway undertake one Directing and one Scriptwriting unit and can then further hone those skills in one on one mentoring subjects Project I and Project II in third year.
- The Producing pathway is compulsory for Theatre Practice students and involves developing skills in producing dramatic works and running a dramatic art business. Second year students undertake one Production Management and one Business Management unit and then have the potential to produce their own work in their third year Project I and Project II units.
- The Management pathway is a specialised stage management stream designed to get students professionally stage managing and capable of performing this role in college productions in their third year.
- The Design pathway involves specialised units in Mechanical Design, Technical Design and Visual Design, with skills ranging from lighting design to prop making. It is a required pathway for Production majors and the skills learnt in these units can also be consolidated with the third year Project I and Project II units.

Each of these pathways was designed in consultation with a specialist from the particular field and they are designed to give students a deeper understanding of their chosen pathway so that graduates can pursue multiple roles in the Creative Industries. Students should be able to develop a level of resilience to industry change as they will

be able to adapt to flows of employment in particular areas by switching the types of work they are looking for.

The final change that needed to be considered was how to embed the narrative of portfolio training into a digestible way for students. Latukefu and Ginsborg's (2018) research into portfolio training outlined a certain hesitance from the student body in accepting portfolio training.

In order for students to be successful in training for a portfolio career, their career and life after the college had to become a part of the collective approach from early in their educational career. Bennett and Bridgstock (2014) note the importance of introducing the seemingly contradictory concepts of career awareness and intrinsic (often creative) satisfaction early in the student's educational experience in order to manage student expectations of their career. Early introduction also could allow students to develop their own individual balance of needs for financial stability and creative satisfaction to allow for a level of deliberateness in their initial employment choices. Staff expressed that previously some students had seemed to exist inside a bubble throughout their training, unwilling to think of their life after graduation.

An important addition to the co-curricular activities offered to students at the college were negotiations with the broader college for a career resource space and a career counsellor who specialises in Creative Careers to run micro-career workshops on selected topics such as: building my online small business and how to create sustainable mental and physical approaches to my creative practice.

As well as these features, the degree emphasises the importance of choice to encourage students in their autonomous journey. By directing students to a progression of subjects rather than one off electives, it ensures that they seriously consider their pathways, the assumption being that students will be more careful if they are committing to two semesters worth of subjects. This choice element was also supported by an emphasis on "Active Learning". Students who are active, self-determined learners are motivated and self-confident and they construct their own knowledge and understanding through personal experience and a dynamic role in decisions about their education (Deci et al, 2011; Petress, 2008; Simons, 1997; Dewey, 1936). This sort of learning has personal meaning and can be applied to relevant activities beyond the educational setting (Verenikina, 2008). By allowing students choice both in their overall course progression and within their individual units, we were able to empower an active learning environment to support student independence and, therefore, engagement.

Conclusion

The new Bachelor of Dramatic Art will begin in March 2019; however, it will be some time before we are able to report the outcome for the students in terms of their employment and welfare with three years before they even become alumni. It is yet to be seen if Lawson's introduction, development and assurance model combined with a pathway skill development system will in fact improve alumni employability and

resilience in the face of arts industry change by bringing the portfolio career into the forefront of the student and staff psyche.

In training students for portfolio careers, we examine the portfolio career in a deconstructed way so that students can place themselves anywhere on the spectrum of a portfolio career. This spectrum goes from using the same skill cluster working for multiple companies, to multiple skills in the arts sector, even out to Throsby and Zednik's (2011) proposal of creative skills being transposed to non-arts sector employment alongside arts employment. This could combat the student perception of a growing irrelevance of tertiary education by realigning the training to feed directly into their industry, and explicitly showing them this progression through the professional development units.

Overall, our findings in the review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Art emphasised a need to develop new features within the degree to respond to the concerns of the staff regarding student employability. The design was underpinned by theories of active and self-determination learning in which students are autonomous, self-reliant authors of their own career. Furthermore, the design was heavily influenced by the notion of the portfolio career which countered "swept up with luck" narrative of acting careers. Instead the narrative of this reviewed degree is that students are preparing for a portfolio career in which they are able to practice taking positive steps and weighing risks which is a key skill required for a portfolio career which involves constant decision making, flexibility and foresight in career steps in order to be successful.

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Dr Mark Seton is the founder of Sense Connexion, which he established to inspire savvy resilience in actors and other professionals whose giftedness for empathy and sensitivity is crucial to their effectiveness and success. He is an adjunct lecturer at Excelsia College, International Screen Academy and Academy of Film, Theatre and Television. He is also an Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at The University of Sydney. He was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2009 to conduct a study tour of actor training healthcare practices in the UK. Arising from this study, the Equity Foundation, in collaboration with the University of Sydney, initiated a ground-breaking Actors' Wellbeing Study (AWS) in 2013. Aside from being a member of the international Editorial Board of the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* Dr Seton is a co-founder of the Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare (ASPAH) and is currently Vice President. He is also an Ambassador for Entertainment Assist.