

## Testing the water: Fine Art students seek new opportunities

The Self-Initiated Creative Arts Project (SICAP) at Staffordshire University represents a challenging choice as a Fine Art vocational initiative. While not an original idea or a revolution in new thinking, it has given interested parties the opportunity to identify and negotiate a contribution that benefits the student and the host placement. Frequently the challenge for the student is that it is a very different experience for them but it fits comfortably with my personal experience which spans three decades. Over this period I have had the privilege of coordinating and supporting many students interpreting the role of an 'artist-in-residence'. The first experimentation for me took place in East London where I collaborated with the Head of Fine Art at the North East London Polytechnic (now the University of East London). Geoff Brunell was an inspirational print-maker and keen to support his students in educational experiences across the range of provision in Tower Hamlets, Walthamstow and Hackney. In my role as Head of Art and Design and faculty leader at a local VI Form college I performed an advisory role across the age phases in the locality. Here innovative placements were undertaken by students' midway through their three year degree experience. The duration of these placements varied and was negotiated on the basis of individual expectations and interest. The responsibility was extremely rewarding for students and the informal staff development facilitated extended experimentation in the participating institutions. Cascading skills and confidence in the use of materials ensured outcomes that supported creative risk and questioned the rationale for the existing, frequently predictable, art/design practice.

The module offered to Fine Art students at Staffordshire University (SICAP) built on one that already existed under this module heading and served to support very similar goals. My contribution was predicated on the same philosophy as the 1980's model with refinements that had been made following the experience of a hybrid which was provided for art and design students at the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University). Here the opportunity was available across the whole faculty and was accessed as an 'elective' under the title of '**Negotiated Study**'. Interestingly this created a diverse student dynamic with individuals representing a broad range of disciplines (e.g. Jewellery, Graphic Design, Fashion, Fine Art etc.). Managing the initiative was extremely complex due to staffing levels but the model evolved over 12 years and much was learned.

This more recent incarnation, offered to the students in the Fine Art department at Staffordshire, is a freer interpretation with even greater responsibility being given to the individual student. Retaining a broadly similar timing dimension, not to disrupt the usual course assessment stages, students are offered this opportunity midway through their BA course. Introduced as another dimension of creative thinking it sought to translate what they knew, understood and valued into the wider community. This initiative may build on studio practice preoccupations/concepts or take a completely different emphasis. It is an opportunity to negotiate and communicate outside of the familiar 'art language community'. In many cases

the choice is one of sampling a possible career path, testing the feasibility of workshop interventions or alternative options for creative development.

In the context of personal development the SICAP module has attempted to provide a negotiated placement that supports individual interest in extending studio practice and a creative introduction in the vocational context. As a self-initiated choice it is always a creative risk for host institution/industry. Most students rise to the challenge in forming a common dialogue and tempering personal ambition with the unfolding realities and limitations. Indeed the coordination of the learning experience is uniquely challenging for all those involved.

Interestingly research undertaken by **a-n The Artists Information Company** has focussed on the tension between preparing Fine Art students for their personal critical practice and the need to raise awareness of the vocational opportunities post university. The report itself maybe accessed through the a-n website – search: **The Lay of the Land: current approaches to professional practice in visual and applied arts courses**. A personal response to this item is also published in the ‘international news section’ of the a-n website – search: **Flying a Flag: the intrinsic value of study in the Visual and applied arts**.

Personal research in this area is, as stated above, an on-going experiment in how best to prepare Fine Art students for audiences other than those in their specialist field. Demonstrable feedback has indicated that participating students gain confidence in finding common ground in discussion with potential placements. Given that they are taking very much a proactive role in seeking complementary off-site experiences they need to be prepared to make ‘proposals’ (discursive and written), negotiate and adapt accordingly. Developing a range of transferable skills they are encouraged to critically reflect on their contribution and analyse the experience in terms of planned and unplanned outcomes. Working within the module group they are encouraged to articulate their rationale, consider the feasibility of the intention and anticipate difficulties and likely problems. Group tutorials have a vital role in the supportive interrogation of the ideas in a broader social context. Understandably, many problems arise over the period with some related to the students’ preparedness to plan effectively and others to the related difficulties of engagement with non-art based communities. What has been interesting over the years, however, is the increased awareness of possibilities beyond the current course of study. Some students have used the SICAP experience to secure further study at MA level accessing courses in social work, media, therapy etc. Others have pursued business initiatives, freelance workshops in schools, social centres or health related organisations.

Not wishing to exaggerate the claims for what is a small component part of a much more demanding Fine Art programme the module has served to complement and extend studio practice. It has given confidence and a voice to those who lacked confidence in using the tools that make the module work. Information and Communication Technology has provided a conduit as all students are linked to the module leader by personal email. This on-line

tutoring is offered throughout the whole period and documentation is exchanged, filed and evaluated to secure clarity of intention and sensitivity in engaging with outside agencies. The module leader routinely emails host institutions, visits those in the region and monitors performance against the success criteria. Students are also aided by guidance in formulating a final illustrated report and this professional documentation is assessed alongside all evidence of participation.

In conclusion, this Fine Art course as others are going through a process of change and development in accordance with the prevailing requirements and this particular reflection provides a background at this time of change.

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