THE PLACEMENT

An approach to Mitchell, Kane Associates (MKA) was made on the strength of an already established business relationship. The company currently handles the design and printing of the University Prospectus and the ‘Inside/Out’ quarterly newspaper. With an already comfortable working relationship existing between Dr Matthew Martin and Mr Seán Mitchell, Partner with MKA, coupled with Matthew’s declared interest in the area of marketing, it was considered appropriate to negotiate a period of placement allowing Matthew to experience the full range of work carried out by MKA.

On Matthew’s application to become involved in the EU Peace II, Proteus project, ‘Enabling Lecturers to Learn from Business’, he stated:

“I specialise in the teaching of writing and in helping people to develop their own written communication skills. I look forward to sharing my knowledge of a range of writing pedagogies with those people working at the front line of business communications and marketing in order to see what synergies may be produced by our different approaches to the medium of written communications.”

It had been agreed with Seán Mitchell that Matthew would be given an introduction to the breadth of activities associated with MKA commissions, such as, advertising, marketing, public relations and event management. This involved viewing a number of client files on existing contracts at different stages of completion. Matthew was therefore in a position to grasp the sequence of tasks involved in securing and delivering on a contract.

Matthew then focused on two particular contracts by shadowing Seán’s involvement with the associated clients.

The first contract was commissioned by Investment Belfast and involved the marketing of Full Circle. As part of the contract, an event devoted to recycling issues, environmentally sound products and sustainable development was to take place in the centre of Belfast in autumn 2005.

The second contract was commissioned by Perfecseal, a medical packaging company wishing to launch new product innovations. Introducing this to the market was to prove very challenging as the physical properties and scientific advances which these innovations represented were difficult to understand let alone market.

The stunning reality of the product and the associated specifications might appeal to technicians but a ‘marketing splash’ would be difficult to achieve. Matthew was party to the whole process which settled on the web of the ‘Orb Weaver Spider’ as one image for capturing the complexities of these innovations— a web that requires greater relative tension for breaking than steel and one which is produced in a most complex, non-linear shape. A fascinating and
powerfully complex metaphor – and one, based totally in nature, where all the best packages are found (bananas, amniotic sacs, skin etc). The extensive research and lasting debates resulted in this successful and powerful step forward in confirming a direction for this particular marketing campaign.

During this placement, Matthew was plunged into the ‘world of marketing’. Expecting to feel very much a burden in the organisation, Matthew was instead made to feel very much at home with contributions being acknowledged as meaningful. Seán Mitchell, when interviewed was asked to comment on Matthew’s contribution, he commented: “During the period of Matthew’s placement the ‘skills set’ changed which had a positive effect on completing tasks involving problem solving”. Sean explained how, “graphic designers approach problem solving in a similar way drawing mainly on visual impetus. By having Matthew on board, his expertise in the field of literature changed the problem solving dynamic, raised the level of creativity and thereby added breadth to ideas generated”.

KEY LEARNING POINTS ON BUSINESS
The energy and level of research involved in generating ‘marketing ideas’ and thereafter gaining approval from the client. A client will have a grasp on the detail of their product specification, particularly in the case of highly technical products. It is difficult therefore to convince a client of the priority for the ‘broad sweep’ approach required to create market impact.

An appreciation of how a raft of details needing to be communicated leads to a tension between visual communication and verbal communication. It is that ability to convert the complexity of the verbal detail into the elegant simplicity of visual design that is the ‘gold standard’ of effective marketing.

Knowledge of cost and management techniques in converting a negotiated contact into a realistic budget and thereafter managing that budget.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE BA (Hons) LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE PROGRAMME OF THE UNIVERSITY
Matthew noted that his experience would be relevant, particularly in relation to his teaching on the BA (Hons) Liberal Arts seminar series in Critical Reading Skills. Having acquired a wealth of detail and examples, these can be used in presenting students with challenging opportunities to read texts with a critical eye for the hidden agendas within. Students can also be stretched to reading visual imagery critically.

FUTURE LINKS WITH BUSINESS
Matthew’s working links with Seán Mitchell will continue through work related to future issues of the college ‘Inside/Out’ newspaper. Matthew considers Seán Mitchell would be a fabulous person to speak at BA (Hon) Liberal Arts seminars to demonstrate his ability to “present complex, challenging ideas in an accessible way”.

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION
Matthew expressed particular interest in the work done by MKA on a number of projects which involved re-positioning companies which had either protestant or nationalist image associations. In each case this was in contrast to the truly cross-community reality of their present work. Looking into the materials produced as part of each re-branding scheme revealed the degree to which these companies are actually cross-community and despite legacy image problems have remarkable records in terms of training and supporting staff. Examination of these materials is evidence that some companies are prepared to place emphasis on breaking down barriers and openly follow peace and reconciliation initiatives.

PERSONAL LEARNING
Matthew stated, “...an appreciation that so much learning can take place while being part of a different work environment, particularly when the matching up of the lecturer with the right placement is precise. In my case, the match was perfect.”