

Wholeearthmedia Communities

i. A European Art Education Collaboration.

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Abstract

This paper is a short reflection on an attempt to broaden the definition of Art Education across a partnership of European co-collaborators. National interests all too often determine particular goals for all subjects in the educational system and as art education is rarely seen as a priority frequently the ambition is narrow and predictable. In contrast the broader international field of creative enquiry, mostly outside of formal education, is dynamic and challenging. Why is it that art in schools (here in the UK and elsewhere) differs so much from the guiding principles of the 'parent' subject which has open artistic and aesthetic characteristics? In 1991 personal research in this particular mismatch developed into a submission for funding from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and through practical engagement, across a European partnership, we attempted to critically interrogate what consensus existed for the notion of a curriculum experience with demonstrable 'value' for the learner and the facilitator (teacher).

Our application identified partnerships with other university courses in Holland, Spain, Greece, Portugal (original membership) and colleagues in France, Germany and Italy had also expressed an interest. At this time we were one of the first universities to successfully secure the new Erasmus 'Intensive Programme' (Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and the first to acquire support for an Art and Design initiative 1993-98. What we wanted to create was a climate for discussion outside of our own UK preoccupation with the assessment and measurement of creativity.

Introduction

What united the membership was a strong interest in specialist Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and the important link to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). We collectively wanted to develop the concept of 'critical and contextual study' and focus on the theory informing current practices. The original context for the European initiative was very much associated with the undervalued status of art education in the UK and a general interest in exploring more varied and de-centralized curriculum models that may be used to enhance and promote developmental strategies for learning and teaching.

Having a strong research interest in assessment in art education, I had produced many papers on the issues and in 1989 after being awarded the Berol/NSEAD research bursary, I looked closely at the problems related to summative assessment within the new hybrid examination system for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Personally advocating an emphasis on formative evaluation this research informed later research contributions that further questioned the assumptions made about the performance of teachers and what seemed to count as reliable indicators of learning. The changing climate in the UK signalled for me the need for a more collaborative and internationally valued perspective on the role of schools in promoting the aspirations of art and design education in the 21st century.

As the lead university in this successful bid for UNESCO funding, the context of educational provision in the UK provided the initial critical framework for understanding a Government agenda, the aspirations of the teaching provision and the learning methods experienced by pupils and students. Undoubtedly there

was a perceived need to reform testing procedures to ensure a balance based on an understanding of educational value rather than political expedience.

In the first two years of the Erasmus programme the workshops scrutinized the importance of 'college based provision' for teacher training and the extension opportunities for promoting subject knowledge through various practical workshops. These workshops addressed the cultural context and professional competence in terms of the skill-base and most importantly the underpinning pedagogical thinking. The residential courses attracted representation from the six participating universities with numbers generally reflecting two staff members and 8 students from each of the respective universities. Over the five years of financial support the funding was, however, reduced following the organization's funding policy, as it was assumed that the individual universities would progressively contribute a higher proportion of the cost or reduce numbers to reflect the diminishing budget. Not too surprisingly the universities failed to provide the additional funding so the number of participants unfortunately diminished over the period culminating in half the original number in the final year.

Positive outcomes from the initiative obviously included the culturally shared understanding and the mutually supportive networks for curriculum and professional development. Underpinning the collaboration was the emerging Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which provided the exchange of resources and the establishment of a professional association. Access to the Internet supplemented the increased availability of CD ROMS and DVDs which were used as exemplification and context analysis. (see Davies, T and Worrall, P 1997) While the technology proved to be extremely valuable, it was considered that to best facilitate long-term collaboration, the opportunities for 'face to face' should not be underestimated.

The annual European collaboration required the host institutions to explore themes that reflected the emphasis and concerns of the particular courses. In Leiden, for example, the focus was on psychological aspects of identity. The concept of 'craft and design' featured in Dordrecht and in Seville the engagement was emotional responsiveness. For periods of up to two weeks the common link was the original rationale which explored the value of art education for all participants. Transferable skills and the cross-curricular concerns generated learning methods and teaching strategies that addressed the different kinds of intelligence, creativity and cultural diversity. Indirectly, this inter-professional collaboration triggered, changing perspectives on what was thought to be the commonality of curriculum development.

The implications for Initial teacher training and continuing professional development became clear in that flexibility and adaptability was required to accommodate the multifaceted role of specialist teacher training. Strategies needed to be in place to extend the influence of art-based learning across a range of curriculum areas. Extending community links and teachers confidence was thought to be more important than supporting the proliferation of 'readymade' lesson plans. The specialist knowledge and creativity of the teaching profession was considered central to providing engaging experiences for learners. This said, virtual networks offered a platform for sharing and reflecting on the possibilities and potential range of experience for particular age groups. (see Orava, J. 2011)

Action research provided an appropriate strategy for professional development, school-based curriculum development, and linking the Erasmus programme to improving opportunities for collaboration between schools and institutions of higher education. Supportive networks helped to develop the concept of a 'reflective practitioner' and created access to 'critical friends' to refine developments in the field.

