Peer-to-peer sharing is key

Managing a global post-graduate arts management course

by Andrew Marsh

The challenges of creating and managing a global post-graduate arts management course in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world are manifold. Connecting people beyond borders, enabling communication and adapting to global events is key to educating future cultural leaders.

At the time of writing this article in November 2022 in the UK, Collins English Dictionary has declared 'Permacrisis' its 'word of the year'. Defined as "an extended period of instability and insecurity" (Sherwood, 2022) it does indeed typify recent and current times, not just in the UK but globally. There are echoes in this term of what Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus defined in 1985 as times of 'Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity' (VUCA). Both terms accurately capture the feeling of critical times we are currently experiencing.

The following article will reflect on a few of the challenges faced in delivering a post graduate course in Arts and Cultural Enterprise together with members of the global arts and cultural community under a rapidly changing global landscapes. It will specifically examine the impact of global climate-related events and geo-politics on aspects of the course delivery and the student experience. It will also discuss how the course team has responded to incorporate and utilise such challenges in a way that fosters a global community of arts and cultural practitioners despite increasing nationalism and therefore hopefully empowers its students to address these VUCA times through their own cultural practices.

MA Arts and Cultural Enterprise: some context

Created in 2015, the MA Arts and Cultural Enterprise is a 2-year part-time, low residency, blended learning, postgraduate programme delivered by

35

Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London. It is delivered in collaboration with Hong Kong University Space. Through theory and practice-based units the course engages participants in developing new knowledge and skills in order to manage cultural projects in the UK and around the world. It was developed specifically in response to an increasing need for multi-skilled individuals who can both generate the ideas for original arts and cultural events, as well as provide leadership for the teams that realise them. Teaching takes place at both institutions separately with moments where the students of each institution are brought together for discussion and collaboration. The Course is taught through online workshops and lectures combined with intensive and in-person teaching on specific weekends at both locations. As a course it acknowledges that we are living in a fast-changing, globalised world, which presents a great number of opportunities and challenges for cultural innovation. It takes these changing conditions as a starting point to engage students in developing new knowledge and skills to manage cultural projects around the world.

"The world and its global outlook in 2013-15 was very different to the world as it stands toward the end of 2022."

However, the world and its global outlook in 2013-15, when the course was designed, was very different to the world as it stands toward the end of 2022. There was a recognition in early development of some of the challenges that the cultural and creative industries might be facing, like globalisation, sustainability, shifting models of funding and governance, etc. Little did we anticipate how much these challenges would rapidly grow and include many we hadn't yet considered.

Challenges in the world and the course

What has become increasingly challenging over the seven years of delivering and managing the course is that internet access is not equitable globally (UN, 2020). While we felt initially that a mainly online course would allow more participants across the world to access it and share experiences, it has become apparent that geographic and political locations have a huge impact in how a participant might engage with the course. Restrictions to access in specific countries where the internet is heavily policed or controlled have risen. These do not only encompass issues of access to classes on certain platforms

but also of possible surveillance of material being searched for in relation to course assignments. Add to this restrictions in some countries on certain social media platforms and there is the potential that student bonding can also be curtailed. For example, China, Tibet, and the United Arab Emirates, amongst others, ban or restrict platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, which hinders our students bonding across the globe. Some of these countries furthermore monitor and restrict specific content. Some student searches might be monitored and that might impact on student safety.

"How might we, as a course, address a disparity of experience when internet experience is not equitable globally?"

Additionally, there is the major challenge of access to online classes and content being restricted due to catastrophic weather events because of climate change, for example, typhoons in Manila and Hong Kong, or wildfires in California. We should also not forget the major impact on physical and mental health when faced with the lived experience of dangerous large-scale global events. Both examples have raised some difficult questions for me as course leader that I would argue are not faced in the same way when students are residing in the country of the university in which they study. Questions such as: What is the courses' duty of care to students in parts of the world impacted by such issues? If students were located in the UK, then a single but university wide, and therefore equal, decision over safety and wellbeing can be made to minimise collective impact. This is not possible in a course delivered mainly online to students all over the world. How might we, as a course, address a disparity of experience when internet experience is not equitable globally? Again, on a residential course the student experience of teaching spaces and materials is comparable, but this is not the case in this type of delivery.

In a wider political context, it must also be acknowledged how regional politics can impact how students engage with each other and tutors and that political events in countries inhabited by students must be addressed sensitively. For example, Hong Kong's protests and political unrest prior to the introduction of the National Security Law, civil unrest due to ethnic tensions in Ethiopia resulting in the internet being switched off, or human rights issues in the UAE are events that have directly impacted some of our former students (some issues continue and new ones most certainly will

arise). Being open in the learning environment about that there will be debate in this sector is essential as is addressing world events in class in real time. To not acknowledge, or to shy away from the rapidly shifting political landscapes in our students' home countries would be remiss and disrespectful. I feel there is a responsibility on the part of the course to recognise the hugely uncertain political landscapes' impact on our cohort, their families, and the communities in which they work and practice.

