

Design and Craft Education, some fundamental questions

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Having had my attention drawn to the concern felt by craft teachers about recent developments in craft and design work in schools and, as the head of a department in which many of the ideas promoted by the Research and Development Project have been adopted as part of the normal programme of work, I feel able to comment on some aspects of Design and Craft Education that seem to need attention. It will be a tragedy if the main core of the work conducted by the Research and Development Project team becomes neglected because some of the ideas suggested provide convenient and vulnerable targets for criticism.

Perhaps the largest single area of concern is the emphasis on Design as an activity rather than Craft. (The cover of Vol 5 No.1 of *Studies in Design Education and Craft* with its stress on design education and the almost total exclusion of the word craft is indicative of an attitude that is worrying). Let me first admit, there are many partly formed ideas of what is meant by ‘Design Education’ in circulation. Some of these are quite erroneous and their holders are not confined to the teaching profession. I think it is now widely accepted that what has passed for craft education in the past did not attain the ideal at which it was aimed. (This is not a case for declaring that ideal invalid.) All too many pupils suffered a stifling experience. On the other hand, many pupils found fulfilment and great enjoyment but, very little has been mentioned of their experiences. (I am firmly convinced a large proportion of the “do it yourself” movement has its basic roots in successful school craft activities on the part of many past pupils.) The main worry, therefore, is that too much emphasis has been, and is being, placed on Design. Craft, particularly craftsmanship, is in the process of being relegated to a secondary or, supporting role. The extension of this, of course, is that a construction on Design can easily be diverted into a predominately ‘Art’ approach. (The article “Metropolis”, op.cit. illustrates this. I find the whole experiment, as described, an operation singularly devoid of attributes associated with craft and craftsmanship. Most of the work carried out was of a transient nature. This approaches the ideas underlying much of what is called ‘Art’ today.) The number of College of Education craft courses absorbed into Art and Design departments is increasing and indicative of the trend. I have also heard arguments subjugating craftsmanship amongst the advocates of Technology and Craft ideas, particularly in some Project Technology regional circles. To me, it is increasingly significant that words expressing vague meanings like ‘Technology’ and ‘Design’ are replacing words having definite meanings. This is confirmation of a growing lack of certainty in educational thinking. I am sure this is only a symptom of the readjustment

necessary to meet changing circumstances. As such, great care should be taken not to deal with the symptom to the exclusion of the basic problem.

The evolution of sequences of operations that appear to emulate the process of designing have been used as a base to promote design activities in schools. These sequences were originally isolated as part of the process involved in preparing instructions, (programmes) to enable computers to be employed on routine design tasks. The development of sophisticated programmes has produced a plethora of flow-charts, line diagrams, etc. showing the so-called "design process". None of these have been seriously challenged because, patently, they work. What has not in any way been proven is that the application of such processes to school work is either valid educationally or, of benefit in later life. They are, at the moment, merely a vehicle whereby young people can be encouraged to produce novel responses to given stimuli. (The fact that uninhibited minds would probably create novel responses without rigid guidance, especially if the stimuli are powerful as in the exploitation of the moral awareness of young people, seems either to have escaped notice, or, is being deliberately ignored.) The whole process is promoted as "problem solving". There are, in my view, grave errors in using a "check list" approach and I am afraid all too many teachers will use such material in just this manner.

I detect an undue influence from College of Education craft lecturers. They have been fortunate during recent years in receiving well-prepared candidates. Throughout the whole history of Teacher Training this has probably been the only period when such a favourable situation has existed. Very properly, they have built on this firm base and moved naturally into the field of design education. Using the computer based ideas their work has had spectacular success. Their error, it seems to me, is in not having appreciated the value of the base, a sound grounding in craft skills, and they have sought to extend the necessarily ephemeral qualities of design work into the school curriculum. There has been no clear definition between that part of their work which is concerned with the personal development of the student and that part concerned with teacher training. (That this has been the case across the whole field of teacher training became fully revealed by the findings of the Committee of Enquiry on "Teacher Education and Training" appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the chairmanship of Lord James.) Another factor influencing craft lecturers has been the need they have felt to assess their work against a set of educational objectives that received current favour. These are those set out by Bloom in his *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. While this book and the concepts expressed therein are well-known in Higher Education circles, it is almost unheard of in schools, certainly at teacher level. The fact that other workers in the same field have challenged Bloom seems not to have altered the attitude of lecturers in Colleges. Both Design and Craft work have been measured against the Bloom Taxonomy objectives and lecturers have convinced themselves that Design work has a closer relationship to these than Craft work. (One has the feeling that this result was not unwelcome to the craft lecturers because they were already aware of the attractions of Design work for the reasons set out above.) The motive behind the conduct of this exercise was, no doubt, the maintenance and improvement of the status of the subject under pressure from academic sources. (These battles are also fought in schools.) Whatever the cause, the effects remain. Some of this thinking is now being published.

