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Per Ardua...

At the time when *Studies in Design Education and Craft* are celebrating a tenth anniversary, I thought it might be interesting to look back further than the last ten years which are likely to occupy the majority of our contributors. I would like in fact to comment briefly on some of the remarkable changes I have seen myself during the last half century in our most interesting and vital field of education.

In 1920, as a boy of eleven, I won a scholarship to the local boys' grammar school. From what I have learned since, I think that this school and its attitudes and curriculum were fairly typical of the time. It was clear that education in craft, design or even art counted for very little indeed. In fact any practical work as such was barely tolerated.

After getting Matriculation I went into the Sixth Form (Science) at my peril, knowing that there would be very little supervision or help, compared with the almost full time teaching that was provided for what was known as the VIth Lit! I knew too that if I later went into the teaching profession it would be virtually impossible to obtain the Headship of a grammar school. Mathematics would have been OK, but people who used their hands (scientists, craftsmen and artists) were regarded as not quite gentlemen and unsuitable for promotion! Understandably, at the grammar school we only studied 'woodwork' for our first two years and were taught by an instructor who was not expected to enter the masters' common room. During these first two years we also studied pencil drawing, and then at 13. I dropped for good all practical work except that in Science, the spaces on my timetable being filled with yet more Latin and Divinity. To be fair to the school, we did have a weekly discussion period when the sixth formers joined and very occasionally we talked about modern art or design. But we were never involved and had no practical experience.

It was a pleasant surprise to go on to the Imperial College of Science with another scholarship and to find there that skill of hand and eye were regarded in every way as important as the ability to think and to write. I had the extreme good fortune to be taught scientific glass blowing by one of the top men in Europe, so that when I was doing research and making my own apparatus I began to get the first real glimmering of ideas about design. Unfortunately all that came to an end in the great Depression of 1931, when my father lost his job and I had to earn some money, getting a temporary job teaching in my old school. After a year or so, I moved on to a lectureship at Woolwich Polytechnic, and saw there what I can in retrospect only describe as the black side of craft teaching.

A Junior Technical School (ages 13-16) was incorporated in the Polytechnic and made use during the daytime of the extensive and excellent practical facilities that were provided for advanced evening students in many kinds of engineering and technology. During their three years in the Polytechnic, the boys gained a facility with tools and machinery that assured the best of them a poorly paid semi-skilled job for a few years. It was the practice to make most of them redundant when they wanted a better wage. With national unemployment at its peak, there was no shortage of eager replacement. The Technical School was in fact a cheap form of vocational training and cheap labour. Though there were a few idealists on the staff who gave something of value to the boys it must be recorded that most of the school's effort went in instruction and preparation for the temporary jobs that lay ahead and were so clearly dead ends.

For the older students at Woolwich there were, it is true, a few day time so-called sandwich courses, but far too many had to do their studies to gain technical qualifications in the evening after a day's work – a very wasteful and inefficient occupation. British leaders learnt of the folly of our educational system the hard way, when with the unexpected demands of the second world war, it was realised that very large numbers of skilled and intelligent, adaptable technicians and craftsmen of an entirely new kind were needed. Unfortunately, men and women with the earlier narrow kind of vocational training rarely could adapt to such new techniques.

To summarise, most grammar schools had failed because they were buried in the past, and had not realised that a second industrial revolution was on the way, hastened of course by the pressures of war and the resulting extra resources now available for research and development. The vocational schools had failed because their narrowly conceived curriculum and training had provided robots who could not think for themselves and adapt to new ideas and processes such as those demanded by electronics. The technical colleges had largely failed because the bulk of their work had been done with tired and often exhausted students at night, resulting in great numbers of drop outs.

In a desperate attempt to improve both schools and higher education, all specialist teachers such as myself were frozen in our jobs with the object of educating young people for the large number of science and engineering bursaries that were now provided to the universities and colleges. Hastened by wartime pressures, a new generation of technical experts began to emerge. In retrospect, I see in this movement, the beginning of an encouraging new look at practical subjects of all kinds – a movement that soon was to embrace handicraft.

