

Design Education, The Shift from a Craft Base

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Over the last few months I have been engaged on a study of the curriculum of the 16 to 19 age group, and its relationship with entry to C.N.A.A. Art and Design degree study. During this time articles have been published about this area of concern in a number of journals, and it is evident that there is a widespread interest in sixth-form education and the possibilities for its reform and development.

Clive Ashwin in the 'Studio International' (Jan/Feb 1976) outlines the recent history of the ill-informed distaste and suspicion with which the various sectors of Art Educational field, from Primary to Post-graduate, view each other. He stresses the scale of the wastage implicit in the successive 'diagnostic and remedial' strategies which begin the programme in each of the individual sectors. He identifies the current basic 'teaching' strategy in Art and Design degree education as heuristic, being centred on student self-motivation. Finally he speculates on the likelihood of change being imposed on the system as a result of Art and Design degree validation coming under the C.N.A.A. umbrella. What became increasingly evident during my investigations was that 'change and reform' pre-date the C.N.A.A. merger, and though a considerable impetus in this change came from the first degree and post graduate degree sectors, a substantial impetus also comes from the radical changes in the curriculum spread, and syllabus depth in the school general education programme.

In a recent colloquium on crafts held at the instigation of the Crafts Advisory Committee an interesting debate was reopened which recalls the earliest days of Art Education at the beginning of the century. Van de Velde, Peter Behrens, Walter Gropius et al, all tried to stress that 'equality of esteem' should attach to the disciplines of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, the Crafts and Industrial Manufacture. They talked of the necessity for society that these elements of the visual

environment should be nurtured together. Conscious of the materialistic agnosticism of the current political life in an industrial community, they saw this concept as essential if the man in the street were not to eventually inhabit an aesthetically, and culturally bankrupt environment. The difficulty then as now, is that 'curriculum balance' is rarely seen, or accepted as symmetrical with 'parity of esteem' either in or outside educational institutions. Value judgements on curriculum topics derive from all sorts of extracurricula sources, some within the private conditioning influences on individual staff and students, others implicit in the constraints imposed on educational institutions by governments.

The argument at the colloquium was that degree education in Design actively devalued craft education. The corollary was that Design students left their degree experience lacking in 'traditional specialised craft skills' or a 'craft vocabulary'. Not only that, but they had developed negative attitudes towards the crafts, and the notion of craftsmanship.

Whilst agreeing with the speakers that this may be true, I would not accept that this is a bad thing. One can accept that if degree level Design Education teaches something other than craft skill, then it may have built into it unfortunate difficulties for students wishing to shift laterally from craft oriented vocational design programmes to degree study. This may be a bad thing if in all other respects the two courses share a lot of common ground. One suspects however that this is not the case, and that the notion that movement from Vocational Design study to degree study in Design is vertical is built up prior to any enrolment on any course. However desirable it may be that lateral movement should exist in Design Education, I'm sure that students know before enrolment that it is exceptional.

A number of factors which shed some light on this problem emerged from my investigations. On interviewing a large group

of C.N.A.A. students in the first year of Art and Design degree courses about their secondary schooling, they identified the significant problem for them in making choices of specialism as the early age at which they were required to do so. Concomitant with early choice went lack of information on which to base choice. In the worst cases the choice was based on 'liking the teacher', or successful performance in a subject at the time of choice. The curious feature of 'choosing' was that it involved a drastic reduction in the range of subjects studied without any compensating increase in the depth of the syllabus coverage in those chosen subjects. Too often it amounted to a choice to spend 'more time' on a subject the student liked, irrespective of factors to do with study in an institution of Further or Higher Education. A depressing feature for sixth formers studying 'Art' was that for most of them it was a choice to leave the 'general' or 'liberal' education core of the school. This does seem to result in difficulties when a student re-enters such study as part of his high level degree, or vocational course programme.

In the centre of this issue sits Foundation Course. In terms of the normal routes of entry into degree study, Foundation Course occurs *after* a student's choice of specialisation. Although the publicity attendant on Foundation Courses stresses their diagnostic role, this is an overstatement. More often Foundation Course tidies up prior choice, or it remedies a poor school situation. It confirms rather than initiates choice on the basis of new information. This is valuable for students, particularly if it is done well, and it integrates well into the subsequent degree programme, particularly those in Fine Art. It is a traditional part of degree education that the first two terms are spent in developing student motivation from a relatively general base. It should be remembered that Foundation Courses, particularly one year courses, very rarely have general or liberal

education components. Their theoretical content is usually both small and rooted in Art and Design history. From this one adduces that at their best Foundation Courses have stronger affinities with the initial stages of a degree programme than with the school.

In its early days Foundation Course, as 'basic design' had a major role to play in the notional integration of Art and Industrial Life. This was before the whole spectrum of Design Education moved on from this worthy, idealistic position to a more complex relationship with Industry, Commerce and Technology. One cannot offer induction programmes to students based on 'familiarisation with new materials' with that same magical optimism which permeated the Bauhaus course. It is silly, since the students are already familiar with most industrial materials by virtue of living in a consumer society. What is also important is that they are aware of the complex moral problems raised by the uncontrolled use of many such materials. It is equally evident that the crafts, and craft education cannot take on and support the role discharged by Design Education. The craftsman essentially, is producing uneconomic objects for a devoted few sharing his value judgements about objects.

