

Design Education The Other Side of The Coin

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The development of Design Education Courses in our schools has been part of a very necessary and valuable evolution in Craft teaching. It has gone some way towards opening up and enlivening an area of education previously encumbered by limited objectives and over-preoccupied with out-moded and time-consuming processes. It has helped to eradicate the manual and menial tag so unfairly attached to Craft teaching in the past. It has given Craft teachers more sense of belonging in the main stream of education by requiring them to relate their work to that of teachers in other disciplines.

These developments can only be applauded – and yet for all that is good in Design Education, there has been during the past two years, a growing sense of unease amongst Art educators and amongst teachers of Home Economics that some aspects of this movement are having unfortunate effects upon those subjects normally associated with Design Education.

The last two years has seen a considerable acceleration in the establishment of Creative Design, Art and Design or Design Departments in those schools re-organising along Comprehensive lines and in which the Craft, Home Economics and Art Departments are united in one faculty.¹

The reasons for this rapid growth lie within a tangle of coincidental pressures.

Pressure from the D.E.S. to up-date the image of Craft education with consequent pressure upon the Colleges of Education to re-structure their courses.

Publicity pressure from two very successful Schools Council Projects.

Theoretical pressure from these projects and from a number of articulate lecturers in Colleges of Art and Education.

The pressure of Comprehensive re-organisation and an attendant building programme with a strong emphasis upon providing related and shared facilities for Art, Craft and Home Economics.

Political pressure within the schools to form larger empires to match the other large Faculties being formed.

If we judge the success of the Design Education movement in terms of how many Departments are being established in which there is an assumption that such Faculty groupings will encourage Design Education – then the movement must be counted a staggering success. That Design Education has achieved such rapid acceptance raises some interesting hypotheses – especially when we take an honest look at what is happening in the large majority of Departments: how they are time tabled, how the different disciplines work together, what educational functions they tend to exclude – and what political implications buttress their formation.

Design Education has certainly found great favour with administrators. It makes for tidy administration and is supported by a nice rational logic. The syllabuses of most Design Departments express a particular concern with analysis, with research, with the application of logic in problem-solving situations, with the cognitive aspects of education. There are many elaborate models of the 'Design Process'. Impressive models with complicated flow diagrams to show how the ideal student passes from 'The Identification of the Problem' to 'Assessment of Goal Achievement'. The recently published C.S.E. Design syllabus of the Northern Examinations Board lists the twelve stages of the Design Process, each of which can be clearly identified and assessed. It is these aspects of rationality, logicity

¹ Peter Sellwood, Art and Craft Adviser for Dorset, in his research thesis for a Dip. Art Ed. at the School of Art Education, Cardiff established through a questionnaire to which the majority of L.E.A.'s responded – that over 80% of schools approaching or in the process of re-organising, intended to establish Faculty groupings linking Art, Craft and Home Economics Departments.

and assessability that commend the system to educational administrators — aspects that appear to make rational the whole untidy, random business of making decisions and externalising these decisions in three dimensional form.

The creation of Design Faculties, in which Handicraft, Art and Home Economics are combined, provides the administrator of a large school with a useful tidying up process. He can lump together what have often been awkward components in the curriculum without disturbing the traditional academic virtues. Outmoded Craft processes, eccentric luxuries (like Art) and the bread and butter of Home Economics can live together within the new social order of the Design Faculty. It puts a logical and respectable barrier around them and between them and the rest of the curriculum. It has also enabled Headmasters to make considerable reductions in the amount of time allocated to the 'practical' subjects. In Secondary Modern schools it was common practice for boys and girls to have six periods a week each of practical work — two each in Art, Woodwork and Metalwork for boys; two each in Art, Dress-making and Domestic Science for girls. Even where Design Departments are allowed six periods a week for each group, the requirement that boys and girls should work in all the areas available has effectively reduced the amount of time in each subject discipline by forty per cent. The common practice of allowing only four periods a week for each year group in the Faculty represents a massive cut in specialist time and one which has probably affected programmes of work in Craft and Home Economics most dramatically in that the actual working processes in these areas are more time consuming than in Art.

