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The academic dimension in craft education: Anomaly or opportunity?

There is an interesting dichotomy in the teaching of crafts as a subject in UK tertiary institutions. It is taught as an academic degree – but in what is essentially a vocational manner. After all, students are expected to be able to 'do' ceramics, glass or jewellery when they graduate. There is an underlying ambivalence at the heart of educational institutions concerning the valuing of subjects that are taught by doing – iteratively – by the body, rather than by the mind. One option is to divorce craft from academia; to teach it as a purely vocational subject, as an apprenticeship, and in some cases this would be an excellent option. But it is not the only option. Academic work and studio work can exist in harmony and indeed complement each other. But there is a need to define what academic study in crafts needs to provide for the student, for the institution, and for the wider society. The challenge is to make the academic work that students do relevant, not just in an institutional sense (where a dissertation, for example, 'proves' that students have a right to represent themselves as academic degree level students to society at large) but to their wider lives.

As an educator in Higher Education today I feel under pressure all the time to change what I do according to the winds of change and the whims of those in power. Should my teaching be less academic? More employer-focused? There is a subtle pressure not to push students too hard for fear of Trip Advisor style feedback from things like the National Student Survey. This I find particularly misguided. I know I am not the only person to have passed through a degree who finds themselves thinking some (at times many) years later of a lecture or tutorial, and making a new kind of sense of it. And yet our accountability systems are determinedly short term. All of this is presented to us as being in the interest of students; but I feel we should question this robustly. The question we need to ask is, what are we actually providing when we provide what we do as educators? In whose interests? There is a tremendous pressure in education in the UK to 'return' to a kind of imaginary land in which students are all writing academic papers for esoteric journals, discovering new types of (lucrative) processes or materials, starting debating clubs and probably learning Greek in their spare time. These may all be good things … But there seems to be a concomitant shift, with students who study vocational (in this case arts) subjects, away from academia, as if it is not relevant, or worse, as if because they are vocational they can't cope with academic thinking or writing. I am not about to argue against appropriate differentiation for students. But I do want to try to make a case for the retention and development of academic ways of thinking, of understanding the world, for *all* students.

It's not just because it's my job that I think this impulse to do away with the academic side of craft altogether is a bad idea. My own experience of studying what was called Communication and Cultural Studies was to feel as if I had gained a new kind of sight, a new sense by which I could examine the world. I realised a new sense of freedom, and I would like to pass this on to students. The ability to engage in critical thinking gives freedom in this knowledge and understanding of whose interests are being served in each type of cultural practice encountered in everyday life. I believe that until one realises that everyone has an agenda, and starts to be able to ferret out what those agendas are, one can't be free – specifically free to act.

Action is significant in particular ways as a measure of craft. Whilst so much fine art is essentially saying, 'LOOK!', drawing attention to aspects or things, craft has been concerned with, centred on, and defined by a sense of agency. In an age where Rob Hopkins of the Transition Movement can say that we are bringing up the single most useless generation in history,[1] craft students have what many do not – skills. They can actually make things with their hands. This making things may be a kind of meta-skill, a problem-solving-in-action one, in that it may become an attitude that transfers to other areas of life. In any case it is a sense of action (and agency; being capable of action) which sets craft apart. It is also something that is needed in education.

The work of John P. Portelli, Professor in the Department of Humanities, Social Science and Social Justice Education and Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, examines the role of ideology in both the structure and the content of courses at educational institutions. Despite the fact that some current government ministers seem to be of the opinion that 'ideology' means the same thing as 'Marxism', and that teachers are engaged in promoting it, Portelli says that educational ideology is currently neo-liberal. This is potentially problematic, and the more so because it seems neutral, though it is anything but.

Neoliberalism started as an economic theory, but has long since migrated: what began as a desire (promoted by economists such as Milton Friedman – see Friedman and Friedman 1980 – and others) to have total freedom of movement for capital, goods and services, into a more philosophical realm. The idea that the most important freedoms are market freedoms has been extended into culture, become more like theology than economics. Paul Treanor (2005) writes:

> As you would expect from a complete philosophy, neoliberalism has answers to stereotypical philosophical questions such as 'Why are we here' and 'What should I do?'. We are here for the market, and you should compete. Neo-liberals tend to believe that humans exist for the market, and not the other way around: certainly in the sense that it is good to participate in the market, and that those who do not participate have failed in some way. In personal ethics, the general neoliberal vision is that every human being is *an entrepreneur managing their own life*, and should act as such. Moral philosophers call this a virtue ethic, where human beings compare their actions to the way an ideal type would act – in this case the ideal entrepreneur. Individuals who choose their friends, hobbies, sports, and partners, to maximise their status with future employers, are ethically neoliberal. Such social actions are not necessarily monetarised, but they represent an extension of the market principle into non-economic area [sic] of life. (emphasis in original)

Portelli says that because the neoliberal agenda and ideology are so entrenched and hegemonic we are blind to them – but that we won't change anything until, and unless, we embrace the critical democratic approach. This is an approach to education that stems from the work of Paolo Freire (see Richard Shaull, cited in Mayo 1999: 5) and others, which firstly has at its heart an understanding that education is never politically neutral, and that educators must engage with conscious decisions surrounding ideology:

> There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an Instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Secondly, a critical democratic education prepares students for thinking critically with the aim of encouraging them to participate in their own schooling as a way of preparing them to shape the future. This approach sees students as active participants in communities, and furthermore sees conflict as a good and necessary engagement with different beliefs about what is in the community's best interests, rather than as something which needs to be shut down or cut off (Winton 2010).

