

# Craft as a Liberal Education: A Response

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It is important to correct some of the impressions that may have been created by Mr. Allen in his last issue of *Studies in Design Education and Craft* 9.1.

Specifically I want to examine the Peters' analysis of education and the Hirst account of liberal education with reference to the place of craft education in the curriculum. I will maintain that an acceptance of the Peters-Hirst theses is perfectly consistent with an emphasis on craft education.

Mr. Allen is worried about the Peters' criterion of 'cognitive perspective' as a necessary condition of 'being educated'. He thinks it provides a wrong emphasis in craft or excludes it from a justifiable position in the curriculum. Let us see what Peters actually says about craft. His phrase is that being educated in craft implies at least having 'some depth of understanding in carpentry not just a know-how'<sup>1</sup>. His point seems to be that one could hardly be said to be educated as a craftsman or as anything else if one could only follow instructions or display some knack — however important these things are. Indeed one could hardly be said to be a craftsman at all unless one had some idea of the whys and wherefores of craft processes, some grasp of relevant scientific and technological information and principles, as well as a knowledge of design and some aesthetic feeling for materials and product. To be educated in craft involves more than being trained to copy the master's demonstration or design — although this may be a necessary stage in the development of craftsmanship — it is to be able to display autonomy and relate appropriate, relevant facts or principles to the problem at hand. The kind of know-how aimed at is informed or principled know-how, the ability to generalise from the particular tasks upon which one has been engaged, the craft 'jobs' or projects upon which one has been working, to other situations on which one has not yet been involved. In short both the skilled and educated craftsman must display

certain kinds of informed judgments. The educated carpenter has however more than skills in this sense: 'his understanding and sensitivities would have to be not limited to carpentry'<sup>2</sup>. In Peter's phrase, he cannot just be a narrow specialist, he must possess cognitive perspective'.

Now Mr. Allen seems to think that 'cognitive perspective' must involve a depth and breadth study of the academic disciplines and therefore is beyond all but the university student. But that is not what Peters says. For example he writes that vocational training 'can be used as an urgent centre of interest around which cognitive perspective can be developed'.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he suggests three ways whereby craft could be liberalised, thus providing a focal point for a liberal education; 1) one could stress the intrinsic standards involved in the activities; 2) one could use the practical activity as a centre of interest from which people could be encouraged to develop an interest in wider areas of knowledge that were relevant to the practice of them (e.g. sciences, art, history or furniture and technology); 3) one could encourage the students to be more searching and critical about what they were taught (e.g. critically analysing designs, having first mastered the principles of what has to be taken into account in designing)<sup>4</sup>. It must be clear to any fair-minded reader that Peters is sympathetic towards and cognizant of craft teaching. Witness his stress on the need for some sort of developmental study of craft skills, and his recognition that 'a child may delight in a well-made boat who is unmoved by a cogent argument'<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps, however, one may argue that Mr. Allen is more justified in attacking Paul Hirst's account of liberal education. Mr. Allen accuses Hirst of wrongly believing that the Greek view of liberal education is based solely on the nature of knowledge. He asks whether it is possible that Hirst has read Plato's *Laws*. Hirst is furthermore accused of

classifying the arts and practical activities as anti-intellectual, though Mr. Allen has great difficulty, so he tells us, in understanding what Hirst actually says about the arts.

As becomes clear in his *Encyclopedia of Education* article on liberal education,<sup>6</sup> (not mentioned by Mr. Allen), Hirst follows tradition in basing his view of liberal education on the Aristotelian account,<sup>7</sup> as an education which is neither vocational, nor exclusively technological or scientific, nor specialist. Hirst states that central to Aristotle's advocacy of liberal studies was a complex picture of human nature and the importance he attached to the pursuits of reason in the good life. He thought that the greatest good of every existing thing was the fulfilment of its fundamental or essential function. For man this meant a life devoted to the pursuit of excellence in intellectual and moral activities.<sup>8</sup> This seems to me to have got Aristotle's views just right. But is there a conflict here with the Platonic account? In the image of the cave<sup>9</sup> — Plato argues that man becomes free by pursuing those subjects such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics and dialectic, which he sees as concerned with grasping or understanding Reality. For him, they are important not for their practical use, but for their concern with abstract ideas and knowledge which is not subject to the same changes as our beliefs about the empirical world. If one studies the subsequent stereotyping of the liberal arts in the writings of Varro (116-27 BC) and St. Augustine (354-430 AD) one sees how this Platonic view is central to the tradition of liberal education. It certainly does not appear to be contradicted in the *Laws* or the Aristotelian writings.

