

Justifying Craft in the Curriculum

R. Stewart

College of St Mark and St John, Derriford, Plymouth

73

Craft teachers, perhaps more than most, have through the years displayed a particular sensitivity about the status of themselves and their subject. Although the days are gone when woodwork might be taught by the school caretaker and instructors not allowed into the common-room, some recent trends indicate that all is not well. An Institute of Craft Education conference at the beginning of the year reported a serious shortage of craft teachers in many parts of the country, the problem being most acute in the London area where some workshops have had to be closed. Although promotion prospects within craft departments need be no worse than in any other departments, it was suggested that many specialists are 'escaping' to teach other subjects in order to gain status or promotion to a higher level. If this is so, it would seem to indicate a certain reticence on the part of headmasters and governors to acknowledge the basic equality of craft and its teachers. Similarly, the growing failure of college of education departments to attract adequately qualified entrants indicates that pupils, and therefore parents and advisers who influence them, do not rate craft and craft teaching as sufficiently worthwhile activities.

How might craft educationalists convince others of the importance of their subject? The following article traces the development of various arguments proffered in the past and describes the way in which craft can provide educational experience which is as important as that provided by any other subject.

With the growth of the Industrial Revolution in this country a number of movements arose for the education of the poor. A look at the curricula of some of their schools indicates on the one hand a concern with basic literacy (reading, writing, etc) and on the other with the learning and practising of a trade such as shoemaking or cardsetting. Thus craft subjects were seen here in terms of vocational training. Indeed, during the

first half of the last century 'Schools of Industry', for example, were expected to be financially self-supporting through the craft activities of their pupils, and later with the spread of education for the poor it was felt that such work might promote a consentient parental attitude.

As a national system of secondary education developed craft subjects became available to pupils of varying abilities and social background, but just as many parents and teachers refused to accept practical work as worthwhile curriculum activity for the intelligent or middle class child, so there were (and still are) those who continued to justify it on vocational grounds. The weakness of their argument becomes apparent even by a consideration of the industrial situation. Only a minority of pupils actually enter trades such as carpentry, blacksmithing and silversmithing which are directly related to the crafts commonly practised in schools. Even for this minority the hand production techniques which form the backbone of most syllabuses are not relevant to the mass production methods of 20th century industry. As one personnel manager said, 'Why waste your time and effort; we can teach a boy more about engineering in five weeks than you can in five years. In fact we prefer a youth with no knowledge of our organisation and practice to one who has developed doubtful concepts and skills.'

Justification—or confusion?

During the present century there has been much confusion over the claims of craft on the curriculum, and craft teachers themselves seem to have produced little in the way of sound philosophical writing. This in spite of Rousseau's claim that the individual employed in a workshop becomes as he uses his hands 'a philosopher while he thinks he is becoming an artisan'! The following are some of the justifications for craft which

have been popularly put forward since it was realised that the subject must be considered in other than vocational terms:

In craft 'the hard test of practicability' develops logical thinking.

The discipline of a craft contributes to physical, mental and moral discipline, too.

Craft develops self-reliance, perseverance and initiative.

Craft benefits the slow learner, giving him confidence and courage to tackle academic work.

Craft is a means of strengthening and vivifying other studies.

Craft lessens the schoolroom aloofness from the life outside, helping to develop a sympathy for those who work with their hands.

All these arguments have been seriously developed over the years in the literature relating to craft education. Unfortunately, they do not stand up well to the analysis of the philosopher or the doubts of the curriculum developer, at least when expressed in such terms. Statements relating to the development of desirable intellectual or emotional qualities are too global to be meaningful, tending to indulge in outmoded faculty psychology. They do not relate specifically to the content of craft subjects. Thus, a pupil might solve an engineering design problem through careful reasoning but might be quite irrational in his development of a viewpoint in a form debate. And because he commits to memory the procedure for successfully soldering the seam of a metal jug he will not necessarily memorise mathematical formulae more easily. Similarly the claim that craft can contribute to moral discipline is hard to substantiate. No doubt a boy is less likely to insult his classmate if he has pleasurably dissipated his energies through creative woodcarving rather than having spent a frustrating forty minutes

other hand if his piece of wood had accidentally split he might well have been more inclined to be rude or surly with his teacher.

The other justifications can be even more quickly dismissed as being insulting to the nature and tradition of activities such as cabinet making and mechanical engineering or of being spurious. Why should the knowledge and skill which has achieved so much for mankind (at least, in a material sense) be orientated towards building model villages in geography or making garden dibbers in rural studies? And surely for those young men strolling down the Eton High Street in tail-coats the benefits of craft are more profound than providing a sympathetic understanding of the road sweeper or the navy. Even the current emphasis on skills relating to the household seems something of an insult. Many household tasks can be learnt in the home by watching parents — is it necessary to take children out of the home to learn them? Activities such as replacing tap washers or boiling eggs hardly fulfil the criteria for inclusion on an overcrowded curriculum.

A place for craft

What, then, are the justifications for a subject which specialist teachers claim to be as important as any other on the curriculum and yet over which there is so much doubt and uncertainty? Much of the confusion seems to be because craft involves such a diverse range of activities many of which relate directly to other subjects on the curriculum. Painting a design to be etched on a copper brooch might be regarded primarily as art activity, whereas the silver plating of the finished brooch might be regarded essentially as a scientific pursuit. Perhaps because craft is so diverse it is not accepted as a serious academic subject. This is certainly true at university level; there are

listening to a talk on good manners. On the

no professors of craft in this country as

there are of Industrial Arts in America. Yet for the school this diversity can be a distinct advantage, providing an effective means of resolving the dichotomy which exists between the arts and the sciences.