Having said all that, there is a real issue for educators who believe that students should be encouraged to question and engage in conflict rather than to consume and produce. How can we help students to see themselves as actors – stakeholders and participants, in the sense of Freire's participatory action research – when the venal reality is that we may also need to keep our jobs in an atmosphere increasingly antagonistic towards this approach? The critical–democratic approach is at heart one of 'common-sense' attitudes towards power relations, and Portelli fittingly suggests flying under the radar. He says:

> … subversion is a useful form of resistance for educators and policy makers committed to promoting social justice and equity and resisting the injustices and inequities created by the neoliberal context … some of the major tensions and problems in the ethics of subversion in education … include: Are disobedience and dishonesty justifiable? Is asserting the mere personhood of oppressed people subversive in the context of oppressive power structures? Is resistance to oppression our responsibility/duty? Is subversion

> useful/virtuous? (I) …challenge the view that subversion is harmful or negative, and will argue that subversion is often useful in resisting injustice and thereby promoting justice … an important means to achieving more equitable and morally sound education.[2]

We shy away from the idea that we should be teaching values, ignoring the fact that everything we do as educators has an ideology or set of values embedded in it. We're just pretending that we don't teach neo-liberal agendas and values. Given the ideological change in government initiatives in education, it seems subversive enough some days to merely question neoliberal ideology. (What happens on an institutional level often is that educators are given instructions to become more reactive to what student–consumers want, while at the same time students are not encouraged in any meaningful way to examine what it is they may want outside of a producer/consumer paradigm.) Here is where the academic side of vocational education might have a more important role than one of teaching students to write essays (the role it's often seen as occupying). For example, students may come to a college course thinking they can make a decent living as a craftsperson. If we were to study Marx in a neoliberal way we may concentrate on the writing, or the theory as something historical and unconnected to students' lives. When we look at Marx in a more critical–democratic way, students may begin to recognise that as crafters they are/have only one unit of capital. They may realise they can only break out of this single unit of capital restriction as artists or designers, where art is part of an investment economy and design a manufactory one. Furthermore, there would be a role in examining and exploring what alternative structures there may be (to be entered into, developed, or possibly challenged) to the current capitalist ones. In this scenario students would have less literary interaction with texts, but arguably more of an exemplified understanding of the theory.

Of course, this is neither widely publicised. Nor is it the entirety of the subversion.

Students are paying more for their tertiary education, and they are consequently expecting more. But expecting more what? I would argue that the more that they think they want is direction, not freedom. But this is an art college! (Or drama degree, or experimental science, or geography in a rapidly changing world – whatever.) I think students are giving their freedom away when they expect this 'more' from an institution and its representatives, and we are complicit in this when we treat them like some odd version of hotel inspectors. Paradoxically I think we give more as educators when we withhold ease, whether this is the ease of continually being told what their achievement level is, or giving them information they could spend some time finding out for themselves, or any one of a hundred other initiatives that have been set up to head off discomfort. In whose interests is this desperate fear of conflict? We say we want to stretch students, to challenge them to achieve their best. Here I am invoking Emerson when he said: 'Your actions speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.' Questioning and acting are imperative; not always encouraged. But the discomfort of conflict can often bring very positive results.

When I used to live in a caravan in some woods I had a little handwritten reminder to myself on my wall, something that I'd read somewhere. It said: 'HEALTH AND HAPPINESS *OR* COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE', and it was there to remind me that I couldn't have both. Living in the woods was hard work, without many of the conveniences I had taken for granted in our modern world, but I *was* healthy and happy there. Of course the position is a relative one, and it's a provocative statement (and quite an uncomfortable one for many) but I still think in broad terms you give up health or happiness if you focus on comfort and convenience. You can't have the nth degree of both. In terms of sustainability you can't have both either – our desire for comfort brings us into direct conflict with natural systems and their limits. Again, questioning this desire for comfort and convenience, in sustainability terms as in educational terms, could be seen as a subversive act, or at least an ideologically questioning one. I do see the two as inherently linked, and I think theoretical cultural study and research have an important role to play in both.

We might begin by drawing attention to the contention that making needs to be underpinned by a deep understanding of the culture and conditions under which it is produced. This view is mirrored by my experiences both as a teacher, and as a researcher into sustainability. Not just unsustainable behaviours, but the thinking that leads to unsustainable behaviours, must be addressed in order for meaningful change to occur. In most institutions, the focus of sustainability initiatives is on stuff. But if we take a more critical and analytical approach to the ideas of sustainability we might begin to, for example, apply the ideas of Marx and the fetishisation of the commodity to sustainability,

perhaps finding that when we focus on the end commodity, even if that commodity is something as nebulous as energy use or carbon credits, we still think we have no intimate relationship with these units or with their producers, and we still think we can buy our way out of trouble. In other words, there is an analogy between the ways we (as institutions) engage with concepts in the world, and the way students can engage with academic tasks.

