

Design Education – A Change in Name only?

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Packaging in its various forms has a major role to play in the sales promotion of a consumer product. Whilst the contents of the package often remain unchanged a change of package style and image, or the “slicking-up” of a product’s title can influence the sale prospects, often dramatically. But superficial changes of this nature may not yield lasting results, the sales boost being only temporary. As sales decline so the process of reviving interest begins again with a further adjustment to image and style. The consumer at some stage, however, could for a variety of reasons change allegiance to the product brand: reliability, economy, degree of compatibility with other trends and influences, even doing without in certain cases may go contrary to the marketer’s predictions and projections. In attempting some degree of forecast, market research methodology includes a programmed strategy in the need to form an understanding of the idiosyncratic behaviour of the consumer. This recognises the importance of taking into account some of the less obvious factors that may jeopardise success, and also the ongoing process of monitoring modes of behaviour and patterns of acceptance towards change.

This brief outline serves to illustrate the importance of a continued and systematic understanding of a situation, if change, however small, is to yield any degree of sustained interest, purpose and progression.

Change in Education seems to suggest certain parallel characteristics to the consumer world of industry and commerce, the fundamental characteristic being the idiosyncratic behaviour of its public. In the field of education we are required to provide a service, and while our consumer (pupil, parent, employer) is obliged to submit to some aspect or other of the service, sympathy towards it may not necessarily follow. Views on why we require education, how and what we should teach tend to differ considerably, particularly between educator,

pupil, parent and employer. If we are to reap some of the benefits of the capital investment of finance and teacher resources, particularly in view of increasing cut-back, and gain a sympathetic audience towards future change and development, then we must seek a fuller understanding of, How, When, What and Where to plan our future changes with particular reference to the curriculum.

To use an apt and accepted phrase, “seat of pants flying” of educational kites may become increasingly less effective in bringing about a balance and control of curriculum matters. While loss of personal initiative and conviction within the education system would be highly undesirable, some monitoring of the curriculum and the effectiveness of the packages (subject areas) now seems essential.

“In the interests of effectiveness and efficiency, principles of management and systems analysis are already gaining popularity amongst educational planners. A corollary of such approaches will necessitate gauging the rate of return, perhaps in part measured by changes in curricular activity. Whilst such precise planning may prove controversial there is cause to suspect that educational targets require objectively determined schemes and that ensure all teachers are reached and that follow-up and feed-back channels are created.”¹

There is a growing awareness and debate regarding the true justification for education as an institutionalised system of learning as it has developed historically and as we now know it: it is becoming increasingly difficult to gauge the interaction of education with the economy, social structure and changing cultural values.

“A general theory of structural change is advanced although the specific agency responsible for affecting the integration of education with the economy can be and has been interpreted variously – technological need for skills, changing

cultural values, class conflict, etc. ...

The influence of educationalists and pressure groups is thus dismissed unless their ideas were congruent with the requirements of their contemporary social structure.

Historically the growth and specialisation was, therefore, a response to social needs. The form which education took was influenced by educationists but within the existing social framework. Frequently ideas of pioneers have only been influential after their death, once social conditions have changed in a direction which has made them relevant.²

For example, the degree of influence that Art, Handicraft, Science and other subject areas may have had on the innovations and man-made artefacts of the past 50 years could be regarded as minimal. On the other hand it could be argued that the effects of the man-made artefact and the created environment may have grossly over-influenced our attitudes towards educational priorities. Shipman states, "If the only statement made is that with more industry in society there will be more science in schools, this is better reduced to a casual but un-original proposition".³

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the roots by which subject areas were originally created appear to have determined their growth and prejudices, and tendency towards self-preservation. Manual Training, Craftwork and Science at the various stages of their growth appear to have been influenced by the forces of social economic, and political needs, and contributory identity with techniques and preparation for vocational training.

Art education, however, appears to have received considerable support during its early development stages from educationists, and psychologists who formed priorities using the cultural and expressive elements of the activity on humanitarian grounds.⁴

When we examine the existing situation in education and the dilemma and confusion that many teachers are faced with in the operational area of the curriculum, a pragmatic view seems necessary if some understanding is to emerge regarding probable future developments in the field of Design and Craft.

Design Education, an increasingly popular term, is undergoing considerable scrutiny from the standpoint of definition and educational implications. Continued discussion about umbrella titles which may involve all, or some aspects of Craftwork, Art, Home Economics and Technology, is bringing about a state of confusion which Design also seems to share from the standpoint of its varied definition and territory.

Whatever title is used to label a subject package, change of content will not automatically follow. There are already grounds for concern that although many courses have been repackaged under new and attractive titles, little in the way of actual change may have taken place in subject content in terms of curriculum renewal and development. Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that for a variety of reasons, some beyond the control of the teacher, a deterioration may have taken place in overall subject standard and credibility.

One factor has emerged, however, that where positive changes to the subject's teaching approach and content are taking place, new and appropriate labellings seems to appear as an integral part of the renewal and development operation.

In other words it may be essential in the future to consider the genetics of our subject rather than the generic titles and influences. There is an increasing awareness that Design Education in a generic sense may yet prove to be little more than another of the many verbalisms which have been used throughout the history of craftwork in an attempt to uplift the subject's educational opportunities, status and credibility. To define Design

Education genetically we are obliged to examine its origin and this is difficult in exact terms. The popular idea that whatever subject title is used it should identify and embrace a body of knowledge is not unsound; it is this identity of a specific body of knowledge which concerns many of the less convinced onlookers so far as Design Education is concerned.