Nevertheless, if craft is to command equal status with subjects such as mathematics, history and biology it must be shown to demand a sufficient level of intellectual and creative involvement on the part of the pupil and provide an introduction to important human or natural phenomena pertinent to the society in which he lives. With regard to society, ours is a technological society and as craft is frequently termed 'technical studies' or 'technical activities' the subject would appear to have some relevance by its very definition. To take this argument further a definition of a technological society might be 'a society which has developed and exploited the use of materials to an advanced degree'. Surely craft — or to use the Schools Council phrase 'education through the use of materials' — has some relevance to such a society.¹ In this respect craft is seen as providing an introduction to the materials and processes of our technological society. But it is doubtful whether syllabuses (and there are many of them) which concentrate primarily on the acquisition of techniques relating to wood or metal demand sufficient intellectual activity or generate a concern with broader issues associated with craft.

What type of approach, then, is considered to fulfil such criteria? Many teachers see the present emphasis on projects which involve design work as providing an answer. Indeed, an increasing number of craft departments are being termed 'design departments' as the fundamental importance of this aspect of craftwork is recognised. There is still some disagreement regarding content and approach, possibly because teachers tend to think of design in terms of their own specialism, be it in the visual or plastic arts. However, regarding craft, design work is seen primarily as involving creative activity in a

specific field, namely that of product designing, and as such is not concerned only with appearance. Products are designed to satisfy human needs, whether these be new needs arising in a rapidly changing society or traditional needs for which improved solutions might be possible because of new knowledge, materials and processes. In an assignment a pupil will have to define and analyse a problem in terms of human needs, synthesise possible solutions capable of being realised in the workshop, construct the chosen solution and evaluate it in terms of accepted criteria. Thus, such craft activity will involve intellectual acts of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and involve a concern with relevant historical and sociological elements as well as technological and scientific elements. For example, the Stafford boys who were recent finalists in the 'Young Scientists of the Year' competition were credited for the sociological content of what was essentially a craft project.

It has even been argued that the designing of an article is sufficiently intellectually demanding without its production in the workshop. But this ignores the fact that craft is essentially a practical activity concerned with forming materials by using tools. And to reduce craft to a theoretical study denies it an important justification for inclusion on the curriculum. Academic subjects place emphasis on abstract thinking, and communication, whether oral or visual, is by symbolic means. Usually they involve little contact with real objects and situations; contact which can be so important to the pupil for the reinforcement and testing of new concepts and theories. In craft, however, the three stages of the design-make-evaluate process involve creating and communicating ideas by symbols (usually, but not necessarily, graphic) which are then translated into the material form of the product and finally assessed in practical situations. Here 'the hard test of practicability' can be seen to have some impor-

tance as can the fact that craft might provide compensatory situations for pupils who find the classroom emphasis on verbal performance disadvantageous. One might reasonably assume that mathematical formulae for area and volume are far more meaningful to the young metal-worker if he has used them calculate the capacity of the jug he is making.

(A reference should be made at this point to technical drawing. It is unfortunate that the activity of the school drawing office is so often divorced from that of the workshop. Essentially the role of the subject would seem to be to facilitate the development and communication of pupils' ideas for realisation in the workshop. Syllabuses concerned only with 'geometrical and engineering drawing' would seem to be too narrow to satisfy the varying interests and abilities of pupils engaged in the multifarious activities of a large craft department.)

The mention of the creation and communication of ideas leads on to the question of individual expression. Here one might consider the claims of art, a subject closely related to craft — indeed the distinction made between the two is a relatively recent phenomenon. Art teachers believe that by providing opportunities for expression through a wide variety of materials art promotes creative and mental growth.² Although this again raises the question of transfer it is true that art does provide the pupil with another language of expression and should therefore promote a special type of creativity. But if this is true of art could it not be true of craft which provides just as many materials and possibly more processes and facilities? The fact that functional and other criteria have to be considered in addition to aesthetic ones in the creation of a product might even stimulate the creative and intellectual involvement of the individual. Of course, it could be claimed that aspects of craft such as jewellery and sculpture with a dominant aesthetic content fall

within the province of the art department. But equally it could be claimed that much of what purports to be art is really craft, being produced for a specific purpose with a clear distinction between means and ends.

As far as aesthetic education is concerned, this in practice usually involves pupils in the creation as well as the contemplation of aesthetic products (whether in the field of music, the literary, the visual or plastic arts). Given such a situation, craft can justifiably claim a role in that area of aesthetic education concerned with functionally useful things — often termed 'consumer discrimination'.

- 1 Schools Council (1969). *Education Through the Use of Materials*. Working Paper 26. London: Evans Bros.
- 2 For example, see Lowenfeld, V, and Brittain, W L (1970). *Creative and Mental Growth*. New York: Macmillan.

KEELE TEACHING UNITS

(1) THOMAS TELFORD

(2) CHILDREN IN INDUSTRY IN NORTH AND WEST MIDLANDS

Each unit consists of reproductions of documents and pictures together with work cards of suggestions for follow-up work by children.

Price 70p each

Institute of Education,
University of Keele,
Keele, Staffs.