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Practising practicing: Helping students to find their voice in the Illustration world

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Introduction

A new generation of student has emerged in recent years. More and more undergraduate illustration students arrive with some understanding of the industry and sometimes professional experience, and many go on to take on professional commissions before they have graduated. Curiosity and playfulness, risk taking and experimentation are integral to the art college learning experience. Allen states that, 'it is also important for students in our field to take risks. Playing it safe cuts the learning process short and leads nowhere' (Allen, 2000, p91). It is possible to argue that by engaging with industry earlier, there has been a loss of the studentship period, the time spent playing, experimenting, learning the craft before going out into the world to apply it. In the past students worked on imaginary, self-directed or competition briefs; now they are taking on professional or paid commissions with the inherent demands and restrictions, either in an independent capacity, or as part of the course. This raises a number of questions including – is the driver for this desire or ambition to reach a professional position; or is it the necessity of covering the higher costs of being a student in the UK, another kind of part-time work. This then leads us to consider how this might change the student's approach to making work.

Industry and education boundaries are blurred. Some courses are already largely designed around working on live briefs, competitions and include assessed placements as part of the learning experience – this offers valuable experience of the creative industries, however is there a danger that too much focus on industry rules could limit or stifle the curiosity of participants? We must consider how education should adapt for this shift. For example, does the student need preparing for professional practice earlier in the curriculum in order to avoid approaching a task wrongly and losing legitimacy and confidence. Yet, if a curriculum focusses strongly on the requirements and boundaries of the professional context too soon, does this skip over the essential development stage that learning requires?

Art college education models have always reflected and valued an apprenticeship tradition in learning, however this does not always fit within the university education model (Wang, 2010). This paper begins to explore how an event based around artist's books, zines and a broader range of self-publishing can be used in teaching and learning. *Bookmarks* gives students permission to play and experiment, legitimizing it by offering an end point. The model of a book fair gives students an opportunity to practise alongside graduates and teachers, learning by doing and reflecting on the experience back in the classroom. This experiment has brought surprising results in developing autonomy, creating communities of practice and challenging the relationship between education and industry.

Figure 1. *Bookmarks* event held in the *Sculpture Court, Edinburgh College of Art* (Lucy Roscoe, 2017).

The *Bookmarks* model offers a solution to these challenges in the form of a book fair, open to the public and offering free stalls to current students, staff and alumni from *Edinburgh College of Art*, and also bringing together staff and students from other educational institutions and organisations which use the creative book form in teaching and learning. Over four years the event has been complimented by a symposium and a series of talks and workshops engaging discussion around the use of the book in education. The event gives the participants direct experience of self-publishing and encourages collaboration and dialogue between students, graduates and also staff as practitioners. This supports students in finding and creating identities, celebrates the handmade and

encourages autonomy in learning. It is worth mentioning that although the event itself is designed to support all students and practitioners working with the book form and has included Graphic Designers, Artists and Animators, this paper reflects specifically on students studying Illustration as the design and running of the event was founded here and is focussed on this community.

Handmade

One could argue that one of the fundamentals of Art and Design education is to provide the environment, time, freedom and safety to experiment and explore ideas and methods of visual communication. Allen argues that, 'education should stress the fundamentals, encourage the desire to learn, and create a safe environment in which the students can learn about themselves, take risks, and grow to exceed their perceived potential' (2000, p92). Students respond to projects in different ways and react well to a range of stimuli therefore it is important to design different learning opportunities to enable students to apply the fundamentals. Some work best with the restrictions and clarity that a tight brief offers, while others work better when they are allowed a more open and experimental approach. Each of these approaches are valid and need to be valued and tried on for size in the early years of Art and Design education. Projects therefore need to be varied and one size does not fit all. Students should be encouraged to use their period of study to challenge themselves and to develop a visual language. It is also important that they are highly aware of current expectations, trends and industry norms so that they can position themselves within this context and to endeavour to explore how they can contribute in an individual way. This aspect of learning can be focussed on the later years and the emphasis of outward facing learning in honours years seems a good time for this to be examined, allowing time for exploration at that point and development to continue during a final year.

