

Career story: Visual arts - where to now?

This career story features a fine arts graduate who decided that her arts career would sit apart from her income-deriving work. The account is a great resource for understanding the difference between work and career. When reading the account, reflect on what you have learned in your degree and how this may position you to follow your passion.

At the back of this resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

Sandra's story

"I have always intended to continue working on my art business, but didn't expect it to pay the bills. I knew I would have to split my time between working part-time and my art."

After completing her final year of school, Sandra chose to follow her passion at university and enrolled in a three-year Bachelor of Visual Arts degree followed by a one-year Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours).

Sandra knew she wanted to do something creative when she finished her degree, but she was not sure how to go about this. She recalled that at the beginning of her degree, career information was available. However, with the uncertainty of what she would do at the conclusion of her studies, she found the information to be too vague. Nonetheless, the information highlighted possible career paths such as curatorship, gallery work, art criticism and education.

Professional preparation

In preparing Sandra to become a professional artist her degree course taught her how to run a business, apply for grants and secure exhibitions.

This was taught in her final semester of study and she reflected that the most appropriate time to offer this information may have been the middle of the course. This would have enabled students to develop further knowledge under the guidance of lecturers. Sandra acknowledged that her lecturers were a valuable source of career information as they were practicing artists.

Through volunteer work, Sandra became aware of what life as a professional artist might look like. One such project was an outdoor wall piece commissioned by the State Government. Working outdoors provided different challenges than those she had encountered when working in a studio.

“The project management involved was something I was not aware of. Traffic management was required as we were painting a wall, meaning cars and pedestrians were to be considered. Then to complicate matters it began raining! The artist was being paid for a specific time frame. Juggling these aspects is stressful for the artist.”

In her third year of study, Sandra won a prize. The prize enabled Sandra to exhibit her artwork in a hotel for twelve months. As part of the prize, the hotel was able to purchase her paintings and keep them on display permanently. She recalled thinking: “hopefully this is the first of many!”

Balancing employment and art practice

During her honours year, Sandra began casual work at an assessment education company. At the time of her interview this had become a part-time position, and working there enabled her to support herself financially. It also provided ‘a break’ from drawing and running her art business. The education work appealed more to her logical side than her creative side. It was also different to her self-directed art activities.

In order to improve her profile, Sandra believed she needed to add variety to her work and to keep challenging and experimenting with her style. She agreed that continuing to apply for grants, and painting between other part-time work was necessary. In order to achieve this, she recognised that she must be self-motivated and continue to look for inspiration in order to have her artwork available to share with the public.

“I feel artists divide their time in two: firstly in applying for grants and exhibitions and then in painting time.”

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett.