

Acquiring Design Skills for Teaching - a self-help suggestion

In any kind of analysis of complex arrangements like those which constitute Craft Design and Technology Education, it is always easier to show what is wrong than to give clear and singular suggestions for improvement.

In two articles written for this magazine I have tried to show that a great deal of fundamental thinking is still required about what this subject really is and how it ought to be serviced.

The object of this short article, as a follow-up to the other two, is to alert readers to a possible vehicle which might offer CDT teachers the opportunity of pulling their design skills up by their bootstraps. This would be in contrast to waiting for the 'authorities' to provide the means of teacher improvement. I am going to suggest a 'self-help' idea in this article, and would appreciate some feedback on it. But in order to set this in the context of the issues I raised in the previous two articles, let me briefly summarise these.

The motivation behind them was that I wanted to try and find some plausible reason for what had begun to disappoint me so much; the realisation that Design Education (CDT) was largely failing to get a grip in the schools in spite of the terrific support it received.

I found evidence to show that there was a strong 'grass-roots' resistance to it. I suggested that the training of most teachers had been quite antithetical to the introduction of design based education. Our teachers had a lot of expertise in craft but none in design it seemed, and understandably they lacked confidence in this area.

Design had been attached to craft as a bolt on extra with little appreciation of how the centre of gravity of the whole subject should shift in order to properly accommodate it.

In addition to this assumption that the subject could simply expand without undergoing some radical change itself, I questioned the assumption implicit in our title (CDT) that 'craft' 'design' and 'technology' sit well together in an educational context and mutually support each other.

I had observed in schools that there always seemed to be irreconcilable conflict between the objectives of these in almost every project. In all but a few projects, most seemed to be contrivances which tried to straddle craft, design and technology in a most uncomfortable fashion, and set out to satisfy what were in the end, mutually exclusive objectives. Naturally this was leading to failure and frustration.

As a result of this observation I attempted to explore that appeared to me to be the logical and procedural differences between 'craft', 'design' and 'technology' in order to see the conflict in these terms.

While the integrity of each of these as educational entities were largely established it was their relationships which were problematic. Distinctions still needed to be made between 'craft' and a general practical capability supportive of design capability. It also seemed to me that we

should be clear whether by 'technology' we mean a knowledge centred 'applied science', or an activity based subject which combines principle and creative application into a seamless garment. There also remained the question of how to distinguish between good and bad technology when judged against moral and social criteria.

However the point that remains most intact throughout all of this discussion is that unless the teacher has a reasonable grounding in design skills, nothing will improve. Design is absolutely central to all of the diverse elements of the subject however we arrange them. It is the principal educational activity which holds it together and underpins the justification for it in today's curriculum. It is the essence of what CDT is about. To separate designing from technology in education is to completely miss the point of having technology there in the first place. Even a craft existing in the curriculum separately from Design and Technology needs to have a highly developed design dimension to it. It is the cerebral component of the craft and, as such, has to be there in the educational context.

It is not the purpose of this article to re-open the discussion but it must now proceed to its main objective by asserting that if we concentrate some effort on increasing the design skills of teachers in the field, we might be able to prevent the subject either from regressing to the old patterns, or even disappearing up its own flight line as it pursues forms of development in technology which cut away at its ground base of creative practical activity.

The objective here then is to try to find out whether teachers see the problem in this way too and whether they might be interested in subscribing to and contributing to a new journal, about to be launched in the United States, which is primarily designed to be a home study-course in Design as well as a magazine of general interest in that subject.

This journal is aimed mostly at American woodworkers, at least in the first instance. As a group of craftsmen these have emerged from almost nowhere in the last ten-years. In terms of craftsmanship they are coming of age under the guidance of a number of distinguished craftsmen and teachers from England, Scandinavia and Japan and through the influence of the magazine *Fine Woodworking*. Some readers will be familiar with

this magazine which is now about to go into colour, has a subscription of 200,000 per monthly issue and has an equally successful sister magazine called *Fine Homebuilding*, as well as a number of books on the market. However, what these craftsmen are crying out for now is the equivalent help with design. They have had the 'how-to,' now they need the 'what to', why and how in terms of design skill.

