

Scholarly Information Futures

A faculty 10-year view

Faculty of the VCA

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Purpose

In response to the Information Futures Commission, this document seeks to consider the question: What scholarly information and technologies, services and infrastructure does the Faculty need¹ to achieve its aspirations over the next decade?

It is not possible to know what technological developments will emerge over the next 10 years but it is almost certain to continue the direction of mobility, speed of access and the free flow of information and services. This applies as much to scholarship and innovative arts practices as it does to banking and commercial services.

How we prepare for it will have a direct impact on how well we adapt to these changes. There are a number of conceptual shifts that need to be made and some previously and firmly held views will need change. There are questions about how new technologies make new social and cultural engagements possible. Does the technology create the new behaviour but or rather reflects emerging tendencies and accelerates their progress. There are exciting cultural and social impacts and the future will be full of interest.

This submission supports the urgency of addressing these matters and of bringing the University of Melbourne into line with its competitors. Below are a number of perspectives and examples, as a way of signalling the willingness and enthusiasm of the VCA to be part of this future. We believe that the VCA can be a site for experimentation and speculation on the important domain of human-technology interface.

Ten years is a long time in this rapidly expanding field and the key messages are to be ready for change, to develop a fluency and agility in our thinking that can then be enabled by the technology. This is a human endeavour before anything else.

Teaching and Research Environment

The use of digital resources are now a mainstream issue and no longer seen as a new and speculative option. The ubiquity with which information and communication circulates now requires a systematic set of actions to maximize the effectiveness of the learning and research environment. There is little time for delay as the faculties and campuses of the University of Melbourne are in need of a significant and urgent upgrade to remain competitive.

At the VCA, while the primary activity of undergraduate students has a focus on studio and workshop practices, there is considerable and increasing demand for access to effective IT services to support the studio based work or the more traditional academic scholarship required of the degree programs. This access needs to be made easy and mobile and allow for the free flow of communication. The advantages of the digital technologies that students use in their studio based work is that it included image and sound capability. This significantly expands the access to important knowledge and new ideas in the fields of art, music, the performing arts and film and television, as represented at the VCA.

¹ Including consideration of collaboration needed between faculties and more widely, in particular for NewGen degrees and to support the growing inter-disciplinary nature of research.

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Library Collections : the future of resources for music, visual and performing arts

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This section of the submission addresses four key areas that are seen as critical to create the level of digital fluency, library services, staff development and student fluency and infrastructure and the teaching and research environment. The full version of this section is made within the University Library submission.

Present state:

Art, performing arts and music libraries are currently in a state of “mid-repose” between the analogue and digital publishing spheres.

These libraries are “media-heavy” in comparison to the usual books and journals (print or electronic) required in other academic disciplines.

Books, journals, PLUS music scores, sound recordings, DVDs and other formats are required to support the teaching and research activities in the visual and performing arts.

Specialised staff are required to select and support these collections through adequate cataloguing for accurate access and information reference services.

In the studio-based, practically orientated teaching and research that occurs in the visual and performing arts disciplines, there is still a need for library materials to be taken and viewed/listened/read in this environment. Collections are still in demand by our students and staff for “objects” to be borrowed, taken home, viewed/listened to, (possibly “copied/burned/ripped”) and returned. The following graphs validate this ongoing demand. They indicate continuing growth of non-book format CD, DVD and Music Scores loans at the VCA Library in the past 3 years. 2008 promises to be a similar increase again.

Digital books and journals are still not the norm in the visual and performing arts. The high production values required for portraying the artistic image is indicative in the number of art journals not available full text. The image does not transfer well. Despite this there are a large number of “zine” type sites that students use for inspiration, contemporary design and thought. With teaching less reliant on textbooks, as in other disciplines such as economics, commerce, medicine etc, the requirements are more diverse and less predictable. Many of the titles required come from small publishing runs and are less likely to be available in digital format.

