

Art Stars: Rattling Their Cage

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As a Department of Art & Design situated within a research-based university, our Foundations curriculum was much in the manner of the routine thinking of a typical beginning sequence of lock-step drawing and design courses. Upper-level students commiserated with Foundation students and were once overheard saying, “Oh yeah, Foundations, you just have to get through it.”

Our curricular approach of first-year Foundations failed to effectively consider the range of high school experiences of our incoming Art Stars. For some students, from intensive art and advanced placement programs, it seemed to be a rehash of their self-determined confidence. For others, it was an expanded studio environment, yet predictable, narrow, and too much about basics. In other words, Foundations was a waiting period and not stimulating enough to get students engaged.

From the viewpoint of our faculty, upper-level students lacked familiarity with hands-on materials; failed to relate basic principles across art disciplines; were stymied by conceptual thinking and problem solving in art-making; and seemed to rush to finish solutions without sufficient process and were too easily satisfied with the first idea.

Our faculty commenced discussion and formed an ad hoc committee in 2013 to rectify this circumstance by reviewing our teaching resources, studio environment, and the learning development of first and second-year students. In order to revise and shape an improved structure for our curriculum, we considered how students perceive and process their experiences. They enter our department with a caged viewpoint of what they already know from high school. Their intention is to conform their university art and design experience to fit their expectations and modify their expectations to fit the experience (Perry, 1970, p.43-44).

To understand this scenario, William G. Perry’s research was a significant resource. His scheme of intellectual and ethical development includes nine stages or positions of development (Perry, 1970). The first two positions were the most relevant for our focus on the first and second-year students.

Position 1: Basic Duality

Students conceptions of knowledge, truth, and morality result between “in-group vs. out-group” (p.59).

Students appear naïve-innocent and will exercise simple obedience (p.59). Answers can only be right and wrong and are usually obtained by authority figures that are readily accepted as true.

Position 2: Multiplicity Pre-Legitimate

Rebels against multiplicity “in defense of growth rather than defense against it” (p.75).

Students are aware of different perspectives but they are also aware that they have not grown enough to be receptive to this diversity – they rebel but at the same time feel “frozen” (p.75).

Ann Gribbin (2003) cited Perry in regards to students in her Foundational Design Course, stating that:

‘William Perry’s scheme is useful to help explain the cognitive development process of many college students. His recommendations to support students at

their current level of development and challenge them to higher positions can be applied to the pedagogy used in beginning design courses. Instructors can structure courses to support students in dualist positions at the beginning of the semester and progressively add challenges that will move students to learn to evaluate their solutions in contextual relativism and to acknowledge personal agency for their solutions.’ (p.7)

Another summary of these beginning phases of development is that of Marcia B. Baxter Magolda in her stages of knowing model. (Baxter Magolda, 1992) Her first stage is identified as absolute: knowledge is certain and there are always answers; uncertainty exists when learners don’t know answers; learner believes teacher is expert; focus is on absorbing knowledge; and assessment is simply checking what the learner has ‘acquired’.

Recognizing these three sources of incremental transition in student growth within the timeframe of the first and second year, our Core curriculum, implemented in 2015-2016, sought to immerse these students in hands-on art and design practice. In other words, direct course instruction to their developmental level to acquire knowledge of the defined making methods of studio practice. It is a cross-disciplinary skill-based model including all studio disciplines. Art and design principles, project outcomes, and lexicon are emphasized according to the essentials of creative process, skill, technique, materials, and equipment within each of the twelve studio disciplines.

These disciplines consist of ceramics, design, drawing, interaction design, moving images, painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture, three-dimensional modeling, typography, and lecture-based media/design/culture. This total of 36 credits is distributed across four semesters with an additional Core Colloquium (one credit) each semester. Core Colloquium fosters interaction among first and second-year students, features visiting artists and designers, includes presentations by Advanced students, provides group advisement, and assures familiarity with University policies and procedures.

The two-year Core is about breaking down pre-conceived patterns and building up a skill set in preparation to embrace uncertainty in the Advanced curriculum of the third and fourth year. The Core seeks to prepare Art Stars for this substantial jump in development from makers who learn and reflect process, to thinkers who make with familiar process in the Advanced curriculum. The Core fosters breadth of a skill set prior to a more ambiguous mind set within the depth of a selected studio disciplines in the third and fourth years.

Our studio-wide approach encompasses increased interaction of Core students with Advanced students and nurtures studio camaraderie. Discipline-based studio faculty are Core faculty teaching first and second-year students as well as supervising MFA graduate teaching assistants teaching Core courses. Beyond the studios, the Art & Design Living Learning Community, supports first-year Core students with live-in Advanced Art & Design Peer Mentors, and is located in the Residence Hall closest to the Art & Design studios.

In the latter half of spring semester in the second year, all Core students participate in the comprehensive Core review. The review begins with a digital portfolio of twenty projects representing all twelve courses and a self-assessment questionnaire (Likert-type scale). Faculty feedback and ratings are tabulated prior to individual advising sessions (three faculty per student). The advising session discussion addresses strengths and weaknesses along with a suggested path forward in the third and fourth years. It considers the options of Bachelor of Art ART-BAAS, Bachelor of Fine Arts FA-BFA, and Bachelor of Visual Communications VC-BFA. FA-BFA is a self-determined mindset as an artist, whereas, VC-BFA is client based with set parameters. In addition, all three degrees require 12 credits in Art History.

Core First Year	Core Second Year
Core Drawing	Core Printmaking
Core Design	Core Sculpture
Core Painting	Core Typography
Core Photography	Core Moving Images
Core Ceramics	Core 3-D Modeling
Media/Design/Culture	Core Interactive Media
Core Colloquium	Core Colloquium
Core Colloquium	Core Colloquium
<i>Core courses (3 credits) are non-sequential with a mix of three studio courses + Core Colloquium (1 credit) each semester for a total of 40 credits.</i>	

ART-BAAS	FA-BFA	VC-BFA
40 credits Core	40 credits Core	40 credits Core
12 credits Advanced	36 credits Advanced	36 credits Advanced
12 credits Art History	12 credits Art History	12 credits Art History
124 credits total for degree	124 credits total for degree	124 credits total for degree

The Core is intended to include as many faculty as possible teaching Core courses in their studio discipline and supervising their MFA TAs teaching Core courses. MFA TAs are typically second-year students. During the first two years of implementing the Core, 14 of 16 faculty taught Core courses. Two sections of each Core course were offered each semester (2 x 12 = 24 per semester). At least one section of each core course was taught by faculty. In addition to MFA TAs, supplemental adjunct teaching included MFA alumni and local artists and designers. Another predicted aspect of the Core is increased in-class scheduled use of studios and labs, along with greater out-of-class occupancy in studios and labs.

This current 2018 spring semester, in the midst of the third year of implementation, the first cohort of Core students is pursuing the Advanced curriculum. As an entering first-year class of 49 ART-BAAS

students and two ART-BAAS Honors students, the cohort distribution is two ART-BAAS students, 23 FA-BFA, and 26 VC-BFA. A preliminary survey was disseminated in mid-February to the cohort of BFA students (20 FA-BFA and 23 VC-BFA completed the survey). The paper survey (hand-written responses) included questions prompting responses on a Likert-type scale, plus a few open-ended questions.

My high school art experience included various media.

	Drawing	Design	Painting	Photo	Ceramics	Digital	Printmknng	Sculpture	AP Art
FA	17	10	13	9	7	7	5	5	6
VC	21	12	17	15	11	14	4	5	12

My high school art experience prepared me for the Core curriculum.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	7	4	6	3
Visual Communications	4	7	6	6

I developed skill-based hand practice with equipment and technology as a maker in Core courses.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	0	3	8	9
Visual Communications	0	2	11	10

I realized connections of process and method between/among the Core courses.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	0	6	9	5
Visual Communications	0	6	9	8

I changed my mind about my original intended art discipline as a result of the Core courses.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	5	6	5	4
Visual Communications	9	9	4	1

The Core review (portfolio and faculty advising session) was a valued and effective process.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	2	7	4	7
Visual Communications	1	11	4	7

The breadth of twelve Core courses prepared me for mixed practice in future creative endeavors.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	0	4	8	8
Visual Communications	0	6	8	9

I had confidence based on Core courses to make the transition to Advanced courses.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	0	3	8	9
Visual Communications	3	12	7	1

I recognize using aspects of what I learned in Core courses in my Advanced courses.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Definitely
Fine Arts	0	3	8	9
Visual Communications	1	8	10	4

Here's what worked for me in Core courses. (open-ended question)

	Range of disciplines	Making decisions, experimenting	Hands-on skills	Explore new mediums
Fine Arts	12	4	8	7
Visual Communications	17	5	4	6

Here's what did not work for me in Core courses. (open-ended question)

	Grad TA lack prep	Grad TA lack skills	FA/VC related courses	Too easy	Not enough concept
Fine Arts	4	3	3	1	1
Visual Communications	5	4	2	7	7

The survey was the first step of gathering student feedback about the Core curriculum. A number of initial assumptions are evident. The vast majority of incoming first-year students indicated their plans to pursue VC-BFA for graphic design and computer graphics. Most often this is parent and job-oriented thinking with no solid basis, as the students usually do not fully understand Visual Communications and the potential of Fine Arts. After completing the Core, many students changed their minds and the split between FA-BFA and VC-BFA was 47% to 53% respectively. Compared to the previous Foundations drawing and design portfolios, students were better prepared and more confident in determining their Advanced path due to the array of ten additional disciplines/mediums, and faculty were more informed in reviewing Core portfolios for feedback and advising a path in the Advanced curriculum.

It is now apparent that instruction in our Core courses requires effort to dispel student perceptions of screen-based courses as Visual Communications courses and materials-based courses as Fine Arts courses. As such, components and examples of Fine Arts and Visual Communications must be more evenly represented in all Core courses, together with the principles of art and design, lexicon, and more importantly the relevance of both approaches in daily lives, culture, and society.

Student responses indicate the need for collaborative supervision and enhanced mentoring of MFA TAs, such as greater preparation for teaching methodology, as well as improved experience with equipment, materials, and software prior to being assigned Core courses. It would be appropriate for MFA TAs to be more rigorous with course policies and grading, more specific and realistic with their comments during project instruction and critiques, and adhere to more consistency with the syllabus across various sections of the same Core courses.

In conclusion, the topical survey provides pertinent responses for the recently appointed faculty ad hoc committee charged with appraising the Core for continued revision and refinement. It's time for the faculty to give more thought to the insight gained from Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development. Along with the evidence of other researchers, much would be gained within Core course

instruction in conjunction with the structure of the Core curriculum. Not only should the Core rattle the cages of first and second-year Art Stars, it behooves the faculty to rattle their own cages.

References

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3. Perry, William G. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College years*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.
4. Wilson, Noah. (2013). Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development. Available from: <https://www.slideshare.net/NoahWilson/perrys-scheme-of-intellectual-and-ethical-development> [Accessed 18th October 2017].