

Design and Creative Studies Departments — Have we Gone too Far?

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247 The promotion of design studies in schools of secondary education from such investigations as the study of Keele University and the more recent enquiry at the Royal College has promoted much criticism, analysis and discussion as to the nature of art and craft studies in schools from people in all spheres of educational practice. Commendable recognition must be given to the aims of design studies in schools from those educationalists who have so eloquently promoted its advancement and studied its possibilities. Their criticism that art and craft studies have previously been too insular in activity, unco-ordinated with, and often of low status within the general school curricula, lacking in academic content, and material and technique based in activity, is undoubtedly in many cases absolutely true. It would seem logical that the activity of designing, and enquiry into the nature of design in a rapidly advancing technological society, would serve as an excellent tool for developing all the educational experiences and understandings that the promoters of the movement both expected, and in many cases have proved it would do. These were notably for the design/creative studies department to assume a more central role on the school curriculum with art activities at one end of the spectrum and science and technology at the other, and to integrate the various arts and crafts in designing activities which would also inevitably inter-relate with other curriculum subjects, especially science and technology, and humanities. It seems sound educational thinking that the process of solving design problems would incorporate aspects of perception, function, structure, communication, appearance, choice and decision making, develop attitudes of enquiry, analysis and reasoning within the pupil, and whilst relating to the environment, occupational and leisure activities, develop a visual understanding of the environment and technological society to which he belongs. Thus art and craft would contain

a more meaningful, academic content, relevant to the reality of the future life of the pupil.

However, the movement towards developing design studies in secondary schools and their practice so far, has already been heavily criticised, even by those educationalists who have done much towards promoting their development and firmly believe in their educational value and potential. Although such design courses have helped eradicate the manual and menial tag previously attached to craft teaching, a paper from the Association of Art Advisers (1974) questioned as to whether art education had 'lost its way' as the notion of designing became the dominant feature, and rightly expressed concern at the 'tacit assumptions' being made that the design process, whether problem solving or otherwise fulfilled all the needs for creative work in the education of children.

Reasons for the rapid development in Design Departments have been attributed to publicity pressure from two very successful Schools Council projects, pressure from the Department of Education and Science to update the image of craft education, the pressure of comprehensive reorganisation and an attendant building programme advocating related and shared facilities for Art, Craft and Home Economics, and political pressure within the schools to form larger art/craft empires to match other large faculties being formed, providing a considerable administrative convenience and 'tidying up process' giving the larger Design Department more political weight within the school than most of the art and craft departments achieved in isolation. This unfortunately enabled headmasters to make considerable reductions in the amount of time allocated to the practical subjects.

Of particular concern has been the dilution and over-simplification of the original aims of design education, and the mistaken 'practice' for 'principle' in the development of the 'materials circus' as an

introductory course to all the craft disciplines of the Design Department. This often results in a fragmented, unrelated experience of materials with a later unco-ordinated jump into more academic designing situations demanding considerable skill and understanding. Similarly the rigid use of the problem solving process as a 'method' for creative work, which many pupils would find great difficulty in using, the misconceived use of themes to link work in different areas of the department, and the assumption that an open-planned art and craft area will engender conceptual, material and methodological integration of the crafts in designing activities whereby interdisciplinary activity becomes an end in itself rather than a means, has been heavily criticised.

Further concern has been expressed as to the effects upon the teaching staff in Design Departments, many of whom learn about design education through secondary experience by way of books, slide kits, publications of articles and test programmes, many of which demonstrate the results of the system rather than putting it into any conceptual, educational context. Laxton (1973) felt that without the imagination and vitality of both staff and pupils the work would stagnate into a sterile, pseudo-academic activity. Both Jacks (1973) and Zanker (1971) criticised that many of the barriers towards design education were the result of teacher training. Much concern has also been expressed over the appointments of the heads of departments of the new design faculties; The nature of the work they had been engaged in, and their often limited understanding of the philosophy and practice of design education has left much to be desired.