Art Education/UK context (1993 – 2002)

In the introduction I referred to the UK's political climate as unsympathetic and constraining for art education. Certainly, in the subsequent years since this particular European initiative the attitudes, values, policy and practices have further restrained opportunities in art education. Government policy and priorities have remained narrow and focused on quantifiable data and scoring in mostly English, Mathematics and Science league tables. Notions of 'breadth and balance' are a distant memory for art educators who remain unconvinced by 'testing' as an educational priority. More specifically, 'school-based teacher education' has undermined the need to see the practitioner as a principled, academic critical commentator on the curricular content. Reflecting more on the archive notes from this period I have assembled the most salient findings within the reference material and commentary of that time. Interestingly and disappointingly some twenty years later the issues remain very similar.

'In the United Kingdom continual reform, restructuring and testing is endemic and largely based on the distrust of teachers to perform their duties to the required standard' (Davies, T 2000).

Recruitment and retention of teachers is a key issue and the blame for the problems is not solely related to economics.

'They are in part due to the climate of strain and tension, society's unrealistic expectations of teachers and schools, and the low value that is placed on their work future contracts for teachers are likely to be short term and performance based, following the industrial model of personal review, bonus payments and value-added incentives...' (Davies, T 2000).

These aspects have implications for initial teacher training and continuing professional development.

The drive to raise standards of achievement and attainment (English, Mathematics and Science) through constant monitoring, over-enthusiastic testing, target-setting and inspections focus only on certain aspects of the teachers' efforts to educate the whole child. Art education in both primary and secondary schools has been demonstrably neglected, undervalued and under-resourced and teachers across the arts feel constrained by the requirements of the National Curriculum and examination requirements.

'National reports of the last 30 years have consistently indicated that teachers need to do better, as their pupils / students are allegedly neither acquiring sufficient knowledge in school nor developing the motivation and flexibility for lifelong education and employment. 'Politicians demand greater effectiveness from the educational system, as the return on national investment appears inadequate. In such a climate educationalists press for evidence of a consensus, debate on common goals or a shared vision for formal education and schooling. However, a satisfactory resolution is unlikely in a contemporary context with many constructions of reality based on variety, heterogeneity, discontinuity, pluralism, interest groups, relativism and localism. If we have learnt anything in from the past, especially the emergence of schools as training institutions to support economic demands (skilled workforce), we need to accept the inevitability of a diversity of response to meet the varied needs and wants of a rapidly changing world order'. (Davies, T 2002).

Government policy is clearly not achieving its stated aim of creating a broad and balanced curriculum, nor is it achieving the variety and diversity of educational experience. Time allocation, resources and in-service training for art education in schools has been severely cut and morale would appear to be at an all

time low (see NSEAD report 2014)

'For teachers, the pressure to 'teach to test' has disillusioned many of the most inspirational and dedicated and their role in the future must change to adapt to new learning environments, new technology and the variability of schools in type, demand and contractual obligations' (Davies T. 2002).

The use of testing (quantifiable data) has developed to such a point that it is now counter-productive, in that it is taking time away from learning and teaching, in both primary and secondary education. Monitoring pupils' progress in order to seek to raise levels of attainment and achievement should be seen in the context of individual pupils' learning journeys and not to bolster league tables which do not reflect the complexities of knowledge and understanding.

The Erasmus planning group identified the need to re-form testing procedures across the partnership in order to ensure that the resultant material related to the declared educational function rather than predominantly political ends. Teacher training is at risk if it becomes a mechanism for content delivery rather than questioning the status quo.

'All postgraduate routes for Initial teacher training (Post Graduate Certificate in Education — PGCE) have been regulated so that 24 of the 36 weeks are school-based. After the period of initial teacher training a further year of induction is required in the profession with guided and differential training ...' (Davies T. 2002).

Art-based study offers distinctive modes of learning and this is an aspect of specialist teacher education which has been neglected in teacher training. The problem is therefore compounded by the fact that initial teacher training is predominantly school-based, where supervising teachers do not necessarily have the professional expertise to be able to extend students' knowledge of the discipline and its variety of skills, processes and critique.

'Reflection on practice arguably requires a degree of detachment from the school context but increasingly pressure to move further to 'on the job' training is dumbing down the process of thoughtful and ambitious practice. Many of the tacitly agreed principles of teacher preparation are giving way to pragmatic solutions'. (Davies, T 2000).

