

A lost arcadia for art education: the rise and fall of Art Ed/UK.

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective commentary on the pre-millennium fervour for guiding the evolving National Curriculum for Art (1990s) and how this maybe contrasted with the current state of play in 2015. In the past the promotion of the established 'principles and practices' of art, craft and design had secured appropriate coverage but this appears to be increasingly unsustainable. The current faltering curriculum provision for Art follows further government intervention in 2014 and a detectable narrowing of the priorities for schools.

If advocacy for Art's contribution to a broad and balanced education is insufficient, what evidence can be used to support creative aspirations? By its very nature, 'knowing and understanding' in the creative process is achieved through a gradual and personal development of the confidence and competence associated with experiential learning. A **threshold** to 'troublesome knowledge' and self discovery.

Prof. Tom Davies 2015.

Introduction and background context

Re-reading the aspirations of the pre-millennium vision for art and design education (schools) in the twenty first century, it is a little depressing to comb over the ashes of this 'hot bed' of hopes and dreams. The National Society for Art and Design's (NSEAD) most recent survey of schools' art departments (2014) tells its own story, but what is evident is that the numbers of pupils/students are down and the mood is generally negative in terms of any perceived move to its former status as a subject with demonstrable importance in the general educational system.

Reflecting on the challenges and critical commentary of the 1990s zeitgeist for curriculum change and innovation, it would seem that Birmingham School of Art had an edge in terms of the battle to influence the National Curriculum proposals. Fortunate in having become a member of staff in 1988 (Senior Lecturer, Initial Teacher Training: Art/Design) I contributed my own critical commentary of the government's generic and centralist policy. Personal research at that time had addressed the national examination inconsistencies and the proliferation of 'how to do it' blueprints for pupil performance. **(1)** While not necessarily agreeing with all the points promulgated by Arthur Hughes, the then Head of Department, his contribution was extremely valuable in compelling practitioners to question their assumptions. Here Hughes perceived changes to the malaise in school art/craft/design departments as resolvable through a significantly different approach. **(2)** Personally, I favoured the retention of the subject's title and a sharper focus on the theoretical justification. Dr. John Swift (Head of School of Art

Education) had yet another set of possible solutions and these are indicated most clearly in the 1999 NSEAD manifesto which he co-wrote with Dr. John Steers (NSEAD's then General Secretary). (3) Swift was tenacious and his exacting standards regarding research integrity contributed greatly to the unfolding debate. Suffice to say I benefitted greatly from the combination of these complementary perspectives as they served to enhance those shared elements of what it was to be 'art educated'.

The decade was dominated by the National Curriculum Orders for Art (NC: Art) for England, as it was based on what was then considered 'good practice', albeit with vague and questionable theoretical findings. More worrying was the promotion of safe, tried and tested practices that had implications for pupils and specialist teachers. It certainly influenced my own views on the advocacy of diverse practice and the promotion of 'personal rationales' for achieving teaching strategies. (4) The 'critical and contextual' element was central to our debate as it served to further strengthen the links across the phases of education and it accorded with the goals and aspirations of Higher Education (age 18+). Hughes, in this regard, argued for an urgent need for a solution which might involve readdressing the National Curriculum proposals - perhaps offering more than one? And that 'this should be the result of a broader and more informed set of views from different agencies and representing the whole field of public art and design'. While generally we agreed that there was this perceptible malaise that needed to be addressed the strategies for change varied in accordance with individual academic staff's relationship with schools and the respective school hierarchy. My role, for example, reflected a close association with teacher training and in-service professional development, so it was largely the advocacy and empowerment of teachers to risk a different approach. For Swift he saw that the government initiative was 'managerial in style, accountability-led and modelled on an industrial, competency-based model'. Here Swift draws parallels with 'earlier centralist control of educational policy with a limited concept of utilitarianism and an emphasis on social structures'. While suspicions of the Conservative government strategy for educational change many teachers, I recall, became worn down by the pressures and somewhat reluctantly conformed to the 'requirement' agenda. Bigger questions as to the purpose of education were lost in the comparative simplicity of ten subjects each with due emphasis on commonality and testing.

