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Crafting Sustainability

Sample and Extra-Curricular Enterprise

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When obvious deficiencies in the social sphere await action, and when their solution does not require years of training or special experience, one has a responsibility to participate in finding solutions outside the framework of official directives and organizational structures.

(Rich, 2004)

Introduction

Uncertain times often foster lateral thinking and a more resourceful approach. There is no doubt that action must be taken in order to ensure the craft industry is a sustainable and viable force within the future world economy. Ethically and morally we also need to exploit the inherent nature of sustainable and ecological craft practice.

Education is widely recognised within the recently published Craft Blueprint (Creative and Cultural Skills, 2009) as one of the major contributors to and facilitators for the future of the crafts industry. The research highlights a potential 63% growth in this already multi-billion pound industry in the UK. As key providers and stakeholders in this sector, it is relevant to ask: what role should we play to ensure maximum opportunities whilst maintaining the integrity of craftsmanship?

Craft and Sustainability research currently being carried out by Plymouth College of Art with support from the National Arts Learning Network (NALN), concurs with thinking currently emerging at the University of Huddersfield and provides a critical reflection on how we have reached our current position in relation to the sustainability of craft practice. It was heartening to see that we shared many of the issues with a community of fellow researchers, and this awareness has enabled us to feel less isolated in seeking solutions and more confident about the approaches we are taking to pursue pedagogic developments in the field of sustainable crafts.

At a time when long-standing and reputable craft courses are being 'rationalised,' government and institutional demands continue to expect more from those that survive. For those that do, studio space is at a premium, resources are squeezed and contact hours are often reduced. And yet, despite this erosion, we tend to cope by deft, resourceful strategies, tackling those challenges that are in our capacity to overcome, with the result that levels of student achievement remain high. It is debatable whether the historical decline in resources can sustain the quality of student experience, indeed whether it is morally justifiable or even realistic, to expect more from less. We all share these conditions that significantly shape the context of our subject today.

So it is against a familiar background that this paper will present an outline of some positive initiatives currently in place on the Textile Crafts undergraduate course at the University of Huddersfield. The paper will do so by citing particular examples embedded in our curriculum and expose some potential plans to address the need for sustainable futures in relation to pedagogy and student experience.

We will begin by sketching the local context of Textile Crafts as a degree within a portfolio of courses in the School of Art, Design and Architecture at Huddersfield, before describing our philosophy for sustainability in Higher Education, and how this is applied in practice: internally through pedagogy and the SAMPLE project, and externally, through extra-curricular enterprise projects. The paper will conclude with an evaluative summary of findings that will influence our plans in educating for a sustainable future.

Context

The university is based in the centre of Huddersfield and has over 22,000 students. The town has a long tradition in the textile industry and this is reflected in the design-related degree courses at the university which, as well as Textile Crafts, includes Textile Design, Surface Design, Costume Design, Fashion, and Business with Marketing.

The Textile Crafts degree itself currently has around 140 students enrolled and is about to celebrate its tenth year educating craft graduates. It offers specialist disciplines in embroidery, print, knit and weave and encourages a breadth of practices that range from traditional hand-heritage to emerging new media technologies.

Our approach establishes a number of career-oriented contexts - such as designer, designer-maker, textile art, community and education - defined by pluralistic notions of creative practice in which applied theory and community enterprise are integral to the development of students as informed and flexible contemporary practitioners.

We have found that the Textile Crafts course, as reflected nationally and discussed in the report *Creating Entrepreneurship* (The Higher Education Academy for Art, Design & Media, 2009), students value cultural and social recognition over economic or commercial success. Their ambition maintains an ethical outlook throughout their education that leaves them with a genuine desire to harness creativity in conjunction with a sense of social responsibility. It is in light of this social conscience that issues of sustainability have become increasingly embedded into the course's ethos.

Defining Sustainability through Education

We believe that issues of social conscience such as sustainability are matters of practical awareness and application in the training of our textile practitioners. An inclusive ethos must challenge older attitudes which Suzi Gablik in her paper *The New Front*,

...[where] artists aren't encouraged to be integral to the social, environmental, or spiritual life of the community. They do not train to engage with real-life problems. Instead they learn to be competitive with

their products in the marketplace. All our institutions are defined by this market ideology-none have escaped.
(Gablik, 2004)

Clearly then, a balance has to be struck between training students to deal with a competitive market-led ideology while also retaining a realistic awareness of the complex social, environmental concerns such as those involving sustainability. The complexity of this need can be demonstrated by the number of themes which implicate "sustainability" in contemporary practice (themes such as community, ecology, heritage, entrepreneurship, economics, political and social contexts, education and culture) and which influence two key concepts affecting how we define the future of Crafts, namely: social responsibility and sustaining the craft industry.