Unfortunately, a survey of several Design/Creative Studies departments, selected by County Art Advisors for visitation, proved much of this criticism to be true. Whilst in these departments there was commendable practical art and craft work

being achieved, there was also a disturbing paucity of conceptual understanding as to the original intentions of developing an integrated art/craft department in schools, of the possibilities of curricular development in the department, of the diversity of possible teaching methods, and of the diversities in the nature of learning and the development of appreciation in the arts, crafts and design.

Staff appreciated the provision of more than adequately equipped, pleasing surroundings, especially new departments offering both integrated facilities of open multi-equipped areas and privacy of teaching rooms if required, and felt that such integrated areas fostered the understanding of the natural inter-relationship of the crafts in both themselves and the pupils, and encouraged mutual understandings of specialisms amongst the staff. However, the extreme open planning of some departments were having disturbing effects upon occupant staff, and destroying co-operative attitudes and welfare of staff and pupils. Despite the initial visual excitement of the open area created by displays of work, disturbance from heavy crafts, continual noise level from sometimes as many as two hundred and fifty pupils in the area, not only disturbed concentration but made the atmosphere not at all conducive to work. Staff were finding great difficulty in maintaining discipline and consequently standards of work.

The facility of blocked timetabling was used almost exclusively for the unquestionably accepted 'materials circus', rotating pupils through all the crafts, sometimes using themes in desperation to link materials and processes together, or accepting the fact that the rotation was a fragmented, limiting experience, but necessary to build up a vocabulary and basic knowledge of materials and skills for later optional specialisation. In some cases a rejection of 'modern methods' from trial, error, and bewilderment had

segregated boys to a limited experience of heavy crafts and girls to domestic subjects.

Staff, divided in aims and attitudes, suffered in many cases simply from a lack of understanding of the basic intentions of the new departmental formation, a considerable contributing factor to some of the disasters, particularly those staff already established in the school where departmental re-organisation had been forced upon them. Resistance to change, little understanding of how the crafts could work together for curricular aims, caused much objection to specialists subjects becoming submerged in the broader organisation, to an apparent drop in standards of work, to a loss of privacy and demands from a larger department upon the specialist curriculum.

Despite the abundance of practical activity little or no attempt was made to develop an appreciation of the cultural arts, and an understanding of the elements of design was considered as being achieved through pupil involvement with practical work, knowledge of materials and techniques and some design problem solving activities. In short, much of what was happening under the design umbrella was an unconceptualised, unrelated practical shamble, aimed at developing the child's creative and artistic potential, providing channels for self expression and hopefully achieving some aesthetic appreciation and awareness of design through practical activity. Although some heavy crafts adopted a problem solving approach to design and attention was paid to linking curriculum with the environment and occupational activities it was generally apparent that the original intention and aims of establishing the department were not being fulfilled.

It is always easy to jump a clear round from the grandstand, and similarly to make a critical appraisal is relatively simple in comparison with making a constructive, remedial suggestion. The experience of looking at several Design Departments,

of reading pertinent literature about what is intended for design education and of observing it in practice seems analogously similar to being in an operating theatre where the surgeon, attendant doctors and nurses all have differing opinions as to what should be actually happening, where such opinions are founded upon insufficient knowledge of medical fact, and where the combined ignorance and lack of the essential mutual understanding for the team co-operation results in a massacred death. Unfortunately, a visual education is not essential for basic survival and massacre of its development can pass comparatively unnoticed in the child, especially when camouflaged by prolific production of art and craft products. Only in the adult world do we realise that vast numbers of people are visually indiscriminate, that much of what people do with their environment lacks aesthetic sensitivity and understanding, and that understanding of the cultural arts remains largely an esoteric activity for a few who have been fortunately tutored in their appreciation.

From the 'design' shamble springs blatantly the old proverb of 'united we stand, divided we fall', and whilst the situation is a multi-dimensional problem of inter-related factors embracing student and teacher training, empirical knowledge of learning strategies in the arts, and opinions as to the essential nature of art and craft, it would seem imminently necessary to achieve some consensus of opinion about the nature of art and craft education before any progress can be made.

