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Does the current British Higher education system really prepare graduate animation students for a developing and changing industry?

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Abstract:

There is a current trend in UK and Europe for animation students to work on group projects during their studies. 'Creativity is not purely an individual performance. It arises out of our interaction with ideas and achievements of other people. It is a cultural process.' (Pg 12. Robinson). Gobelins in Paris, was one of the first animation schools to start this trend and the final films were slick and professional with an incredibly long list of credits. Many of the graduates went straight into industry working as technical operators, animation assistants or riggers and many UK animation schools soon followed suit supported by institutions like Skillset (a UK government body set up to link industry with education). The idea has been championed by industry and a trend has started for animation courses to apply for Skillset or other similar accreditation bodies to give their courses a stamp of approval. These accreditation bodies have a say in how the course curriculum is taught and if the courses don't follow their advice, there is a danger that this stamp of approval will be removed. The question is, does this turn out interesting creatives or factory style technicians specialising in one skill to fit into a large team of people. Robinson also goes on to say, 'Creativity requires an atmosphere where risk taking and experimentation are encouraged rather than stifled' (Pg 12. Robinson) . Is this 'group work training' a short sighted solution for today's industry creatives and directors to solve an immediate skills shortage or will this stratégy keep the British animation industry at the cutting edge of creativity and innovation on the worldside stage?

 (Max. 250 words)

Key Words: (3-5 words) Education, Industry, Animation, Economy, Creativity

Introduction: There is a current trend in UK and Europe for animation students to work on group projects during their studies. 'Creativity is not purely an individual performance. It arises out of our interaction with ideas and achievements of other people. It is a cultural process.' (Pg 12. Robinson) Gobelins is one of the first animation schools to start this trend and the final films were incredibly professional and so they should be with the accompanying long list of credits. Many of the graduates went straight into industry working as technical operators, animation assistants or riggers for special effects and many UK animation schools soon followed suit supported by institutions like Skillset (a UK government body set up to link industry requirements with education). The idea has been championed by industry and a trend has started for animation courses to apply for Skillset or other similar accreditation bodies to give their courses a stamp of approval. This stamp of approval helps with recruitment so Universities are keen to encourage this practice. These accreditation bodies have a say in how the course curriculum is taught and if the courses don't follow their advice, there is a danger that this stamp of approval will be removed.   The question is, does this turn out interesting creatives or factory-style technicians specialising in one skill that they can fit into a large team of people.   Robinson also goes on to say, 'Creativity requires an atmosphere where risk taking and experimentation are encouraged rather than stifled' (Pg 12. Robinson). Is this 'group work training' a short sighted solution for today's industry creatives and directors to solve an immediate skills shortage rather than a longer term solution for the durability of the British animation industry and it's inventive and imaginative place on the worldwide stage.   Traditionally, UK animation courses have encouraged students to create their own film, and engage with the whole animated film process rather than one part of the production pipeline. This creative freedom gives students the chance to find their own style, and voice. It is a risky process but has produced some brilliant animated films that have gone on to win various awards both in the UK and abroad including Oscars,

Bafta's and the Grand Prize at Annecy. This method of teaching seems to be fading away and is gradually being replaced by group projects. 'Many Organisations stifle creativity in the structures they inhabit and the ethos they promote. If ideas are discourage or ignored, the creative impulse does one of two things. It deserts or subverts the organisation' (Pg 12. Robinson). Heather L. Hollian discusses this in her article about group projects or individual genius published on the SAS Animator Blog in 2013 and likens it to the artist training system of the Renaissance where artists such as Raphael, directed a large, capable and creative workforce to work on his vision for the Pope's private apartment's in the Vatican. It is without doubt Raphael's designs, and rather like a large animation studio, he assigns jobs according to the artist's technical and creative ability. However, without this large workforce, there is also no doubt that Raphael would not have finished, and yet there is no reference to any of the artists that worked on this vision or sense that they had a creative rather than technical input. In short, it appears as though, the nature of the big animation studio, is exploitative, uncreative and yet an absolute necessity for the completion of the project. Have we moved on so little?

Main Text

E.G. Lutz explains in his influential 1920 volume, Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made Their Origin and Development, that hierarchical delegation was key to the process, just like during the Renaissance. According to Lutz, the chief animator should keep the most important parts of the short for himself and delegate the rest to assistants, (Lutz p.61) while the "staff of helpers," as Lutz calls them, is meant to do just that and nothing more (Lutz p.185). And in truth, the rushed production schedule of this era left little to no time for creative collaboration between individuals. Does this sound familiar? It will do to any animation educator in the UK. Skillset and the government, led by the influences of industry, are currently trying to encourage a similar scheme in Higher Education establishments to prepare students for industry.   The usual proces that most institutions take is the following; all the students are allowed to pitch their idea as a potential film. The best pitch is chosen and then the rest of the students are divided into production roles: animator,

