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Putting the cart before the horse? Driving student engagement through first year career identity development in a large multidisciplinary Creative Industries cohort

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Abstract

It is now widely accepted that first year students benefit from pedagogies which mediate and support their transitions to university, and assist them to develop an adaptive student identity. We present an initiative which takes an alternative and additional approach to this way of viewing the first year experience. Based on research into creative industries career trajectories, this initiative focuses on the establishment of nascent career identity and professional self-concept amongst 600 first semester Bachelor of Creative Industries (BCI) students at QUT. The BCI is offered as a three year undergraduate program involving self-selection of majors, minors and electives, and also as a four year double degree with Business and Law faculties. Students engage in a scaffolded process of initial career visioning and reflective course planning, based on their own industry and careers research, guided by industry-active academic and careers staff, and drawing upon the experiences of final year students.

Introduction

Over the last decade, Queensland University of Technology has made significant efforts to enhance the first year experience of its undergraduates (e.g., Kift, 2009; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009; Queensland University of Technology, 2010), adding to an impressive array of research and practice in the field. We are now keenly aware that students have a wide variety of backgrounds and prior experiences which influence their approaches and potential in tertiary education. First year is a pivotal period which can strongly influence outcomes for students during their courses and beyond. Tasked with being, “the glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together” (McInnis, 2011, p.9), the first year curriculum must engage students, make them feel supported, and help them to develop a sense of belongingness and student identity (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). With these objectives in mind, Kift (2009, p.10) proposed organising curriculum principles for first year (e.g., ‘diversity’, ‘engagement’, which demonstrate ways in which student engagement may be supported through intentional curriculum design. These principles have found wide purchase in Australian universities (Smith, 2011).

In this presentation, we articulate a seemingly paradoxical approach to the first year experience, involving the development of career identity, as an overlay to existing first year experience approaches. The career identity development approach is not intended to replace Kift’s (2009) curriculum principles, but rather to supplement them as a way of deepening engagement with learning and reinforcing student motivation.

Career identity and student engagement

Career identity is the definition people have of themselves in terms of work or career (Meijers, 1998). It describes ‘who I am’, ‘who I want to be’ and ‘what’s important to me’ in the career

context. Career identity reflects motivation, personal meaning and individual values as they relate to work. It has a strong effect on career-related behaviour, acting as a “cognitive compass” (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004, p.17) that directs, regulates, and sustains the individual’s learning, job creation and acquisition actions, and career building strategies (Fugate, et al., 2004).

Career identity development is largely overlooked by tertiary education. The OECD’s (2002) *Review of Career Guidance Policies* commented, ‘many students in tertiary education appear to have little idea of why they are there or where it is leading’ (p.18). Students can complete courses with only the vaguest of notions regarding what they will do afterwards, guided by unrealistic, media-influenced ideas about the world of work in the field they have chosen, or with an overly rigid, foreclosed and idealistic career identity (e.g. having a career just like that of film director Peter Jackson).

Critically, these career identity issues also influence engagement with learning while students are at university, and therefore the skills they depart with (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012). Students who have an adaptive and realistic sense of career identity and therefore have a well-developed sense of the personal relevance of course content are more likely to take ‘deep’, sense-making approaches to learning and engage with curricula meaningfully. Students who have less sense of why they are there are more likely to ‘just get by’ in their courses, and aim merely to pass (Nyström, Dahlgren, & Dahlgren, 2008). Students who have foreclosed career identities are likely to engage with learning in terms of that identity, and only later realise that what they have learned is too narrow and not optimally useful to them (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012).

Career identity and the Creative Industries

The Creative Industries include ‘traditional’ arts-based fields such as music, dance, drama, writing, publishing, and the visual arts, alongside film, television, radio, advertising, games & interactive content, architecture, and design. The unifying themes of the Creative Industries are individual creativity, skill and talent, and the potential to create wealth and jobs through the generation and use of intellectual property (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2008).

Bridgstock (2011) argued that adaptive career identity development is particularly important for Creative Industries students. The reason for this is that there are an enormous range of career paths and scenarios that creative graduates can pursue and many of them involve freelance, short-term project work in which individuals find their own unique, often trans-disciplinary, creative niche. Creative Industries careers are commonly individually navigated, with little opportunity for stable employment or progression within a single firm (Bridgstock, 2005). Decisions regarding employment are much less likely to rely on formal educational credentials or professional accreditation than in other sectors, but rather are often dependent on a network of informal contacts and the quality of previous work. The nature of employment within the Creative Industries is a motivating factor in introducing career development and identity formation in the first year curriculum of Creative Industries courses at QUT.

The Bachelor of Creative Industries (BCI) degree at Queensland University of Technology is designed to accommodate the diversity in disciplinary skills required by the contemporary creative practitioner. The BCI is structured similarly to a traditional liberal arts degree. Students can choose from one of 13 different first disciplinary creative majors, accompanied by a second major in 23 possible disciplinary areas, or two minor areas of study from the same list. Some of these second major/ minor disciplines, e.g., entrepreneurship and marketing, are hosted by Faculties other than Creative Industries. The BCI can also be taken as part of a four year double degree with Law, Business, Human Services, or Information Technology. As well as their disciplinary studies, BCI

students complete one core unit in each semester of their degrees, designed to build a sense of cohort identity, make sense of and synthesise their disciplinary study in terms of their own learning and career journeys, and develop generic capabilities required by professional creatives (such as written and verbal communication, creative project management, and entrepreneurship). The initiative articulated in this presentation relates to the first core unit in the BCI, which is taken by all 600 first year, first semester students. The initiative is being delivered for the first time in first semester, 2012.