An example - The libraries still maintain a vinyl record collection. Many recordings have still not been released digitally, and the importance of access to historic recordings, offering a range of interpretations is extremely important for the performer, the conductors and the musicologists.

Similarly, the extensive art history slide collections are in need of either digitisation or replacement with proprietary digital collections. The old and now redundant slide technology in most cases supplied by Kodak is now no longer supported by the company and academics and students using visual images are now using digital images. There are however significant contemporary art image collections that will have value as an archive.

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Equipment is maintained in libraries to support our collections eg Projectors, Video players, Turntables, Laserdisc / DVD and CD players, Cassette and Mini disc players. Many students no longer have turntables or video players, so the performances that are still not available digitally, can be studied in the library space.

Much of the collections held in older technology formats, are either not available in a digital format, or there have been little funds to replace in digital, even if a digital form is available. Despite this extensive collections in digital format – CDs There has been the need to build collections in the preferred format, and to maintain publication coverage – not allowing the collections to fall behind, become redundant, and remain relevant to the teaching and research.

Off-air recordings (audio and video) are made and available for streaming from the University website. Recent updates include accessibility to High Definition and cable television channels.

An extensive archive of original films are held by the VCA School of Film and TV. This valuable archive is the subject of a separate submission.

Use of library collections/ media in teaching spaces - Lecture theatres and teaching spaces are still in need of technology upgrades in many parts of the university, especially the VCA. Streaming from off-air university web sites or even the provision of a DVD player to play DVDs is a challenge at times.

The Future:

Some initiatives that are currently influencing the delivery of media within universities include *Variations3 project* at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor <<http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/projects/variations3/>> (February 2007, sighted 23 April 2007)

This project is a leading development in music teaching software. It “is a digital music library software system that provides online access to streaming audio and scanned score images with a flexible access control framework to ensure respect for intellectual property. In addition to access tools, Variations also includes analysis and annotation tools useful in music teaching and learning. With Variations, institutions can digitise materials from their own collections and provide those materials to their students and faculty in support of teaching, learning, and research.”

Music Australia < <http://www.musicaustralia.org/> > (hosted by the National Library of Australia), provides “access and navigates a rich store of information on Australian music, musicians, organisations and services, all from a single access point”. Music scores, sound recordings, websites, biographical information, audio links etc are accessible through Australia’s cultural institutions or other music sites.

The Australian Music Centre <<http://www.amcoz.com.au>> is also providing a “one stop shop” for information about contemporary Australian music with an online journal, discussion site, biographical information, and digital resources.

Video resources - <Ubu.com> is currently being used extensively by VCA students and staff in their teaching and research. It is “a completely independent resource dedicated to all strains of the avant-garde, ethnopoetics, and outsider arts” and non-

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commercial and educational use is encouraged. This is in some ways superseding much of the physical DVD collections in the library, as the students seek obscure, experimental images that do not reach the mainstream commercial publishing environment. But despite this DVD borrowing is still continuing to grow.

Digital books and journal titles availability are increasing weekly. But with limited runs in some publishing areas in the arts, it is envisaged "Print on demand" will grow.

Digital audio libraries are available to students via university subscriptions – but due to copyright and limited availability of some performances, the range of titles is limited. Interfaces are difficult to use and students are not enthusiastic users. It is essential that key performances are available for academic use, not just "any old performance" will do. Use of library CD collections remains high.

Music scores - With the increasing availability of music scores online and freely distributed, there is increasing problem with students accessing less than reputable, or historically inaccurate edition ie those out of copyright or changed to avoid copyright restrictions. CDs of orchestral parts are available, but again the editions are not academic, and there is still the need to print out parts for reading on the music stand during rehearsals and performances.

It is essential that key rigorously academic editions are promoted and used by staff and students, in available formats.

Library staff expertise: Despite the growth of unmediated internet and digital access to resources, there is still a need for specialist information managers to assist in identifying and navigating students to relevant and appropriate websites. Along with academic staff we can assist with preventing plagiarism, and quality of research through mediated research consultations and pro-active information literacy activity.