Another particular concern is the way in which the original aims of Design Education have become commonly diluted and over simplified. Those educators who were innovators in this field — Hudson, Green, Baynes,

Laxton, Roberts, etc. — were all at pains to emphasise the general relevance of Design Education to the rest of the curriculum.

Hudson.

Our education should create an environment where an individual can discover something of himself, his aptitudes, the relevance of his ideas and of other peoples ideas.²

Roberts.

(Design) can be that element that draws together the social, technical, economic and aesthetic factors inherent in beginning to understand contemporary society and its culture.³

Shirley Williams.

The current realisation of the idea that design is not a subject but the animator and illuminator of all subjects, was made possible in the first place by the design of the post-war primary schools.⁴

These as educational aims are exceptional. With very few exceptions they bear very little resemblance to those reasons put forward by Headmasters for setting up Design Departments — and very little relationship to the work that is actually going on in the vast majority of Departments. Apart from all the administrative reasons already touched upon, Headmasters — and an alarmingly large proportion of those applicants for jobs in Design Departments — seem to assume that the main function of a Design Department is to help in the development of taste and discretion: that Design Education is something to do with training children to choose the right wallpapers. It is an assumption that ignores all the external

2 Introduction to Catalogue for the Bauhaus Exhibition, 1968.

3 Introduction to the syllabus of the Creative Design Department — Oadby Manor High School.

4 N.U.T. Conference. Design Education. 19th Feb. 1969.

pressures that form judgement: economics, advertising, social conformity and sheer irrationality.

Design Education – in theory, however mis-interpreted, has become an accepted part of the school curriculum. Although the labels may vary from Authority to Authority the practice of establishing integrated Art and Design Faculties has become firmly established. Whether there has been much effect upon what is actually happening inside these new Departments is another matter. From my own experience of seven years of involvement in Design Education it would seem that in the majority of Departments the same traditional pattern of work goes on. There are a few exceptional Departments in which the staff understand and are committed to the pattern they have adopted. There is a fair proportion that have attempted some kind of integration which has resulted in programmes of work that are both muddled and fragmentary. There is still a fair proportion of schools in which the Art Department or the Craft Department run competent Design Education courses without much reference to each other.

I have seen very little work in Design Departments that is either very good or very bad. We can all find – or hear about our favourite funnies –

“This term the Art section will do colour, the woodwork section structure, the needlework section will do line – and the cooks will have a go at texture.”

The embroiderers in a Department run by a hard line Basic Design man struggling to keep the children interested in permutations of one square and three lines for a whole term.

The general level of work is much less amusing. Much of it is similar in content and appearance to that produced by any competent Art Department in which the teacher has a nodding acquaintance with the work of de Sausmarez, Passmore, Rowland or

Rottger. It tends to be neat and tidy with a strong emphasis upon pattern making – the difference being that the patterns are now made in wood, metal and fabric as well as paper and paint. In many Departments, teachers, not used to working with each other, and anxious to preserve their own spheres of traditional expertise, have resorted to the increasingly familiar ‘materials circus’. The children spending six weeks in one area and then passing on to another – passing from paint to clay to metal to fabrics to wood – a series of pocket experiences with often little or no connection between them, sometimes merely repeating in another material what they have experienced previously. A great deal of talk and effort is put into giving the children a ‘Basic Vocabulary of Design’ (of colour, texture, line, etc.) but comparatively little into devising ways in which the children can actually make use of this new vocabulary while it still means something to them.

The use of the thematic approach, the requirement that each of the sections should work to a common theme for a particular period of time, has resulted too often in mere repetition of work or in at least one of the sections shouldering a programme of work that is only minimally appropriate to the kind of experience that section can offer.

