

# Disaffected/ Difficult Students Within Design Education: Some Possible Considerations

All teachers have to handle 'difficult' students as a normal part of their teaching load. Two general approaches tend to be adopted in schools: the establishment of withdrawal groups or absorption within mixed ability groups. Whichever technique is used the problems caused by these students are out of all proportion to their numbers and are a major source of both stress for staff and reduced contact with other students, the net effect is to lower the quality of the learning experience. The focus of this article is on the withdrawal technique, though some points will be of interest within mixed ability.

The term 'difficult' students does, of course, cover a wide range of specific difficulties and forms of behaviour and many inexperienced teachers make the mistake of attempting to work with them in a similar manner. Having said this and so emphasised the need for consideration of these students as individuals, there are a number of strategies which are worth careful consideration when teaching such students. The factors discussed below are based both upon my own experience conducting research in design departments and those of other practitioners in the field. In dealing with those factors I feel to be most relevant I have identified four broad areas:

1. The identification of students requiring particular help, and selection, if a withdrawal system is to operate.
2. Facilities needed when operating in a design faculty.
3. Relationships.
4. Work schemes and resources.

1. The topic of learning difficulties is complex. In this case I intend to identify a certain proportion which we can define as students who, if not identified and considered, lower the quality of learning for the rest of the group, usually by direct and often disruptive behaviour. The pathology of the condition can, however, be very varied and so the only real criteria teachers can operate is to treat students very much as individuals, with all the ramifications for teaching ratio. In this way it is often possible to identify the conditions which bring out disruptive behaviour and react accordingly, whether in a withdrawal or mixed ability group.

Analysing the pathology of the various student reactions is difficult but well worth the extra effort involved, many cases may be based on a relatively simple factor or chain of factors which can be broken if the key points can be identified. Techniques to use centre around improving ones perspectives on the group and individuals. Use colleagues who are willing and available at the time to help you focus on certain cases by helping out in the room. The results from even a few hours of such double staffing can be of great value. Other outsiders to consider are specialist advisors etc. When operating on ones own prior consideration of potential problems can help focus attention and so generate new understanding. Whichever techniques

are used it is important to try to identify the reasons behind the situation, it will probably be a complex interrelationship, but many have a key, a logical place to start attacking the problem.

If a withdrawal group is operated it is very important to consider the mechanism by which the student is, after being identified, withdrawn. Students who are disaffected are not going to improve simply by virtue of withdrawal, indeed they will suffer a form of shock, and you may find that all you are doing is containing, rather than educating them. Such students need careful counselling before being withdrawn so they may see it in a positive light and are mentally prepared for appropriate work. They should be introduced into the group in a sensitive but positive manner and a crisp start made in order to engineer rapid positive feedback from the situation.

A crucial factor at all times, but particularly on being withdrawn, is that of 'dead time'. This is time when the student needs help before he or she can progress and yet that help, usually the teacher, is not immediately available. Such dead time causes loss of direction and, in some cases, increased anxiety due to lack of feedback. It is important to engineer the learning experience in such a way that dead time is reduced, for example:

- a. High staffing ratios, making staff more accessible.
- b. Clear resource material which logically indicates direction.
- c. Having alternative foci for dead time e.g. interesting resource bases and a generally 'live' environment.

It is necessary to quickly build a sense of identity for the student within the group, to build relationships (point 3) and establish positive feedback from the work undertaken.

2. The facilities needed in a design faculty, particularly when a withdrawal system is operated, depend to a large extent on the situation: and the staff operating it. This article does not intend to go into detail on tools, equipment etc., however the following points may be of interest:

- a. There should be no unobservable spaces, the teacher must be able to cover the area with a glance.
- b. If withdrawing students, the location used should, ideally, be closed so that a climate may be developed within with minimum disturbance from outside. Ideally the area should be 'theirs',

that is, used only by them, but this is rarely possible. It should, however be capable of being individualised to some extent and made more inviting for such students.

c. There should be no internal windows, if there are, cover them with work/posters etc. This is not simply to cut down on external interference but also to help build a feeling of security within.

d. A large, centre work table helps students come together more naturally and provides a central forum for interaction which the teacher can control more easily rather than running from one work space to another. A climate and relationships can be developed around such a central table as the teacher can more easily be aware of and manipulate what goes on, teaching via the medium of design rather than simply teaching design skills. Interesting opportunities often arise which the teacher can use to promote discussion whilst work continues in a very relaxed and natural manner.

3. The development of working relationships is vital if the teacher is to gain the most from any situation. Despite often aggressive attitudes these students need support from staff and many interactions which at the time are apparently pointless or disruptive are simply students attempting to communicate in one of the few ways they have found successful. It can be very stressful for the teacher managing such interactions but only by reacting correctly can better relationships and so learning develop. Key points identified by students are the need for teachers who are approachable, friendly, but know where to 'draw the line' and are consistent in discipline.