Developing and enabling peer to peer networks

Given the above, my own role as course leader and of the tutors leading units on the course becomes one of increased pastoral care. We aim to ensure that students can share these experiences but also assist them in finding solutions or tools to tackle those. We encourage them to question how their lived experiences might shape their own practices as creative, cultural leaders and managers. Alongside these in-class approaches, a peer-to-peer network fostered and created by the course becomes an essential tool of support. Sharing can help students become reflective practitioners by being responsible for their own professional development, which allows them to be able to contextualise their own experiences and those of their peers to truly innovate in the sector (Tan, 2021).

"We encourage them to question how their lived experiences might shape their own practices as creative, cultural leaders and managers."

This is managed through our own platforms as well as through spaces in which the students can support each other outside of the more formal 'classroom/tutor' context. Having early discussions with new cohorts about what platforms and channels of communication they might use as a student body ensures that no student becomes excluded because their country of residence does not allow specific types of software. Here the balance is about giving the students agency in selecting their own channels of communication with each other but being sure that a clear conversation is being had about what platforms can be accessed and by whom in the group. If a cohort wishes to use WhatsApp socially or Google Drive in group work, for example, are they certain that everyone can use it in their country of residence in order to ensure no one is excluded? To then encourage students to explore

alternative online communication tools and methods increases awareness of different contexts and collaborative skills. It is important that students feel that group forums set up in the official online platforms the course uses are safe spaces, in which all can participate.

Alongside this, in the more formal classroom environment encouraging the sharing of these experienced events and political shifts and attitudes by the student body in the context of the course is empowering for those students living through unfolding events. Moreover, it also acts as an important tool for awareness of future global cultural leaders about the need for empathy and sensitivity when working with collaborators and stakeholders in local and global contexts different to their own.

Knowledge Exchange

An emphasis on engagement with external guests and their organisations allows us to address issues such as the climate crisis incorporated into the curriculum. A recent knowledge exchange collaboration with The Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC) asked students to research and present case studies of successful practices of decarbonisation and sustainability in exhibition making. By being in small mixed groups students had to decide on the case study of choice, meaning that a conversation about different countries' positions and attitudes to climate change took place. The resulting effect is both micro from the perspective of arts and culture in relation to cultural sustainability in different geo-political contexts as well as macro from the perspective that these organisations and case studies can only be understood in the context of the wider political agenda surrounding climate change in different locations. A case study on "eco-finance" was particularly innovative in looking at this topic from a fresh angle.

The outcome was an event titled 'Towards Environmentally Responsible Exhibition Making' in which these case studies were presented alongside a panel discussion of industry professionals on current and future practices in the sector. The next phase will be to write up the case studies for public dissemination. The course thereby operates as a porous membrane between both practitioners (students and staff in a peer-to-peer network), external organisations in the sector, and the university.

Students and staff being able to explore real world scenarios in arts and culture from their own experiences and geographic locations in order to

analyse and reflect on these in an educational context allows space for innovation, enterprise and responsible leadership in the cultural and creative industries. This is where real change can be implemented in participants practices.

Some conclusions

The above reflections are still emergent. In many ways they are being worked through in an iterative process on both a course and student level. We are learning and developing together a step at a time (Rojas, 2021). Given the fast-changing landscape both in arts and culture on one hand, as well as geo-political shifts more generally, an iterative methodology must be employed. Over the past seven years we have addressed political tensions on numerous continents. In the case of Hong Kong, we debated conflicting political views directly in the class-room by creating a space that was discursive and respectful. We have discussed the possibilities of students being surveilled while searching online for materials dealt with on the course. There also have been multiple challenges because of climate change and access to the course from different global scenarios. While each is a very different challenge to address, the ability to iterate and improve the course as a result has been key to the success of our students and therefore the course. This is done by embedding rapid ways in which feedback and communication can be given to the course from students and vice-versa as well as creating a culture of empathy and active listening. Formally, this can be achieved through university course committees but most importantly through informal channels developed and nurtured by the students themselves. Due to all students feeling they have a direct and immediate channel to me as course leader and the team of tutors, any concerns, tensions or issues can be raised and addressed immediately through conversation and discourse.

Lastly, creating a clear space in and throughout the course for equitable peer-to-peer sharing and reflection by all participants and staff is absolutely key to the course's ability to adapt so that it nurtures responsible and aware cultural leaders and reflects the VUCA of our current time and the future.

REFERENCES

Bennis, W & Nanus, B (1985), *'Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge', Harper & Row: New York.*
Rojas, V (2021), *'MA Arts and Cultural Enterprise: Managing and Valorising Creativity + Bringing Creativity to Management', Plus E-Zine Issue 1, Revalorise+: Enhancing Research Impact.*

40

Sherwood, H (2022), ''Sums up 2022': Permacrisis chosen as Collins word of the year', *The Guardian.*

Tan, O.S. (2021), 'Problem-based learning innovation: Using problems to power learning in the 21st century', Gale Cengage Learning.

UN (2020), Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World: World Social Report 2020, UN Dept of Economic and Social Affairs, New York, NY.

Andrew Marsh *is the Course Leader for MA Arts and Cultural Enterprise at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London. He also works as an independent curator and has curated exhibitions in London, Birmingham, Düsseldorf and New Delhi.*