assistant, background artist, special effects etc.   This means that one student takes on the role of chief animator or the Raphael role and the rest are the "staff of helpers". There is nothing wrong with wanting to prepare students for industry, particularly when the cost of studying for a degree is so expensive, but the question isn't whether to prepare students for industry but how to prepare students for industry. If we don't give students the room to explore, create, and question who will be the next visionary film-makers and without visionary creatives who will come up with the ideas for next big blockbuster films and TV series. Students from countries like China are queuing up to study animation in the UK where creativity, originality and experimentation have traditionally been at the heart of most animation courses. In China, the teaching methods are very different and students are encourage to concentrate on technical skill rather than research and experimenting. China has a huge animation workforce and a tremendous amount of feature films from other countries are shipped out to China to be animated. Chinese students don't want to work in these animation workforces for other countries, they want to make their own films, reflecting their own culture and rightly so. Why are we preparing most of our students to be technicians when countries like China are keen to become creative leaders and coming to the UK to find out how to do this? This begs the question, who does this current trend towards group work benefit? It might produce slick, well made films made by a very technically capable team, but is this an education or a training akin to the Rennaisance?   Does this benefit the current animation industry or does it benefit the student? 'As Carl Jung puts it, the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect alone but by the play instinct." (P133. Robinson, Ken). but as E.G. Lutz states, maybe we just don't have time to be creative anymore. Twenty or thirty years ago it was almost compulsory to go to university to enjoy yourself, to write creatively, explore extreme political ideology and engage with the world in a critical and idealistic manner. The final degree result didn't really matter and most students weren't obsessed with getting a first, but with how to change the world.   The current generation of students have been subjected to repeated testing and it has left most of them feeling insecure, with an inability to

trust their own instinct and innate creativity . Psychiatrist Dr Rory O'Connor from Strathclyde University feels that schools should spend more time on basic communication and problem solving and less on this testing. This testing produces a fear of failure. By not teaching people how to deal with disappointment and failure we are not preparing young people for life. Failure and disappointment are part of life and learning how to deal with this is a key life skill and without this skill, there is a danger that young people will become depressed and demotivated by the inevitability of life itself. Education reformer and champion of pragmatism John Dewy feels failure is instructive. Allowing students to try and fail and then work out how to succeed within an educational framework is confidence building. If graduate students understand the benefits of failure, when they experience it in the professional world, failure is more likely to be seen as an chance for change and less likely to be seen as loss of opportunity, stagnation or a catastrophic event. It is clear that today's animation industry requires talented, imaginative, innovative staff who communicate well and work in teams but how can University staff find the time to nurture students to be like this with increasing numbers, pressures from government bodies such as Skillset and students who are too scared to take risks. Students are under so much pressure to achieve, and in the UK creativity or creative thought and process just isn't currently valued. There is no government funding for creative or humanity courses, all the funding goes to science and technology. This has a knock on effect in several ways, creativity, design and the arts are undervalued, there is less investment in equipment, teaching and resources and the numbers of students studying these subjects dwindles. Is the government being short sighted by not encouraging and supporting an already growing industry? In 2014, the GVA (gross value added) for the creative industries according to the British Government UK was 5.2% of the UK economy and was worth 84.1 billion pounds and in 2016 it is worth almost 10 million an hour to the economy. Jonathan Ive, the designer of many Apple products including MacBook Pro, iMac, iPod and the Apple Watch studied art at Newcastle Polytechnic, not science or technology and yet, has gone on to one of the most successful designers in the UK. During his time at Newcastle Polytechnic, during his formative years he was given time and

space to create. He was given time to experiment and fail. The UK currently has a reputation for creative, interesting animation. Auteur animators like Nick Park certainly didn't go through a rigorous training schedule currently promoted by Skillset or other industry accreditation bodies.   He studied fine art at Sheffield Poly where he was encouraged to explore whatever medium he wanted, and then went on to specialise in animation at the National Film School where he was allowed as long as he like to finish his innovative and original film 'A Grand Day Out'. He wasn't given deadlines or forced to work in a team, but encouraged to take his time to finish his film and he didn't have a huge debt of tuition fees hanging over his head. Park has gone on to win several Oscars for Aardmans and has made the animation company, a household name. Park has brought millions of pounds into this economy. Other important and influential figures like Mark Baker and Neville Astley, creators of Peppa Pig, were also given the luxury of time to finish their final films and develop their own unique voice during their time in education at the National Film School. Mark Baker was nominated for an academy award several times before creating Peppa Pig with Neville Astley, another National Film School graduate.   Peppa Pig is one of the biggest exports this country has seen and the company was recently sold for 140 million pounds to Entertainment One and is distributed world-wide in North America, South America, China, Europe and Australia.   I once asked Mark what he thought about this system of training people for industry and he replied saying he had never had any 'training' He just got on with it, and muddled along. He said he learnt by mistakes and a desire to make a good film. Phil Hunt, now creative director of Studio AKA, Soho London and a Royal College of Art graduate was also given space to create his own film and develop his own voice. Today's leading creative voices have shaped the British animation industry and yet they don't appear to have experienced any kind of rigorous training, testing and re-testing but were engaged in the kind of education where students were expected to question, research and explore ideas. They were encouraged to take risks and to fail.   These educational methods have informed and shaped the British animation industry and have made it the economic success it is today. This creative, exploratory form of education is something today's students

