

The Last Decade and the Next

A review of developments in Design Education over the last decade could well start with a look at the first article in the last issue of this journal (Design and Creative Studies Departments by Hilary Cameron) since the point of view of the writer is approximately ten years out of date. It would be far more at home in Rhodes Boyson's 'Black Papers' since it also looks back with nostalgia to a past that never was instead of applying intelligence to the actual present.

The title alone, with its suggestion that the distance travelled is more important than the direction taken, should prevent anyone taking it too seriously, but a closer examination of some of its grosser absurdities reveals the shallowness of the 'Dissertation'.

The writer apparently accepts without question the 1974 paper issued by the Association of Art Advisers and does not know that this statement was foisted on the Association by a few strongly motivated individuals, was never accepted by all art advisers and is now generally discredited. I have never been able to understand how any adviser can, with a clear conscience, justify a bolstering up of his teachers' prejudices against development when he should be using all his energies helping and encouraging them to face the challenge of changing conditions. For a more balanced view of the attitude of art teachers to the need for change it would be better to refer to the proceedings of the last NSAE annual conference.

Hilary Cameron also claims to identify the motives of those who set up Design Departments and then uses this bogus assessment in order to denigrate them. Could it not be that Local Authorities, Heads of Schools and Departments, becoming aware (even if only partially) of the possibilities offered for better development of pupils, thought it wise to attempt some change of organisation? Of course, in doing so, many of them made mistakes but as Royce (of Rolls Royce) was fond of saying, 'A man who never made a mistake never made anything'. There is no doubt in my mind that a teacher who tries to develop his ideas on education, even if he does make mistakes, is a better influence on children than one who complacently goes on offering the same tired old pabulum.

Some of the more detailed criticisms in the article also show total ignorance of the real situation. The 'Theme' and the 'Circus' are not at all the result of new open plan (sic) buildings or block time tabling. They were devices thought up by teachers trying very hard to develop a common approach with colleagues who had previously taught in isolation in isolated rooms. New buildings (if they are wisely planned and not just open barns) and block time tabling actually remove the need for these (always) artificial stimuli to integration as the more perceptive teachers soon discovered. That is why — although no doubt some teachers are still using the methods and even using them well — both are now old hat.

'Problem solving' is another phrase for a phase that is passing. This served its purpose in concentrating teachers' and pupils' minds on the need for clear thinking about design but the phrase is now seen to be simplistic. Life does not consist of neat 'problems' that can be 'solved'. Instead we are confronted with many 'situations' that can be 'modified' and this is the way design teachers are beginning to think of the activities they promote. But instead of more flogging of a horse that if not dead is, I hope, dying let us look at the positive contributions of design education to the general good.

Those with the good sense to join the National Association for Design Education will have been kept in touch with developing ideas and with the growing acceptance of Design as a serious component of general education. But it is worthwhile from time to time to remind ourselves of certain landmarks which indicate the extent of this progress.

The great achievement of the Oxford A level Design Syllabus (A 83) was not to establish Design as an intellectually demanding study at least as important as academic studies — although it has done so and it was some achievement — but that it infiltrated new ideas about assessment into the examination system. Because designing does not recognise a 'right' and a 'wrong' response to a situation (but does recognise excellence) any assessment of ability in designing must concern itself with the way a situation is approached rather than the 'correctness of a solution'. Hence, 'at a stroke' it cut across the right/wrong; tick/cross; pass/fail syndrome that has bedevilled education. Instead of setting up hurdles for candidates to jump, any assessment of designing must open gates to fields in which candidates may display their abilities. The instigators of the syllabus were well aware of the challenge and, whether the Delegates of Oxford University were equally aware or not, they deserve great credit for being willing to try out such an innovative style of assessment.

This is the key to understanding the development of Design Education. In the beginning those of us who were concerned to develop more fully the contribution of practical activities to general education were not altogether aware of the magnitude of the change we were advocating. It has been a great joy to me to see how deeper

understanding of the possibilities inherent in designing has offered an opportunity, not only to revolutionise practical education, but to influence the whole of education.

If a list is made of phrases current in educational thought since the war: child centred education; success at different levels; relevance to life outside school; *et al*; it can be shown that Design Education has something to offer in each case. All these aspirations are, to my mind, attempts to deal with the fact that education is very good at making pupils see their own failings but very bad at making them realise their own potential. Of course! If you offer any pass/fail test to a child there is a statistical 50% chance of failure. The great advantage of thinking in terms of designing is that it is literally possible to succeed at different levels — and still recognise that while one's own suggestion is *not* wrong, others are still better. It is not the job of education to fool children into thinking they have succeeded when they have not. It is far more important that they should accept their own limitations but, at the same time, rejoice in their own measure of achievement.