One is surprised at the equivocation of the Post-graduate sector of Design Education on this point, particularly at the Royal College of Art. One hears of notions such as 'craft vocabulary' and its seminal position in design still being mentioned amongst other notions which stress a diametrically opposed view that stronger links must be forged between design education and industry. The drive to regenerate the crafts is countered by the drive to extend a Design student's awareness of the wide range of technologies in industry, not just to do with manufacture, but also to do with management and marketing. The craft based view places 'design', 'production' and 'marketing' in

an ordinal relationship. Modern industry seeks to co-ordinate production, subject to revision from a wide variety of sources and viewpoints. This model is already in an advanced stage of development in the building, aerospace and car industries.

To return to a point I made earlier concerning the drastic narrowing of the subject range when children start to specialise. Amongst the large group of students I interviewed the subject spread in their 11 to 16 year curriculum was between 12 and 14 topics. The range was only marginally dependent on the type of school attended, though there was some evidence that variations in syllabus depth and examination structures correlated with the type of school.

At 16 years if a child chose to stay on at school, he reduced this total to 2 or 3. To this he might add a small amount of study in subjects where he wished to retrieve an examination failure. In a survey of sixth-form study published in 'Educational Research, 11/72' it was shown that the typical pattern of sixth-form specialisation was towards related subject groups, e.g. all Sciences, or all Arts, or all Humanities. It was evident from my investigation that *all* Art and Design students (at Degree Level) make atypical choices of mixed subject groupings, usually centred on Art at 'A' level. Crafts were just another example of the atypicality of Art and Design Education, but followed the pattern in schools whereby children contemplating degree study do not offer themselves for examination in 'practical' subjects. One can see that evaluating this fact is of crucial importance to Vocational Design and Craft Education.

When one sees evidence that success in a practical, or any other subject is low, two questions need to be asked. What is the extent of study, and what value is ascribed to the study by tutors, students, and tutors responsible for entry to subsequent programmes? In this case one saw that the incidence of study in practical subjects was high, and

broadly spread, implying that it was thought valueless by someone. The assumption was that it was thought valueless by tutors responsible for entry to Further and Higher Courses by the tutors and students in the secondary sector.

Given that there is confusion over Art and Design degree entry in the minds of everyone except admissions tutors interviewing applicants it would be profitable to look at the sort of base which might be relevant for entry, and which might exploit the best features of the secondary school experience, and Foundation Course. The choice for Design tutors, given the normal mode of specialisation in sixth forms, is between Art plus science options, or Art plus humanities options, or either of those options without Art. Putting the options together may happen at school, but I found some evidence of it happening on Foundation Course. In this instance a student would complete a sixth form 'A' level programme in science or humanities without any Art, then they would take a Foundation Course. Design Courses recruit students of great similarity to Architecture Courses by this route. The tutors choice could also relate to their programme, and there is argument over whether a student needs the skills of numeracy to really contribute to high technology product design. Architecture Courses universally say "Yes", some Design Courses want to, but see evidence of a diminishing number of science sixth-formers being produced. There is also a case that Design Courses base some of their programme on applied social science, and they may therefore wish to see Humanities subjects amongst those studied by sixth-formers. At present no clear guidelines exist, and as a result craft teaching is becoming increasingly undervalued in the secondary sector. To me this seems one main reason why the crafts are becoming increasingly neglected. The other main reason would be that crafts, traditionally transmitted through families, or through tightly knit

communities, are no longer transmitted this way to any extent.

The crafts are not the only practical subjects on the school curriculum, and in other areas efforts are being made to revitalise the subjects, making them more challenging to students, and to introduce into them skills which relate to career sequels. For example Home Economics and Nutrition now point towards the catering, and tourist industries, not just domestic efficiency. Likewise Commercial Studies now comprises a group of related subjects which point towards Business Management, Economics and other related career opportunities, rather than just copy-typing, or secretarial work. In initiatives of this sort craft education lags a long way behind, and there is depressing conservatism and obsession with trivialities throughout the field. Perhaps this is to be expected in a society so utterly dependent for its wealth on Industry, and yet still clinging to a William Morrisian medieval philosophy with relation to objects. The smoke-screen of taste oriented judgements has completely obscured the fact that British Industry has gone bankrupt, and been bought up cheap by multinationals.

The lack of esteem in which all practical subjects are held is a function of their low status in Educational priorities, but not entirely so. The examinations in practical subjects are suspected both by tutors in academic subjects, and more importantly by Art teachers. All of them point to the absence of accessible criteria, and a common level of teaching and physical resource provision. One can see that many crafts do wither in the school situation, to the detriment of many children who could benefit from learning them. If one accepts that Design Education at degree level must set its sights on producing for manufacturing industries the sort of well informed co-ordinator which Architecture Schools produce for the Building Industry, then crafts must produce a new generation prepared to take on a similar role to the Fine

Artist in society. The craftsman, in retaining control of his total production method, from a design idea, to finished object will need a fuller 'craft vocabulary' than is at present the case, especially if he is to face the rigours of occupying a position near to the whim of the affluent. Protection does exist, but only to a very limited extent. One can point to CoSIRA and other government agencies. Alternatively a start could be made on the recasting of existing priorities in fifth and sixth form education, jacking up the status of a whole range of practical studies of which the crafts form a significant part. The effort could be made to shift esteem away from the non-vocational, and at the same time to make the 'vocational' more demanding. In this enterprise two elements would be of paramount importance. One is a need for an increase in the subject spread of a 'typical' sixth form programme. The second is a need for a restructuring of the 18+ examination system to give either a wider choice of examination format, or, a single format which possesses a wide range of multi-disciplinary options.