The name of Ian Kirby may ring bells with many teachers of CDT. He taught at Trent Park College, now Middlesex Polytechnic, for many years. He and his wife Rosalind emigrated to the United States in 1976 and set up their own School of Woodworking and Design in Vermont. They have been part of the tremendous craft revival that has occurred there and Ian in particular is now extremely well known and widely respected throughout the United States and Canada.

Kirby Studios Ltd is now taking up this challenge of providing a practical design education for people who are craft trained but are aware that they need help in design. Hence the self-teaching journal which the Studio is about to launch.

The basic objective will be to de-mystify the notion of design and its process; to make it accessible and readily understandable to someone without college training in it and to enable them to practice the skills involved so that they reach a level of confidence and competence such that they can design things easily for themselves.

The principal skills it will set out to promote are those of design drawing of all kinds, and those connected with gaining understanding and mastery over visual and aesthetic factors.

It is my feeling that this new journal will speak to the same problems facing teachers of CDT in terms of their own personal development.

Design Drawing

There is little doubt in my mind that the single most important factor in developing any general design ability, and certainly in trying to teach it, is having the ability to sketch ideas relatively fluently and sufficiently well to communicate them to others. I am not talking about either talent or art. I refer to the learnable skill called drawing that anyone who is sufficiently dextrous to write their name, can learn in a fairly short space of time. The most important prior thing, is learning how to remove the psychological conflict that makes you put up barriers against drawing and makes you assert that you cannot draw. Kirby Studios has developed material that will do this. Once you realise that drawing has more to do with your mind than with your hands and you learn how to manipulate this, you can make very rapid progress.

Many people have written of the fundamental importance of drawing as a technique which supports design so there is little point in going over it again here. I am certain most teachers are aware of it only too well, and their own short-comings

in it makes them feel shy about design right from the start.

Visual Literacy

The other aspect of design which makes teachers of CDT feel really uncomfortable is the visual one. Most of us lack confidence in this area, because we are not experienced in it beyond normal every day life. We haven't developed, through training, a vocabulary and a conceptual framework, which allows us to operate easily with aesthetic problems, let alone help others to do so. It is a tricky area where the ground beneath ones feet seems uncertain and criteria for judgements are hard to pin down.

The reasons for the difficulty lie partly in the complex and dynamic interrelationship of all aesthetic factors involved in any one instance, but more profoundly, in the difficulty of building up within ourselves a visual language that is visual and not verbal. Verbal language or vocabulary is not sufficient for the purposes of aesthetic judgement; indeed it can get in the way. Visual Literacy is non-verbal. It is being able to see directly, and understand, visual relationships.

We certainly can borrow concepts that belong elsewhere to explain relationships like proportion harmony rhythm etc., but in themselves they are insufficient. To become more visually aware or literate you have to get involved with the elements of visual design themselves; colour, shape, pattern etc.; to manipulate them, get familiar with them, arrange them, and so on. Aesthetic relationships are felt and experienced rather than thought about in an abstract way.

As with the drawing skills element in the journal, material is included which has been very carefully designed and structured to give exactly this kind of experience. An added advantage is however that once the teacher has experienced and developed confidence in handling content of an aesthetic kind, the material can become lesson content for the children, or at least very useful learning resource material for workshop and studio based learning.

This kind of bootstrap operation could, if enough teachers became involved, make a significant contribution to the overall problem.

Short courses and conferences like those run by LEA, and the DES are useful in sensitising people to the need for these skills but they are simply too short to provide the means of acquiring them. A long term home study programme in the form of a journal entered into by a conscientious, well motivated teacher interested in improving professional competence might, on the other hand, provide the kind of sustained practice and tuition which is necessary to build these skills and abilities.

I am a United Kingdom based partner in Kirby Studios Ltd, visiting the United States during Polytechnic vacations. I have a large measure of editorial responsibility in this project, so if sufficient interest is forthcoming from CDT teachers in England I will ensure that their needs

are catered for in every way possible consistent with the overall objective of the magazine. I would also hope that there are teachers who would wish to contribute articles for it. There is also a possibility that postal tuition could be made available to people in the United Kingdom. This would extend the journal as a self-teach vehicle to that of being the basis of a distance taught course.

If you think that this area has anything to commend it perhaps you would be prepared to tick the relevant boxes on the return slip provided and return it to me as soon as possible.

Please return to:

Colin Tipping
Kirby Studios Ltd
2 Bardolphs Cottages
Ware Road
Watton-At-Stone
Herts SG14 3NP

Name

Address

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