Education has a vital role to play in sustaining the industry by providing graduates who are equipped with the transferable skills and knowledge to sustain their careers within the industry. The next generation of practitioners will be not only passionate and innovative, but also the ethical conscience of the future. Their challenge will be in finding ways to motivate changes in consumer expectations and buying habits while also re-kindling the taste for the high quality, locally hand-crafted artefacts to which we all have an ideological allegiance. The nature of this challenge is encapsulated in the following quote taken from the Plymouth University's paper Crafts and Sustainability that says

The idea of the Applied Arts having inherent value will not be surprising to craft practitioners. However, the hypothesis and the key question in this project is whether the public can be re-engaged via the more widespread concerns over environmental or sustainability issues.
(Plymouth College of Art, 2004).

This is not an easy task but as Maurice Strong, influential ecologist and senior advisor to UN on environment, has urged '...what we do as individuals matters. It adds up.' (Strong, 2001 p.38) By that token, what we are able to achieve on our courses individually could have a significant part to play in ensuring a future where sustainability is the 'norm', developed from crafts where such issues already underpin practice.

Slow.....encompasses design for long-term use....intelligent and innovative choice of materials for minimal impact and waste, aesthetic, functional and emotional value, and concern for the entire life cycle of the product.
(Black, 2008, p.78)

Harnessing the notion of the 'slow' as a philosophy might provide a useful starting point for both the maker and consumer to engage with crafts as a sustainable option that enables both parties to invest an 'emotional' value into the product, engage with localised rather than globalised production, and support a reappraisal of quality which addresses a transparent sustainability concept. In a recent interview in Crafts Magazine Grayson Perry commented

The pressure is on to be consumers, hyper-consumption infantilising us all. This privileges the easy over the hard, the fast over the slow, the simple over the complex. We're encouraged to be children with a child's impulse control, no delayed gratification... We're addicted to drama and adrenalin. Everything I see as great in crafts - subtlety, moderation,

reflection, compromise, commitment, in short adulthood - is under attack.
So I see craft as adulthood.

(Anon, 2008, p.54)

So, if we are to create a sustainable education - and ultimately a sustainable craft market - we must consider the current social and economic needs that exist outside of the craft arena. As we have considered, embedding key skills into the curriculum in order to create a sustainable graduate craft practice is essential for the growth and development of contemporary crafts.

Entrepreneurship and Enterprise

The challenge is to make it meaningful, and resist the tendency to put it 'in a box'. Going beyond an accommodatory response requires the deeper understanding that ultimately the argument goes way beyond a simple 'add-on' about sustainable development.

(Sterling, 2001 p.19)

As we have highlighted, education is one of the keys to developing the Craft Industry sector and The Craft Blueprint suggests the enhancement of entrepreneurial opportunities. Entrepreneurial activity within the craft sector is inherent according to a report published jointly by The Higher Education Academy for Art, Design and Media (HEA-HEA) and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA).

Current definitions of what characterises an entrepreneur need to be questioned so that we can move away from one-dimensional stereotypes as presented in television shows such as The Apprentice and Dragon's Den, where a 'compete and consume' attitude precludes any place for 'care and conserve' approaches. (Sterling, 2001 p.21) Nevertheless, student research tells us that '...creativity, inventiveness, good networking skills, opportunity spotting, and problem solving are, for them, the basis of key entrepreneurial skills.' (The Higher Education Academy for Art, Design & Media, 2009 p.58) Responsiveness to students' values offers the opportunity to counter stereotypical attitudes and embed entrepreneurial activity accessibly into the core curriculum.

The Textile Crafts degree at Huddersfield combines entrepreneurial and enterprise activities in a number of related ways, most notably through what we call the SAMPLE publication, and also in community enterprise projects.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE is a brand identity, created for the Textile Crafts course, that over the last five years has developed from a "what if" moment. Initially, it was seen as an opportunity to create a small publication of a high standard that would reflect the work of the graduating students. And, in order to enhance its relevance, we examined the impact the project had had for the graduates both while at university and in the period following graduation. We discovered the following positive entrepreneurial and enterprising skills had been acquired as a consequence of the SAMPLE project which can be summarised as

- Improved overall learning experience for individuals
- Development of a strong community spirit
- Providing real-world experiences and professional deadlines
- Raised levels of ambition, vision and quality.

SAMPLE Published is a live project that now involves five academic staff, three support staff and approximately 80 students who design, produce and fund a catalogue on a yearly basis which promotes the creative achievements of our graduates. The catalogue is foremost a learning tool which also provides marketing opportunities. At times it develops independently of the curriculum and at others it is embedded into the foundations of the course.