The proposed National Curriculum repertoire held no surprise in the envisaged content. Originally the ten subject areas, common to traditional school provision, had the expected hierarchy of subject importance and a re-emphasis on the time allocation. Even at this stage the framework documents reflected an increasingly narrow view of the purpose and function of education in society. A particular disappointment for me was the undermining of cross-curricular links and the connectedness of knowledge across the then termed 'core subjects' (English, Mathematics, and Science). Art education itself had its own historical sub-sets with considerable potential for media studies collaboration (English link), measurement, proportion etc. (Maths), and innumerable related scientific enquiry –light, colour perception, illusion etc. (Science). More commonly understood was the trio of disciplines in the Art curriculum itself, which included craft and design. Each having its own reference points in establishing what could be termed a 'working knowledge' and each had potential content that might include a critical familiarity and an appreciation of the past and present contributions. In order to ensure real engagement with this developing 'working knowledge', reference to the past and contemporary creative enquiry required this critical commentary and access to 'original works' (galleries, museums etc.) was thought essential. Within this discourse connections could be made that supported a general understanding, arguably appropriate for the majority of learners in their respective schools (Primary/Secondary). These engagements and reflections would, however, have implications for verification through examination, norms, assessment criteria and exemplar materials were both commissioned and commercially generated. For those students seeking future professional opportunities within the subject area (Further and Higher education) a quality school experience was considered an invaluable experience.

In a very real sense the decade preceding the new millennium was buoyed up on possible new directions, alternatives and options.

What's changed now in 2015?

A characteristic of the first decade of the twenty first century is less about options and more about art's very survival as part of the school day. By any sort of consensus the goal for the subject specialism remains clarity in articulating its purpose but forums for dissemination have been drastically reduced (CPD implications). The assumed 'transferable skills' of critical understanding, empathy, enthusiasm and confidence building thought part of the creative process seem to have been lost. Now the crucial question is what have we to offer in this pared down version of state provision? Being 'art educated' has even less support now than it had in the 1990s when we, as art educators, were critical of the lack of ambassadors and celebrity in championing the cause. Within the West Midlands I recall the pitch for Music in the National Curriculum had Simon Rattle (the newly appointed conductor of Birmingham Orchestra) and the argument for a form of Arts integration was being promoted by Ken Robinson (Warwick University) who was the principle author of one of the major national research publications identifying 'Creativity' as the catalyst- 'All our Futures'. (5) I guess the lack of voices from established contemporary artists may have had something to do with the perennial rift between 'school art' and 'art school'? The attitudes in Higher education art departments have seldom regarded the connection between school artistic/aesthetic experiences and the motivation of 'serious' artists as convincing. Some of this tension is known to all those who have worked in, or across the educational phases.

This lack of solidarity and acknowledgement of the contribution made in each of the phases of institutional education (age groups) is central to the divisions in the discipline. The transition from primary school to secondary school has traditionally assumed that little of relevance has happened prior to art in a secondary school context. This has frequently also been the case for students moving into further education (a sense of starting a new with 'real' art experiences). The various courses in Higher education can again promulgate the idea that serious work really starts here! This disregard for prior learning may not be unique to progression in Art education but it would seem that this disjuncture contributes to a persistent sense of fragmentation. This hierarchical 'gate keeping' may partly explain the reluctance for prominent exponents to defend the school experience as part of the experience and preparation.

Understanding this problem is a starting point in convincing the art community that the subject knowledge grows incrementally. Learners exercise this knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and interpretative ability and apply it to the various forms of art, craft and design practices. More generic skills relate to criticism and creative interpretation and this is an area of rich cross subject collaborations. **Doing** art is not sufficient as an argument for the retention of the discipline in mainstream schools we need to articulate the learning that takes place as students move across the diverse working methods associated with the understanding and appreciation of two-dimensional work, three-dimension work and the diversity of lens based, digital and virtual communication systems. The visual aspects of media study requires engagement with the diversity of creative endeavour and includes interrogation of contemporary practice and the proliferation of the virtual worlds that form a major part of social media.

Further Marginalization: the erosion of status

The overcrowded curriculum is an indisputable fact. The original subject range was based on the idea that education needed to be somehow balanced and offer diversity and range for pupils who needed to find their place in a bewildering range of choices and options. For those studying in state schools in 2015 the task is simpler as the choices are fewer and the vision is short focused. Art in secondary schools has always had the problem of how it offers a range of opportunities from such a diverse portfolio of specialism within the discipline. Interestingly in the past, and very much part of my own personal research, heads of art departments needed to develop 'personal rationales' for teaching the subject as this would give particular departments a distinctive element. (6) Common to all departmental syllabuses

would be the need to provide at least two disciplines – ‘art practice’ and ‘art theory’ (history/appreciation with extension to notions of criticism, aesthetics, sociology, psychology and the issues of cultural pluralism, gender, contemporary practice etc.). Adding to the matrix the fact that ‘craft’ and ‘design’ practice have their own distinctive disciplines the options for selection are huge. The challenge is to retain essential concepts and provide a balance that reflects both the potential permeation of practices and theories. Fortunately for the long term benefit of the subject the working groups contributing to the development of the National Curriculum for Art favoured the retention of ‘craft and design’ within the subject’s title as the historical precedent (evidence from quality teaching in the 1970s, 1980s) was irrefutable.

