Singular Talent Emerges from Collective Endeavour

Good Afternoon,

Just to introduce myself. My name is Ron Blaber (pronunciation of the last name has produced some interesting creative moments.) I am currently the Head of Communication and Cultural Studies within the new School of Media, Culture and the Creative Arts in the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin University.

My field of teaching and research is in cultural studies with foci on postcolonial and Australian studies. I have been at Curtin since 1989 and since that time I have had significant involvement with the Performance Studies and Creative Writing streams within C&CS, particularly as supervisor of Honours and Higher degree students working on creative pieces – primarily creative writing, but also co-supervising Higher Degree Students from the School of Art.

I guess today I want to talk about the University as one of those Artificial Creative Environments, often beset by the simple question “How can you teach creativity?” Not only asked by people outside the academy but often by those within, particularly when faced with students wanting to work within creative disciplines but seem incapable of doing so. This is a situation that vexes practitioners when invited to teach.

However, I don’t want actually address the question of teaching creativity. Rather I want to rearticulate the positioning of creative arts teaching streams in terms of an older educative form, which is that of the apprenticeship. This should be fairly obvious, but not to think of it in this way does have an impact on the way in which the creative arts, creativity, is supported and funded.

OK The apprenticeship is a 4 level structure: 3 year basic
4 year honours
6 year master
8 year doctor

People will exit a various points and will be variously credentialed.

Now if you think of an 8 year apprenticeship that is not bad.

As I have indicated there is some disquiet about indulging students who may not be up to scratch. (But that would be true of any apprenticeship system). Nevertheless, it would folly to mistake precocity with genius. If I may draw an analogy. Those who watch and are fans of the Tour de France would understand that more often than not those who win the various stages or the race overall emerge from the peloton. In other words singular talent emerges from a collective endeavour, and this is very much the pedagogic model embedded in teaching creative arts and in the apprenticeship more generally. However, I’m not sure this would translate into the artificiality of reality TV – I can’t imagine something called Australia’s Next Great novelist.
Having said that, it is important to consider the current state of play of creative arts programs. I can speak only for my area within Curtin University, which is clearly positioning itself in terms of Resources, Energy and Engineering. Rightly so given the economic boom., but what I have to say may be applicable to other Universities. While course demand remains strong, I think it would be fair to say that supplementary support is diminishing. This occurs at a number of levels and are highly influenced by outside factors. For example in Creative Writing and Performance Studies, in principle, we like to invite practitioners to teach some of our units in order for students to benefit from the wisdom of established creative producers. Remuneration for sessional teachers is not the best. Policies on class sizes makes difficult to run master classes of a few students 5vs 10 vs 15 etc.

Artist-in-Residency programs go someway to addressing this problem, but these programs are subject to increasing scrutiny and in some instances diminishing financial support.

Internal responses to these circumstances is “Why don’t you get sponsorship?” When you do seek support from government and private agencies, you often are met with the belief that certain kinds of cultural work are the sole responsibility of the University. And to a degree you can see why. There is greater benefit to a mining company is sponsoring a state theatre revival of say Oklahoma than there is for supporting a university student production of a Caryl Churchill play, even if that production were the only opportunity to see it.

Anyway that is something that we still pursue.

But to change tack a little.

But where do University creative arts programs sit in relation to outcomes, creative economies and creative environments?

Graduates who are serious about creative production are invariably entrepenurial, they have to be. Not necessarily in terms of making millions but in terms of making and ensuring a cultural vibrancy to the environment in which their creative production takes place. And recognition often doesn’t come until some years after graduation

The nexus between the artificiality of the university space and the real environment of cultural production needs to be maintained, strengthened and developed. I am concerned that should one side of that nexus be diminished then so would the overall environment.

To conclude I would like to advance a proposal, something speculative but potentially spectacular. We are familiar with and celebrate the success of WAAPA – the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. It is a key institution in WA’s creative environment. And, of course, it mirrors NIDA, the National Institute of Dramatic Arts. Politically this has something to do with that West-East divide. Where in lies the Western Australia equivalent of AFTRS – the Australian Film, Television and Radio School? May be we could replicate that, or perhaps be more innovative and creative
and establish the Australian School of Digital Media Arts – but who is going to pay for it?

Dr Ron Blaber
Communication and Cultural Studies
Media Culture and Creative Arts
Curtin University