An unforeseen benefit that has emerged from the “what if” moment is the way the SAMPLE project has developed students’ experience of entrepreneurial organisation and project management. The project quickly gathered momentum and was soon recognised by a variety of industry-related sectors, even gaining a nomination for the McNorton publishing award. As we evaluated the success of SAMPLE catalogue, we speculated on what other opportunities could be developed from the brand and we are currently pursuing a number of avenues, but it is in areas of funding which have suggested the most exciting direction.

Over the last five years, four main funding streams have financed the catalogue: a fee paid by each student, fundraising activities, external sponsorship, catalogue sales and course contributions. The following example of work based practice allowed us to develop our income sources and provided a new method for learning within the remit of the course.

We felt there was an opportunity for a more meaningful entrepreneurial experience to be taken. In providing ‘in house’ experience for our students we are able to provide ‘real experience’ in a supportive environment when placement opportunities are less widely available externally. Within this new project (which commenced in July 2009), students take an alternative placement year in which they set up their own businesses. This project has the support of the university’s Business School who provide a lecture series in setting up a business, mentoring, office facilities, practical advice and support on business start up. Textiles students can use the workshops and have a small studio space to further develop ideas. Local sponsorship has been achieved through various organisations to support the scheme.

This project offers students the first steps in ‘real’ business experience. They develop products under the SAMPLE brand which guarantees support from the Textile Crafts course, the University of Huddersfield, and further fosters collaborative working practices. Overall, it has the potential to develop into a completely sustainable social enterprise where ecological, moral and social aspects are addressed.

Our current intentions are to expand the SAMPLE brand and embed its related activities within the core curriculum so that a symbiotic relationship between sustainability and entrepreneurial activity is demonstrated through practice to be viable and realistic.

Extra-Curricular Enterprise

In order to understand the role of education in the development of the craft industry, we must also talk about the social responsibility both of individuals and of institutions. This understanding influences the relevance of courses to the industry, and through their ethos, the resonant potential for graduates to shape the aesthetic needs of society. Therefore, it is appropriate for degree courses to give students an awareness of a social responsibility in the practice of their craft. Our community projects attempt to engage with such social responsibilities and enable the student to fulfil personal social goals where ‘craftsmanship shows the

continuum between the organic and the social put into action' (Sennett, 2008 p.290)

Crafting the Community II is a HEACF (Higher Education Active Community Fund) volunteering project now in its second phase and sixth-year. It is important to note that this is an extra-curricular opportunity. A funded co-ordinator establishes links with the community, clarifying project requirements and provides support for the volunteers.

Students are given the opportunity to be involved on projects with various community groups including, children, adults and those with special needs in order to engage with and enrich our local communities. This extra-curricular enterprise is always popular with our students. The community spirit of the course fosters the students' confidence to bring their creative skills to external projects, and it seems that the popularity of community projects is a response to the role of craft itself as a social practice. Certainly, teaching styles and staff ethos encourage equality and help to empower students to feel they can participate in the community and apply their learning. This view accords with Sterling's opinion expressed as follows:

If we want people to have the capacity and will to contribute to civil society, then they have to feel ownership of their learning – it has to be meaningful, engaging and participative, rather than functional, passive and prescriptive.
(Sterling, 2001 p.27)

As Stephen Sterling suggests perhaps there needs to be a shift in educational practice in order to create participatory, collaborative environments where students engage with their learning much more deeply; and where they understand the true possibilities and contexts for the skills they are acquiring. (Sterling, 2001)

At Huddersfield, independently of academic staff, students work collaboratively on each project to collate research, devise workshop plans and teaching aids appropriate to the specific brief.

Recent examples of projects include:

- A tapestry project with 14 year-old boys for which the outcome was to exhibit nationally within the Tapestry 08 exhibition.
- One-to-one workshops with special needs children; creating a quiet reading tent for the children's school library.
- Workshops with the charity Mencap and local young carers as part of the global art installation created by artist Jennifer Marsh of Huntsville, Alabama.

As mentioned earlier, particular projects are run as extra-curricular activities. Alongside this work we also run a professional practice and volunteering module for those students who wish to engage with a greater academic depth and underpin the practice with theory.

Students engage productively with both of these opportunities that often bring an enhanced clarity to the aims of their own practice. A focus on sustaining the local community and remembering the value of sourced, designed and 'Made in Britain' becomes ever more evident to the students. Taking crafts into the community clearly helps to raise the profile of craft and awareness of sustainability as something more than an abstract concept. An example of the benefits of this is

the work of Sophie Callaghan who graduated in 2008 and has established a sustainable business model which originated at her graduate show.

Sophie Callaghan: Synthesising Skills

A day in the life of a craftsperson is intrinsically diverse. Involvement in a variety of projects and productions normally sustains a viable career. A product, idea or concept can take many directions and outcomes often moving into multi-contexts and disciplines. A craftsperson tends to possess a varied range of transferable skills.

