

Crafting professionals – professional development and entrepreneurship in UK crafts higher education

by Lauren England, King's College London

Abstract

Situated within the context of declining participation in and provision of craft higher education, this paper explores pedagogical framings of professional development in UK crafts higher education (HE) and skills for independent craft practice. Through the analysis of online courses descriptions from a sample of undergraduate craft programmes across multiple disciplines and regions in England, I examine educational practices and the ways in which craft, professional practice and entrepreneurship are conceptualised within HE. From this, I reflect on approaches taken to contemporary practice and how the presence or absence of discussion on craft and business could impact the practices of future professionals. This is combined with findings from interviews with four early-career practitioners, in which I reflect on the experience of professional development within HE and identify priority skills and resources including recommendations for additional support requirements within and outside of HE. The paper also highlights a need for further in-depth research into the influence of HE training on professional development for craft.

Introduction

This paper presents early-stage findings from a collaborative PhD project between King's College London and Crafts Council UK through which the themes of craft work ideologies, entrepreneurship, and the skills requirements of crafts graduates are being explored within the context of UK higher education.

Situated within the context of declining participation in and provision of craft higher education as noted in the Crafts Council's report *Studying Craft 16* (Crafts Council, 2016), this paper explores pedagogical framings of professional development as occupational ideologies (Deuze, 2005) in UK crafts higher education (HE) and skills for independent craft practice. I start with the literature context for this research: the research questions and methodological approach taken. This is followed by the analysis of educational practices used to promote professional development within craft HE and reflections on pedagogical framings of craft work – how craft, professional creative practice and entrepreneurship are presented in higher education. I then explore makers' perspectives and seek to identify the needs of early career practitioners in developing sustainable creative practice post-graduation. The paper concludes with recommendations for additional professional development support both within and outside of higher education.

Context

The key areas of literature I have drawn from for this research are: craft careers in the creative industries, occupational identity and ideologies, entrepreneurship and enterprise education, and creative graduates in the creative economy.

Craft and the creative industry

Susan Luckman notes a tendency to misrepresent craft and its values as being anti-industrial (Luckman, 2015). In this research I am interested in how craft and its values are positioned in higher education, particularly at a time when employability and entrepreneurship agendas are dominant within the HE sector.

There are indicators that in professional creative activity there exists an aversion to the term crafts maker, with preference given to terms such as 'maker' or 'designer-maker' which are seen as more professional and of higher status (Pollard, 2007). One suggestion is that aversion to defining oneself as a craftsperson may be a result of diversified practice (Hughes, 2012) where makers working across materials and processes do not see themselves aligned with the craft tradition or specific material as is often used to define craft (Adamson, 2007). Contrastingly, the words 'authentic' and 'craft' have been appropriated by marketing and corporate entities seeking to instil a sense of added value to their products (Lloyd-Jones, 2015: 17). The value of 'craft' is also dominant within the food and drinks industry and service jobs such as butchers, barbers, bartenders and distillers (Ocejo, 2017). In my own research I am exploring how craft and professional practice is framed within craft HE today and whether an aversion to defining oneself as a crafts maker is perpetuated by the education system as there is currently limited empirical evidence of this.

Occupational identity and ideology

In observing pedagogical framings of craftwork I consider the concept of occupational ideologies, following the definition given by Ranson 'the habits, beliefs, values and social relationships associated with work' (1989: 90). By analysing the discourse presented in HE in relation to craftwork I hope to develop an understanding of approaches taken to contemporary creative practice.

I argue that the ideological positioning of craft work is not merely a semantic issue; according to Caves (2000), educational training has the potential to influence the professional development and the identity formation of crafts practitioners; 'School training defines or reinforces the budding artist's standards and personal goals, setting attitudes that colour the artist's subsequent dealings in the marketplace' (*ibid*: 21). However, there is currently little evidence regarding the playing out of ideologies for creative practice or institutional philosophies as described by Bennett (2009) within the craft education system and the impact this has on craft students and their career literacy - 'awareness of industry structures and potential roles and the ability and confidence to locate one's self within them' (Bennett and Robertson, 2015: 13).

Some examples of broader social and educational ideologies for craft are the Arts and Crafts Movement (Crawford, 1997) and figures such as Ruskin and Morris who were anti industry and prioritised the pursuit of 'good work'; The Bauhaus and Walter Gropius's manifesto (Gropius, 1919) which promoted the integration of art, design and craft and in contrast to the Arts and Crafts Movement embraced industry; and John Makepeace's vision for Parnham School where making, creative and business education were integrated. However, there is little evidence of the contemporary ideologies that are presented in craft HE today and how these influence graduate practice and perceptions of craft.

