

NEPN is a professional development agency for photography based in the Northern Centre of Photography, University of Sunderland. Through its commissioning, talks, portfolio review and associated programmes, it aims to create a critically engaged context of photographic activity and debate in the NE region. This slide shows the current NEPN front page.

In this paper we will give a brief account of NEPN's history, outlining its underlying rationale and placing it within the academic framework from which it emerged and in which it continues to exist. Our more specific aim is to reflect on the underlying pedagogical priorities that underpin it and what it contributes to the student experience. We will end, briefly, with some wider reflections on the value of photographic education in relation to wider anxieties around the changing HE sector. Some of NEPN's most recent commissions can be seen here.

Unlike other arts agencies, NEPN has been developed from within the context of a University and as such is influenced both by the University and the broader arts community needs. It brings this together through its staffing, having both an academic and an arts manager

So, we might begin by asking: How does the activity of NEPN relate to the core business of a University like Sunderland and why does the University continue to invest in it?

One way to argue this is that, in raising the profile of photography in the University, the city and the wider region, NEPN aims to attract high quality photography students to study with us. It does so by developing a vibrant photographic community of practice in the region from which our students can benefit and to which they can continue to contribute post graduation.

More specifically, it develops professional and live learning opportunities for current students and graduates through an on-going series of projects that involve students, staff and external partners working together (authentic learning).

To take an example: in September 2015, NEPN was approached by Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens to become a project partner in delivering an engagement and learning programme to run alongside their showing of an NPG touring exhibition *Picture the Poet*.

We were able to commission two photographers from the network to work with libraries, schools and creative writing organisations during the run of the exhibition

This is NEPN working as a development agency, fostering links between photographers in the network and other arts organisations.

At the same time, we were able to integrate opportunities from this partnership directly into curriculum. For instance, Genres of Photography is a first year first semester module. We think of this module (PVD 121) as one in which students learn *to become* students; the pedagogical model is one of process and exchange rather than transmission. To help achieve this, we offer opportunities to become involved in the community of practice that is NEPN. In this instance, students were asked to produce a photographic project responding to the work of any one of the poets featured in the exhibition. Selected examples of the work in turn were included on the *Picture the Poet* website, along with short audio interviews with students talking about their approach to the brief. So, in this case, the existing cultural partnership between NEPN and Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens led to innovations in curriculum design for a first year module (PVD 121), which in turn led to students having their work selected for inclusion on the project website of a national institution.

Rationale

The rationale for such meshing of opportunities stems from pedagogical approaches (or 'signature pedagogies' to use some jargon) that aim to engage students and graduates in communities of practice, in ways that help

build the confidence of students as active cultural participants, as consumers as well as producers.

We also believe that enhancing such opportunities for 'live' engagement is particularly important for students who are sometimes resistant to more traditional academic modes of learning (who don't always respond to the traditional classroom or lecture context). It is also a means of encouraging students to develop ownership of the need to learn.

Of course, in referring in this way to 'signature pedagogies' (Thomson et al., 2012) we are aware that we are on well-trodden territory in Arts & Design education. Many of you will share our aim to create authentic learning experiences for our students and will have different strategies for achieving this. Sometimes, though, we forget that what is a given in Arts and Design education appears strange and novel from other discipline perspectives.

So far, so predictable perhaps.

We'd like to focus now on a rather different, more fluid model of engagement, in which some students (not all) engage independently with NEPN and its commissioning programme.

Commissioning new critically engaged photography is at the centre of NEPN's work. Since 2000 we have been successful in securing funding from various sources, currently ACE and the University through research. Key to the success of this ongoing project was the ceaseless energy of John Kippin who, with colleagues, helped establish the national and international partnerships that have enabled such commissioning to happen.

(Visuals on this – to show the range and depth of commission going back to 2000)

In 2013, NEPN created a context to showcase some of its recent commissions, producing *The Social: Encountering Photography* a month-long international festival of photography across the North East of England and with Sunderland as its hub. In addition to major gallery and museum

exhibitions, the festival incorporated various public contexts and sites and was designed to enable different forms of social engagement with photographic artworks, within traditional arenas such as galleries and museums as well as unexpected places across the region such as in shopping centres, advertising hoardings, bus shelters, metro stations.

The Sunderland focus was also important in the commissioning of new projects to be premiered at the festival. Sites of urban regeneration and the repurposing of the landscape were explored by Simon Roberts in the major commission titled *The Social: Landscapes of Leisure*. The images were shown in a range of indoor and outdoor, conventional and non-conventional contexts, mirroring the festival's theme and infiltration of varied social contexts.

Other commissioned photographers included Dow Wasiksiri, a leading Thai photographer, who came to Sunderland as part of the UK premiere of *The (Post)colonial Photo Studio*, an exhibition at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art which explored traditions of portraiture and commercial studios in former western colonies. During his visit, Dow also created a roving, pop-up studio and invited Sunderland residents to pose against fabrics and giant backdrops that were specially reprinted from historic photographs.

Without the students who volunteered to work alongside us in a whole range of capacities and roles, *The Social* wouldn't have been possible. As assistants to the commissioned photographers, they helped facilitate Dow's project and worked alongside Simon Roberts and Sarah Pickering at the research stage.

