Art and Design Education: Creative dialogues across the Arctic

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Introduction: creativity, networks and dialogue

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this historic occasion, the first Africa and Middle East Congress of the International Society for Education through Art; I am deeply honoured to be here.

The political, social and educational landscape is changing rapidly around the world and, concurrent with these changes, the demand for an adaptable, highly skilled and creative workforce is increasing. In most countries in northern Europe, particularly in Finland and the UK, higher education institutions have traditionally produced graduates with a good 'skills mix' of creativity, Information Communication Technology (ICT) and sound practical competences. Art schools, with their emphasis on independent and studio-based learning have been adept at allowing students to pursue their own ideas, whilst providing training in practical and craft skills. Education in art and design has always been about creativity, problem solving and encouraging alternative ways of seeing and making sense of the world. Although there are notable exceptions, what has been missing in many such programmes has been practice-based learning rooted in the 'real world'.

Over the past twenty years or so, in many European countries and in the United States, there has been something of a narrowing of the scope of educational provision, especially the school curriculum and a focus on so called 'core' subjects; Language, science and mathematics. There are worrying signs that this is extending to the higher education sector. An unfortunate consequence of this has been the sidelining of some subjects, for example art and design drama, dance and music have often found themselves on the edges of the debate about what skills and experience are important and relevant to society:

> […] the emphasis on practical and craft making skills has been lost,
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> while schools are too narrowly assessed and regulated on the basis of

qualifications achieved and university places attained rather than the depth and intensity of the learning experience. (CiC, 2012, p.17.)

While these changes have been taking place, the world of work has changed almost beyond recognition. Employers are seeking innovative people who are good at team working, adaptable, creative problem solvers, who can work comfortably in an interdisciplinary manner. The so-called 'creative economy' (Bakhshi, Hargreaves & Mateos-Garcia, 2013, pp. 26-28) often characterised by very small, flexible and interdisciplinary companies, is an increasingly important sector of many national economies. Commerce and business has long recognised the benefits of networking and dialogue and, to an increasing extent, creativity is on the business agenda. It is not at all clear that higher education providers (in art) have kept pace with the changes in society and current employment requirements, especially in the so-called creative industries. Concern is growing, across the Higher Education (HE) sector, that there is no longer good fit between what is being taught and what is required in a changing industrial, commercial and business landscape.

Employers in the 21st century increasingly seek workers who are:
   o Adaptable
   o Creative
   o Problem solvers
   o Team workers

In the far North of Finland, a unique masters level programme has been developed that promotes innovative models of working with groups and communities. The programme simultaneously provides theoretical and practice-based experience; it is called *Applied Visual Arts.* The *Applied Visual Arts* (AVA) programme is based on a context-driven model of arts practice and social engagement. Through practical, creative engagement in 'real life' situations, students learn to use dialogical methods and recognise the importance professional and creative networks.

New directions for art education?

Figure 1: International summer school: Collaborative learning Photo: Glen Coutts

As the economic, political and social landscape changes in Europe and the rest of the world, perhaps we need to reconsider the nature, purpose and direction of education and training in art at all levels from the early years onwards.

The relative importance of the 'creative industries' (Bakhshi et al, 2013; CiC, 2012) to the economic life of countries has been an area of hot debate for some time. It is increasingly recognised that this sector of the economy makes significant contributions in terms of wealth creation and employment (Bakhshi et al, 2013, pp. 35-39). The implications of changes brought about by, for example, developments in digital technologies, changing demographics, travel opportunities, ageing populations or youth unemployment should also give pause for thought. These concerns have led to discussion about *what* is taught in our schools and universities and also *how* it is taught. Is the model

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that served previous generations really still fit for purpose? Since the 1980s, especially in the UK, there has been a shift of emphasis in school and, to certain extent, university curricula; art and science have ended up as 'either / or' choices for many of our students and we need to consider the implications of this: *'[…] you need to bring art and science back together. Think back to the glory days of the Victorian era. It was a time when the same people wrote poetry and built bridges.'* (Schmidt 2011, p. 6). In many countries, notably the US and parts of the UK, there is an increasing emphasis on STEM[1] subjects and one unfortunate effect of that drive has been the marginalization of some arts and humanities subjects, in many schools and colleges. Some commentators argue for a more balanced and holistic approach (Sproll, 2013):

> […] a consequence of the subsequent reductionist approach to the education of American students, which preferences STEM subjects, will inevitably and regrettably come at the expense of the provision of a broad educational experience for our young people, one that is inclusive of the humanities and, most particularly of course, the creative subjects, which all too often find themselves on the margins of school curricula.

