The triumph of the major work and demise of the major study: mapping a case in past curriculum reform and surmising educational futures

Penny McKeon and Chris Peers
University of New South Wales

This paper examines a case of secondary curriculum reform in New South Wales. It focuses on the school subject Art, specifically the innovation of two pedagogical constructs: the major study and the major work.

In the 1960s, universities regarded the historical study of art as the principal symptom of intellectual rigour in the subject. By the end of the decade, these academics represented art history as an anodyne occupation. However, artmaking was relevant to the civic and cultural formation of emergent adults.

The major study and major work were constituted as examination instruments during the Wyndham curriculum reforms. The major work redefined how artworks were submitted for examination and subsequently altered the educational character of artmaking. The complementary major study required a sustained art-historical investigation, assessable in addition to a conventional examination.

The authors account for the emergence of these innovations, and speculate on a disjunction in their reception. It is argued that the popularity of the major work and atrophy of the major study is due to public assumptions about the nature and contribution of Art in society and its appropriate educational deployment.

The continued success of the major work is legitimated by gallery exhibitions such as ARTEXPRESS. In contrast, the fate of the major study as an historical artifact reflects how the state construes Art as a school subject in past and present iterations of curriculum reform.