Clearly the establishment of design education — even if it could be purged of all error — will not immediately produce a community of confident, fulfilled individuals. But can anyone seriously doubt that a concentration on failure detracts from that halcyon state and that a concentration on the contribution by and achievement of pupils *tends* towards it?

If this educational argument for the development of sound Design Education is forceful the social argument for it is even stronger. Is it really necessary, any longer, to spell out the importance of cherishing our environment and of understanding the ways in which man effects — or neglects to control — changes in it? Surely enough has been said by now to alert all thinking people to the need to accept the responsibility of all of us for the way in which change takes place.

Designing is about change and designers are effectors of change. To understand, by having experience of, designing is to come to terms with the way a situation is 'modified'. This teaches the hard lesson that there are no magic wands. It is no good sitting back until 'they' do something about it. Whether you adopt the high sounding, 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance', or G.K. Chesterton's more amusing, 'If you want a white post in your garden you must keep painting it', what must be accepted is that it is a mass of small actions and decisions, not one big one, that will modify mankind's situation to his benefit. In so far as we educationists can encourage this positive but humble attitude — and only in so far — are we ourselves making a positive contribution to improving our environment.

I have used the word environment freely and by this I mean the *total* environment which is made up of all the works of God and man. Sometimes we are apt to forget that, as with actions and decisions, the total environment is made up of a mass of small

items. It may not be within our power, individually, to make big changes — although it is not outside the capacity of mankind as a whole to make changes of quite frightening size — but we can and do make any number of small ones — even as small as putting litter in a bin instead of in the street. To give children a chance to modify some small part of their personal environment (within their own capacity) and to encourage them to see this as a sample of the way conditions can (or can not) be changed — or even to see the effect of small changes on the bigger scene — is a good way to encourage a sense of responsibility towards the environment.

We must claim no monopoly in this: our colleagues in 'Environmental Education' are doing magnificent work. In some ways it is a pity that Design Education and Environmental Education are thought of as separate activities, yet if we co-operate then there is extra strength to be gained. Designing, because it calls on many areas of knowledge and offers many opportunities for the exercise of knowledge, should be a very necessary uniting factor in education and must avoid any clash of interests.

There is not room in this article to discuss the methods that might be adopted but *why* we teach always seems to me more important than *how* we teach. Any method that helps to further the ideas here propounded should be encouraged. It is the aim and the intention that is all important.

As a member of the Consultative Committee for the Keele Project and a member of the Steering Committee for the Royal College of Art Project, 'Design in General Education', I have been privileged to see the development of ideas in Design Education at first hand. Not only has the development of ideas been rapid but the speed with which it has been accepted has been surprising. Whether the arguments are negative and destructive or positive and constructive, Design inevitably is included in any discussion about practical education that takes place today. Recently the Standing Conference for University Entrance recommended that a whole list of examinations of a practical nature that contained a large element of design should be accepted by all universities. The recently published report of the Design Council, 'Industrial Design Education', strongly recommends that 'Design' should be part of everyone's secondary education and that it should be an element in selection for Higher Education and, for whatever the reasons, more and more Authorities are providing purpose built accommodation that encourages development in this direction. Nor should it be forgotten that in many of these departments *all* children — not only those thought to be less able — are given some opportunity to understand the way the world they live in is shaped and changed.

Now I know that there are many teachers frustrated by conditions virtually unchanged by all this development. They can only take hope from the fact that change is coming and that it has massive support from Schools Council and RCA projects

and more sympathy and understanding from top educationists than ever before. During the 'Great Debate' not only the Minister of State for Education and Science but other Ministers as well have been looking with interest at the possibilities of Design providing some of the links with industry and the 'real' world that have been thought weak in our educational system. In principle the main fight to establish the importance of practical activities as a necessary part of general education is won. A refusal to take advantage of such a situation is the only way in which this victory can be thrown away.

Effort is still required. Hence what we need in 'Studies in Design Education and Craft' in the next ten years is: encouragement to clarify our ideas still further; shared experiences of attempts to put ideas into practice; shared experiences that have not worked out as hoped — if valuable lessons can be learnt from them.