In the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the United Kingdom there is a growing lobby for a more central position for the arts and a new acronym – 'STEAM'[2] as recognition that 'In this climate of economic uncertainty, America is once again turning to innovation as the way to ensure a prosperous future' (Sproll 2013). The evidence in the research and reports on education and the creative industries clearly points in one direction; change is needed. Art and design programmes in HE need to make more active connections with life in the 'real world' to prepare students to be the tomorrow's innovative entrepreneurs.

The pre-university education systems vary from country to country across Europe and the place of arts subjects varies even more:

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[1] STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
[2] STEAM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics. The term 'art' here is usually understood to mean 'art and design'.

…in more than two thirds of the education systems examined, no criteria to assess the learning of arts subjects are made available to teachers by the central education authorities. In other words, this means that teachers, alone in their class or collectively with their colleagues within the school, have to draw up the assessment criteria themselves. (Eurodyce, 2009, p.52.)

This situation, in addition to the growing emphasis on 'the basics' or 'core subjects' has led to a somewhat inconsistent picture in arts education in the second level, or pre-higher education (high school), sector. If we take the UK as an example, in England at the time of writing the government is prioritising sciences, mathematics and languages; as a result there is no secure place for arts subjects – the STEM model. By contrast, Scotland is introducing the so-called *Curriculum for Excellence,* a radical shake up of educational provision between the ages of 3 and 18. There is an emphasis on inter-disciplinary working and cross-curricular study. Cross cutting themes such as creativity and literacy are central to curriculum development and teachers have more say in what and how they teach. At the heart of this new curriculum sit the aspirations to develop four key capacities in learners; successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Broad themes such as citizenship, creativity and enterprise are highlighted, as are periods of placement experience (work-based learning).

The contrast in approach between two neighbouring nations could not be more pronounced as both strive to provide effective educational foundations for the citizens of the 21st century. It is incumbent on higher education providers to design programmes that are theoretically sound, rigorous, practice-based and tightly connected to the world beyond academia. It could be argued that training in our institutions of higher education needs to be more 'future orientated' and fit for purpose if it is to adequately serve the shifting needs of society. In short, I am arguing for a new direction in art education, one that promotes creative dialogue and social engagement as an integral part of the student learning experience.

The convergence of art, design and education

Figure 2: The ASAD network - Arctic Arts & Design

The connections between learning in the academy and the world of business are not always easy to make. Indeed, the disciplines of 'art' and 'design' are often seen as separate in many institutions. However, in the case of Applied Visual Arts, the programme seeks to develop a symbiotic relationship between art and design. Similarly, the terms 'art' and 'education' should be interpreted in the broadest sense; education to embrace that which takes place in informal sectors of society as well as schools or colleges and art as practised in the participative, collaborative and socially-engaged world of AVA.

When we consider the sort of arts work going on in Northern Finland and the other countries that are part of the *Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design* network (ASAD, 2016), some questions might arise. When does art practice cross the line into design and vice versa? What do artists and art educators mean when they talk about 'ownership', 'empowerment' or 'agency'? What lessons can be learned from people working with community groups outside the school or university curriculum for teachers and academics? These questions are just a few of those that may be considered when assessing the educational potential of AVA. Students and staff work together to design and deliver 'innovative productions' (Jokela, 2012, p.7) on location and with community groups. The research and teaching experience of members of the ASAD network from across the Arctic (Jokela & Coutts, 2014; 2015) provides an insight to some of the ways that the disciplines of design, art and education can come together.

Applied Visual Arts: Animating learning

Figure 3: Active, collaborative learning - snow sculpture. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen

At the core of Applied Visual Art practice lie the notions of participation, engagement, collaboration and innovation. To design and deliver effective AVA projects requires not only the ability to innovate, but also the capacity to motivate. The artist who opts to work in the field of AVA is not an artist first and foremost, in the traditional individualist, self-expressive sense. Rather, the artist acts as a *facilitator* for a community group, bringing skills and experience to enable communities or groups to arrive at solutions over which they have a sense of 'ownership'. Essentially, to work in Applied Visual Art means taking a step back, handing over some control and allowing the artwork to emerge from the group. Artists adopting this model of practice must constantly refine and develop their own skills, not just those required to create

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artwork, but also those necessary for understanding community issues and problems, working in partnership with those who will host the results of the process. Applied Visual Artists need excellent communication, interpersonal, motivational and organisational skills to facilitate effective art projects. It is not an easy career option.

The emphasis is on the role of the artist as facilitator, animateur or 'enabler' and it is incumbent on the artist to arrive at innovative solutions in collaboration with community groups and, often, local companies and service providers, for example tourist organisations.

What might be the educational benefits of AVA projects? In addition to subject-specific learning in art and design, collaborative projects might promote the development of exactly the sort of skills that I referred to earlier; problem, solving, team work and so on. AVA is, by its very nature, practical and favours an active, experiential learning style and it is normally characterised by collaborative work (as opposed to the traditional image of the solitary artist in a studio). The (physical) results of AVA projects are often temporary, unlike much of the art that ends up in public and civic places.