(e.g. *Design and Craft in Education*, by Francis Zanker.) Naturally, craft teachers who were conscious of inadequacies in their work turned to these new ideas in gratitude and, I am afraid, without reservations. It is unfortunate that the communication between craft teachers in schools and craft lecturers in colleges has been at such a low level. I am sure a full discussion of all factors at work would result in the evolution of a balanced system of Craft and Design Education. It is the lack of such an interchange which lies at the heart of many of our problems.

There is no doubt that the publication of the philosophy, working material and guide books, etc. associated with the work of the Schools Council Research and Development Project in Design and Craft Education is awaited with anticipation. However, there are attitudes that give cause for disquiet, "When all the Keele stuff comes out, we shall have our Bible for the next ten years", is a remark, or something very like it, I have heard on a number of occasions. "I'm not starting this Design business until I have all the Keele slides and books", is another typical statement. No doubt this has to some extent been anticipated. I feel, however, a widespread dependence on some of the ideas tried during the run of the Project and now merely being reported could have disastrous results. Since it is known that many teachers are seeking such reliable guidance, it is important to ensure only totally relevant material is produced initially. The more contentious items can be dealt with moderately and at a later date.

A recent, disturbing, element I have observed in the field of curriculum development has been the reaction of teachers attending promotional exercises. Much of this reaction does not reach the promoters because it is expressed in private discussion at coffee breaks, at the close of meetings, etc. The tide of efforts in school reorganisation, the raising of the school leaving age and similar developments appears to be swamping many of the ideas currently being advanced. Teachers ask lecturers a few key questions regarding the organisation of feasibility studies and the age, abilities and character of children involved. In many cases, the replies are invariably and inevitably completely redundant when compared with present circumstances. This produces a reaction of almost total rejection by the teachers. It may be argued that this is shallow thinking and indeed such is the case. However, an initial rejection is a difficult obstacle to overcome and this response ought to be avoided if possible. A few examples may serve to clarify the point. Any scheme based on a five year development prior to the statutory school leaving age has little apparent relevance for reorganised secondary schools with an age range of 13 to 18. The first two years of the scheme can only be conducted with the co-operation of feeder 9 to 13 schools. This is clearly unsatisfactory and, in some cases, almost impossible. Any scheme for R.O.S.L.A. pupils where feasibility studies were carried out with pupils who chose to leave school at 15+ for reasons not connected with their academic attainments is suspect. With the requirement of statutory attendance till 16+ many such children are now entering examination courses. Teacher attending promotional exercises, curriculum development lectures, diffusion courses, etc. feel depressed for the leaders of these operations do not understand the problems now being faced in schools. Surely it is not too much to expect that lengthy and expensive curriculum development projects of the type carried out in recent years should take into account the different schemes of reorganisation proposed for secondary education? The

main education system of the nation is moving away from the concept of elite education towards the ideal of general education for all citizens. Surely this should be a major factor in any curriculum development work? Yet, the whole matter has been largely ignored. That difficulties exist cannot be denied. The infinite variety of schemes being submitted for approval is an obvious problem. The initial documents outlining the main courses of development, D.E.S. Circular 10/65 et.seq. provide enough information for project staff to at least consider the problem.

I feel there is an element of exploitation of pupil's feelings and moral sensitivity about some of the activities being suggested. The community service ideas of pupils taking part in social and welfare service operations particularly come under scrutiny. It may be that many areas of the country have differing standards in this field. Certainly needs vary considerably. School based social service, therefore, is not necessarily an activity universally available or welcome. The responsibility for social work is extremely onerous. Old, sick, handicapped and underprivileged people soon build up a dependence on those offering help. Even if this is a good result, a school cannot always maintain continuity, staff changes, pupil changes, even timetable alterations all militate against proper management of the situation. A paradoxical aspect of the problem is that the dependence aroused can be a negative factor in helping people to help themselves. Trained social workers are well-aware of this intricacy. It is presuming much to expect all school pupils to understand and respond correctly in such difficult situations. In placing pupils into social service situations are we:

1. usurping the place of or, creating difficulties for, the statutory services?
2. placing pupils in a position they find difficult to maintain?
3. creating negative factors in the situation of unfortunate people without being aware of the consequences?