The main concept of this work is to 'inspire change' with a Craft-for-Charity project... It is important that the installation not only raises awareness for the charity, but that it also makes its own contribution.
(Perren, 2008 p.98)

Sophie's current practice involved the production of individual characters that are hand-constructed and stitched. Sophie's practice addresses some of the following areas:

- **Recycling:** All materials used to make products are reclaimed; even the threads used to stitch are unravelled from reclaimed garments.
- **Community:** Raising money for the 'Invisible Children' charity based in Uganda through sale of products as well as working with local communities through workshops that in turn raise awareness.
- **Collaborative:** Working with other practitioners, in this instance a graphic artist, to produce a collaborative exhibition and alternative product concepts.
- **Multi-disciplinary:** Understanding the multi-context potentials within work and addressing the potential for these in terms of scale, product ranges, product areas.

Sophie Callaghan demonstrates the transfer of skills, knowledge and experience as a student into a successful, ethical and sustainable practice.

Crafting the Community II actively engages with the concepts of Sterling's participatory, collaborative environment and creates numerous entrepreneurial opportunities of which the students are specifically choosing to connect with. The successes of these projects consistently demonstrate that these new craft practitioners will, and do, harness creativity in conjunction with social responsibility.

3. Curriculum Developments

We need to provide a framework for students to make informed decisions about their future. Our ultimate goal is for craft practitioners to emerge onto the global arena as forward thinking, dynamic and innovative.

A number of incubation projects are currently evolving in addition to the established schemes discussed. Developing the idea that all components within education should be intrinsically linked as opposed to placed in separate boxes, a new module is being utilised this academic year. An Integrated Learning Portfolio encourages students to make links between all modules and study skills and embed these within the curriculum as opposed to an add-on. It will further support an integrative way of learning and reflecting.

A more practical and hands on approach to Craft involves active debate surrounding materiality and the responsibility of the maker. Developments within

practice explore notions of product lifecycle, longevity and material impact. Essentially we will directly encourage a deeper understanding of the implications of their developing practices.

Respecting diversity in design means considering not only how a product is made but how it is to be used, and by whom. In a cradle-to-cradle conception, it may have many uses, and many users, over time and space.

(McDonough and Braungart, 2002 p 139).

Summary

In this paper, we have presented particular initiatives that have evolved into valuable educational experiences for Textile Crafts students at Huddersfield University - students for whom the issue of sustainability is shared by many crafts practitioners as a growing concern. We have summarised those initiatives and explained how we have interpreted the issues as positive opportunities for entrepreneurial and community enterprise projects.

Our objectives are to present the principle factors that significantly contribute to the philosophy of a craft education at Huddersfield. These factors are:

- To engage with, and enhance the inherent ecological craft practice that is often the result of its intrinsically 'slow' practice. It is important that an education that considers global resources, material concerns and economic costs is firmly embedded within the core of the educational practice.
- To aid the development of responsive, responsible, entrepreneurial craft practitioners who upon graduation and beyond will both enable and become a part of a sustainable, economic, viable craft industry.

It is perhaps important to note that discussion surrounding creativity, artistry and craftsmanship has been limited if not completely avoided within this paper, such aspects are of course essential to the development of a craft practitioner and provide that essential foundation to any successful future in the crafts. This paper has focused on the social and entrepreneurial skills that need to be integral to a physical and creative sustainable practice.

Within the realm of our roles as academics, an attempt is being made to offer an alternative approach to a higher education in crafts. We are undergoing a significant economic shift and education should be part of the driving force that takes craft into the future. The following are a selection of key proposals for the next generation of craft education:

- Widen work based learning opportunities and collaboration with external bodies and business's to provide real experience that should reflect a realistic mode of operation.
- Consider a much wider agenda that suggests communal gain rather than individual. This should be considered both in terms of course curriculum design i.e. integrated learning alongside a social interaction and community volunteering.
- Embed a program of study throughout the curriculum that has at its core, an ethical and ecological grounding to generate responsive, forward thinking and considerate practitioners.
- Ensure students leave an educational institution with a diverse range of transferable skills and understand the potential applications for these.

Ongoing research continues to explore the practical ways in which sustainability issues can mould into the curriculum and other activities. This paper has profiled a number of live projects that attempt to address the currency of these issues; that is to enable an ecological and economically sustainable future for the crafts industry. There is a need to step back and re-address where we are headed and what the future holds and work as a community in order to make it happen. As Japanese Textile Artist, Jun Mitsuhashi describes

I think that under the sun you do not use your imagination so much, because everything is visible under the sun. But under the moonlight, it is dark and there is space for our imagination. There is not such direct thinking in the moonlight; we imagine things in the moonlight.
(Millar, L 2008 p.75)

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