The limitations of school-based initial teacher education are also evident when students qualify but do not take up posts in schools. They find that they do not have a strong enough understanding of pedagogical issues to sustain their work as educators in other educational settings. There is a need to reorganize initial teacher training as more than classroom management and to increase the university/college-based provision for art/design specialist workshops and education programmes that develop both pedagogical thinking and the necessary professional skill base. The establishment of local management of schools, diminished responsibility of local authorities and the demise of the advisory services has meant that schools are increasingly isolated. They operate as individual businesses and they are of necessity in competition with one another. Mutuality, collegiate and collaborative approaches are difficult to establish and sustain in a climate of distrust.

'In an attempt to alleviate pressure and reward success in the classroom the government introduced a number of initiatives designed to stimulate interest in career development and recruitment (Threshold payments, Advanced Skills Teachers, Fast Track Teaching Posts, etc) but these developments too have the potential to create divisions and distrust'. (Davies, T 2002).

For teachers, and especially artists that teach, it is difficult to ensure professional progression and development within the subject area, as progression is usually seen in terms of promotion related to administrative, management function and funding initiatives.

'choice and direction is considered in terms of special funding incentives and enhanced status within the community' (Davies, T 2002).

This is particularly the case in art education where resources are increasingly secured not in relation to educational or social need, but by schools who have mastered the bidding system, in terms of obtaining sponsorship or winning awards and competitions.

Information, Communication Technology (ICT) has not been particularly well integrated across the national schools provision for art education despite generic pronouncements and over the intervening period there has been little hope of quality control or comeback for inadequate providers.

'eLearning across all schools and specialist subjects is hampered by the dual impact of equipment/running costs and appropriate training. The government, over the past two years has implemented New Opportunities Funding (NOF) but teachers widely report on its inappropriate, generic content. Offered for commercial tender the training has been at best variable and for those in Art and Design reports indicate the material fell short of expectations. There is a strong interest in moving forward towards a more sustainable use of the available technology, but research is required to ensure confident and appropriate use.' (Davies T. 2002)

Art Education/ European dimension/ 1993-98

The context and preoccupation of the UK situation was not directly comparable with the other participating universities in the collaboration, as each had considerably less centralist control.

The consensus that underpinned the work across the collaboration was based on exploring different kinds of intelligence, creativity and cultural diversity. Notions of 'transferable skills' and 'cross-curricular' concerns informed the learning methods and teaching strategies and the organisation and management of the art curriculum. This inter-professional collaboration in art education generated, within the context of the collaborators, a harmonious fit for the curriculum development. The associated secondary school experiences (structured school visits were part of each workshop) were largely founded on the laudable principles associated with the International Baccalaureate system which continues to promote the connectedness of knowledge and the social agenda (International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) 1968-).

Education through art activity draws on the variety of the disciplines (art/craft/design) in order to provide different frameworks for learning, encoding /decoding and developing a wide range of understanding and skill acquisition. Art education in each of the participating countries focused, quite rightly, on a study of art forms, perspectives and the techniques and processes involved in making art. Predominantly, we found that across the various interpretations of the subject, at school level, the emphasis seemed to be on the technical aspects rather than ideas. While certainly the notion of 'expression' was common this did not always serve to promote art as an important vehicle for developing the skills of reflection, perception and invention. A distinction between the aspirations of the art educators and the resultant practice in schools appeared to pivot on the ideas that informed the work. A sense of sharing the themes and con-

cepts explored by artists and their interest in changing the public's perception of the world itself was not always evidenced in the samples shared. The notion of what was frequently referred to as 'critical and contextual study' was an aspect of all courses but this was not always apparent in the art programmes in schools. Moving forward we agreed that art education should be more than understanding the various art, craft, design forms and should incorporate the creation of personal ideas, intellectual curiosity and the ability to interrogate artistic claims. Leadership of the various workshops was preceded by lectures and illustrated presentations which exemplified what needed to be included in the initial training of teachers and the requirements for continuing professional development (CPD).

In varying degrees the subsequent workshops offered a blend of experiential learning with due regard for the range of intelligences (e.g. visual, spatial, gestural, emotional, etc). Art was explored as a prime vehicle for learning, addressing the values and attitudes that facilitated the claims for transferable skills (perception, communication and invention). These risk-taking practical encounters embraced the given framework of experiment, enquiry and intellectual curiosity with each seen through the prism of cultural diversity and cultural development. Colleagues interpreted the creativity as involving reflection, action and personal/social aspects (self confidence, collaboration).