It is a comparatively simple matter to impose blanket terms in education but by so doing there is the further danger of ignoring less obvious and important issues which influence understanding, acceptance and an on-going review of new approaches and ideas. For example, the traditions which have become embedded during the historical growth of a subject seem to be prominent in influencing the attitudes of teachers towards a change in structure and choice of courses. But from the teacher's point of view perhaps the most difficult task is realigning existing stock-in-trade to new educational priorities, methodologies, and criteria of pupil/subject assessment.

Thus the teacher, although willing to adjust to a changing climate appears to be faced with a dilemma. In the first instance, in the case of the specialist Art or Craft teacher, there may be a feeling of obligation and allegiance to the subject through the known outlets geared to the acceptance skills and subject stock-in-trade. Yet the demands of placing pupils in a more flexible and thought-provoking device of design experience, involving activities which are not always conducive to accepted practice, or the production of artefacts, may be seen as a threat to the status and tenure of the subject in the curriculum market.

To some extent this dilemma may have been partly resolved by allowing pupils to express some opinion in designing specific articles as part of the making process. But this is now challenged by more recent developments in the search for a broader understanding of design terminology and its

relationships with the pupil's social responses and commitment to his future destiny. To these ends there is now a hint amongst some educators of a self proclaimed right that any aspect of the curriculum which includes matters to do with living habits, the habitat and the environment is part of a compendium forming the hallowed territory of Design Education. This school of thought may be as limiting in the development of design activities, and their wider acceptance, as the uptight attitudes of the preservationists in the eternal conflict of opinion between some Art and Craftwork specialists of what design is, and who should be teaching it.

Already there is a distinct reaction towards matters associated with design at the operational level of the pupil and the teacher as a new and innovative way of changing from the traditional methods. The permanent acceptance of innovation as part of the every day teaching routine, may be the true proving ground for Design Education as a blurring agent to the deep-rooted practices of existing subject activities. The self-conscious attempt by many specialists to join the "design movement" without a true understanding of the ramifications is proving in some cases to be disastrous. Understanding and operating new methodology is but one aspect of change, and there are those who have found, or are finding the water deeper than they had anticipated. A variety of very valid reasons can be isolated, lack of teacher knowledge, poor facilities and resources and unfortunately a lack of understanding and support from colleagues.

This "Tissue rejection", or reverting back to the security of the tried and accepted methods is usefully explained by Bell's model in setting out the stages of curriculum development, development and renewal.⁵

The three stages are: Unfreeze ...
When people re-examine or are persuaded to re-examine their assumption

assumptions and to assess their previous practices.

Change ...
an experimental period, involving new practices.

Refreeze ...
making sure that the new practices — if satisfactory when evaluated — become built into a system and there is no gradual regression to old ways.

This regression back to old methods is not an unusual reaction, and regaining some measure of security in the teaching situation could be a fundamental ingredient of survival. But once rejection on one count has taken place this could lead to a hardening of attitude towards further and more valid adjustment of teaching method. Two very pertinent factors, however, may be seen as preventative measures in avoiding absolute rejection of an innovation or trial idea.

The first is a more effective understanding of definitions and terminologies — often the barrier between the innovatory source and the area where change may be a necessity — may assist in making headway in communication.

"The observation, identity and discussion of problems of interpretation, interpersonal relationships to try to enhance self-knowledge, especially about the impact of one's personality on others who would appear to be of paramount importance as a foundation upon which to develop modes of rethinking".⁶

This leads naturally to the second factor. This is one of teacher investment whereby the teacher must not only gain a basic understanding of what is required from the change but is required to invest some of his own ideas and thinking into the system. The benefits of this are two-fold in as much that a greater security results from the

understanding which is gained; there could also be a build-up of individuality in approach arising out of the combined resources of teacher investment and the original innovation. This would naturally reduce the risk of building a panacea situation.

There seems to be a level of investment whereby the teacher gains security and understanding and where the facets of an innovation will stick, Shipman refers to this as the 'threshold' ...

"Change requires investment: of resources of time and energy. The chances of an innovation being established and having a lasting effect depends on the investment made by the teachers involved ... This model of change suggests that there is a threshold beyond which the level of investment will guarantee that the innovation will stick."⁷

To briefly sum up then, it is debatable whether Design Education would satisfactorily form an additional subject or take in and replace existing subjects on the timetable. It would seem to require some further definition in alliance with already established subjects because as a generic term it has little meaning to the uninformed: to the converts it is a convenient descriptive term within the range of their existing experience. As a package label or umbrella title it may lack credibility because genetically its routes are complex and difficult to define: its main supportive subjects, Art and Craftwork, have little in common from the standpoint of their historical origins and continued educational justification. While on the face of it, this historical gap may appear unimportant, it seems influential in allowing certain in-built prejudices and traditions to prevail in spite of relabelling under such titles as, Creative Design, Design and Craft, and others.

In the role of providing a vehicle for edge-blurring of existing subjects, and pro-

viding a language of communication, Design Education as a *mode of thinking* may eventually become more universally understood. But at present this role is limited because of a lack of understanding of the dialogue (assuming this exists) by those who use the label without understanding the need to examine the contents of their existing stock-in-trade. As a means of drawing in relationships with the technical, aesthetic, social and economic aspects of education, Design Education seems to offer a useful opportunity to gain this understanding.

In all modes of change some control is necessary if the change is to become fully institutionalised. It is therefore essential that if new modes in innovation and thinking are to be effective and permanent in the form of a change strategy, teacher participation and investment must be encouraged as part of the change pattern.

In this way Design Education could be part of an agency for change and this as a

proposition will be discussed in a follow-up article.

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