

Media Arts Knowledge Transfer: Socio-cultural challenges in responsive art education

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“Topic: Towards a new concept of arts education”

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Knowledge transfer programs in the arts as well as other disciplines are emerging globally at an extraordinary rate. Over the last decade from Canada to South America to Europe, to Australia, and Asia new departments were created, new academic positions were inaugurated, hybrid learning collaborations were initiated and brand new curriculums have been developed. Consequently the learning environment has completely changed. Approaches to the new paradigms vary from place to place and are often shaped by socio-cultural considerations, the nature of the organizations and/or institutions implementing the programs. The most current academic announcements indicate that “innovation” combined with breakthrough partnerships are considered keys to the future. In this presentation various options will be discussed, including novel incentives at vulnerable crossing points leading to hybrid projects and interdisciplinary practice. The bird eye view of this landscape is gained from recent personal experience/ or contacts and thus the picture might seem to be fragmented, however these are only the beginnings: the concept and practice of these hybrid projects are still in progress.

In the international education field, the interdisciplinary dynamic approach by various organizations including the Leonardo Education Forum (LEF) brought together over the last three years experts in media, arts, science and technology to identify key issues concerning responsive interdisciplinary learning methods for the 21st Century. The initiatives aimed to bridge the existing gap using an alternative hybrid methodology. As a national example in Canada where I live, the Ontario College of Art for instance – in contrast to previous approaches – now combines studio learning with research and critical inquiry. At Concordia

University in Montreal extensive novel art research programs form integral parts of the Hexagram Research Institute. These international, regional and local initiatives are not merely instructional in nature; through novel methods and collaborations they prepare the emerging generations for pragmatic practice. Despite the widespread concern on behalf of academics and students, little public debate exists yet on the need for critical education in art & science & technology. Moreover, educators admit to a palpable tension between academic and vocational education. Yet, from Bogotá to Beirut, an increasing number of professionals are deeply involved in the convergence of mobile communication, arts& science projects, on-line communities, and urban space. They frequently work in cross-disciplinary teams, connecting from remote locations and collaborating in hybrid environments.

The explosion of this new ecology has not been pre-planned; it is mainly due to tremendous student interest. The daily reality of the emerging generation is often in conflict with outdated educational concepts. Recently, together with Daniela Reimann we participated and organized various workshops and summits focused on creativity, innovation, and education. The conclusion of most of the speakers was that creativity and innovation is stifled by currently prevalent systems at all levels of education from kindergarten to PhD programs. What to do? First, several questions need to be answered, such as what type of structure proves more effective? Should it be a cross-disciplinary strategy or developed by a media art-based department? Does the current media art curriculum allow for play, failure, and experiment? What are examples of meaningful connections between media production in the university and cultural institutions as well as scientist and technical businesses? To resolve these issues it has been argued that interdisciplinary involvement; collaboration and alternative methods might be an answer to move forward. An effective way to tackle the burning issues in education seems to be the initiation and developments of workshops, round table discussions involving professional experts including practicing artists and students.

Between 2007-2010, we have organized seven workshops/ conference sessions at major European international festivals with Daniela for the Leonardo Education Forum (LEF). In addition I have developed a further seven international workshops for LEF in Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. LEF is an active community of over 100 members, growing annually. LEF promotes the advancement of artistic research and academic scholarship at the intersections of art, science, and technology. It also provides a forum for collaboration and

exchange with other scholarly communities. LEF members actively participate in research conferences, including the annual meetings of the College Art Association (CAA). In this process we organize panel discussions, convene mentoring workshops, curate exhibitions, and organize other events that promote scholarship and education at the intersections of art and science. The specific events we organized are aimed to bridge cross-cultural gaps and facilitating discussions towards publications on burning issues. The focus is on educational goals, crucial elements of curricula for artists as well as art teachers and practice based educational goals. We felt that by building up an international network of these workshops, a road map of education will be gradually charted, which then can be linked with similar initiatives in other parts of the world. While we intended to investigate and report on art & science & technology educational achievements globally during the process of our work it was confirmed that while education in these fields might be resolved in parts of North America, Australia and some European countries, in the rest of the world media art programs are either emerging or getting established now. Consequently a considerable amount of effort is required towards establishing satisfactory art & science & technology education in the future. Existing initiatives include programs at Hexagram, Concordia University in Canada, BioArt degree courses at the University of Western Australia, various initiatives in Brazilian Universities and opportunities at the Planetary Collegium in the UK, Switzerland and Italy – to mention a few. The detailed list of various arts & science & technology programs are outside the scope of this presentation.