The key characteristics of AVA include an emphasis on process rather than product; active rather than passive engagement with issues and problems; the artist as facilitator - emphasis on developing the skills of others within the context of a community setting. As a result, AVA might be seen not only as a particular form of arts practice, but also as an inclusive and active model of learning.

What can be learned from the AVA interdisciplinary and participative approach? What are the implications for artists wishing to work in this way? Questions such as these, need to be addressed in order that the salient features of good practice might be extrapolated from the various projects. Many projects have been short-term; a strength or a weakness? As the distinctions between 'community',' mainstream', 'formal' and 'informal' education become increasingly blurred there is scope for more research into the place and practice of AVA. There is also room for consideration of the potential of AVA to 'animate' learning across the intersections of 'art' and 'education'.

If we think of Applied Visual Art from this perspective and pause for a moment to think about the pedagogic potential of AVA practice and an appraisal of how it might inform more 'traditional' models of artists working in the public domain. What are the distinctive features, qualities and benefits of Applied Visual Art? How might these characteristics inform practice in our education system for the arts at all levels? Importantly, how might these qualities be researched, documented and evaluated? How might the salient features and distinctive ways of working of AVA intersect with the domain on education?

An innovative tool for learning?

Figure 4: Project with older generation: Snow sculpture: Photo Mirja Hiltunen

I am aware that, to many readers, the term 'applied arts' still conjures up images of glass, ceramics, furniture, graphic design, architecture and so on, but that is not what is meant when considering applied visual arts as it is taught and practiced in the North of Finland. The key word is 'applied', it implies something useful, relevant and suitable to a particular context, visual art that is produced following a careful contextual investigation and interpretation, almost always in collaboration with others; community groups, business partners or both. It is in this sense that AVA has a great deal in common with design, but we do not talk about Applied Visual Design, for the simple reason that often the artist rather than the client identifies the 'problem'

(often in collaboration with a community group) rather than the client posing a problem to the designer in the form of a brief.

Nevertheless, emergent fields of design share much in common with AVA thinking – service design, participatory design, co-creation and user generated design (see Armstrong & Stojmirovic 2011 for example).

In essence, AVA practice is multi and inter-disciplinary. Successful examples of AVA draw on many different disciplines and traffic back and forth across the traditional boundaries of fine art and design. Methodologies inherent in design processes can be clearly traced in many of the AVA projects reported in this volume. The artists who work in this field require skills that are not often taught in art academies; they are artists for sure, but they also need skills in research, documentation, analysis, community engagement, interpretive innovation (Lester & Piore 2004) and design thinking (MacDonald 2012). To engage communities and companies with the practise of art requires practical skills, leadership, innovation, entrepreneurship and diplomacy; one might argue that pedagogical skills are important too.

Applied Visual Art as presented here refers to projects that involve artists working with, or for, people in a public context. The art form is a context-driven model of art practice characterised by notions of participation, collaboration and inclusion. It should also be recognised that, while the main focus of this book is on visual arts, projects frequently embraces work across the arts disciplines. Projects might include, for example performance, sound

and movement. Working in this field, artists need to draw on different disciplines, for example anthropology, cultural geography and place-making, sociology, history or town and country planning. So, inevitably, there are many points of overlap and interaction between different disciplines and it is impossible for the artist to be an expert in all of them. It is however essential that the artist has skills in what Lester and Piore have called 'interpretive innovation'. This has implications for the education system. Education providers need to consider whether the programmes on offer are the most conducive to developing the skills-base required to deal with the complexities of the world of work in the 21st century. The social issues facing many countries, such as unemployment, ageing populations or health and well being often provided the context for AVA projects (Coutts & Jokela, 2015).

Conclusion

To conclude, it could be argued that Applied Visual Arts embodies sound art practices on the one hand and potential learning environments/ situations on the other. Furthermore, the notions of participation and co-creation are increasingly to the fore in current educational thinking. The balance between theory and practice and 'hands on' thinking through making permeates good practice in AVA, similarly it may offer alternative approaches to education. Essentially we are talking about a dialogical approach (Kester, 2004).

In an age when the digital revolution has impacted every aspect of our lives, when computers have rendered some jobs obsolete whilst simultaneously creating new ones (think of the film industry, music or advertising), we need to

be proactive in response to the changing needs of society. Applied Visual Arts requires creative professionals with highly developed craft skills coupled with the ability to share and pass these on in the real world beyond academia.

The projects I have presented invite the audience to consider what education can learn from art and design practice, and from visual culture, rather than how such practice can be accommodated within traditional education structures.

Note

More information about the Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design network can be found at: www.asadnetwork.org

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