Self-publishing is extremely useful in offering each student the freedom to examine their own subject matter and imagery in creating a book, zine or print. Each of these formats offers independence in the approach but it is set within an accepted set of rules or boundaries that can be adhered to in creating successful work or pushed against to allow wide ranging results. These formats are extremely useful in the fact that they demand decision making, ordering and pacing. They help students to edit and to question their intentions, how best to say what they want to say, what materials and scales are most appropriate and how the viewer arrives at the work. This certainly will compliment and indeed support commissioned work. These formats are discrete spaces where a student is in control of their own realm and these should not be undervalued as useful tools in teaching.

Figure 2. Risograph flutter book zines designed by Second year Illustration students in response to a field trip to Oban on the West Coast of Scotland. An edition of 10 of each zine was printed. The project was designed by Astrid Jaekel, Teaching Fellow in Illustration at *Edinburgh College of Art* (Lucy Roscoe, 2017).

By self-publishing students are able, or required, to bypass large companies and traditional publishing organisations and take complete control of the whole process themselves. This is a valuable exercise, allowing them to learn directly from experience and mistakes. In turn this encourages autonomous learning and engagement; this 'willingness to learn' is a key component to learning as stated by Allen (2000, p90). McClure (2001) considers autonomy to be a reflective approach that attaches a narrative to educational experience - by being innovative and confident in their critical thinking, students become reflective practitioners. The act of self-publishing supports this cyclical examination of process which resolves in a piece of published work. Trowler helpfully defines student engagement as being 'concerned with the interaction between time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes' (2010, p3). Participation in an event such as *Bookmarks* demonstrates engagement by students as it is a voluntary exercise, not compulsory or

part of an assessment structure. It also requires investment of time and finance in order to fully participate. Essentially the more they are engaged, the more they will learn from the experience.

Historically these original self-published artworks have a value in that they offer affordable art, creatives connect directly with the public. This reflects the accessibility often associated with Illustration in comparison to Fine Art. In their book *Behind the zines: self-publishing culture*, Klanten et al. celebrate the rejection of standard publishing rules and freedom that it offers, suggesting that playfulness and experimentation are fully supported through this activity:

'A welcome shake-up and shortcut that slashes through the regular publishing set-up and industry, this approach of cutting out the middlemen, of peddling your wares directly to the reader and getting close to your recipient, reflects a vital concept prevalent in the self- publishing scene: the idea of 100 percent authorship, of undiluted output, and minimal editorial 'invasion' that might smooth out any deliberate edges in style or execution' (Klanten, 2011, p4).

Experiencing the journey from start to finish connects the illustrator with the audience directly, cementing this in their mind where there could instead be a disconnect in the large publishing machine. On the other hand, it also neglects the specialist expertise the publishers bring in terms of market knowledge, design, marketing and of course finance. Self-publishing embraces the handmade yet also embraces the experience of new and traditional technologies; consider the resurgence of risograph printers in recent years for example.

There is now a prevalence of illustrators using experimental publishing and projects to promote and compliment their work. Sometimes this takes the form of collectives where groups of illustrators work together on a publication or exhibition, the benefits being inspiration and collaboration, as well saving costs by working together. In other cases, artists dedicate two distinct halves to their practice. This is not perhaps a new thing, however it is significant that publishers such as *Flying Eye*, with their roots in 'indie' or independent publishing are beginning to be recognised by the oldest awards bodies, for example *Shackleton's Journey* by William Grill was awarded the *Kate Greenaway Medal* (Drabble, 2015). Does self-publishing give illustrators the freedom to try new things, collaborate and use a different voice, escaping the expectations surrounding commissioned work? It could be suggested the nature of *Bookmarks* in its celebration of creatives and the local supportive community embraces this kind of experimentation. *Bookmarks* offers the best of all worlds, a comfortable environment to make work, but with an outward facing structure that enables students to explore the edges of self-publishing. This is the most exciting area to be working within and where new things will happen and new discoveries will be made.

Contemporary illustration teaching books articulate the whole illustration process from beginning to end, and there are online courses and advice that lets a first-year student get a fairly full perspective pretty early on. To the benefit of the student, a good course can incorporate external projects into their assessed body of work, an argument for flexibility at this point. This allows the student to both gain professional experience whilst being supported in this by the teacher. It is surprising however that those same textbooks which teach *how to be an illustrator*, rarely mention self-publishing.