The primary questions at the LEF meetings centered on educational changes such as the role of research in art and interdisciplinary education, new curricula requirements including science and technology aspects and how to assess changing institutional positions. The working group discussions formed the base of the outcomes on these topics. In January 2009 an educational strategic summary has been disseminated outlining focus issues and an action plan for a white paper on policy analysis and planning in new media and media arts education. This document was based on international meetings at Mutamorphosis, re:place 2007, ISEA 2008 and ARS Electronica 2008. The outcomes are based on the collaborative contribution by working group leaders and participants. The participants continued collaboration beyond the workshops, which incidentally was one of our goals. The post workshop discussions revealed that, although most of the sub questions in the identified focal areas overlap to one degree or another, there is also the need to add a discussion of network-centric and intercultural learning

methods and processes. In addition to the above, a Latin American educational document, based on the contribution by representatives from 7 Latin American countries is in an advanced editing stage and a policy paper from the LEF working groups at ISEA2009, ARS2009 and Re:live2009 is in an editorial phase.

Beyond the LEF initiatives, providing widely available quality higher education is increasingly seen as one of the keys to educational development and success in the 21st century. This requires the acknowledgements of new models in media art education, such as private universities, media labs and hybrid models. In July 2009, explosive growth of private universities was highlighted at the World Conference in Paris. Philip Altbach, director of the Centre for International Higher Education, Boston College, reported that "private higher education institutions, many of them for-profit ... represent the fastest-growing sector worldwide".

Private universities have sprung up like mushrooms in Africa, in South America, East Europe and Asia. It might be extremely useful for this discussion to present some examples of this trend from various regions of the world:

City Varsity is a school of media and creative arts and applied studies in the heart of Johannesburg, South Africa. One of the primary goals of the school is to encourage collaboration between students in various departments as well as professionals from the art world and related industries. Based on personal lecturing experience the interaction with students in this school was one of the liveliest encountered in any educational institution in Johannesburg.

In a country where no undergraduate education is offered in media arts, the master program at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires is exceptional. The master classes here are crowded with students whose background range from music to journalism, from film making to electrical engineering. Academic at this University developed and maintain international collaborative media art programs, such as the master degree collaboration with the University of Chile and Caldas University in Colombia.

The Business College of Communication in Budapest has a brand new media art program – it is only in the planning stage and will be operational only from late 2010. Yet for a typical local

reason there is great interest already in the program. Why? In a country of over 10 million people there are only two fully credited art academies in the capital city where hundreds of students are eager to learn and prepare for their future in arts. Consequently additional learning venues are much appreciated in this environment.

The Sabanci University in Turkey provides extensive education and research opportunities through participatory, team-based methodologies for a fast growing international student body. According to its website “this mission is reflected throughout the entire University, from its interdisciplinary academic programs, its state-of-the-art technology and infrastructure and its research and development projects in industry.”

There remains an ongoing debate about the traditional role of established academies versus private institutions, which tend to focus on livelihood-related programs and an economic intervention in art and technology. This has to be mentioned along with the note that such private initiatives closed a gap in education in many countries.

Today so-called media-labs are significant contestants in hybrid art, science and technology education. Medialab-Prado for instance is a program of the Department of Arts of the City Council of Madrid, aimed at the production, research, and dissemination of digital culture of the area where art, science, technology, and society intersect. The primary objective is to create a structure where both research and production are processes permeable to user participation. To that end, Medialab-Prado offers a permanent information, reception, and meeting space attended by cultural mediators and frequently posts open calls for the presentation of proposals and participation in the collaborative development of projects. Program developers in this organization are keenly aware of socio-cultural issues as confirmed by their recent call for “Neighbourhood Science” workshop and the Embodied and Distributed Knowledge in Social Networks April 2010 event.

Kitchen Budapest, (opened in June 2007), is a new media lab for young researchers who are interested in the convergence of mobile communication, online communities and urban space and are passionate about creating experimental projects in cross-disciplinary teams. Kitchen has affiliate programs with the Moholy Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, offers international residences and regular presentation/round table discussion/workshop events

Beyond educational goals, Kitchen is interested in rethinking and remixing the possibilities of new media in everyday lives and to argument connections between new technologies and society.

The Designing Digital Media for the Internet of Things (DDiMIT) media lab at the University of Toronto provides a platform where a consortium of researchers, artists and companies are able to develop and share expertise and skills in the development of objects. DDiMIT, the first initiative of its kind in Toronto has been established barely six months ago, yet it already held two highly successful workshops and a round table discussion for the publishing industry.

The inclusion of media labs in this presentation is important, because it is a fact that limited funding, escalating class sizes and threatened course closures continue to be a serious challenge to the effective training of artists. There is a growing universal desire to create in students the capacity for pragmatic as well as academic learning. Furthermore everyday it becomes more important to collaborate for both practical and ethical advantages of cooperation. In an era of fast technological growth and transforming art forms there is an increasing need for educational flexibility by academic institutions. It is also important to keep in mind that the profile of higher education in the 21st century is going to be very different to what it used to be. Higher education will be a much larger enterprise with an emphasis on livelihood-related programs.

In this presentation we intend to provide a report rather than an analysis of knowledge transfer in media arts education including recent historical contextualization. The concepts, plans and practice of the cited examples might not provide answers yet to burning issues. These initiatives prove however that the formal and informal educational and knowledge transfer opportunities contribute to a better understanding of the globally shifting paradigms in new media education.

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