ORTHODOXY, CREATIVITY AND OPPORTUNITY

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Orthodoxy – What is the problem?

At the turn of the 21st century, any theoretical stance underpinning art education in English state-maintained schools appears to be profoundly confused and, to an unnecessary degree, defined by incoherent political and bureaucratic imperatives. The control exercised by government bodies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is driven by a spurious belief that curriculum and assessment developments can simply build upon examples of assorted existing good practice in schools. But what is said to constitute 'good practice' – by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) for example [1] – is seldom contested or debated, and rarely, if ever, defined from a theoretical or philosophical standpoint. Rather, there is an assumption that certain practice is self-evidently 'good' and should there-fore provide the basis for development. The problem with such pragmatism is that at best it leads to uninspiring and slow evolutionary development and, at worst, to atrophy. Uncritical acceptance of current practice in art

education has dominated to the point where the subject is in danger of becoming an anachronism. The vital energy required to jolt it forward into the 21st century is lacking, so that the subject neither meets the needs of students nor keeps pace with professional practice.

Most developed countries have experienced education 'reforms' in the last two decades, driven by the same imperatives of supporting economic growth and trying to ensure social stability. Henry Giroux of the Penn State University questions the thrust of these reforms in a way that seems just as apposite in the United Kingdom:

> Back to basics, merit pay, a standardised curriculum, raising test scores, evaluation criteria and the like. This is just another version of the technological fix that ignores the philosophical questions. It is quantifying the educational process in the belief that the outcome will be some kind of excellence or economic competence. ...those who are pushing these reforms have no educational philosophy at all. We have to ask what the purposes of education are, what kind of citizens we hope to produce. [2]

If Giroux is correct it explains why the extent to which reforms have focused on how to *control* the curriculum (and teachers) – through the joint mechanism of assessment and inspection – rather than engage in debate about the overall shape and content of the curriculum. For example, it might have been expected that the 1992 National Curriculum statutory Order for Art in England was the considered outcome of a rare opportunity to consider the philosophy, purpose and content of the subject from first principles. What emerged was a rational but far from radical conceptual framework that essentially codified an existing tradition. This was distorted by the then National Curriculum Council, on spurious grounds of 'manageability', to create an artificial divide between theory and practice with two attainment targets, 'Investigating & Making' and 'Knowledge & Understanding'. The most recent English National Curriculum revision in 2000 has a single attainment target, knowledge, skills and understanding' with four strands. [Strand (1), 'Investigating and making art, craft and design', strand (2) 'Exploring and developing ideas' and strand (3) 'Evaluating and developing work'. The remaining strand, (4) 'Knowledge and understanding' is expected to inform all

these processes.]

In reality, the history of the National Curriculum for art and design has been a process of compromise and précis apparently designed to make it fit a similar basic template as other subjects. Embedded within it is a tradition-al, modernist approach to teaching and learning in this subject with roots in two sets of ideas. The first stems from a tradition of working from direct observation and an emphasis on process, promoted strongly by the Art Advisers Association in the 1970s and early 1980s, sanctioned by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI), and perpetuated in secondary schools by the examination boards. The second important influence comes from domain-based curriculum models that emerged first in the United States in the late 1960s and which later informed the development of assessment criteria for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in the mid-1980s. These approaches now have coalesced in a predominant approach where children and young adults all too often produce work that is formulaic in subject, style and concept.

Arguably, the introduction of the National Curriculum did little to change pre-existing art and design practice, especially in secondary schools, except to cause a significant decline in design and craft activities and to make 'criti-cal and contextual studies' a required element of the subject. Arthur Hughes, reflecting on the need to reconceptualise the art and design curriculum, described it as an arbitrary set of practices passed down over the years and, through process of accretion, absorbed to form the canon of the subject:

> The result is a set of procedures, processes and practices which are a kind of historical trace of past theories of art education, child development or art, craft and design practice, all existing simultane-ously and each exemplified by activities which jockey for time and space. [3]

The subject literature for the past decade or more includes frequent critical references to a prevailing orthodoxy of approach – or convention or tradition if you prefer. Norman Binch, the former Staff Inspector for Art and Design in London, describes how the GCSE examination introduced in the mid-1980s, with its strong emphasis on 'process' often led to a single class-room methodology, particularly in secondary schools, where the starting

point is usually investigation and research. The development of ideas and some experimental activities, and the completion of a `finished' piece of work follow this. Whilst the investigation and research might be into any relevant matters, including the work of artists, craftspeople and designers, or into concepts, issues and ideas, Binch notes that:

> ...it is most commonly based upon objective drawing and visual analysis. The predominant sources of reference are collections of objects set up in the art room. The model reinforces the insular nature of `school-art' and, even when reference is made to external sources, it is usually based on the same methodology of objective drawing and visual analysis. [4]

Inevitably a very high stakes education system makes teachers adept at finding effective prescriptions for their students that enable them to satisfy the QCA's standardised assessment objectives. This approach often produces 'safe' work of a kind on which teachers can rely for the award of good examination grades. Thus, very understandably, teachers try to meet the demands of league tables, inspection, and appraisal for threshold payments. When a particular kind of work is well rewarded by the system, it is rapidly imitated and what once was a genuinely innovative or creative approach is reduced in no time to cliché or pastiche.

This phenomenon is not new – the history of art education in schools is littered with examples of 'school art'. It is easy to recall a sequence of once fashionable and ubiquitous images: monotone drawings of Che Guevara; work dependent on the Sunday newspaper colour supplements; studies of sections of vegetables and fruit; baseball boots and trainers; images from 'in' record sleeves; crushed Coca-Cola cans; rubber plants; reflections in stainless steel kitchen utensils – to that long-running all-time favourite, the sliced pepper. What these 'school art' exercises have in common is their almost total lack of any relationship to contemporary art and design activity beyond the school art room.

A key concern, therefore, is the apparent lack of alternatives to these tired and derivative approaches. Art and design education needs to change if it is not to atrophy through its sheer indifference to students' own interests and concerns (and to those of parents, higher education and employers).

The National Curriculum has not faced this challenge and, despite the subject's re-designation in the 2000 version as 'Art & Design', there is strong evidence from research and OFSTED of retrenchment into a limited fine art approach with few craft or design activities. [5] The National Curriculum removes any real incentive to explore new approaches or visions of the art and design curriculum – its very existence proclaims that the problem of what to teach has been finally codified, there is no need to look further. And yet:

> ... we are still delivering art curricula in our schools predicated largely upon procedures and practices that reach back to the nineteenth century – procedures and practices which cling to a comfortable and uncontentious view of art and its purposes. As a result, secondary art and design education in England and Wales is, in general, static, safe and predictable. [6]

And then there is assessment. Tattersall, a former head of the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) sums it up rather well when she writes:

> Professional confidence to teach a subject rather than just what an examination requires has plummeted. We are a nation obsessed by assessment, particularly external examinations. [7]

She continues:

> The equation of reliable assessment with externally set and marked examinations is neither helpful nor based on reality. It devalues the skills which external assessment cannot accommodate; it places pressure on students. Most of all it undermines teachers' confidence and commitment.

> We need to challenge society's double standards of faith in external markers - the majority of whom are classroom teachers - and lack of trust in teachers' judgments of their students' attainment. Investment in teacher training in assessment skills and professional development would raise the status of teachers and enable the range of skills which students need for the 21st century to be recognised. [8]

In the present education climate, with its often corrosive emphasis on quasi-vocational utility, assessment, league tables, monitoring and inspection, it has been hard to convince government of the need for radical change. There are conflicting calls from within the field to adopt new approaches to art education to take account, for example, of new technologies. Or perhaps to embrace media education; visual culture education; align art education with postmodern trends in arts practice; to adopt a multicultural approach; celebrate diversity or to place primary emphasis on the transmission of an ill-defined cultural heritage. There has been little coherence to these proposals and there is a danger that, as so often in the past, any 'development' will consist of grafting additional concerns onto an already very shaky conceptual framework.

Creativity

Perhaps creativity is the key to breaking out of the prevailing orthodoxy? Creativity is becoming more fashionable again in the education world generally, but in the United Kingdom mainly thanks to the work of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) whose report 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' [9] was published in 1999. The report had 59 wide-ranging recommendations and at least some of these are being acted on.