It is surprisingly rare to find the new Departments making an imaginative use of the flexibility that block time-tabling allows by setting up a chain of sessions, alternating or changing the subject emphasis as appropriate to the development of the teaching programme, using each specialist in turn as the theme requires. The rigid acceptance of the materials circus with each section working with the same size groups and for the same periods of time assumes a unanimity of working methods between the sections that does not exist. The acceptance of common themes for different sections tends to reduce the range of work to the lowest common

denominator and to ignore the very different and valuable processes and means of expression that the different sections can offer to children.

There are certain obvious advantages in establishing Design Departments.

It is obviously a good thing that teachers should work together. It is obviously a good thing that children should be given some understanding of the inter-relationship of the different experiences available within the practical subjects.

It is a good thing where the provision of shared or related accommodation has resulted in a better range of resources and equipment being made available to children. Within the political world of the school, it is also a good thing that some kind of federation will give smaller departments a greater share of policy making and decision making previously monopolised by bigger academic fish. Whether it is a good thing that a good Craft teacher or a good Art teacher can only achieve the maximum scale by taking responsibility for an integrated department is, perhaps, open to question.

These advantages tend to be general or political. Where they can only be achieved at the expense of the quality of experience that good specialists have always brought to their children, where they can only be achieved through the dilution and fragmentation of the educational encounter between teacher and child — then they may cease to be advantages at all. There is not much evidence to suggest that the formation of these new Departments has done much to improve or alter the content of teaching within them. The truth is probably nearer that general truth — that in English education we constantly tinker with the structure but rarely ever change the actual content. There are a few exceptionally good Departments. There always have been a few exceptionally good teachers who will prosper under any circumstances. Design Education must, inevitably,

be judged by the over-all effects it has had upon the specialisms working within it.

The Association of Art Advisers, during the last twelve months, has set up a number of regional working parties to examine the effects of the establishment of Design Departments upon the teaching of Art. Members of the Association have also consulted with their colleagues advising in Home Economics. There has emerged a great deal of general agreement about particular adverse effects upon specialist teaching within these new Departments which can be summarised as follows.⁵

In many schools there has been a marked decrease in the time allowance for the specialist subjects resulting in a dilution of the quality of specialist teaching and a reduction of the range of experience offered.

The use of the 'materials circus' has resulted in a harmful fragmentation of childrens' experience and of the working relationship between teacher and child.

The imposition of common themes or programmes of work upon the different specialisms has frequently resulted in exclusion from the syllabus of important areas of experience within each of the specialisms involved.

The setting up of such Departments has made it much more difficult for teachers to make profitable links with teachers in other disciplines outside of the Design Department.

Much of the concern shown by the Art Advisers has been brought to a head during the last year by their involvement in the appointment of assistants and Heads of Departments to these new Faculties as schools have undergone re-organisation. The quality of candidates for these appointments, the nature of the work they have

⁵ 'The Establishment of Design Departments In Schools.' Statement published by the Association of Art Advisers. June 1973.

been engaged in and their often limited understanding of the philosophy and practice of Design Education has left much to be desired.

There should be clear distinction made between the establishment of Design Education courses within schools and the formation of Design Departments. The majority of Art Advisers would want to encourage and support the development of Design Education Courses and would want Art Departments to contribute useful and appropriate experience to these. The Association, however, is firmly of the belief that the subjects now associated with Design Departments are complementary — not composite and that the wholesale adoption of integrated Departments by schools assumes a unanimity of purpose and philosophy and function between the specialisms involved that simply does not exist: and that would be educationally limiting if it did.

Design Education will develop and prosper as teachers gain more understanding and experience of what it can offer to children. It will be a great pity if that development is side-tracked because Departments are established for the wrong reasons: if the philosophy and purpose become congealed by the tensions and frustrations of enforced integration for the sake of a few small political and administrative gains.



"We're doing creative metalwork, Mum, and I made this toothbrush holder especially for you."

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