Entrepreneurship and enterprise

A growing body of research has highlighted a need for entrepreneurial skills development in the creative industries (Ball et al., 2010). However, there is currently a lack of consensus around what best practice is for creative entrepreneurship education (Clews, 2007), although it is acknowledged that traditional business-school approaches are ineffective (Pollard and Wilson, 2013). There is also a lack of empirical evidence of the influence such practices have on the development of professional practice.

While the Crafts Council (2014) state in their manifesto for craft education that craft practice is entrepreneurial, I argue that this depends on your definition of entrepreneurship and enterprise and that crafts' relationship with entrepreneurship is not that straight forward. Definitions of entrepreneurship in the literature span from an emphasis on business management skills, desire to form a new enterprise, the recognition and exploitation of new opportunities, attributes based, career self-management or a combination of these. The terms and concepts of entrepreneurship and self-employment can also be conflated (Penaluna and Penaluna, 2011) and may not be fully understood in a craft context. There is also a general agreement in the literature that craft labour and pursuing a career as a maker is driven by intrinsic, non-monetary motivations (Banks, 2010). The very label of "entrepreneur" may therefore contradict the motivations, aspirations and identity of the creative person (Rae, 2004) as discussed later in this paper.

Creative graduates and the creative economy

While employability and preparing students for industry are seen as a key priority within HE today (Ashton, 2015), knowledge and skills gaps have been highlighted within creative curriculum which, according to Bridgstock and Cunningham (2016: 21) 'may in part be due to a certain hardy Romanticism in creative arts education' which promotes pure artistic endeavour without thought for financial gain. Angela McRobbie (2016: 12) has also suggested that 'a whole new vocabulary' is needed to address issues of financial stability and compensation for creative work. This suggests that part of the problem may lie in how we talk about creative practice and creative careers both within and outside of higher education.

The wider creative graduates literature calls for broad employability, career management and transferable skills development (Bridgstock, 2011) to facilitate portfolio working and capacity for non-creative employment. Meanwhile, craft-focused literature calls for greater entrepreneurial business development and applied, practical knowledge that is tailored to the needs of the sector (Hunt et al., 2010). I am interested in what approach is taken in craft education and what the priorities are of early career crafts makers in relation to the current educational provision.

Methodology

A two-stage methodology was taken for this study. Firstly, desktop analysis of secondary data to identify common educational practices and explore institutional ideologies presented within texts. I take a material discipline definition of craft, as this is how crafts are categorised in higher education, and focus on contemporary 'core craft' disciplines; ceramics, textiles, glass, metal, wood, jewellery and general crafts.

For stage 1, I used course outlines and programme specifications from 22 degrees from 14 HE providers in England. Quasi-statistical analysis was applied to educational practices explicitly cited within texts, focusing on professional development. I also used thematic analysis of course outlines and programme specifications to explore ideological positioning.

For stage 2, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 4 early career craft makers. The focus of the interviews was on identity, entrepreneurship, skills and the higher education experience and included a skills-ranking exercise on skills for independent creative practice. Thematic analysis was used for the interview transcripts and combined with quasi-statistical analysis of the skills ranking to form a priority ranking. The interview sample size was small, and the findings therefore represent initial reflections and indications of graduate needs. This will be developed in further research.

I acknowledge that course outlines on institutional websites are marketing material designed for recruitment and may, therefore, not truly represent the realities of studying craft at a particular institution. Nevertheless, I argue that the ways in which craft practice and graduate destinations are presented within this material to prospective students requires consideration as it may influence students' subject choice, their expectations of their degree programme and perceptions of craft work. In further research I will look more closely at this relationship between the course material and its messaging, and the expectations and course selection of first year crafts students.

Educational practices, skills and attributes

Here I identify practices and skills that are explicitly mentioned within course outlines or programme specifications. In future research I will explore how effective these practices are at developing career skills and knowledge according to graduate makers.

