

## **Integrated Visual Studies**

### **A case study of student participation in a College of Education.**

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Some educationalists feel that if students are given the opportunity to co-operate in determining the pattern and content of their own education they will be able to benefit by being active decision-makers during their period of initial training and, that they are then more likely to become confident and responsible teachers. This in turn could help students to develop self-determining attitudes in flexible situations in which their own interests are seen to be important. Indeed, since Dewey, 'progressive' educators have stressed the importance of student participation in what goes on in education. In expressing his views on student-centered learning Dewey criticized the traditional process of subject-centered teaching with its emphases on the acquirement of knowledge for its own sake. He advocated the use of activity methods and experimentation and also suggested that the student's personal interests should be taken into account.

In the writer's own department, staff and students have been experimenting with integrated work in Art and Design within the framework of the existing syllabus. The department is, to a large extent, organised as an integral teaching and learning unit in which flexibility and personal initiative are encouraged.

Students take 'Principal' (Main) Courses in Visual Studies of three year duration, and are encouraged to participate actively in determining the work they do and the consideration of educational ideas underlying it. Some accept the challenge readily but others — perhaps conditioned by previous schooling were oriented towards the passing of examinations and the obtaining of places at university or college — are somewhat reticent about accepting responsibility for their own actions and modes of thinking; they like to be told what to do. Nevertheless, at some stage in the course they are expected to take a great deal of personal responsibility ; this includes the formulation and structuring of their own courses of study.

The lecturing staff consists of seven full-time tutors. They conduct introductory, classroom orientated courses in Art, Design and relevant Crafts for groups of 'Complementary' (curricular) students in Year 1, as well as being responsible for specialist areas of study: areas such as Textile Crafts (Weaving, Dress, Fabric Printing and Embroidery), Art (Painting, Design, Sculpture and Graphics) and Ceramics.

A studio technician is responsible for the maintenance of studios, equipment and requisitions, and he gives some assistance with the instruction of skills related to the making of things in wood and metal. Much of his work is of a technical nature and his function is comparable with that of the artisans who worked closely with staff and students at Bauhaus. This is probably a vital factor, for it provides for a logical integration of art and design principles, pertinent skills and techniques, as well as allowing the tutors

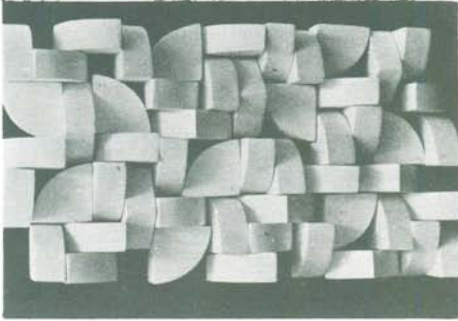
and artisan together to provide better facilities and richer experiences for the students.

The department has five studios on the ground floor – including two for drawing, painting and design work; a graphics area with photographic darkroom facilities; a three-dimensional workshop containing some heavier machinery; a lecture room doubling with a corridor as an exhibition gallery; two tutorial rooms; various store rooms and a workroom-store that the technician uses as his base. The Textile Crafts are situated in four studios on the first floor and there are five tutorial rooms and two storerooms. The Ceramics Department is comprehensively conceived in the basement of a house – used for general tutorial work by the College – about two hundred yards from the main part of the department; it has practical studios, clay and slip preparation areas, kiln room, storage and display areas. Although the accommodation is adequate the large numbers of students taking ‘Principal’, ‘Second Subject Dress’ and ‘Complementary’ courses, coupled with expanding groups studying for the B.Ed. Degree in Art (Painting, Textile Crafts and Ceramics), are bringing increased pressures to bear on heavily committed working space. However, some alterations have been made to the structure of the building and certain walls between studios have been opened-up to create larger, more flexible working areas. These changes have certainly helped in fostering an integrated pattern of working and the operation of self-initiated and team teaching philosophies, for they have facilitated easier access to both specialist and non-specialist areas; for example, the print making area leads to photography, to a general purpose studio and on to a painting studio.

In Year 1, students experiment freely with materials and develop confidence and manipulate skills in every aspect offered by the department. They learn something about the role of art and design in education and discuss the organisation of classrooms, equipment and materials used in schools. But towards the end of the session they choose a specialist aspect for development at a personal level and this gives them opportunities to practise, as Dewey might have said, “...their individual powers in meaningful activities...”. Throughout the course they are considering the rational development of design work from what in the initial stages might be termed ‘play’ experiences, to the completion of work at a high level of competence. This ensures the progression of design projects from empirical beginnings right through to their completion and gives the students ample practice in the organisation of ideas and materials in self-determining roles.