Library staff in the visual and performing arts also have relevant backgrounds, with usually multiple university qualifications. This background and experience is used to make selection and cataloguing/access control for collections. It is important that with the increasing unmediated use of digital resources that we don't relinquish "control over selection and cataloguing of particular works and performances" of collections. (Wright, p. 594)

As technology progresses and storage capacities increase and become cheaper, this will change.

Digital Fluency: A Critical Perspective from Research Students

Alex Gibson, Master of Fine Art (Research) candidate, Faculty of the VCA

As a result of the rapid and unprecedented development of digital technologies in contemporary life even those of us young enough to be digital-native still lack the level of digital fluency required to take full advantage of this evolution in scholarship. Most of us are self-taught with many gaps in our knowledge. We are often dependant on a limited range of software, hardware and resources because we are yet to master the principles, methods and problem-solving strategies required to move from one system to another with confidence. This issue needs to be addressed within tertiary, secondary and primary levels of education and will probably form an attempt to catch-up culturally with the speed of new and updated technologies.

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I am a member of the Net Generation and am critical of the often-admired digital fluency of my generation. There is a danger that the Baby Boomers (and others) over-determine the digital fluency of the Net Generation and deploy digital methods and technologies that are not used to their full potential because of a core literacy issue among its predicted participants. Net Generation are likely to be able to perform a range of digital tasks from email, blogging and file-sharing, while not fully grasping the possibilities of digital fluency. The range of tasks able to be performed by Net Generation are constantly being improved, but usually in unstructured, entertainment-based environments such as Facebook and Youtube. While the power and usefulness of these two websites are self evident, they represent only the tip of an iceberg of what is possible for scholarly information in the digital age.

I am a sessional lecturer at the VCA teaching digitally-fluent research students and am regularly trying to find ways to resource my students for the possibilities of digital practice. In my experience, the best approach is to engage the student in a project or interest that they are passionate about and then offer various tools, methods and technologies that may assist them in achieving their ideas. This lateral approach is popular because it does not require tedious training sessions designed around specific software that may or may not prove useful, and will definitely become outdated in a few short years. When the student has decided on exploring the range of methods and technologies offered, they begin a supported, structured series of experiments. These often develop the possibilities of the project and teach the student a range of new tools and methods that they can apply to future projects. This process also develops a confidence in the student for their ability to learn and relearn new or updated technologies. The key to this approach is to resource the student with lateral, problem-solving strategies that the student then uses to self learn specific procedures and techniques.

A Case Study: Creative Ideas

Associate Professor Su Baker, Dr. Mark Elliott and Alex Gibson

There needs to be an effort to hire and train staff to be digitally fluent across multiple operating systems, software, hardware, methods and technologies so they can deliver more lateral approaches to using digital technologies. There are many digitally fluent staff, both young and old within the university, and these people should take greater leadership in cultural change so that the technophobia caused by digital illiteracy or partial literacy can be further tackled. It is only when the general culture of the University of Melbourne and its participants are more engaged in the potential of digital fluency that an honest and fruitful discussion can be had. This can be achieved quickly by setting up consultation workshops that address the need for staff and students to “learn how to learn” the language of digital practices. In this way they can confidently move from one system to another, as specific projects dictate, without steep learning curves or crippling frustration.

The Collaborative Contract subject developed for the Victorian College of the Arts' Centre for Ideas has introduced a program that encourages cross-disciplinary collaboration through a lecture-and-tutorial structure that is supported by a custom-built, social networking website. The subject will continue to develop in the coming years under the founding leadership of Dr. Mark Elliott and coordinator Alex Gibson. The creation and development of this subject is an excellent example of the potential for digitally literate academic staff within the VCA deploying cutting-edge technologies within existing information infrastructure. The subject has also been a community leader for best digital practice among students and staff alike and is being used by other academic staff and students not enrolled in the Collaborative Contract subject as a way to disseminate various creative practices.

