Making by Doing: Testing curriculum design by getting our hands dirty

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At the beginning of 2015 New Zealand's first Bachelor of Animation with Honours was launched. A small team of professionally active animators, artists, and designers assembled to deliver the first year. The programme has already trialled a novel approach to curriculum design called Project-Based Integrated Learning - a transdisciplinary approach to education that draws from the established models of Project Based Learning and Integrated Learning. Practice-based courses connect together to form integrated projects, which are driven by theory delivered in conceptually-oriented courses. Now, as the programme plans to run through its second iteration for first year and adds a second and third year simultaneously for the first time, new challenges have arisen, and faculty have looked for new solutions. One of the main issues is that the course and curriculum is brand new. A tenet of best practice in curriculum design is that elements of an emerging design are tested, even while design development is underway (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2001). This pre-testing of a draft curriculum allows developers to assess whether it is "understandable and relevant to the users and whether it works in practice" (Fatmawati, 2012). But what happens when there are no user testing groups available to assess this curriculum? More often than not the first iteration of an assessment is the first time it is run in a real world teaching situation. This also means there are no pre-existing student exemplars to assist with the demonstration of creative projects, which serve as the main means of assessment.
Faced with demonstrating and teaching a new curriculum grounded in Project Based Learning, and given that the lecturers are all creative practitioners as well as teachers, a methodology emerged organically whereby the animation faculty undertook to make projects in a similar fashion and under similar conditions as their students. Essentially, teachers making student projects, either individually or as a group on integrated projects, and thereby testing and improving the efficacy of the assessments through iterative cycles of design change, before providing them to students. This research project examines the rationale behind such an approach, weighs up potential benefits and downsides, and presents concrete examples of the way this methodology has been used in different disciplines. Evidence to support the findings is drawn from lecturer observations and interviews, student surveys, and completed student work.

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Fatmawati, N. (2012, February 26). Curriculum development [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://ilyfathfs.wordpress.com/2012/02/26/curriculum-development/