I find it difficult to accept the intrusion of school based community service into the area of social and welfare services without a full examination of these important problems and the exploitation of pupil's moral sensibilities is fully justified. There are other fields of community service, albeit rather mundane and unromantic, where work of real value to the community can be done, e.g. clearing rubbish from spare ground.

Another aspect of design work beginning to worry me is the differing responses I am detecting between pupils having varying home backgrounds. Those pupils who enjoy a fairly high standard of living, certainly with interested parents and a familiarity with concepts of "consumer protection", a critical attitude towards advertising, etc. compared with pupils whose background is mainly one of acceptance produce work of a totally different character. I am starting to find preferences arising amongst teachers, (including myself,) and examiners for work of one type compared with the products of the other group. There is a possibility of fashions becoming prevalent. (A state I have noticed existing in other school subjects areas, notably Art and English, for some time.) I find this prospect distasteful and totally unacceptable. There is here a direct confrontation with ultimate values which will be extremely difficult to reconcile within the present school situation.

Finally, I suspect that the Design and Craft Education Project suffers from a major limitation. Too much of its discourse has been between teachers, lecturers and research

fellows who are committed to the ideas being promoted. Project Technology was in an exactly similar position. I have no doubt other major curriculum development projects share the same difficulty. People engaged in the field of education at all levels are deeply restrained by their existing duties and they only have time to pursue interests in which they already are involved. The objectors, critics and assessors feel no compelling need to take part because, finally, they have the option of rejection. Thus, important new areas of work are explored without the vital element of opposition. I hope this paper will not be construed as obstructionist reaction because it is a genuine attempt to provide a particle of this important ingredient.

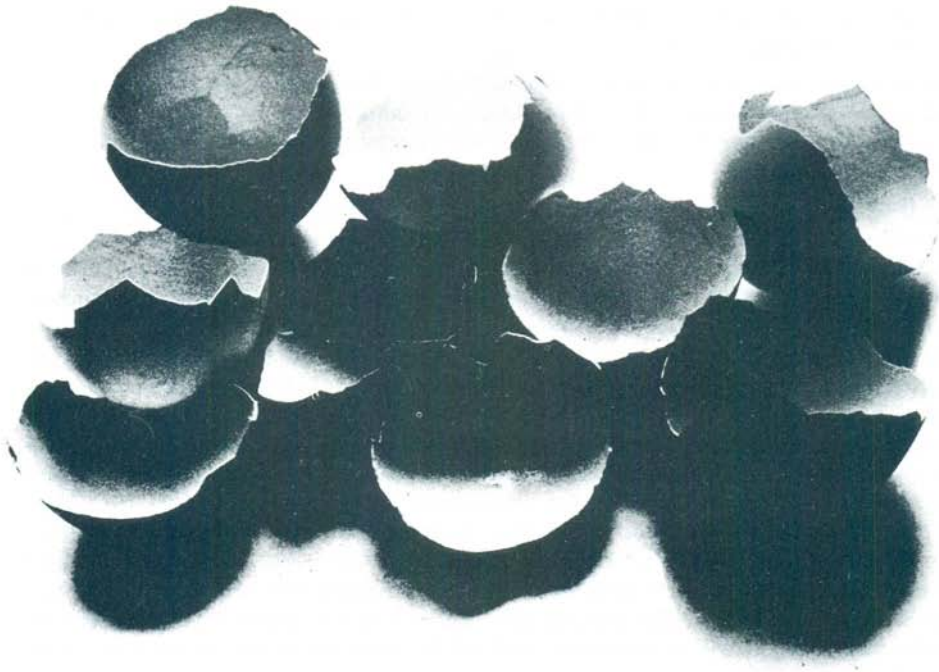


Illustration from *Designing with Natural Forms* by Natalie d'Arbelott, Batsford £1.90.