So much for Hirst's scholarship. But doesn't Hirst display an intellectual arrogance in the statement Mr. Allen quotes about *retreating* 'into arts and practical activities'.<sup>10</sup> Here a study of the context would indicate that Hirst was applying the principle of

equality. If the arts and practical activities are worthwhile pursuits, then they are worthwhile for anyone not just the less able. Their place is limited since they represent only part of the curriculum and therefore cannot act as a substitute for acquiring basic skills of the use of language or of numbers. But are they worthwhile? Do they lead to the 'development of mind'? This is where the problem occurs. One has to dig into Hirst's theories to see what they signify for the subject teacher, including the craft teacher.

Briefly let me say that his main thesis obviously owes much to the philosophies of Kant and Wittgenstein. If I were to state a modern view of the development of mind on these lines it would go something like this: We judge someone as possessing a mind in so far as he possesses certain capacities, such as the capacity to acquire intellectual abilities, for example, the ability to operate with symbols, to act intelligently and to choose goals for oneself. The mind does not develop from nothing. We possess certain primitive capacities such as the abilities to interpret visual impressions spatially and all impressions temporally, and the aptitude to employ a causal principle. But certain social experiences including the acquisition of language are vital for the elaboration and sophistication of these infantile capacities. The acquisition of publicly agreed concepts is absolutely essential for the effective use of the mental powers *per se*. Though physical processes may be involved when people perceive, understand, doubt, believe etc, these processes involve more than the physiological elements. All these processes have objects for which there are public criteria for example, whatever object we perceive is classified within some conceptual framework. Whether or not what I see is a chisel can be judged against a public agreement about what is meant by a chisel. On Hirst's account there are certain basic ways by which we organise our experience and



knowledge (e.g. mathematically, scientifically, morally etc.) and these 'forms of knowledge' are imbedded in language and in the rule-governed ways we employ symbols. A 'form of knowledge' is not an academic discipline or school subject, since Inter-Personal knowledge with its unique concepts of action, intention, purpose etc. can be found employed in History (Napoleon's intention), the Social Sciences (human purposes), or in ordinary experience (my intention). It is experience which gives content to these basic distinctions in knowledge. Hence the mind develops in a dialectical relationship with the various objects of experience, and the objectivity of knowledge is guaranteed by the tests of truth that can be applied in this relationship. It is possible that had we inhabited different worlds or had we possessed different sense organs we might have developed different forms of knowledge. However the distinctions in existing knowledge are supported by the objective tests we employ against our background of inter-personal agreement about the use of symbols. We learn the meaning of the various symbolic systems of knowledge against a background of social activity and practice. Hence learning a form of knowledge is not as Mr. Allen thinks it is, learning propositions *per se*. The religious form of knowledge, therefore, is concerned with the peculiar nature of religious activities and their significance for human beings: it is not Christian theology. The meaning of, say, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is to be found in the music itself. If Beethoven could have said what he meant by the Ninth Symphony then he should have published his work in words and not in music. Human beings have developed a number of basic ways by which they organise their understanding, and for each of these ways the objective tests, whereby the dross is separated from the pure product, are unique. Thus we go about making mathematical judgements in a way that is different

from the observational-experimental ways of science.