The forces that were evident in the 1990s persist today with pressure to secure an organizational bias, be that towards ‘Craft and Design’ or the ‘Combined Arts’ agenda. The choices of content and progression through whatever counts as the school curriculum is now a matter for individual schools or so that is the claim. In June 2013, Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education announced that, as part of reforms to the national curriculum, the current system of ‘levels’ used to report children’s attainment and progress would be removed and would not be replaced. The Department for Education were seeking to give schools the freedom to approach assessment systems as they saw fit, or so it was claimed.

New ‘programmes of study’ set out what should be taught by the end of each key stage and individual schools would have the freedom to develop a curriculum which is relevant to their pupils’ needs while meeting these expectations. Additionally schools would be able to introduce their own approaches to formative assessment, monitoring and progression. External monitoring, through inspection, would take account of these tracking systems and form judgments but the implications of these changes were met with some concerns from the specialist subject. NSEAD being the professional society with an overview commissioned a response and this framework made significant observations regarding the benefits of the removal of the former ‘levels’ but cautioned an emerging vacuum. (7)

A pendulum swing: what’s the chance of that?

As hopes of a pendulum swinging back recede we are left with the feeling that the goal of a genuine, art related, creative entitlement for all is even further away from that heady discourse in the 1990s. Significantly these arguments pivoted on a number of perspectives that embraced the perceived needs of the individual learner, the specialist subject and those thought to benefit society. The potential conflict between personal and socially constructed skills leads to what teachers see as their role in the dissemination of knowledge and the fulfilment of assessment requirements. As an Art educator and believer in the importance of learning as ‘personal creative development’ the individual learner is crucial. Teachers, at whatever level of provision, need to remain true to those laudable principles and offer engaging, intellectually stimulating and emotionally charged opportunities that balance those spurious central government forces that control policy, measurement systems, standards and more worryingly teaching methodology.

Meaningful learning in Art is usually more a ‘slow burn’ than a flash of realization. It is therefore difficult to adequately quantify experiences that are essentially qualitative. It is frequently difficult to argue for the retention of something that has a distant goal or objective. Personalized learning is, more often than not, the way art teachers target the particular needs of individual learners. In models of quality subject teaching we see specialist teachers genuinely listening and responding to personal interests and targeting the requirements for the particular level; age, ability, gender, ethnicity and culture. This sensitivity demonstrably served to modify the more generalizable ‘learning objectives’ into sharply focused and manageable interaction.

Much in the past decades has been made of so-called 'Issues-Based' approaches to the study of art but in the hands of the less ambitious it can take a tokenistic form. All too often work that may appear engaging, in terms of the conception can, after questioning the learner, be just a formula strategy that provided an illusion of enquiry. Critical and contextual approaches can also be hijacked to give the impression of understanding the links between the past, the present and future but appearance may be unreliable. More meaningful is the obvious point that theory and practice are inextricably linked. All practice is based on some theoretical understanding) and all theory is grounded in practical application. Theory, in this context, embraces reflection, appreciation, aesthetic considerations, communication, research and social/psychological matters. Practice on the other hand is mostly seen as the skills of **doing**, mastering the processes and techniques, analysis, synthesis and summative assessments requirements. Conceptual ability and practical competence exist in unison but the physical outcomes are (the range of art/craft and design pursuits) are more accessible to those outside of the learning environment. This is why actual teachers' judgements (those who have actually taught the particular pupils) must arbitrate in a process of formative assessment and graded evaluation. Those advocating greater weighting for external adjudication have a more 'formalist' approach to learning and see demonstrating the standards required as paramount. Here the formalist approach emphasises the building blocks of practice (point/line/plane/texture/colour etc.) which are frequently described as the 'language of art'. The metaphor is not, however, particularly convincing as 'language' assumes a common grammar/structure and, as indicated above, this sort of individualized knowing/learning shares no common strategy. The body of knowledge that we call Art has multiple cultural and temporal forms which inform but does not provide a common paradigm. Importantly there exists, within the literature of art and art education, those basic principles that transcend the particular interest groups. Art experience seems to be regarded, at best, as a vehicle for better understanding the natural and constructed world. This can empower and develop a critical understanding that can then be applied both within the subject area and make meaningful links across the various other disciplines and fields of knowledge. Learners equipped with the ability to interrogate and create personal interpretations develop the skills to express ideas and direct their own questions and way forward.

