

CDT at Leeds Girls' High School

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Leeds Girls' High School

For many years as an Art and Design teacher at Leeds Girls' High School I have been in a position to earn respect by joining my energy, willpower, devotion and enthusiasm to that of my pupils in mounting displays of work and producing large scale canvases and murals. I consider one of my major advantages to be this requirement to continually and publicly demonstrate the work of the department.

At the same time, I have been aware that one of the greatest dangers for a teacher trained in a Fine Art tradition, as I am, is that of too easily assuming that art is self justifying, because I spend so much of my time involved in it. The truth of the matter is that 'Art' as a generalised kind of activity is simply not enough to meet the needs of the majority of secondary school pupils.

Much has been said and written about the importance of 'visual literacy' and the significance of design education on today's schools. A cast iron case for Art and Design in the curriculum would appear to have been made. However, I believe that it will not produce lasting or meaningful results unless and until the pupils themselves recognise this significance.

For this reason, changes in teaching Art and Design at LGHS have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. From the sidelines, viewing my experimental introduction of CDT in 1985 and success in being awarded one of four national Curriculum Development Awards in 1986, it may well seem otherwise.

One of my starting points was a range of views expressed over 4 years ago by 14 year olds about to make option choices.

1. Art gives me a rest from normal school routine.
2. You can only teach people a certain amount. It is mostly talent.
3. If a subject has to be dropped in school I think it should be Art, because it has not value except to those whose job is on the artistic side.
4. The value of art in school is that it makes us use imagination and our senses, especially sight.
5. It is important for us to raise our standards high enough for us to pass 'O' Level.
6. I chose Art because I enjoy it and I don't want to do Geography.

7. Art is a way of using your enthusiasm in an acceptable way. Art is an outlet.
8. Doing Art teaches us what to think about paintings in galleries.

So much for attempts to promote and encourage informed and creative attitudes! I hasten to add, that at the point when I sought these opinions, I was teaching very able pupils, that I had clear objectives which I felt were well demonstrated in their work, and they thoroughly enjoyed their art lessons. Their statements made it clear that in the main they were motivated in their attitude to this, and to other subjects, by external pressures — examination systems, fear of failure, fear of incurred displeasure; the need to succeed on someone else's terms and to suit someone else's purpose.

The second major starting point was taken from the HMI Working Party Curriculum statement on CDT which saw it as being 'concerned more with developments of desirable attitudes than with an end result or with the acquisition of a specific body of knowledge'. Obviously the starting points are linked. They led me quite naturally to develop an inter-disciplinary approach to design work, to encourage the exploration of alternative solutions, to promote flexibility of thought and help the children recognise the subtle persuasiveness of the barrage of visual images to which they are subjected. I assembled a structured but open ended series of design briefs which were introduced to the 11-14 year olds. The emphasis was upon exploration of materials, cross curricular research and solutions arrived at through experience. The justification for design and problem solving activities in school lies in a far more general outlook than one which merely looks at artefacts. Many of our products are of no permanent value and are not intended to be, but they provide a foundation from which we may begin to move towards a more analytical approach.

Some ideas never get beyond the drawing board. Providing they don't happen to the same child all the time such 'failures' can be seen as an essential part of the experimental process and can help rid us of pre-conceived ideas. The acceptance of 'right' or 'wrong' solutions in many contexts can be very

damaging. Most significantly it is a policy which reinforces the idea that we learn more from instruction than through experience.

The basic elements taken into consideration by any designer can be applied at school level, providing that the problem set can be solved within the limits of the pupils' experience — hence the abundance of design briefs based on games and toys. (At LGHS we have over 950 pupils aged 3½-18. Test and Evaluate is realistic and very popular!).

We work with materials that can easily be cut with a Craft Knife, junior hacksaw or shaper saw i.e. card, balsa, corriflute and soft plastics. When we work to a larger scale we use plywood, fretsaws and workmate benches.

Model making is obviously popular, produces great excitement when it 'works' i.e. is animated or mechanised. Many projects can make obvious links with Physics and Maths, encourage practical application of academic theory, investigate the relationship between function and shape, emphasise the significance of economy of materials.

We have made Kites, Hot Air Balloons, Windmills, model Land Yachts, Whirligigs: have investigated levels and slots through Pop-Up Books, mechanical toys, marionettes, toys which operate on strings and moving weights. We have constructed carousels, ferris wheels, jack-in-a-boxes, versions of Kaliedoscopes and Zoetropes; have designed new shapes for chocolates and made dresses. We have looked at the communicative value of colour and shape and the use of drawing as a 'thinking' medium. Amongst the games are those which are played on boards, with pegs in holes, mazes with ball bearings, some played by blind and sighted children together, some where balls are projected, thrown, rolled down an incline etc. We have made games to be played in the back of a car or in a Doctor or Dentist's waiting room. The list is endless and I add to it all the time. I continue to emphasise the design process which is my strength whilst having a regard for technological possibilities. All the CDT teachers I have spoken to tell the same story. They have a strength which they exploit and an enthusiasm which they hope to share.

Since individual knowledge cannot always cover the expansion of ideas in all directions, from time to time we all have to seek guidance from colleagues in other areas. Thus new experiences simultaneously confront both staff and pupils which require a learning relationship based on mutual discovery and experience.

The advent of GCSE Art and Design has given the Art department an opportunity to extend its activities in a way which would not have been possible without this foundation work in CDT.

Many of our 'A' Level Art pupils now express an interest in quite specific Design areas.

All of our pupils understand my belief in the old maxim.

'I heard and I forgot; I saw and I remembered; I did and I understood'.

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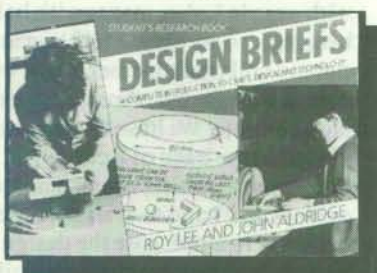
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