Taking learning out of the studio

Bookmarks is also distinct in that it changes the infrastructure of learning by taking it out of the studio and into the public domain. The event prepares students for industry in the ways in which they have to present, describe, and communicate their work to an external audience. Students are required to not only devise and produce work, but participation also encourages them to work

within the print workshop, negotiate working with external printers and it is invaluable to meet an audience and to sell - or fail to sell - one's merchandise. Participants have full freedom within this

format to produce the books and zines that they want to. Applications are selected to maintain quality but content and form are not stipulated and students respond well to this opportunity. It is competitive so the standard is high and students aspire to this. However, stands are reserved for specific early year groups and lead by staff members to engender confidence to the newer students. The event gives students the opportunity to develop valuable graduate attributes in marketing, budgeting, communication, giving them direct experience of planning and enterprise, as well as the core outcomes that every graduate should process such problem solving, communication and critical thinking (Barrie, 2007 and Jones, 2009). Engaging in this event will help a student to negotiate what graduate attributes mean within the discipline of Art and Design specifically.

Students are able to try on creative *identities* before fully launching themselves as a graduate *brand* at their Degree Show and graduate fairs such as *D&AD New Blood* and *New Designers* in London. By creating a safe space to discover who they are, the model encourages a deeper reflective lesson than surface success – is this not the real value of university education over simply building vocational skills. For both teaching staff and students, a clear knowledge of the Art and Design industry and how it works is important. Art students of every discipline should be given some grounding in the ways in which they might progress in careers beyond their education. The same is true for students from all subjects. We cannot prepare students for everything therefore Allen suggests it is better to teach them the fundamentals, 'a solid grounding in the fundamentals (drawing, painting, composition, and concept development) by a responsible student will allow that student to choose from the possibilities and opportunities that present themselves' (2000, p90). Illustration teaching programmes seek to attain a balance of academic, artistic and vocational aspects of the subject. In this regard, an Illustration curriculum needs to be challenging, relevant and connected to the 21st Century world of work, as well as maintaining its academic integrity.

By bringing together practitioners from across Art and Design disciplines, *Bookmarks* also attracts different approaches to book making. There are some who value the one-off, high value, collectable artwork and at the same time others who recognise the form as the cheapest, quickest method to get their ideas into physical forms and out to the public (Klanten et al., 2011). You could assume the divide sits with *artists* and *designers* however experience shows clearly that it does not. Why even print now when you could just blog, produce a pdf or publish online – the online world has arguably an even greater impact of the professional identity and experiences as work is so easily published and feedback received. There is a value beyond just getting the information out there. Klanten et al. also highlight that the industry relies on networking. Despite blogs, websites (any other examples) there is also a strong reliance on word of mouth, swaps of work and recommendations exchanged about printers, processes and suppliers for example. There is a real but ever changing and evolving community centred around *Bookmarks* that reflects the community of artists and designers who inhabit the artists' book fair scene internationally.

Figure 3. Exhibition of work by graduates in Illustration at *Edinburgh College of Art* at *D&AD New Blood* graduate fair in London. The show received an award for *Best Stand* and comments from the judges specifically highlighted that the hand crafted and individual design of the work and display made it noticeable (Lucy Roscoe, 2015).

Learning through Communities of Practice

Palmer introduces Wenger's *communities of practice* as being categorized, amongst other things, by shared ways of engaging in doing things together, a shared discourse on the perspective of the world and mutually defining identities (Wenger 1998, in Palmer 1998). In participating in events such as

Bookmarks, students play the part, pretending at the same time as being part of the community of practice. Reflecting on the requirement to learn and understand industry rules, ideally students need to be offered a 'taste' of what industry expects during their early years of education but without imposing this too forcibly. There are different ways that this can be done, for example *Live* briefs and competitions, whilst talks by visiting practitioners are another key way that students can hear professionals talk about direct experience. This relates strongly to recognising communities of practices as a teaching model, described by Lave (1991). To begin with, peripheral participation provides learners with an opportunity to observe. An extended period of peripheral perspective allows learners to join in this practice.

