

TOTAL TEACHING: AN EXPERIMENT IN POST-SECONDARY ART AND DESIGN

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Abstract

Total teaching is a way of delivering art and design at the post-secondary level. It involves a team of teachers delivering an integrated, post-formalist curriculum through project work and action learning. Students are able to learn at their own speed and all members of staff take responsibility for all aspects of delivery of the programme. This paper describes how this was introduced in a college in London, England and reflects on whether other factors might have contributed to its success.

Key words

post-secondary art & design, integrated curriculum, team teaching, action learning.

Introduction

This paper presents a personal account of the introduction of total teaching

into a post-secondary art and design department in London, England. Total teaching is the name I gave to an innovative way of teaching art and design. It began to form in my mind after attending two, well-reputed English art schools. The studio teaching was delivered by, what was by then, an almost defunct apprentice system and not only was nothing being put its place, neither did the staff appear to think there was any need to. It seemed to be presumed that students would glean some wisdom from their teachers by a form of osmosis. Instead, students learned from each other and from reading magazines but very little from their teachers. The theoretical parts of the programme were delivered through old-fashioned lectures, which took place far away, in another building and were delivered by remote teachers. Many students didn't bother to attend.

When I studied education as part of my Masters degree, I was provided with theories with which to understand and criticise the education I had received. I was able to describe a number of shortcomings in the teaching in this sector, in particular: poor presentation and delivery, lack of coherence of a programme, lack of discussion by staff of how to improve their teaching, no pedagogic innovations. Scholars have often identified these same weaknesses in the teaching in this sector (Pennington, 1994). Total teaching was an experimental attempt to rectify these faults.

Components of total teaching

Total teaching involves a team of teachers sharing responsibility for all aspects of the delivery of a programme, while students take responsibility for their learning and learn at their own speed. It is predicated on the need to integrate a post-formalist curriculum, introduce team teaching and teach through action learning and project work. Although not one of these components of total teaching is new, the way in which they are combined probably is.

Integration of the curriculum. When delivered, post-secondary art and design programmes have traditionally been split up into subject elements, which are timetabled and taught on their own, for example: life drawing, art and design history and theory, art and design studio etc. Often this separation is made more apparent by teaching different subject elements in differ-

ent locations. In this way, the programme is an amalgamation of disparate elements which it is up to the learner to connect (Further Education Unit, 1985). However, students often tend to consider some parts of a programme irrelevant, while they are also frustrated when there is too much overlap, so that what is taught in one subject is repeated in another (Parson, 1999).

Team teaching. Some people prefer to teach on their own and, after all, art and design is an area that tends to encourage individuality. Nevertheless, there are countless advantages to working with others, provided there is a good relationship. I have yet to produce a proposal or document of any kind that wasn't improved when I showed it to colleagues. In the unlikely event that this was ever not the case, I would be immensely reassured to know that colleagues approved of what I intended to do. If all good teachers keep trying to improve, then this is made much easier by working closely with others. On our own we try to reflect on what we are doing right and what we are not. However, frank feedback from colleagues we respect makes this much easier. Working in a team has numerous practical advantages and it is easier to give our best where our colleagues are helping us and lending support (Hardingham & Royal, 1994; Bess, 2000).

Action learning. Although there can be room for different ways of delivering a curriculum, I believe that the best way for students to learn is to find out by doing. There is less passive learning in art and design than in many other subjects, although elements such as history and theory tend to be taught by lectures (Danvers, 2003). All the same, it is important to emphasise that action learning does not imply giving students time and space to develop and express themselves. It entails students taking responsibility for their own learning, identifying for themselves what they need to learn and reflecting on what they have done, rather than depending on a teacher to tell them (Lonka & Ahola, 1995; Moon, 1999).