Creativity is a notoriously elusive concept but the NACCCE defined it as: 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'. Clearly, as the report acknowledged, creativity is not the exclusive prerogative of the arts – I believe it is shorthand for a range of multi-faceted abilities and attitudes that need to be fostered throughout the curriculum. Creative individuals may display a range of characteristics that extend beyond some assumed general capacity for divergent thinking. For example these might include: a tolerance for ambiguity and a certain playfulness with ideas, materials or processes; an ability to concentrate and persist, to keep on teasing and worrying away at a problem rather than seeking premature closure. They need time for what Ehrensweig called 'conscious planning' and 'unconscious scanning'. [10] They are likely to recognise, or have a willingness to explore, unlikely connections,

juxtapositions. They may be particularly self-aware and have the courage (or plain bloody mindedness) to pursue their ideas in the face of opposition. Most of all, creative individuals must have the confidence, the self-belief to take intellectual and intuitive risks in the cause of innovation, breaking or pushing back the boundaries of what is known or thought possible, or in achieving new aesthetic conjunctions. Perhaps in essence creative thinking is *risky thinking*?

But does our education system allow such characteristics to be properly valued? First and foremost we need creative teachers with the confidence to take creative risks; teachers who are themselves creative and reflective practitioners. This takes exceptional commitment and vision in increasingly high stakes education system with the pressures to conform created by ever-increasing accountability. The concept of high reliability schools, analogous to air traffic control, where any failure of the system is potentially disastrous, severely limits the scope for individual teachers to innovate or push the boundaries. Instead, subjugated to successive governments' vain search for a 'teacher proof' education system, teachers too often have been reduced to the role of curriculum delivery automatons.

One consequence is that it is possible to run an efficient arts department and achieve excellent examination results by means of assiduous teacher *prescription and direction*, where students are coached to replicate safe and reliable projects year after year. In this case, activities may be more re-creative than genuinely creative and often typify the orthodoxy of 'Schoolart'. By contrast, creativity is allied with the pursuit of ideas that are inventive, innovative, radical and sometimes heretical or revolutionary. The outcomes may sometimes be uncomfortable or confrontational – indeed much contem-porary practice to judge by the so-called 'Britpack' artists seems to be simply designed to shock. Perhaps that is why in a recent broadcast discussion an examination board spokesperson blithely told me that creativity in schools was a 'good thing' – provided, he said, it is 'controlled' And controlled it often is. Not long ago a Sunday Times feature declared: 'Forget creativity, imagination and play. For children at school in Britain, life is tests, tests and more tests'. 'But', the writer asked, 'if stamping out their individuality is designed to get better results, why isn't it working?' [11]

The QCA has created an official creativity web site www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity/ to complement the QCA publication 'Creativity, find it promote it'. [12] But at the same time we still have a curriculum boxed in by attainment targets, programmes of study and closely linked assessment procedures. This quick-fix 'solution', which presents schools with exemplary 'creative' projects, may be destined to add to the prevailing orthodoxy.

What next? A template to assess and report on a ten-point scale the supposed competencies associated with creative behaviours? The pitfalls should be obvious. In his anatomy of creativity *Creating minds*' [13], Howard Gardner points out that that creativity is not the same as intelligence: that while these two traits are correlated, an individual may be far more creative than he or she is intelligent, or far more intelligent than creative. He states that while it has proved possible to devise highly *reliable* tests for creativity there is little evidence that such tests have much *validity*.

If the British government really want to encourage creative and cultural education in schools it is necessary to eliminate much prescription and provide teachers with better initial education and continuing professional development, resources, and vastly more autonomy. Above all, governments have to learn to trust teachers and give them 'permission' to practice the 'risky thinking' that brings cultural education to life. The key, in my view, is to cherish a variety of visions of teaching and learning in the arts, to enable healthy cross-fertilisation of ideas, to keep channels open to allow art educators to continue to learn from each other as part of a professional, constructively critical, community.

Opportunity

For some time the rhetoric of politicians, including prime minister Tony Blair, has emphasised the creative imperative – to which Ken Robinson, the chair of the NACCCE responded before leaving for the greener pastures of the Getty Center for the Arts in California, 'If the government were to design an education system to inhibit creativity, it could hardly do better'. [14] But even I have to admit that something very odd is going on at present – extraordinary, almost unbelievable!

For some months past there have been a few straws in the wind but for me the first real evidence that government education policy might be veering away from its previous inexorable course came in February 2003. The newly set up Department of Education and Skills (DfES) Innovations Unit whose mission is: *'To contribute to solving learning challenges by promoting successful innovative practice in teaching and learning and making it powerful throughout the education system'*. The director of the Unit spoke about the Secretary of State's 'really deep enthusiasm for subject teaching and subject specialisms' and his wish to make education fun. Fun? Government policy? If that's not a significant change then I don't know what is. There was talk about the need for radical 'Futures Thinking' leaving behind a situation where 'We have spent all of the 20th century adding layer after layer of expectation, structure and newness on that existing [essentially Victorian] basic structure'.