According to Lave in a study on *situated learning*, access to opportunities and experienced practitioners is essential in order to develop in the field, 'to become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community: and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation' (1991, p101). The idea of a community made up of different experience levels and with mutual activities makes a strong case for the mix of graduates, staff, industry and students working together at *Bookmarks*. Students can learn from recent graduates who are not too far ahead of them about things such as presentation, pricing and procedure, the *old-timers* can gain insight into new technologies, materials and ideas from curious students and academics with access to this experimentation. Many students also sell artwork, although they are not necessarily able to place a correct value on their works for sale. Practical instruction can be given in the classroom, however pricing for example is not a precise science, it is a connoisseurship that must be developed. Staff often offer individual advice, necessary because there is much variation and many factors need to be taken into account. This is invaluable experience for a student.

Lave also presents an interesting idea that knowledge spreads more quickly and effectively peer to peer, although evidence is anecdotal, stating 'the effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests, to the contrary, that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for the effectiveness of learning' (1991, p.93). Students instinctively ask a teacher, as the expert, to show them how to do something if they are stuck, however it is when the teacher is not available that they go in search of the answer from peers, forging community and importantly developing deeper skills. Lave indicates that mastery does not reside in the master, but in the 'organisation of the community of practice,' this also places the learner at the centre, rather than the teaching (1991, p94).

Vaughan et al. (2008) warn about the mismatched expectation of students and teachers and the effect it can have on their learning. Student satisfaction surveys regularly highlight that students seek clarity, however the nature of Art and Design pedagogy involves 'ambiguity'. Experience of uncertainty is essential to prepare them for the unexpected after graduation:

'Education in the creative industries however, does not provide a specific training that will fit every student for the many and varied potential roles they will meet in those creative industries. Nor is it possible to provide this in the context of mass education. We would argue that art and design pedagogies provide ways to approach complexity, to maximise opportunities that arise for students in the work place and to point to ways to become successful practitioners' (Vaughan et al., 2008, p130).

Expectations are particularly strong in Art and Design; there is a combined pressure of attempting to achieve excellence in creative practice and the ambition to succeed in an often competitive and challenging industry. It is essential the learner is placed at the centre, not the teaching. 'Essential to all this is the often unspoken requirement that students experiment, take risks, learn to assess the

appropriateness of solutions according to context' (Vaughan et al., 2008). This highlights the importance of transition points, which include both transitioning into Higher Education from Further Education, and then transitioning into industry following Art College. This is another instance where *Bookmarks* can be an ideal way of offering a real clarity of expectation, within a strong, well

organised format. Students may fail, however they are offered a valuable space to gain that opportunity to be innovative.

Figure 4. Lecturer David Faithfull's work shown alongside his students' work from *Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design*. He publishes artist's books, prints and multiples under the *Semper Fidelis* imprint (Lucy Roscoe, 2017).

The challenge exists that Art and Design has *soft* knowledge, few rules and laws which make it difficult to articulate *right* answers. This is too large a subject to discuss fully here, however Vaughan et al. describe the negotiation which students must undertake; 'many practices develop ways of knowing through experience of the tactile, visual and spatial and these ways of knowing are illusive to those outside our community' (2008, p139). *Bookmarks* helps with this by examining work within a broader context than the Illustration world, or even the Design world. Art and Design are disciplines which from the outside have a large range of similarities, yet when examined closely use distinct language which a range of both implicit and explicit expectation foreign to outsiders.

The Entrepreneurial Illustrator

Bookmarks and similar events are useful in preparing students for industry in that they offer a safe environment for risk taking. Klanten et al. reflect that the self-publishing model gives the creator not only complete choice about which bits of the process they outsource, but also experience:

'A crash course in supply chain management, empowerment, and rookie mistakes with relatively mild repercussions if things do not work out – this particular publishing model

allows creators to make informed choices and cut superfluous or costly steps out of the process.' (2011)

Students are required to work through all aspects of the process of producing work, pricing, presenting, selling, marketing and meeting the public. Some students also become involved in the organisation of events and this offers other valuable experiences. As has already been discussed, these events also bring together a range of students, alumni and other practitioners allowing students to begin to build their own networks, appreciate where their work might sit in the context of contemporary practice. *Bookmarks* runs each year therefore it is useful when students can take part over a series of these events building and reflecting upon past experience. This allows them to hone their approach and develop a professionalism in a very hands-on, natural way.