In setting out my position that levels of engagement with critical thinking in the academic side of crafts education are analogous to levels of engagement with sustainability, I will give a number to these portrayals of levels. Level 1 is just enough to pass, Level 2 is a problem solving, meta-learning one, and I will call Level 3 'ninja'.

Level 1 can be described as learning just enough to pass; what students might call 'doing' a dissertation. They turn up for some lectures and tutorials, write something that interests them enough to carry them through the process, and hand it in. The do enough to pass, and see this as enough, because they don't see that the academic side of their course has much to do with their craft practice, or their life. In my analogy this is where most institutions are with their engagement with sustainability debates. They engage in carbon offsetting and so on, because the government makes them. They do enough to pass. And, like students, this is often because it would be a wide disruption of comfort or convenience to do anything else. However, as Stephen Sterling (2007) says:

> The critical problems of unsustainability are interpreted in terms of a systems failure of society, economy and education to be in tune with the systemic nature of the ecosphere and to fit within its resource limits. At a deeper level, this is traced to the dominant mechanistic cultural worldview. In whose interests is this behaviour?

In this way, when institutions do not question their role in upholding the dominant paradigm, we must ask – in whose interests is this?

In Level 2 of the analogy, when students are engaging with academic constructs, they see their learning in the workshop and in critical thinking and writing as equivalent and complementary. They see a relevance to their lives, and they begin to see that words are material. The learning becomes an end in itself and the process of taking on information, whether academic or tacit (or any other way) is the same process. It could be argued that the process of making in itself creates a kind of meta-learning, if students are encouraged to see the wider picture of their processes of problem solving in materials and to relate it to the rest of their work and lives. In a similar way, institutions might instigate more rigorous sustainability measures, looking, for example, at cultural, social, economic and ecological sustainability measures. Here is a level at which the critical democratic precept of truly engaging in meaningful debate with students may take place, though we would still be unlikely to see questioning of the differentials in wages between managers and cleaners in institutions, or a rigorous exploration of the power struggles between institutions and their local areas.

Level 3 is the ninja level. At this level, learning is not for the sake of marks, or even for the sake of the joy of the experience, but becomes transformative. Students learn about themselves as well as about ideas, develop values as well as knowledge, as Portelli and others describe. What would institutions look like if we engaged with this? It would not be easy to describe this, as for one thing it would look different in each case. But one thing that might happen is that we might stop breaking things down into small quantifiable units, and look at systems theories instead. In the nexus between learning and sustainability I have been talking about, we might not teach Education for Sustainable Development but Education for Sustainable Contraction. As David Selby (2007) says:

> We should urgently and concretely explore the idea of Education for Sustainable Contraction [ESC]; in other words, what would be the nature of education directed towards helping humanity through a period when assumptions about progress and betterment folded into the concept of 'development' are more severely tested than ever before. What is the role of education in helping foster an alternative conception of the 'good life' as part of efforts to forestall the onset of the worst effects of global heating? What is the role of education should those worst effects begin to happen?

It takes an understanding of culture to be able to fully investigate and understand processes and materials. This way of thinking can be taught and nurtured to become a systemic approach, in institutions and in lived experience. Such an approach could lead to a more robust and resilient approach to

the ideas around sustainability, but also and at the same time to those around materiality, process and craft. In one sense, of course, it is good to make sure that students are not dissatisfied with their educational experiences because of sub-standard elements of provision. But those students of mine who have decided to go to Borneo to work with orang-utan orphanages, to start community farms or to otherwise look beyond the 'We are here for the market, and you should compete' message: they are rubbish for the institution's retention figures. But I cannot, in any sense, look on them as anything but major successes. Because when I question what I am doing, and ask myself in whose interests, I want to be able to be answer honestly: mine, and my students'. As Portelli (2012) writes:

We have the moral responsibility to question the myth that the 'achievement gap' can be reduced by simply improving test scores of tests that purport to be neutral and objective while at the same time reproducing the neoliberal way of life without ever offering a reasonable justification for it.

Amidst all the 'quality control measures', the rubrics, the quantifications and the questionnaires, we need to keep sight of our moral responsibilities; as educators, as people, and as denizens of this planet. We must remember that the purpose of knowing is to act. Our job as educators is to make clear that teaching knowledge for tests or just knowing is not enough; and that action needs to take place within an understanding of whose interests are really being served by the actions. For me, this is why the teaching of critical theoretical approaches is necessary. In this (and following on from Emerson), I am also invoking Thoreau (see Thoreau and McKinney 2007: 25):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Notes

1. See carbonmanagers.com website: http://www.carbonmanagers.com/blog/file/newsletter-articles/the-great-unleashing.aspx (accessed 11 January 2014).

2. Available at: http://www.dprconference.com/archive/dpr-13-archive/561-portelli-john-when-subversion-is-a-virtue-a-response-to-the-neoliberal-context (accessed 4 January 2014).

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