Within the group of students the central table technique helps develop interaction as indicated above, this in turn helps them develop relationships, an important skill in life.

Again a favourable staffing ratio is important in order to foster relationships more easily, provide rapid feedback and so reduce that dead time which can undo a great deal of good work.

4. In terms of the type of work undertaken I have identified a number of points raised by disaffected students. Firstly they want freedom in project choice, secondly they tend to dislike designing on paper, preferring to get straight on with handling materials. These two points cause many problems, teacher-set design briefs are often not identified with and many students have the idea that one has to design totally on paper for a long period before handling materials, this bores them and is also incorrect in terms of design technique. My research indicates that this dislike of designing has a fairly complex background but is mainly tied up with negative feedback with pencil and paper in many areas of the curriculum, particularly drawing, together with a poor understanding of design technique by the staff who taught the student.

Many teachers try to overcome the lack of interest shown by many disaffected students by offering a free choice of project, however experience indicates that this is fraught with difficulty, students either don't have any ideas or those they do have are unrealistic in terms of their existing skills. All this means more dead time as staff try to tutor individuals.

A technique I have found successful is to build a resource base of simple projects which give rapid positive feedback and require only slight design input initially. In this way the student can look at a range of ideas actually made up, choose one that interests him and start with little or no 'designing' by using the material resources pre-prepared. This may appear to be craft work, and indeed is, initially, however the student quickly becomes enthusiastic and, as each project is contrived in such a way that it can be repeated in a modified form, it invites the student to design, initially in his head and eventually by drawing whilst discussing developments with staff. This approach gives staff more freedom to act where necessary rather than being followed like a mother goose. A key point is that the resources are actual examples, written resource sheets are often avoided by students due to problems relating to the written word.

A further technique to ease pressure on staff and so improve their effectiveness is to encourage students to work in small groups on projects. This can be done in two ways, either three work on one project together, or they work individually but on the same project so reducing the interaction time needed for basic instruction. In practice it is found that students naturally want to work in small groups and do similar work, but by developing this approach staff have flexibility and students have choice.

Success in project work by the above method is infectious and staff must encourage this. Work needs to be seen, the student gets further feedback, praise, and others see the potential in that project and so become keen to try themselves. Keeping work for display is ideal, but some students prefer to take work home immediately. This should be allowed and photographs taken. A photographic resource base has great value and students can relate to it more easily than diagrams on work sheets.

In mentioning praise, staff should be aware of a danger in the way students receive such feedback. Praise is an important tool but some difficult students may react badly to it, due firstly to the fact that they are not used to it and secondly that it lowers their standing in the eyes of their often anti-school peer group. Praise must be given, but in a discreet way. In this way a very difficult student can eventually come to openly relate to staff in a way many find impossible initially.

When developing a work scheme for disaffected students, particularly when withdrawn, one needs to consider a degree of flexibility in relationship to both the groups the students were withdrawn from



One of the 110 winners of the Young Electronic Designers Competition. Paul Metcalfe of Cavendish School with his project, a working model of pelican crossing lights for primary school instruction.

and the possibility of being entered for examinations. Whilst the decision to move them may seem final at the time, circumstances change and the possibility of moves or exam entry may be a good motivating factor in particular cases.

In finishing the section on work schemes it is worth mentioning two points that on their own appear minor but which can cause resentment if allowed to slip. Firstly staff need a very secure method of keeping ongoing work. Losses, whether accidental or deliberate, are taken very personally by students. Secondly, try to make sure you pack the lesson up in plenty of time. Do it in a civilised manner and allow students to leave on time, they get very 'uptight' if they leave a lesson late, particularly if its a breaktime!

**Summary**

Difficult and disaffected students undoubtedly cause a great deal of stress for staff and consume more than their fair share of time and resources, however we should not lose sight of the fact that in many of the students the difficulties are transient and it is important we do not fall into the trap of descending to a policy of simple containment.

The points described above are, of course, not a complete policy on this topic, however they have been found to be successful. There are many other points which readers will no doubt feel are important, based upon their own experiences. These are important matters, and ones which we ought to discuss more openly, it is hoped that practicing teachers will respond to this article and so further our common knowledge and experience.

**ENVIRONMENTAL  
IMPROVEMENTS  
LIMITED**

-----  
 NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 POSITION \_\_\_\_\_  
 COMPANY \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 TEL \_\_\_\_\_  
**NATURE OF ENQUIRY:**  
 Display Screens       Rep. To Call   
 Side Benching       Computer Tables   
 Work Surfaces       Work Bench   
 Large Surface,       Repair Kits   
 Formica Tables  
**OTHER PROJECTS** \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Please State)