I was lucky enough to be appointed Head Master of one of the first of the new types of secondary school to be set up as a result of the 1944 Education Act. The school incorporated much of the new educational thinking and was housed in a brand new building with fine workshops, laboratories, art room and the rest – very different from traditional schools. There was great satisfaction to be had in launching an entirely new kind of school education, even though it was not easy to get good and adequately qualified teachers. In fact, there was a great general shortage of teachers after the war, and an emergency training scheme had to be hurriedly

introduced. This again had a profound effect on the teaching of practical subjects. Here also I was personally involved, for by then I had become an inspector of schools and eventually had a great deal to do with the running of an emergency training college in the Midlands. It was most interesting and indeed exciting to see in action the new values – the totally new look given to the education of teachers. Certainly in my own district craft and creative work of all kinds now became central to the curriculum, whilst barriers between the traditional subjects were broken down as the new project work developed. Much of this filtered through into the schools and English education would never again be quite the same. There were the usual protests from traditionalists who maintained that children were no longer learning to read in the primary schools. At the request of the County Education Committee I personally took the reading age of a random sample of hundreds of children in my area, showing convincingly that literacy was actually very high indeed at the age of nine or ten, and the non-reader was quite rare.

At this time, it was encouraging, as a member of various industrial advisory committees to find growing a new attitude to vocational training. It was realised that there was a necessary place for this at the stage of apprenticeship, but the best industrialists now wanted school leavers with a good general education and preferably as well with a feel for materials, if I can put it that way. Many of the best designers in Stourbridge, Kidderminster and Redditch rose from the ranks as a result of what seemed to be inherited skills, but developed quicker and further if they had first had a good education.

By the time I came to Goldsmiths' College in 1953 handicraft was established as a respected, if somewhat limited, subject. The limitations were to some extent traditional – the aims of the subject were thus not clearly defined. Goldsmiths', incorporating a well known school of art within its walls, not unnaturally gave a relatively high place to what one might call an artistic approach to handicraft, but tended to ignore the large scale and engineering aspect. Other colleges such as Shoreditch took their stand on this latter more technical approach.

The two aspects of handicraft moved much closer together when the BEd examination was introduced into colleges and some kind of parity of approach and standards had to be reached. To be able to offer Handicraft as a subject in a university degree was an immense step forward for what had once been such an underprivileged field of study. It was not without its cost, for in attempts to make the subject academically respectable it began to be in danger of losing its newly found sense of purpose and some might say, its integrity as a craft.

It is for this reason that I value so highly the move which is symbolised by *Studies in Design Education and Craft*, with its emphasis on design and the creative aspects of the subject. Professor Eggleston leads a movement of the highest importance and one which gives direction and a sense of purpose. As I am now in retirement, other contributors still working in the field will be better able than I am to assess the present position. I certainly know something of the difficulties, with the drastic cut back in teacher education and the shortage of money for any kind of education. I know that at the time I retired in 1974, Goldsmiths' was not unique in finding it difficult to recruit suitable students as future craft teachers. We certainly made great efforts, visiting the schools to encourage VI formers to spend an afternoon a week in the college workshops, hopefully to break down some of their prejudices against the subject. A change in emphasis indicated by the new name of the course 'Design and Technology' helped. Ironically, the present tragic position of general unemployment amongst teachers will probably help in the recruitment of all shortage subjects, of which this is one. Finally, this short historical review should not end without a tribute to those in the profession who have, through teachers' courses of various kinds, done so much to raise standards generally. I am thinking especially of the College of Craft Education about which I know most, through an association going back many years.

I still doubt whether the fundamental importance to the future of our country, of finding, training and encouraging good designers, is adequately recognised by our national leaders, in spite of the lip service which is given. Perhaps North Sea oil, more than anything else, has made the traditionalists recognise that wealth and the economic future of our country are bound up with skill of hand and eye. Above all, our essential export industry is more than ever dependent on good design, on the best design possible, for international competition gets more intense each year. Understandably therefore, I am proud to have been associated with Professor Eggleston, my colleagues on the Editorial Board, and with all those in the schools and colleges who are working in a field of such importance.