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The VCA is a breath of fresh air in a linear-thinking world

Geoff Strong

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So many ideas would be lost if we were all pushed to think in the same way.

IN MY 20s I studied visual art, majoring in photography, at what was then Prahran College of Advanced Education. Probably because of this, I evolved what I believe is an unconventional way of looking at difficulties and how to deal with them.

Sometimes, rummaging through the storeroom of my mind, I uncover the memory of a long-forgotten problem and how I attempted to solve it.

Art schools can cause people to do things like this. By insisting on original thinking, rather than just learning what has gone before, they can pump new ideas into society. They can also pump out self-obsessed, mediocre, ego-driven garbage - so we need to be watchful.

In the Western contemporary interpretation of art, one purpose is to take an idea where nobody has gone before. This is important in the current debate about the role of the Victorian College of the Arts. It is about more than producing artists and performers. Australians are always cheering about the boundary-pushing feats of sporting champions, but these feats, no matter how extraordinary, are usually a simple linear progression: fractions of a second off a record, for example.

The way good visual artists develop new ways of seeing is probably closer to the way a research scientist makes a breakthrough. And just as it is with ground-breaking science, our society is less than engaged with great art.

In my problem-solving technique, I learned to reduce conundrums to objects I imagined I could hold in my hand. I visualised them as solid but multi-faceted so that they could appear to change if I rotated them and looked from different perspectives. Ultimately they can become transparent with the solutions refracting differently as I change angle. These are often the alternative solutions.

Rather than linear or lateral thinking, which people were talking about at the time, I labelled this approach prismatic thinking. It is not always easy to explain and in a literal world has sometimes landed me into trouble, particularly in journalism.

Like a number of my colleagues in the course, I did not carve out a career in either photography or art, but the way of thinking I learned has stayed all my life.

In the row about protecting the VCA from its Melbourne University masters, I believe evaluating the art school way of seeing the world is something that should be debated. The comparisons between art and conventional university modes of seeking solutions are important in questions about the VCA and its position as a department of the university. There is concern that as it comes under the Melbourne Model, the practical artistic training will be pushed aside by more academic learning.

Prahran CAE had grown out of the old Prahran Technical College, which boasted alumni as varied as painter Sidney Nolan and football coach Kevin Sheedy. It had a wide range of disciplines but when much of it was absorbed into what became Swinburne University, the art department, including photography, was hived off to the VCA.

I was one of a couple of students with previous university experience in my year of the course, so we had something to evaluate it against. We felt it was lacking in some important areas.

The Prahran photography course was considered the best of its kind in Australia and was closely associated with a photographic art movement that flourished in Melbourne in the 1970s and '80s. Some of its notable lecturers at the time were Athol Shmith, Paul Cox and John Cato. Some of its students included the now controversial Bill Henson, the late Carol Jerrems and the current head of photography at the VCA, Christopher Koller.

Koller was a Prahran student after I left and we have never met, but we talked last week about the way artists learn to think. He says he tries to teach his students to conceptualise the image before trying to make the picture; in so doing he emphasises the importance of rigorous research.

One of the ironies from my time at the art school was that students such as myself sought more academic rigour in what had been a practical course.

We wanted more theory, in particular art history, which until then was totally lacking. Our reasoning was that it was impossible to become great creative artists if we did not understand what had come before. We won the argument; history and theory were added on top of the practical work. Koller says these are still part of the course.

However, I realise that even from a largely practical course I evolved my own way of problem-solving, something I did not get from conventional education. Maybe this is the real value of art schools.

Geoff Strong is a senior Age writer.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/the-vca-is-a-breath-of-fresh-air-in-a-linearthinking-world-20090906-fcq2.html>