The justification for starting to emphasise career identity development in the first year core BCI unit is threefold. First, once students have developed an adaptive career identity, they are more likely to engage actively and meaningfully with learning opportunities and skill acquisition offered during the remainder of the course. Second, they are more likely to choose course options which align with their interests and intended directions, rather than, “because you’ve heard the unit’s pretty easy, or because your friends are doing it” (third year student interview, 2010). Third, career identity building develops career self-management capability, which is an essential skill set for most creative practitioners (Bridgstock, 2011).

Building student career identity development into a first year core Creative Industries unit

Course delivery in the unit comprises a one hour lecture and a two-hour workshop/tutorial in a computer lab each week. The tutorial classes are streamed into industry-specific clusters to ensure that the content and discussion are focussed on the students’ needs and interests. The tutorial is run by a tutor with relevant industry experience.

Assessment in the unit comprises three items. To begin, there is a reflective ‘career profile’ assessment task and, scattered throughout the semester, there are six small pieces of progressive assessment. The career profile is based partly on an online career development module named *Self Understanding* students complete, which provides an opportunity for them to develop a profile of interests and strengths (Thomson, 2010). Early in the semester, students learn reflective writing through the lecture and tutorial exercises.

Under the career identity development initiative, the final piece of assessment in the unit is a reflective career development portfolio, which includes four major sections, in line with Watts’ (2006) DOTS model of career development learning. Through the semester, learning related to each of the sections is progressively introduced, scaffolded and assessed formatively, prior to final assessment. The four sections associated with this final end-of-semester assessment item are:

1. **Career profile:** What are your career interests, influences, values, aptitudes and capabilities?
2. **Industry and careers research:** Based on your research, what are the career opportunities, challenges, and capability requirements in occupations and sectors of interest to you?
3. **Career vision:** Drawing on your industry/careers research and your career profile, what career scenarios and roles might you pursue?
4. **Learning needs and study plan:** Based on your career vision, what skills will you need to acquire? What course pathways might you pursue? What QUT work experience and extra-curricular experiences or learning might you need to undertake?

Industry and careers research is undertaken individually by students during the middle weeks of the semester. Academic and industry resources relating to Creative Industries careers are introduced during the lectures, and students learn information retrieval and evaluation skills via scaffolded searching exercises during tutorials and another online module - *Information PILOT* (Queensland University of Technology, 2012). The industry and careers research phase involves obtaining,

evaluating and information on topics relating to creative career opportunities, including: world of work trends, occupational tasks, skill requirements, industry and role outlook, role challenges, and broad employability strategies (such as who to network with). Students draw from a number of academic and non-academic sources, including:

- academic and popular articles and books on creative industries careers, sector trends, skill needs etc;
- electronic sources such as myfuture.com.au; the creative industries skills council website, and industry-specific resources such as the Australian Graphic Design Association;
- advice from disciplinary academic staff and Careers staff (who run a 'creative career cafe' after each lecture to respond to student queries)
- input from third year students who are undertaking/ have recently completed internships via guest Q&A appearances in tutorials and access to their reflective internship blogs

One class is devoted to career visioning. The career vision is not intended to be a final statement of career goals, but rather is intended to encapsulate each student's personal career possibilities at one point in time (Hall, Waddell, Donner, & Wheeler, 2004). In class, emphasis is placed on the ongoing and unfolding nature of career and the role of happenstance in the career journey. The career vision is intended to provide enough framing that the student is able to make informed decisions about their study pathway.

Two remaining classes relate to exploring majors, minors, electives, and co-curricular activities in terms of the student's career vision and research into industry skill requirements. Students will interrogate unit outlines in terms of intended learning outcomes, and will identify and justify their study choices. Finally, they have the opportunity to learn and practise how to write reflectively and to justify an argument in writing, in time for their final piece of assessment. A formative peer review process will be used with the career development portfolio assessment piece.

Impact and Evaluation

The key aims of the initiative are: to improve student engagement with learning throughout the program of study; reduce student attrition and 'churn'; and improve employment outcomes. The initiative will be evaluated in a number of ways in addition to the standard university student satisfaction metrics.

First, in terms of the development of student career identity and study/career decision self efficacy: students will complete a self-report benchmarking exercise including the well-established Career Decision Self Efficacy (CDSE) scale (Betz, Hammond, & Multon, 2005), and items relating to confidence with course choice. The benchmarking exercise will also allow the curriculum to be responsively tailored to student needs. The students' final week CDSE benchmarking results will be modelled statistically with their academic results in other units, thus evaluating the theoretical proposition (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012) that a better developed, adaptive career identity can drive deeper student engagement with learning.

Qualitative focus groups with students at the end of the semester will gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative from their perspective, particularly in terms of perceived relevance and usefulness of the material, and whether the unit had an impact on their career and study choices. The perspectives of teaching staff will be obtained via analysis of weekly comments made in the unit's teaching staff wiki, and a focus group at the end of semester.

Key questions for discussion

1. Is the first year career identity approach a worthwhile one, or is it too much for first year, alongside other FYE work and foundational disciplinary skill development? What might the impact on student identity development be?
2. What pedagogies might be useful in developing student career identity in early years? What might the role of industry professionals be?
3. What is the applicability of the career identity approach to students from disciplines outside the Creative Industries?
4. How might career identity development be carried into second and third year, to provide continuity and progression between the foundational and capstone experiences?
5. If a career identity approach is adopted in first year, how will other valuable non-vocationally orientated capabilities (e.g., social responsibility and citizenship) be addressed?

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