Student participants were encouraged to share their views on teaching and learning and provide examples of best practice in this multifaceted role. Interestingly many shared the observation that much could be achieved through working with and alongside teachers from other subjects. The organisation and management of resources and curriculum time required, in their opinion, negotiation and collaboration to secure discrete, subject-based consideration. These evaluation sessions revealed the scope that existed for multidisciplinary strategies, where teachers work in parallel and explore interdisciplinary approaches (art/s teachers and other subject disciplines).

A number of student presentations featured the benefits of hosting 'artists, craft workers and designers in schools but this tended, in the minds of some, to eclipse the potential of the teacher as an artist, crafts person or designer in their own right. Outside agencies had, in their view, the potential to appropriate the educational responsibility and focus of an art department and undermine the 'personal rationale' so important in organizing and managing the curriculum.

Conclusion

Research and curriculum development should not be seen as separate, carried out by two different kinds of professionals (researchers/teachers). They are two interlinked aspects of professional development so teachers need to become more reflective on theoretical aspects of their practice. Here, digital technology holds considerable potential.

'The first national experiments with the introduction of computers in schools in the late 1980s failed because of the lack of specific teacher training' (Davies T. 2002).

While developments in digital technology have provided a momentum in disseminating 'good practice' the self-help approach has deflected attention from the responsibility for curriculum development support and further training. The subject advisory service in the UK has diminished generally and training needs have become largely the responsibility of individual or consortia of schools. The overview, once provided by local authorities, has given way to a far more fragmented provision. In point of fact, the National Association for Art Education (NSEAD) survey of 2014 indicated that there is little to no support for

CPD/Art. Curriculum materials for the subject are, however, reportedly on-line and accessible for all. Supplementary exemplification is also offered through membership of the NSEAD but this may be considered a poor substitute for a more desirable forum for the critical analysis of the status quo.

What we set in motion at the time of the Erasmus Intensive programme was the need for research and an evidence base for the claims if the situation for art and art teachers was to improve. Advocating an 'action research' approach through our collaboration we posited the link between curriculum development and professional development. As a practical, problem-solving strategy, it had both the potential to empower practitioners through personal involvement and create reflective, critical self appraisal. Predicated on improvement by intervention, individual teachers take control of the research focus and uncover the theory embedded in their practice. Unpacking the practical issues as distinct from theoretical issues, the associated investigations are owned by the research collaboration who are colleagues and co-professionals. (see 'Action Research' McNiff, J 2002)

In the general evaluation process, prior to the submission of the concluding report on the five years, we agreed that much had been learnt from the successes and failures. The successes were obvious as indicated earlier in this paper and the failures were largely related to the difficulties in maintaining contact with sufficient numbers to make the extension exercise meaningful. As funding decreased over the period of the project the critical mass was correspondingly reduced (participants: students and staff) and the dynamic was compromised (diversity of opinion and specialism).

Despite the reservation we asked if we could build on the experience and reinvest in affordable further collaboration. Changes in courses and shared action research analysis, indicated improvement and possible engagement in systematic enquiry but there were huge gaps in appreciating the individual contexts. Sharing data through digital media and the appropriate web tools was one of the major changes but this in itself was insufficient in the formation of a close cultural understanding.

Bibliographical and Reference material

This paper was written with a continuing concern for specialist support for art and design education in the United Kingdom. Only a few other allusions are made, and the reader is here referred to some of the publications at that time which have been used in the general argument.

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In addition to regional initiatives, European links have taken place over the period partly funded by 'Erasmus' and 'Socrates' Intensive programmes. The first 'Electric Studio' event took place in 1994 and provided the framework for initial experimentation in new digital media within Initial Teacher Training (ITT-Art and Design). The collaboration with European institutions has been greatly facilitated by the technology itself and in more recent years this collaboration has been extended more globally to include partnerships in Africa, China and most significantly Brazil. (Davies: 2000)

A special 'Electric Studio' workshop space was created, (in 1994,) so that Art Design and Performance related activities could be fused with new technology. Computer graphics and animation were recorded on-to video tape using a genlock board, with the final objective to create several five minute films which would be premiered at the end of the two week intensive course (Worrall, Davies: 1997)

Partnerships in Europe were significantly extended in 1997 by the contribution made by Lucia Pimentel, Director of Art and Design (teacher training), Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). As a major aspect of her PhD the focus for the year moved to the parallel development of the workshops in Brazil. This had the immediate effect of extending the data exchange of coursework and heightening awareness of cultural contexts. The resultant collaborative work incorporated related work in Holland and was published in 'Electric Studio: new practice in ICT Art and Design' which was commissioned by Anglia Multimedia. Accompanying the publication was a sample CD ROM containing 1,600 images from the data files including resource material and sample coursework from the UK, Brazil and Holland). (Davies, Pimentel, Worrall: 1999)