Common practices for professional development within the sample were:

- Developing a portfolio or body of work
- Live of external briefs
- Exhibiting work
- Collaborative projects/ team work
- Competitions and awards
- Placements as an integrated part of the curriculum
- Placements as extracurricular activity

Less common practices were:

- Commission work
- Selling work
- Business planning
- Sandwich year – year in industry
- Teaching experience

Skills and Technology: As may be expected given the specialist nature of some crafts courses, prominence was given to developing specialist technical skills. However, there is an emphasis on new technology combined with traditional techniques and digital manufacturing/ design processes. Developing communication skills and being able to effectively communicate ideas to an audience was also prominent.

Community and external: Visiting professionals are positioned as a way of developing networks and as role models for practice. Industry engagement through projects and competitions is also highlighted as enhancing student understanding of industry practices and develop professional skills, while also keeping the course

relevant to the demands of industry. Staff (lecturers and technicians) are often noted as sources of inspiration and knowledge, examples of creative practice, and cited as experts in their specialism.

Context and commerce: Importance was placed on students developing sector awareness and contextualising their practice within professional, market, social and historical contexts. There is a fairly high commercial element to educational practices within the textual representations in terms of awareness but less so in terms of practical skills and experiences. However, it is hard to tell from these texts whether there is more than a semantic difference between 'self-promotion' and 'marketing' within teaching practices. This will be explored in further case study research.

Craft practice and careers

Styles of learning and practice: An entrepreneurial approach to practice is encouraged and there is a strong neoliberal message that emphasises self-work and individual learning and development responsibilities. There is also an emphasis on developing an individual creative identity or visual language and being innovative. A critical, reflexive approach to practice is also encouraged.

Employability and careers: Overall, there is an emphasis on working in/for industry over being self-employed or running your own business. There is a low degree of emphasis on vocational pathways. Being a designer maker is commonly cited as a career pathway but not always contextualised or unpacked – i.e. running your own business, being self employed, working freelance etc. There appears to be a disparity however between starting your own business as a career path (64 per cent) and business skills (32 per cent) or business planning (18 per cent) within curriculum.

The diversity of career pathways and potential for employment outside of a making practice features heavily but there is limited acknowledgement of portfolio working styles, unsurprising given the marketing and recruitment context of the material. I will explore whether this is experienced in teaching practices through further case study research.

There are disciplinary differences, particularly between textiles and 'other crafts' subjects. Working in industry and being a designer-maker more prominent within Textiles Courses and a higher commercial outlook. There is significantly less emphasis on running your own business. Meanwhile, working in other creative roles (non-discipline related) is more prominent within Other Craft courses.

The language being used i.e. Personal/career planning or Business planning may indicate similar practices but semantically different. Something I will consider in further research is the effect of this on how students think about practice and understand creative practice as a business.

Crafting professionals

Institutional ideologies and educational approaches vary significantly, particularly in terms of their emphasis on commercial practice and/or business/enterprise. Common themes however are: a dominance of 'thinking through making', intellectualising the craft process; acknowledgement of diverse practice and practice pathways; identifying non-practice based career options and transferrable skill development and embracing new manufacturing technologies and digital design/fabrication.

The emphasis on the development of transferable skills and the diverse application of craft skills in professional roles and environments appears to acknowledge the potential value of craft and craft skills in other areas of creative and non-creative practice as advocated for by the Crafts Council (KPMG, 2016) while

also acknowledging the diverse career paths of creative graduates (Ashton, 2015). However, I argue that such emphasis on transferable skills may come at the cost of developing more vocationally aligned, practical skills for developing and sustaining creative business. Perhaps in responding to high-level education agendas for the development of 'work-ready' graduates there has been a further shift away from vocational-specific training towards a broader educational development system. Alternatively, this approach could be seen as acknowledging the competitive nature of creative work and challenges facing independent practitioners today (social and economic).

Nevertheless, I argue that it is not enough to merely encourage crafts students to consider alternative employment pathways in place of developing the skills required to enter self-employment if this is the ambition of the student. Alternate pathways may also have specific skill or experience requirements. Finding a balance between these areas can be seen as a significant challenge for Universities, when accounting for the diverse career aspirations of their students, and requires further investigation in order to understand students' career choices and the influence their universities have on their decision to pursue independent practice, taking into account their initial career intention.

Craft within higher education texts (course outlines and programme specifications) is used primarily in relation to specialised skill development. In fact, few courses promote their connection to craft, despite disciplinary links, with preference given to terms such as 'design', 'designer maker', 'creative practice' and 'making'. This is particularly noticeable within the textiles courses in my sample where the dominant discourse is around design. There are exceptions to this, but there appears to be a general omission of 'craft' within course promotion suggests that despite the most recent craft revival and value given to 'craft' when used as a marketing tool, this value has not been translated across into the education system.