Skill acquisition is important but the skills debate, as I have indicated, is an expanding concept with its own protagonists and advocates. Those pressure groups in the 1990's generated a movement to influence the National Curriculum trajectory and this included those championing a change of subject titling. Here 'Visual Education' and 'Visual Literacy' were promulgated as a new conceptualization and one that arguably risked more or new content without adequately rationalizing the thorny problem of selection and hierarchy. Such a paradigm shift would have necessitated a diversity of content and one that would need to adequately identify ideas, contexts, traditional media, histories and typologies as well as communication technologies, social media, virtual reality and the host of lens/time based content.

Art teaching is a 'smorgasbord' of potential provision with challenges particular to this discipline. As an indication one needs only to reflect of the plethora of specialist fields that comprise art, design and craft work as a choice in Higher Education. Students studying within these creative areas further specialize over a typical three to four years of study and those who wish to teach at secondary school level (11-18 year old learners) are confronted with all that they do not know. In the past specialist teacher training in Art provided opportunities to broaden and develop these additional skills in the context of a postgraduate, one year course that linked classroom management and other generic skill to the specific subject relevant material. Much of this bridging function of modelling in the subject context has now been displaced by the more generic delivery role associated with teaching. The subject knowledge required as a newly qualified teacher is largely assumed to be those experienced at undergraduate level.

Historically these newly qualified teachers have provided experiences in two and three dimensional enquiry and have mastered and or developed skills as appropriate. Typically using a range that may include drawing, painting, print-making, ceramics, card etc teachers have extended that vocabulary to include digital media skills and contemporary practice. Currently the assumption is that teacher training is

a question of planning, delivery systems and classroom management strategy. Extending and developing 'subject knowledge' is for most an unaffordable luxury. Finally these generic models of teaching have grown to structure a common and arguably less challenging expectation.

Testing culture or supportive enquiry?

Arthur Hughes in his capacity NSEAD President delivered a paper at the International conference in Glasgow, 1997 in which he reiterated possible frameworks for Art in the National Curriculum (NC: England). **(8)** Interestingly he alluded to the removal of Art from the NC? In this particular context he was reflecting on an inconceivable situation in which Art was no longer valued or that its obvious contribution could prosper outside of statutory inclusion. Far from his mind was the scant provision which is the 2015 reality and the accompanying sparse training and CPD support.

The interest then (1990s) and now is the issue of control. Teachers throughout the 1970s and 1980s were thought to have too much control and influence on the attitudes and aptitudes of the nations young. While 'success' was obviously the intention of those in the educational system, this notion of success had very different interpretations dependant on your philosophy and understanding of what constitutes a broad and balanced educational experience. Usefulness has always been the mantra of those with a utilitarian perspective and training, indoctrination has featured strongly in models that define 'end product' interests.

What counts as the status quo in 2015 is very different to the preceding decades with what may appear more choice and diversity. Behind the contemporary changes is a well established orthodoxy of central control and the values presented are invariably the dominant Government agenda. Concern for all those pupils in Primary schools has been recently expressed by a number of agencies including the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts. Jeremy Newton Chief Executive has indicated that according to the Department for Education's own figures 'the arts are being squeezed out of schools'. **(9)** Specifically looking at the challenge for art departments we see limitations of many kinds and the NSEAD survey revealed a number which I will use in the summary to this paper. Central government policy has clearly marginalized those subjects thought to be less employable. Gradually infiltrating school management the movement is away from the notion of 'transferable skill', coordination critical reflection in favour of abilities that are more easily tested and compared for 'league table' purposes. Given the broad variety of opinion within the teaching profession controlling the actual syllabus has been seen as preferable to allowing too much interpretation of national guidance. The publication of 'how to do it manuals' has helped to fuel the idea that there is only one way, and that way is right. Professional dialogue is circumvented as rote learning and drill like training masquerades as personal development.

For Art education UK we have been, as a professional interest group, reasonably successful over the years regarding the advocacy of our subject. This being evidenced in quantative terms by those pupils and students who have elected to study the subject at GCSE and at 'A' level. School management has seen over the years the huge benefits in these results aggregating impressive exist league tables, but not anymore. Most recently the emphasis has been placed firmly within what used to be termed the 'core curriculum' with Mathematics, English Language and Science augmented by the various employable technological skills. The Arts in general and Art and Design in particular have been therefore castigated by recent government ministers as peripheral and misleading for those that which to progress from schooling to gainful employment. **(10)** Advocacy without hard evidence fails to win over the cynical and narrow minded. It follows that this 'evidence', if we were to generate any, must come from reliable and respectable research. By this I mean the kind of research that is appropriate for the subject's declared aspirations. Qualitative research, conducted across diverse samples, with curriculum materials which are sufficiently flexible suggest a level of national support and interest which is unimaginable at present. Specialist teachers would be ideal but are we currently producing this calibre of practitioner? Continuing

to make assertions about the efficacy of the discipline within the nation's schools without strong case study evidence would change little in the current climate.