Project work. Teaching through project work has become common in various subjects in English secondary schools and in art and design in English post-secondary institutions. In the latter case, projects will follow a set design process. This begins with a brief that sets out what has to be done and also often specifies deadlines. Following this is the research stage, which can include theoretical, image and market research. Next comes idea generation,

when students are expected to produce a series of ideas that might allow them to meet the requirements of the brief. After this, comes development, when each idea is developed as far as possible. Although this can mean improving the idea and refining it, it can also entail unleashing lashings of creativity, when as many avenues as possible are explored, even those that might seem almost ludicrous. After this a decision has to be made about which idea to use and this has to be refined into a final solution. Finally this final solution has to be presented in a professional and striking way (Wise, 1990). It is pertinent that this design process has dominated English post-secondary education for over twenty years. This has contributed to artists, as well as designers, doing work that is more concerned with ideas than with the properties of materials and how to manipulate them.

Post-formalism. For fifty years art and design education has concentrated on formalism. This is rather like cooks falling in love with the ingredients of a dish and their properties. And it is true that many of these ingredients are delicious and appealing. Nevertheless, this approach can only lead to a series of dead-ends. The alternative that I believe in begins with what the work is about and encourages an engagement with issues beyond the narrow focus of art and design itself. In this way, the learning about the materials and techniques comes from these issues in the sense that it is the best vehicle for presenting their meaning, rather than the self-referential formalist approach of beginning with the issue of materials and techniques (Efland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996; Freedman, 2000).

Introduction of total teaching

The experiment took place in a small art and design department in a large post-secondary college situated in inner-London, England. There were about 150 students and 12 staff, most of the latter being part-time. The programmes on offer were one- and two-year general art and design programmes, including an access programme that was specifically designed for adult learners, together with a two-year programme in interior design (interior architecture). During the six years I worked there, cuts in government grants caused the number of taught hours for a full-time programme to be gradually reduced from 28 to 18. Although students came from all over London, they

tended to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and with records of low achievement at school. Despite the study not being compulsory, many students had low self-esteem and displayed hostility to learning in general and to teachers in particular. About half of them had completed compulsory schooling and were aged about 17, the other half were adults who were returning to education. On completing a programme, most would aspire to continue to study at university, although some might wish to find employment.

When I began, staff morale was low and facilities very poor. The programmes were delivered in discrete parts, for example the interior design programme had subject elements such as technical drawing, construction theory, furniture design, modelling, observational drawing. Although there was a room where staff could meet informally, many who were part-time never did.

After my first year, I determined to try to introduce total teaching. My aim was to do this over five years, although, in the event, it only took three. The first thing I needed to do was assemble a team willing and able to do this. I therefore determined to appoint staff with several, specialist skills, one requirement being a first degree in one art and design specialism and a post-graduate degree in another. For example, I appointed a graphic designer who had also studied 3D design. Most of the staff I brought in were young and with little or no previous teaching experience. This was because in my experience they were more flexible and open to trying new ideas than more experienced teachers.

Having assembled a team, it was then necessary to hold regular, formal meetings and function as a team. At first we explored shared aims for the programmes and having identified these, discussed assessment criteria and procedures. These meetings culminated in a two-day, overall review of the programmes which addressed twelve factors, identified strengths and weaknesses and decided which changes we would introduce to improve each of them. By this time the team was already functioning effectively and changes were coming from the team, rather than being imposed. It is important to note that mutual trust and support had been established and there was no shame in not knowing something.

The next stage was to produce overall themes that could link work together and all staff devised work based on these. In this way, the curriculum of each programme began to come together. Themes could last for a week or a term. We found that it was better to have two different themes at the same time and that it was better not to choose obvious ones. For example, if the theme is flora and vegetation, do not set a textile design project, but use this for an industrial design project about designing fridges (which we did). Another consideration in choosing themes was student interests and the fact that students were from many ethnic backgrounds. However, themes also acted as a stimulus to staff, who, having chosen one, would enthusiastically research this topic for themselves. This also prompted staff to select more unusual themes.

The next, crucial stage entailed staff devising integrative projects within these themes. These projects cut across subject elements and were delivered by several staff. Discussion about this was very animated and enthusiastic beginning with brainstorming and then refining and developing a project. I can remember occasions when such meetings ended with staff leaving and saying how they wanted to start teaching this immediately, so excited were they at the prospect. As well as formal team meetings, staff would often spend hours discussing these issues over the telephone during evenings and weekends (email was still in its infancy then).