It may be part of the decision of crafts HE providers to avoid using or overusing craft terminology in course promotional material, opting instead for terms such as design, industry and creative practice which may be perceived as more professional (Hughes, 2012). This may be a reflection of enterprise culture and the marketisation of higher education that does not recognise the value of craft.

While this may seem somewhat trivial, I would argue that as educational institutions currently provide the main training route into craft, an attachment or aversion to the term craft impacts both the practices of future professionals, and the craft sector overall. This relates to Walker's article 'Craft's identity crisis' and could create difficulty for sector development if the next generation of makers do not associate themselves as crafts makers but as designers, artists or crafts 'tourists' (Walker, 2016).

Entrepreneurship

36 per cent of the courses sampled identify entrepreneurship as a career path, and 50 per cent identify entrepreneurial opportunities and/or skills development within their curriculum. However, the positioning of entrepreneurship and enterprise is approached very differently by the institutions reviewed. For some, entrepreneurship is amalgamated with enterprise and starting own business, while for others the discourse is about entrepreneurial attributes valued in creative work: Leadership, ambition, autonomy, risk-taking, creativity, originality and innovation. Primarily, the discourse around entrepreneurship appears to follow a more attributes and personality-orientated approach to entrepreneurship; this can also be seen in courses that do not explicitly talk about entrepreneurship.

The makers I interviewed did not associate themselves with being entrepreneurial however. In fact, they presented slightly negative connotations with mass production and separation with the making process and suggested that an association with business, finance and making money was in conflict with artistic practice

values. There was also a sense that the innovation requirement of entrepreneurship conflicts with traditional skills based practice such as weaving.

Skills for independent creative practice

In this section I outline makers' perspectives of the skills needed for creative practice. When asked what skills were required to establish and sustain their creative practise after graduation the makers ranked these skills from most to least important:

- Business Vision (what kind of practice/business do I want?)
- Business planning (how to plan the business I want)
- Professional networks
- Customer relationships
- Marketing (online/offline)
- Market/Audience Research and Identification
- Professional identity (Who am I as a professional?)
- Finances- tax, cash flow, bookkeeping
- Costing and Pricing
- Sector awareness (What jobs/professions are there? Who else is involved?)
- Being entrepreneurial
- IP/Legal knowledge

Differences in perceived skills needs were observed between makers running a micro-enterprise as a commercial practice or an artistic practice. This was most noticeable in the skills ranking of Maker 4 who has a dual practice, an artistic practice and a jewellery business that they saw as a commercial venture and as a means of making money. Although the more profitable, this was seen as secondary to their artistic practice and they expressed disappointment in their jewellery work for being 'too commercial'. More typical 'business' skills were also seen as interfering with the artistic practice and there was a notable aversion to talking about finances and making money in reference to the artistic practice. Overall, the two were very much separated in their business approach and personal perception of each.

Recommendations

Further research is needed into higher education and professional development to understand its complexities and develop a picture of best practice for maker support both during and following higher education. However, at this stage I make the following recommendations for higher education and the wider craft sector based on the findings of this early stage research.

Higher Education:

The discourse around creative practice, business and entrepreneurship presented within higher education training appears to influence graduates' perceptions of their own practice. This could indicate a need to explicitly talk about creative practice as a business in order to increase graduate awareness of the realities of pursuing a career as a creative practitioner. There is also a need to address the relationship between creative practice and making money for financial stability to avoid a promotion of the 'starving artist' rhetoric but also takes into account the professional needs of an expanded field of craft. HEIs could also develop their alumni support offer and access to facilities in order to support new graduates in sustaining their making practice during the transition from education to professional practice.

Craft Sector:

When seeking business support to establish and/or develop a professional creative practice there is a need for mentors and advisors who understand the logistics of creative business and the creative processes involved in order to provide effective support. This may be particularly important for makers whose work is conceptually driven. Makers also noted challenges in gaining access to the market, particularly the art market, following graduation – i.e. gaining gallery representation and collectors. This was seen as a potential barrier to professional development, particularly for graduates pursuing a more fine-art orientated craft practice. There is also a need for initiatives that increase awareness of where makers can get local support, advice and guidance once they have left university, particularly those who no longer practice in their university town. Makers would also benefit from access to facilities and equipment, particularly large-scale machinery and high-tech equipment that they cannot afford to purchase.

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