Figure 5. Final year work by Illustration student Ann Macleod who designed, illustrated and edited a magazine about food called 'Frankly' (Lucy Roscoe, 2017).

It is helpful to consider the traditional model of apprenticeship in this case. Historically the journey of Illustration, reflected at *Edinburgh College of Art* goes back to the inception of the college to supply workers for industry, an apprenticeship model for crafts people to be trained. Since the 1960s the art colleges in the UK have shifted this model, with hierarchies in Design and Art being

challenged and education being seen as a time for creative freedom and innovation as much as skills development and acquiring of industry knowledge. Lave argues that the term *apprenticeship* needs a clearer definition: referring to the term as a historical model, and to the term *situated learning* as a theory with more uses, '[there is an] implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than 'receiving' a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other' (1991, p33). This links strongly to the idea of student identities forming during their time at university; forming opinions, developing a voice as well as reacting to the new community they are being drawn into.

Apprenticeship comes with its own criticisms, it can be seen to take advantage of the most valuable yet least powerful workers (Lave, 1991). It is possible to see parallels in the recent climate where graduates have been required to undertake internships once they graduate before gaining full employment, often unpaid or with the expectations of some businesses for the cheap or free use of student illustrators. A new generation of illustrators are avoiding this by being informed of this professionalism earlier and taking a whole new entrepreneurial approach to their careers where practice blends with community.

Limitations and Challenges

There are challenges and limitations to the *Bookmarks* model. It is possible that events such as this saturate a professional market with under-priced student work. Although you could argue that the self-publishing market already contains a range of practitioners of varying quality so this is perhaps already a problem. You could question the value of direct selling experience, arguing that it is more important for illustrators to learn to work with publishers, retailers and distributors. However, this is disputed by the success of similar professional events such as the *East London Comic Arts Festival* (*ELCAF)* and Somerset House's Graphic Arts Festival *Pick It Up*.

The cost and time involves with setting up the event are not significant when the infrastructure of the university is fully used, however they are still a consideration whilst stands remain free to participants. This is outweighed by the benefits gained, however in the current form the event is not self-sustaining.

A particularly difficult question relates to how you measure the success of *Bookmarks* as a teaching and learning tool. Is the success relative to the increase in size and breadth of participation? How many have gone on after the event to continue in this specific or related industry? Transferable skills are also an element of this success in terms of the planning, production, branding and sales – this could be seen as particularly important as the changing landscape of creative industry and the competition of the huge numbers of illustration graduates across the country means that the jobs these students do in the future will require a diverse range of skills and perhaps the entrepreneurial encouragement of *Bookmarks* really supports this.

Conclusion

In conclusion there are clear benefits to a teaching and learning model like that of *Bookmarks.* It is possible that part of the success comes from the fact that it sits outside the curriculum. When assessment guidelines are removed, a different playfulness and autonomy is encouraged, and if the work being sold is assessed, it is also interesting to see that sometimes work sells really well that does not meet the learning outcomes. It is essential that students of Art and Design touch upon the world of the creative industry at some stage before they graduate, however without distracting from their academic and artistic education within the freedom of an Art College. Other events of this kind

exist, such as Zine fairs, Printmaking fairs, Art and Craft fairs as well as Comic and Graphic novel events. How we prepare students depends on the destination. This places an importance on developing autonomous and flexible learners.

Bookmarks celebrates the vivid and fertile world of print, artist' books, cards, comics and published artefacts. This is highly relevant, inspiring and informative to all of its participants and to those who observe the event. The great value of this interface is that students will be able to perceive how their work is seen by others, and how it can be presented, promoted and communicated in an appropriately professional manner. The model is evolving and the organisers constantly endeavour to keep it relevant, forming a student and staff board this year to consult on planning. Each year has had a different emphasis and it is clear that *Bookmarks* offers scope for pertinent and positive staff and student engagement.

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