June McFee (1970) stated that empirical knowledge of the way children learn in the field of aesthetics is practically unexplored, and little is known of the diversities in the nature of, responses to, and understanding of visual stimuli, and how those responses can be developed and tutored. However, factual evidence from empirical study is a uniting factor in the path of progress, and unfor-

unately theories of art and craft education throughout its short history have been based upon insubstantial understandings and philosophical theorisation. Of further concern is that within the blocked timetable of a design department tutoring in art is sometimes reduced to an hour a week for possibly one or two terms of the first two secondary school years, after which an optional system of lesson choices may delete the subject completely from the pupil's school life, especially if he is considered to be academically inclined. Consequently we have a subject which, whilst being the visual and the oldest aspect of the three elements of communication in civilisation with literacy and numeracy, is not only becoming a mere tool for design problems, but in many cases is practically deleted from a child's secondary education. What has for fifty years been flimsily understood and only just beginning to be educationally conceptualised on empirical evidence is being denied facility of being taught at all in design departments. Doubtless other areas of the department have similar feelings and in this sense it is possible to sympathise with the sacrosanct attitude many staff have towards their specialists area when they experience only its abuse within an integrated department, and have no experience or knowledge of the valuable contribution it could make within a well organised curriculum for meaningful educational aims.

The developing concept in many design departments that a broad, though possibly limited experience of materials and processes is necessary for understanding aspects of design, problem solving processes, for developing creative potential or a visual understanding and sensitivity, would seem to be in need of serious informed discussion and evaluation. A further disturbing misconception is the prevalent notion that practical involvement with materials and processes, in expressive or problem solving activities, will foster either aesthetic and cul-

tural understanding or the appreciation of design principles. Evidence suggests that such understandings develop when specifically taught and do not grow from practical experience without the supportive theoretical, critical, cultural and affective analysis.

No amount of departmental reorganisation will change what is taught, the nature of those teachings or what is learned by the pupil. What is learned is entirely dependent upon the understandings of the teacher and how those understandings are applied to teaching situations, and it is here that any changes in the nature of art and craft education will occur, and possibly here, in the area of teacher training, that any concentrated effort for development or change should be directed. In support of this notion is the fact that much of what is actually happening in design departments is identical to what has been happening in separated art and craft departments for many years. The nature of the activities have not changed because the training and understandings of the teacher have not changed either.

It is sad to reflect that, while the nature of art and craft education is largely dependent upon teacher understandings, the further training of qualified teachers is both highly selective and dependent upon secondment facilities, and consequently available to teachers already proficient in method and considerably developed in understandings of the nature of their subject. Thus it remains for a vast number to acquire information, knowledge and ideas from art and craft magazines, published material from Schools Council projects, personal training and experience, and exhibitions. From such material it is easy to develop a vocabulary of variations with processes and materials, 'do it yourself' ideas, without conceptualising their educational relevance in curricular context, and realising what understandings those processes are intended to develop in the pupil. Consequently curriculum in many design departments is material/process based.

Whilst approaching the numerous problems encountered in educational change and development, it must be realised that in many schools design departments are floundering and sinking beneath a confusion of ideas, trial and error situations, and wondering just what they should be doing whilst reducing their pupils to guinea pigs in trying to sort out ill conceptualised, misunderstood second hand ideas. Consequently the concept of designing as an educational tool is already being outrightly condemned by some educationalists and both the proper use and recognition of its possibilities is in danger of being lost altogether. It has already been suggested that designing, although fulfilling some of the requirements of a visual education, does not fulfil them all, and to organise the arts and crafts into an integrated department for problem solving, designing purposes, may not be the best way of introducing designing into the curriculum, and may be both limiting and abusive upon the possible understandings of and relationship with the arts and crafts.

Further to this argument, the arts and crafts, when taught in their historical, cultural, critical and affective contexts, need no curricular justification. They have both academic content and contemporary relevance, which combined with the understanding of their aesthetic, affective nature and creative possibilities, makes them a vital component of a balanced education. In essence they are the most fundamental aspects of human culture and communication, and need neither problem solving processes, organised integration or injected design principles to justify them. Is it not possible that what visual education does need is research into curriculum development and teaching methods based on empirical evidence of the nature of learning in the visual arts?

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