Teachers, as the learners that they attempt to support, need differentiated strategies. To improve opportunities for all learners we need to look again and question what evidence exists to support the view that an increasingly narrow definition of education is necessary to improve the school experience. Effective change of a beneficial kind tends anecdotally to grow out of nurturing and supporting what may be regarded as exciting, enthusiastic and confident pedagogy. This exemplification of stimulating pedagogy may be best disseminated in an unthreatening form through sharing best practice and encouraging hybrid experiments that draw on particular learning strategies. Alternatively one could approach the situation, as is more common, with an external classroom model based again on questionable research and pre-specified 'success criteria'. Inspectors police provision on the basis of reported data and personal development profiles (pupils' records) yield to comparatively dry statistics.

Evidence from the NSEAD's survey (2014) largely tells us what we already suspected, specialist staff are not being replaced, departments are getting smaller, take up for the subject is declining and the time allocation has been further reduced. (11) With this sort of evidence from the survey it would seem that teachers' morale is at a particular all time low. For the pupils in the state school art departments evolving 'criterion referenced assessment tools' seem to pre-specify intended destination rather than facilitate the diversity of the journey. Judgments on pupil/student development are better modified, in my opinion, by reflecting on the choices made and the open interpretation rather than a more closed 'scoring' system widely associated with the proliferation of competency skills. Closed forms of learning would seem antipathetic to learning/knowledge acquisition and certainly inappropriate for creative enquiry

Value and Visibility

In conclusion I would like to indicate that finding 'evidence' from different sources and constituencies for comparative consideration has been more challenging than in previous times. On a practical level this is due to having fewer opportunities to visit a wide range of schools in different regions, but significantly there are fewer people to ask. The various agencies of the past have homogenized. We no longer have, as indicated above, the independent voices from specialist teacher training centres, nor an advisory /inspectors' association both having a smaller role in the NSEAD as standing committees. The association of advisers and Inspectors had for many years an independently strong voice and formed its own agenda utilising conferences, committees and platforms for national and regional dissemination. Working closely with Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) there was a real sense of shared and common objectives. Specialist HMI representation is yet another diminished resource as their previously available conferences provided another layer of valuable insight on the challenges ahead. While other organizations exist to advance the subject's interests their numbers are small and regional.

NSEAD is the umbrella organisation with the remit to support and change our fortunes so their most recent survey (2014) represents a credible overview of the state of play. As such I have extracted the most crucial messages as the feedback from the respondents in this survey seems to match my own more anecdotal findings from schools across the West Midlands. Currently a story of the permissible and despondency but somehow this needs to be countered.

Further summarising the conclusions in the survey report trigger questions of different complexity and serve to reinforce the diminution of those laudable aspirations regarding critical contextual study, museology and pluralism

- Degrading of the perceived value of the subject in state schools (Key Stage 3-4)

- Performance measures that marginalize art/craft/design
 - Reduction of opportunities to engage with original works: visits to museums/galleries
 - Decline in perceived relevance of the subject by senior staff and governors
 - Time allocation –significantly reduced
 - Option choices and pathways reduced due to increased competition
 - Subject reportedly taught by increased numbers of non-specialists
 - Initial teacher training numbers reduced
 - Continuing Professional Development (CPD) support ‘rarely or never’ accessed due to the absence of financial support
 - Increasing trend of teachers self-funding CPD in their own time and outside of schools agenda
 - Low levels of professional support, increased expectations, staff morale, redundancies etc.
- If advocacy alone is insufficient then action needs to take other forms. Specialists need to recapture the importance of the subject for all learners and this starts with reflecting on Art’s unique contribution. Here teachers, many of whom practice their own art, craft or design interests alongside teaching commitments are arguably better placed to articulate the theoretical aspects of their personal engagement and how this enriches and benefits the pedagogical contribution. In the teaching profession this element of ‘practicing what you preach’ is distinctive if not unique to art specialists (music, drama specialists may rightly make similar claims). By developing a particular and ‘personal rationale’ for the subject’s importance there is potentially a consistency and strength of argument. Senior staff reportedly having the impression that the subject is a ‘soft’ form of curriculum content requires serious rebuttal from staff and their respective professional associations.
 - The legacy of art educations contribution to the debate over the decades is accessible through searches of current research papers and the national archive (12)

- February 2015

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Notes and references

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