just aren't encouraged to engage in. The current climate in the UK actively seems to discourage creativity in education and academia but champions science and industry. 'The logic of the current reform model has one central flaw: it is, at heart, doubtful of the value of teacher professionalism.' (Hallgarten, 2016) The government plays so much emphasis on industry and raising standards that it seems to have stopped listening to the educators or trust their judgement in relation to their own subject matter in particularly within the arts. Of course there is nothing wrong with wanting to raise standards, all lecturers want to raise the standards of their students but by making them think and question rather than just training them to use the right software or be part of the production pipeline. Yet the results of this past approach – chaotic, experimental, thought provoking - has seen some of the most ground breaking, innovative and now commercially profitable work. 'If we can set creativity and leadership on the same path, there's hope for an innovation-driven education system yet.' (Hallgarten 2016) In turn this should lead to an innovation-driven industry ready to engage and in fact instigate change.   Is this possible in today's climate? At the moment, there appears to be little respect for academia and it's role, particularly in the arts, think of phrases like "Oh it's all academic.' which infers it is just idealistic, without any grounding or reference to reality. Today, students feel they just can't afford to fail, they must get into industry so the money spent on the course is valid.This testing and re-testing sets them on a path where they are scared to inquire, probe or analyse without clear guidelines telling them how. The most asked question at most UK Universities is, "How do I get a first?". Students have grown up in a system where achieving a good grade is all that matters so how are they going to cope in the real world where in order to survive, they will be expected to adapt in an ever-changing industry. Software and technology change so rapidly that it is hard to keep up with it but if students are given the confidence to learn for themselves, adapt and deal with failure, this constantly changing environment will be much easier to deal with.

Conclusion: Students need to be given the space, time and money to engage properly with education. Is it a coincidence that suicide rates in the UK have risen

since 2008 and yet in Scotland, where they don't have tuition fees, they have dropped. In 2008 the fees in the UK rose to £3225 a years and then in 2010 to £9000. Today young people in the UK leave University with a debt of at least £40,000. No wonder they don't want to take risks or take the time to explore. Students want to be given the answers without the risk of getting it wrong. Failure and disappointment can lead to creative, innovative and original solutions and by not allowing students the space to think independently, experiment and then fail, we are taking away their confidence in their instinct, their ability to take risks and their chance to be original and creative. The animation industry may have a skills shortage and there is a need to provide training for these gaps, but there is also a need for creative and innovative teaching so that students can engage critically without fear of getting it 'wrong'. Interestingly, Skillset appears to be an authority on the animation industry and how to get into it, but after some research into their website it states quite categorically that there are no animation companies in the North West of England. This isn't true, there are a number including MacKinnon and Saunders, Cosgrove Hall and many more. I contacted some of these animation companies to ask them what skills shortages they were looking for, and a number of them said that they didn't want specialists, but generalists, students who know the whole production pipeline and can adapt to challenges or had an ability to learn new software independantly.   They were looking for students who had ideas as well as technical knowedge and potential. Some of the companies also commented on how group projects gave an unfair representation of the students ability. This practice allows students to hide behind the work of others who are more capable and even take credit for it. A few years ago I was working at the animation production company Loose Moose in London when a new graduate popped in on the off chance that someone would look at his reel. After watching this incredibly professional film we all told him how impressed we were. He was very pleased and asked if there was any work going. There was, but on further questioning about the film and how it was made, it became clear that he couldn't answer answer the questions adaquately and it seemed blatently obvious that he had a very small minor

role in the production of this film. Yet this graduate was going round Soho in London knocking on doors and using it to get work.   It seems that government bodies like Skillset aren't the voice for the whole of the animation industry afterall and animation staff should rely on their own knowledge of the industry and establised teaching methods to education animation students. There are a variety of skills needed by animation students today; technical, creative, craft-based, critical engagement and reflection as well as time to fail and then suceed. Links with industry are essential for any animation course as well as a good set of skills and understanding for the animatoin process but so is the time to experiment, critically engage and reflect without the fear of judgement or failure. Maybe it is time for Skillset to encompass a more varied and creative approach to employability.

This article is written by academic Sarah Ann Kennedy-Parr who worked in the animation industry for twenty years in a variety of roles; writer, director, creator, voice artist, executive producer and animation director before entering academia.

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