As exhibiting artists, they curated^d and exhibited their own work in one of Sunderland's newest (and hippest) alternative venues (Pop Recs).

At the same time two current research students and one recently graduated produced major new works for the festival:

Juliet Chenery-Robson's installation on the façade of Sunderland's old fire Station became synonymous with the aims of *The Social*. Her series of large-scale portraits were a development of an on-going photographic exploration of the effects on individuals of the much-misunderstood illness ME. The portraits of ME sufferers with their eyes closed offered a metaphorical representation of their invisible illness and lives lived in the shadow of alienation, social exclusion, controversy and loss of identity.

The Social, in other words, provided opportunities for students to experience and envisage themselves in relation to photography, not necessarily as photographers (as producers), but in a variety of possible ways: assisting photographers, curating, working the social media campaign; engaging with the public; organizing the opening event, and more.

Helen is one of the students we saw earlier assisting Dow: In her own words: "Through volunteering with *The Social* I assisted a leading artist from Thailand which has led to me keeping in contact and being offered an exhibition in Bangkok! I could never have anticipated this happening and wouldn't have without my involvement."

NEPN was subsequently able to offer Helen a short paid internship after she graduated, this time to assist Julian Germain on the production of *Newborns*, an NEPN commission in partnership with Sunderland MAC Trust and Sunderland 2021.

Karolina is holding up the backdrop in another of Dow's images. She was a second year mature student at the time. With a background in logistics management, she brought all of these skills to *The Social*, working alongside us as volunteer coordinator. She continued in this role after *The Social*, for instance coordinating students to assist in the production of the NEPN book fair at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in December 2014.

This entailed one fellow student working in partnership with the University's Arts and Design librarian to curate an exhibition table of first edition and rare

[photography books from the collection; a research student working alongside an undergraduate to document and record the whole event for Baltic; a team of ten students who invigilated the event and interacted with the public; an MA student coordinating the social media communications.](#)

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[NEPN mentored all of the students involved and oversaw delivery of the associated Events programme, while Karolina ensured the smooth running of the programme.](#) In recognition, she was awarded the NEPN Student Networking Award 2015, including travel grant and post-graduate mentoring.

Evaluation: Embedded and 'Fluid'

As Savin-Baden (2007) has argued, the spaces (physical and mental) in which learning takes place are diverse; if we view learning as fluid and evolving, then we should also acknowledge the porousness of the contexts in which it occurs. This is close to the way in which we think of the relationship between students and NEPN. Sometimes, as with PVD 121, they engage with NEPN as students and the learning is structured into the curriculum. Even though this takes students away from their 'normal' learning spaces, they are still guided by academic staff and the experience is subsequently integrated back into assessment and feedback.

However, the more exciting and potentially more expansive learning occurs when students take charge of their own interactions with NEPN, when they move from being a student to being a member of NEPN, to and fro, time and again. When students engage like this, then they often continue to engage in the learning experience long after they have ceased being students. Helen and Karolina's stories demonstrate something of what we mean by this, as does the extent of student engagement during, before and after The Social.

Concluding reflections:

In this paper, we have deliberately avoided some of the language that currently imbues the Teaching and Learning agendas in many higher

education institutions, including our own. We are not talking about 'employability' or even 'professional practice' and certainly not the acquisition of vocational skills. Why not? Not because we think the imminent introduction of TEF and associated funding implications can be avoided, but because we consider there is a need to be articulate, to speak clearly from within our discipline, about the value of the education we offer. Perhaps this is because our 'signature pedagogy' may be under threat from increasingly capitalised and commodified models of higher education in which 'getting a good job' is the fundamental purpose of going to University.

In **their** recent publication 'Rethinking Photography': histories, theories and education', Peter Smith and Carolyn Lefley remind us of the critical re-evaluation of photography provision in the 1970s and 80s, through the work of committed artists-theorists including Victor Burgin, Jo Spence and Simon Watney: In their words - 'the idea that photography education at university level might be nothing more than a form of technical training for industry or a fast track into 'art photography' was displaced by critical engagement and a higher level of cultural and political literacy'(Smith and Lefley, 2016: 219).

Outside of photography, the collection of essays edited by Stephen Cowden and Gurham Singh (2013) 'Acts of Knowledge' also reflects back on the opening up of higher education post 1968 and the academic struggles to adapt to the clamour for access and relevance in a fast changing world. This reflection is in the context of what they term a 'deep and profound concern about the commodification of knowledge within the contemporary university' (Cowden and Singh, 2013: 1). 'Acts of Knowledge' offers thought provoking reflections on the wider critical traditions within pedagogy, traditions that view education not as a product but as a process and a means to a wider social end: to promote emancipation, critical thinking and openness to the world. From such a perspective, pedagogy is conceptualized as a process of engagement between the teacher and the taught, one that is based on passion for the subject and mutual empathy. As Cowden and Singh argue, the 'knowing' or learning that can come out of this engagement is essentially an exchange between people. It is not primarily a financial or commercial

transaction measurable in terms of the graduate's position within the labour market or according to the logic of markets. The latter *is* important, but as photography educators we are in a sorry state if the value of our pedagogy is reduced in such a way.

References

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