

# Right Brain/Left Brain: Balancing Digital Art Curricula

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## Abstract

Developing curricula for digital art programs is an evolutionary process. Technology is constantly changing and creating the need for new courses, or the revision of old ones. The level of digital literacy of students entering both undergraduate and graduate programs is also continuing to rise. Traditional art programs contain components of theory, art history, critique and studio work. Digital art programs have the additional components of software instruction and technological literacy. The goal of this forum is to bring a greater understanding to attendees of how to balance all of these elements in order to provide the best possible educational experience for the student. This forum will encourage participants to share ideas and opinions on how their curricula have changed and what they see as important trends for the future.

## Traditional Art Curricula

When teaching traditional art, there are generally four components in the curriculum: theory, art history, critique and studio work. With the advent of digital tools for creative production, two major factors were added to art curricula: software instruction and technological literacy. Since the four components above still need to remain, the larger question becomes, "What gets squeezed out?" as there is a finite time for classroom instruction. While this integration can vary depending on the course and degree program, the general trend was to put software instruction into the studio portion of the curriculum, and combine them as one unit. Other programs necessarily had to decrease the amount of time spent on theory, art history and critique. Questions for consideration are: "What effects have these compromises had on undergraduate and graduate education?" and "How have educators adapted to these changes?"

## Incoming Student Profiles Are Changing

Another important consideration when developing digital art curriculum is the changing nature of the incoming student. There is a distinct generational component to digital literacy. The MFA Computer Art program at the School of Visual Arts in New York began in 1987. At that time, the vast majority of students had not grown up with a computer and were attending the program to incorporate digital literacy and software skills into their creative practice. In fact, computer experience was not a pre-requisite for admission into the program. For those without any computer experience, a two-week "boot camp" was held before the semester started to introduce those students to the digital realm. Almost twenty years later, the situation is quite different. Undergraduate and graduate students are entering degree programs with digital literacy and, in many cases, a solid working knowledge of the software used in the creative fields.

## SVA MFA Computer Art Curriculum Approach

The primary focus of the MFA Computer Art Department is to develop creative self-expression using digital tools by fostering an individual artistic voice and style. This is accomplished through a progressive curriculum, a faculty comprised of well-known

working professionals, state-of-the-art facilities and our location in New York. Students follow a broad curriculum, including studio work, art history and programming. Areas of specialization include animation, digital video, installation art, and networked and interactive multimedia. Interdisciplinary study is also encouraged.

We have developed a process through which potential faculty, as well as ideas for new courses and workshops, are introduced to the department and the students. The pathway of developing a new course follows two routes. The first is the traditional method of developing a course through meetings with staff and faculty. The second takes advantage of using progressive exposure of a potential faculty member to the students. We first hire faculty as part of our guest lecture series or Digital Art Seminar. Based on student response, we then extend an offer to teach a workshop, which runs for two-hour sessions over the course of a few weeks. Workshops are generally organized in response to requests for advanced production and software instruction. The chair meets with student representatives on a monthly basis to discuss how things are going and what the students' needs are. Ideas for workshops are often brought up during these meetings. Workshops are free, not for credit and open to all students. They help to broaden educational offerings, as well as to keep excessive software instruction outside of class time, leaving more room for theory and critique. Examples of workshops include: copyright issues, HDTV, building a website, FlashScript, and lighting and rendering with Maya. If the response to the workshop is positive, we then consider establishing a class based around that topic, as well as what the faculty member does on a day-to-day basis. The philosophy of the School of Visual Arts is to employ working professionals to teach. Courses that have developed in this manner include Stereoscopic 3D and Advanced Modeling and Rigging.

## SVA MFA Computer Art Degree Requirements

The MFA program is a 60-credit degree program, with a graduation requirement of a 3.0 GPA. Required courses include: Digital Art Seminar, Computer Systems, art history courses (2), programming courses (2), Thesis I & II, Thesis Writing I & II. This is 27 credits of required classes (10 classes total) and 33 credits of electives (11 classes), and a public presentation of the thesis project, and an optional thesis exhibition. Underlying this approach is a desire to keep required classes to a minimum. The Digital Art Seminar is a series of lectures, field trips and other digital art-related events required of first-year graduate students. The purpose of the series is to provide incoming students with an overview of the field and its history, as well as introducing them to digital art professionals, venues and groups involved with digital art. The one-semester Computer Systems course gives students a thorough introduction to the technology, hardware and software of digital art and computing in general. The art history requirement is important to help students position their philosophy and creative work within the larger context of digital

art. Being able to look beyond off-the-shelf software and understand how software is written are two of the reasons for the programming requirement. Thesis and Thesis Writing are second-year courses that aid in the development of the thesis project, which is the body of creative and written work produced to earn the MFA degree.

### **Art History Requirement**

Previously, all students were required to take an overview course titled Computer Art in Context in the second semester. Over the last several years, courses such as Professional Issues, Contemporary Voices and the Networked Media Seminar have brought considerable art historical content into the first semester, eliminating the need for the overview course. This has been replaced by Contemporary Voices, History of New Media in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, Animation Culture, Networked Media Seminar, Virtual Reality Seminar, Video Art and Beyond, Ecstasy and Apocalypse, Art & Technology and the New York Avant-Garde, and Ethics and Politics in the New Media Age.

### **Thesis Writing and Research**

A thesis writing and research course is required. The first semester involves writing a thesis proposal and research paper. The second semester includes completing a creative essay, which is an extended artist statement. Many studio programs do not have a writing component and students often proclaim, "I went to art school because I hated writing." While that may be true for some, the core of the Right Brain/Left Brain Theory is to balance both sides of the brain: the intellectual and creative/emotional. In doing so, the two sides now complement each other. Students are well versed in digital art history and have positioned themselves in the larger context of digital art. The research paper has made them aware of what other artists in the field are doing. They are also now fluent in expressing their ideas in a clear and coherent written and verbal manner. In doing so, they have informed their creative work and have produced a clear road map to follow when creating their final thesis projects. However, within this structure, experimentation and creativity is still encouraged.

### **What About Drawing?**

As chair of the BFA Computer Art program from 1994 to 1998, I required four years of drawing. At that time, I felt that drawing helped to develop the creative and visualization abilities of undergraduate students. We do not require drawing in the graduate computer art program. A larger question that arises is: Has the time passed for required drawing classes in Digital Art programs? Opinions differ widely in this area, but most agree that drawing skills do go hand-in-hand with visual thinking, and the visual arts in general.

### **Creating the Balance**

Ultimately, how does one create balance in a digital art curriculum? Dynamism is one requirement, based on the rapid changes in technology and the changing profile of incoming students. It is also important to use outside resources to enhance and broaden the educational experience. These can include guest lectures, critiques, workshops, and field trips to galleries, museums, conferences, trade shows and professional studios. Finally, having a sincere commitment to delivering the best possible educational experience to the student is of primary importance.