After two years integrative projects covered all elements of all programmes. The results were dramatic, as overall student achievement on all programmes changed from about 20% of those who enrolled to over 80%. Areas of the curriculum that students had previously resisted, they now embraced. For example, numeracy and literacy were compulsory elements, which had previously been taught by subject specialists from other departments in the college. However, we took it upon ourselves to deliver these and included them within project work. Students no longer resisted, when they were not identified as separate subjects and were able to understand the value of learning them.

At this stage all staff were responsible for delivering and assessing work of all students. This meant that any student could approach any staff member and be helped. And students were encouraged to do just that: to take

responsibility for their learning and approach a staff member when they needed assistance. Staff enjoyed the flexibility this gave them: they could at any stage swap with one another and be with a different group of students. It also meant that while one staff member was available to two groups of students, two staff members could be working assessing, since our policy was that all summative assessment was carried out by two staff members, including entry interviews.

The team had also persuaded me to teach adult students together with school leavers. I had been reluctant to do this, being concerned that adults would not take kindly to being educated beside more unruly, young students. However, the team was right and this worked out extremely well, with both sets enjoying working together and behaviour of the younger students improving.

By the third year we were ready to introduce total teaching. For this, each student would work at her or his own speed in negotiating an integrative assignment, which the whole team took responsibility for devising, delivering and assessing. The first assignments were short, however as students progressed through the programme, so they became longer and more complex. At this stage I was able to free the whole department from the tyranny of timetables. In this context timetables would have been worse than unnecessary; they would have made it impossible to work in this way.

I had been apprehensive about this. After all, students have timetables right through their schooling. How would they react to determining their own timetable and taking responsibility for their learning? I need not have worried. Students adapted to this without difficulty and it all went smoothly.

It is important to note that formal procedures were in place to guide students in negotiating a project. The project briefs were quite detailed and clearly outlined the stages. Students had to monitor their own progress in their sketchbooks and on self-assessment forms. These were used for discussing progress with staff and during formative and summative assessment. Moreover, staff would always be proactive if they observed a student needed assistance and was not asking for it.

Although within the department total teaching was proving very successful, the senior management of the college, which had eyed this curriculum

experiment with a large degree of hostility, found the concept of no timetables one step too far. These senior managers liked to think of one group of students all together in a class with one staff member teaching them and the concept of several groups of students all over the department being taught by several people did not appeal to their bureaucratic minds! I believe the experiment was only allowed to continue as long as it did because of the outstanding results of the department, in which students won the national 'student of the year' award in two consecutive years. Nevertheless, corporate culture in an institution is very resistant to change (Stuhr, 2003). I found the pressures from senior management unrelenting and finally was forced to leave and the experiment ended.

Evaluation of the experiment

Within its own terms, this curriculum experiment was an undoubted success. Perhaps a hint of the high level of staff and student enthusiasm and motivation can be detected in the way I write about it. However, it has to be acknowledged that there were special circumstances.

One consideration is that I was very committed to this approach and invested a lot of time and energy trying to make it work. It is possible that one reason for its success was that I was putting so much into the job. Another is that I appointed the staff, who may then have felt a loyalty to me and been more ready to try out something different. It has to be admitted that a full-time member of staff who had been in the department for many years resisted the initiative and did not enjoy working as part of a team and his relations with the team became very fraught. This resolved itself when he chose to resign his position and leave, however it is a reminder that team working does not suit everyone and that it could be very difficult to implement with staff well entrenched in their ways.

Another objection might be that it is better for each subject element to be taught by the person with the greatest skills and knowledge in it. Moreover, to introduce total teaching I sought out 'renaissance people' who would be able to bring it about. Without these, the scope for introducing total teaching would be more limited.

Another possible difficulty is reconciling total teaching with a modular

delivery. We had students who were asked if they had done any art and design history and replied that they had not, because it had not been identified as such. It follows that it would be difficult, although not impossible to devise a way of awarding credits to the various subject elements of an integrative project.

Despite these cavils, I remain convinced that total teaching is effective and I do not think that the dramatic improvement in student achievement can only be attributed to other factors. I do not claim it is the best model, but I do believe it is one others can adapt to suit their own circumstances. And I am convinced that improvements still need to be made to the teaching of post-secondary art and design.

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