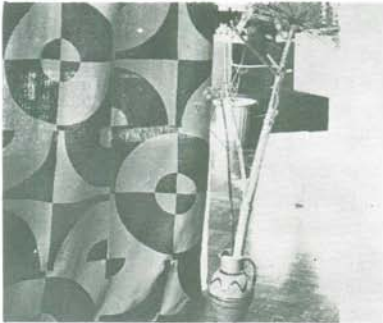
The initial experience with materials, which help to foster both the manipulative and thinking processes, lead a student to a realization of the potentialities of particular materials and working procedures. And this fundamental factor can often bring him rapidly to the planning of his own design programmes in which he states his objectives and outlines procedures leading to their possible solution. It is important that the student should learn how to pose design problems for himself – and this should be reflected in his teaching when children are given this opportunity – rather than tackling tutor-conceived exercises. In fact, these often arise as the student is working and contain a strong element of personal interest. The stating of clearly-defined procedures demand critical self-analysis and evaluation and lead to sound thinking and rational planning of courses. These may be listed as:

1. Personal experiment and exploration with two and three dimensional materials –



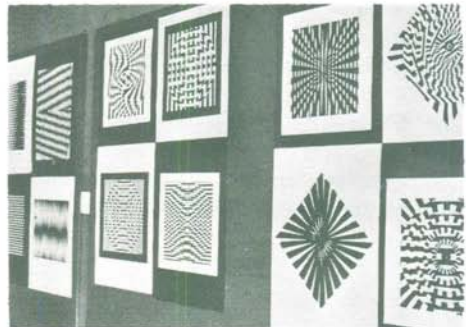
▷ Sculptural panel composed of geometrical plaster forms.

Children playing with 'play' sculptures ▷  
produced in modern plastic materials.



▷ The original motif translated into a printed textile design.

Drawings and screen prints based on ▷  
'op art' imagery.





occurring frequently as the student works, and leading on to (2).

2. Formulation of specific problems of a design nature; the outlining of clearly defined objectives and working procedures related to personal interests and the developing work.
3. Further experimentation and the development of ideas in, for example, film sketch and/or written notes, photography; as well as the collecting of relevant source material.
4. Translation into suitable materials at the desired scale and using self-discovered and taught skills and techniques.
5. Self analysis and self criticism; group discussion; evaluation of working procedures and the work resulting – this helps to focus attention on ideas and areas useful for further development or exploration, and often stimulates new approaches to the solving of design problems and ways of working.

It must be noted that students are free at any time, depending only upon the availability of space in the workshops and studios, to move into different areas when such moves are important in the development of work and the solving of emerging problems by different means. A student will, for example, move into Textile Design and will learn the skills which will enable him to work in that craft because of his immediate and important interests. His work will probably be dynamic in both quality and character, and this may initiate more dynamism within the textile area.

This way of working can best be illustrated by reference to the accompanying photographs which show how one Third Year student designed her own working project in different Visual Studies aspects. In playing around with some cast-off tins – which she polished and juxtaposed as simple three-dimensional structures and relief panels – she became fascinated by a particular geometrical shape and its possibilities as a basic design element. She made some paper ‘cut outs’ using this shape as the motif (fig. 1, centre), and found that her designs were of an ‘Op Art’ nature. She went on to translate these into plaster forms which she felt that children could use as building bricks, but decided that because of the fragile nature of this material she would use them as basic motifs in a small sculptured panel (Fig. 2). This initial work raised specific problems and it was at this stage that she began to plan the subsequent design procedures carefully. Because of her interest in the way children play – an interest allied to her role as a teacher – she wished to consider the production of three quite large, independent but related ‘play’ sculptures which could be used in a children’s playground, and based on the basic geometrical motif with which she was already working. Glass-fibre reinforced polyester resin was the obvious choice because of its durable quality and weather-resistant nature, and she produced her three units in a bright red resin (Figs. 3 & 4). Having completed these she moved back to the design studio and decided to do some related work in printed textiles. The illustration in Fig. 5 is one of her screen-printed fabrics in which optical effects dominate, and which it is interesting to know stimulated later ideas. She became so fascinated by ‘op art’ imagery that she produced a vast number of drawings and screen printed images on paper and other materials, and went on to make a personal study of

this aspect of visual communication and its relationship to modern 'Op' painters (Fig. 6). In this way she integrated both the practical and historical or academic aspects.

Other students have structured their courses and projects to include work in, say, Painting, Printed Textiles and Sculpture; or Embroidery, Painting and Sculpture; and even Weaving, Photography, Embroidery and Graphics, and the above case history is only one of many which could have been used to illustrate the advantages of allowing students to have freedom for responsible self-initiated action in the development of Visual Studies – one aspect is the totality of their initial education. Many achievements are apparent in visual form. But good art and design work is not demanded (though appreciated when it happens) it is what happens to the individual student as a person and thinker that is important. The acquirement of personal confidence and the development of creative potential and sound aesthetic awareness are not easy to put into written terms, but it must be stated that these seem to be immense. Students mature as people, teachers and creative beings – although it is acknowledged that this is also true in more traditionally-gearred situations – and there have been many comments such as: “At first I did not like the idea of planning things for myself at all”. “I found it most difficult to come to terms with this way of working”. “I shall be eternally grateful for having been given this opportunity to find myself. I shall certainly go on to think deeply”. “I gained immensely in confidence and know that this will reflect in my work as a teacher”. “I shall never again wait to be told what to do. I am now much more positive as a person”.

The prospects for developing more integrated and participatory work in art and design would seem to be good. Art has an important role to play in the education of future teachers – whether in school, colleges, polytechnics, universities or newly-created institutions – and as 'change' is a key word in the technological society, it is appropriate to educate for changing roles in the future so that teachers may be adaptable, with the ability to re-learn in flexible and changing educational situations. It is the writer's belief that in future educational developments, there will be an ever increasing demand for participant experience in self-determining roles.