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The subject, with its online methodology, began development in 2004 and continues to be a popular and successful example of delivering digital literacy to students and staff, while practicing best pedagogy using digital methodologies. The subject has grown a culture around it of dedicated staff and students who are developing the online community and producing a range of other cutting edge Web 2.0 technologies (social networks, blogs, wikis etc) for ongoing dissemination of knowledge and practice. The social network developed for the subject continues to be improved through student, staff and volunteer feedback systems. The social network is also available to the public and has attracted many professionals within the creative industries and is providing opportunities for dissemination, employment and engagement in our local and international economies. While the custom technology was designed specifically for the Collaborative Contract subject, the ongoing effect is one of a tool for collaboration, discussion, dissemination and display by the staff students, alumni, industry leaders and international associates. See: <http://www.collaborativecommons.com>

Creative Ideas for Information Futures

A number of straightforward changes to the way things are done at the University are required to develop capabilities and enhance future capacity. Some of these changes are listed below.

The following are perspectives from the RHD student and research community of the VCA.

Academic resources for digital literacy

- Merge libraries and computer laboratories to form information hubs
- Encourage students through subjects to read technical manuals and self-learn digital literacy
- Digital literacy university breadth subjects for beginner, intermediate and advanced students
- Install diverse computer systems and encourage their use
- Open access to computer facilities for breadth digital literacy
- Breadth digital literacy training of staff and students

Internet research and pedagogy

- Web hosting for internet research and its dissemination
- Free wireless internet across all campuses
- Encourage best digital practice by academic staff and researchers
- Develop extra-curricular engagement with digital culture
- Digital copyright and alternate licensing consultation

Current cross-University partners include:

- Information Systems, Faculty of Science
- School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts
- Visualisation Unit, Information Services Division
- Graduate School of Design (Architecture)

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There is an enthusiastic dialogue underway with the above groups and through the Office of e-research, and Professor Leon Sterling a set of exciting projects are underway.

This group formed the basis for the successful 2007 Digital Symposium, see at (<http://digishow.blogspot.com>). There are plans to run a sequel in 2008.

Staff and student fluency

As described above, the issue of digital fluency is a matter for staff and students and a matter to be addressed in a variety of ways, including, curriculum design, self-learning opportunities, (access to wireless network and hardwired facilities) and targeted staff development program based on discipline-specific priorities.

The VCA is currently developing a program to assist staff and research students to upgrade their skills and fluency in the relevant technologies. A staff development season will be run in the mid-year break to provide staff with opportunities to upgrade skills and to undertake projects relevant to their area of interest.

Digital fluency in the staff and student body can be achieved by developing possible University Breadth Subjects that encourage the use of diverse technologies. The subjects should encourage problem solving and technical self learning.

To be able to move from a technique, method, skill or technology depending on a project is a lateral strategy that the Victorian College of the Arts is well placed to deliver.

By developing and encouraging research and learning environments that provide web space to digitally fluent staff and students, the inclination towards creative, innovative and lateral practices will be nurtured. The synergy between active research into best digital practices at every level in the university and providing web space to the community will work together to create a culture which ensures a high level of digital fluency.

The University has a vast untapped commodity in its digitally fluent staff and students. Many of these people are passionate, self-taught and engaged individuals who are dedicated to improving the conditions of their community and culture. By creating research spaces (both online and actual) it allows these people to produce lateral systems and best practice pedagogical environments. By supporting this commodity, the University will continue to develop a healthy digitally-fluent population. This will be attractive to future students and staff and will ensure the continued growth of the University as a leader in education.

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Infrastructure and the teaching and research environment

It is imperative that a baseline of infrastructure be established that includes

- efficient telephony services, including web based delivery
- wireless access to the internet and internal information services across the campus
- learning, teaching and research spaces have the capacity to support multiple delivery modes

Within the campus environment there can be multiple learning facilities and access will be required from a number of points, including student laptops, classroom, studio, workshop and social spaces.

The importance of mobility in providing access to web-based material cannot be underestimated and is now the norm in most competitor universities.

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