What, then, has Hirst's theory to do with subjects, and in particular with craft? Subjects rarely involve the pure language game of the 'forms of knowledge'. Take the subject of English. It involved the teaching of the skills, at different levels, of reading, writing and comprehension. It also involves aesthetics — the teaching of literature and drama — through acquaintance and criticism. It may also involve some scientific element of grammar and linguistics as well as some element of Inter-Personal knowledge and Morals. To break down the subject in this way enables the English teacher to be clearer about the problem of priorities. Mathematics, on the other hand, as taught in its various methods in school, comes nearer to representing a pure 'form of knowledge', though Fletcher work and Piaget type experiments go beyond the basis of pure mathematics to some understanding of the empirical world. Hirst's point is that teachers and pupils alike need to be able to recognise the distinctive nature of the language games implied in the forms of knowledge, including the ways whereby the statements can be verified or not. (It is for this reason that theology could never be a form of knowledge).

What then are the implications of this analysis for craft? Obviously it depends upon what is meant by 'craft'. In its traditional sense it implied performed skilled operations upon some raw or unworked material (e.g. metal, wood) to produce something that could be judged functionally (e.g. a chair is an object used for some particular purpose i.e. sitting of some sort). The designing element could be regarded separately from the productive element, though the functional element may be judged on aesthetic as well as purely utilitarian considerations. This kind of definition rules out wall papering and car maintenance as strict crafts, and sees wood-carving and sculping as arts. The school

activity of Craft, however, covers more than the above analysis indicates, and the new term 'Design Technology' is meant to draw attention to the scientific-technological element of problem-solving that is included within the new activities. In none of these senses can Craft or Design Technology be a 'form of knowledge'. It is not because it is an inferior subject, since 'forms of knowledge' are not subjects at all. The point is that the techniques, skills or know-how that are central to the craft situation employ the various contents and judgments that arise out of the 'form of knowledge' distinction. The skilled craftsman does not just have the knack of performing physiological movements. His actions can be judged scientifically (in terms of what glues are used, joints employed, materials worked upon etc), aesthetically (in terms of the quality of design), sociologically and historically (in terms of the social practice or the history of design). The craft teacher passes on these judgments in demonstrating skills or in organising problem-solving.

In case the kind of view I have considered in the light of the Peters-Hirst analysis is misunderstood, I would like to make certain points clear. This is not an advocacy of lessons that are packed full of scientific and aesthetic theory and little practical work. It seems to be unwise to intellectualise the practical work out of existence. The theory has to go on *within* the practical work: within the demonstration and instruction. It is sought as a means of assisting the problem-solving. Obviously the amount of theory and the depth in which it is pursued, will depend upon the capabilities of the pupils. In general, the more the pupil is able to participate in complex projects, the more he will require to explore related areas of knowledge. What then is advocated is some awareness of the kinds of judgment that need to be made in Craft or Design Technology. It is a plea for a realistic widening of the scope of traditional crafts. I say 'realistic' because I

recognise two constraining factors: 1) pupil interest and capability (successful education involves a working *with* children, operating within their socio-psychological set of attitudes, in order to bring about improvement); 2) teacher interest and specialised knowledge (teachers obviously vary in the degree of specialised knowledge and training they have received). Both teacher and pupil have their limitations but we may have to change both. The teacher may have to increase his technological skills and knowledge; the pupil may have to be more informed about the underlying principles of the processes in which he is engaged. But that, says Peters, is what education means: a change for the better.

#### References

1. Richard S. Peters 'Aims of Education — A Conceptual Inquiry' in R.S. Peters (ed) *The Philosophy of Education* Oxford University Press 1973, p. 45.
2. *ibid*
3. R.S. Peters *Ethics and Education*: Allen and Unwin 1966, p. 85.
4. *ibid* p. 45.
5. *ibid* p. 75.
6. Paul Hirst 'Liberal Education' in L.C. Deighton (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Education* MacMillan and Free Press of Glencoe 1971, Vol. 5, pp. 505-509.
7. Aristotle *Politics* 8:3.
8. Hirst *op. cit* p. 507.
9. Plato *Republic* Book 7.
10. P.H. Hirst *Knowledge and the Curriculum* Routledge and Kegan Paul 1974, p. 28.