- It seems that transformation is now the buzzword, in particular:
  Working with teachers so that they feel empowered to become *the*
- *agents of change* and not the objects of change;
  Reclaiming teacher professionalism and *reclaiming teachers having the confidence in their freedom to innovate;*

Sanity at last?

Recently, government has issued a number of consultation papers including *Subject Specialism and Excellence and Enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*. In a foreword to the primary document the Secretary of State expressed his belief that what makes good primary education great is the fusion of excellence and enjoyment. He says excellent teaching gives children the life chances they deserve and enjoyment is the birthright of every child. He continued: *'But the most powerful mix is the one that brings the two together. Children learn better when they are excited and engaged – but what excites and engages them best is truly excellent teaching that, which challenges them and shows them what they can do. When there is joy in what they are doing, they learn to love learning'*.

Is it all just empty rhetoric? The story doesn't end here. 'Collaborate, Create, Educate' was a major conference jointly organised by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Culture,

Media and Sport (DCMS) in London in the summer of 2003. No less than three government ministers spoke on a programme that also included Poet Laureate Andrew Motion, Nobel prize winner Sir Harry Kroto, film maker Lord Puttnam and Deborah Bull from the Royal Opera. The key message? – 'Creativity, imagination and innovative thinking should be at the heart of children's experience at school'.

At the conference the education and cultural sectors were urged to work together to help enrich school life for pupils across the country. Secretary of State Charles Clarke declared 'Creativity isn't an add on. It must form a vital and integral part of every child's experience of school. Research has shown that, if it does, it can contribute to improved learning and increased standards across the school as a whole.' Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell said: 'We have an enormously rich cultural life in this country, and school must be a window to this world. Our cultural organisations have a responsibility to work with schools to place young people and education at the heart of everything they do'. She continued, 'The Government wants to see young people from all backgrounds have the chance to use their creativity and imagination in a positive way'.

Talking to people at the event it was clear that these messages were met by some with scepticism, especially by head teachers, and one delegate asked the Secretary of State why, if creativity is so important, government had ignored it for so long? I didn't catch the mumbled answer. Nevertheless, similar sentiments to those now being expressed by ministers until recently were usually dismissed out of hand as unrealistic, hopelessly idealistic and sad harping back to the 1960s. I have been as critical of government policy over the past fifteen years as anybody and it will be obvious that I share the view that much of the curriculum is anachronistic. [15] However, I confess that my innate cynicism is beginning to evaporate. I really do believe that at last a very important change of direction and policy is afoot as epitomised in Tessa Jowell's conference sound bite, 'No more Mr Gradgrind, much more Mr Chips'.

It is reasonable to question what is driving this change of heart. On the one hand ministers have been keen to talk about cultural capital and the individual's cultural hinterland – arguments for the intrinsic worth of cultural

education for personal enrichment and as an entitlement in a social democracy. But there is also a strong economic imperative. Tony Blair has said, *'Our aim must be to create a nation where the creative talents of all the people are used to build a true enterprise economy for the twenty-first century – where we compete on brains, not brawn.'* Tessa Jowell added 'Societies that are creative will have an economic advantage' and noted that the creative industries in the United Kingdom have grown at four times the rate of the economy as a whole in recent years.

Specifically, the creative industries grew by an average 9 percent per annum between 1997 and 2001. The Creative industries accounted for 7.9 percent of GDP in 2000. Four of the creative industries account for three quarters of the economic value of the grouping of sectors: Design (2.8% of the whole economy), Software (1.6%), Publishing (0.9%) and Advertising (0.7%). Exports contributed to £8.7 billion to the balance of trade in 2000, equating to 3.3 percent of all goods and services exported. Exports of the creative industries have grown at around 13 percent per annum over the period of 1997-2000. In December 2001, creative employment totalled 1.95 million jobs. Over the period 1997-2001, employment in the creative industries grew at a rate of 5 percent per annum, compared to 1.5 percent for the whole economy. [16] Given all this, perhaps the only surprise should be the time it has taken ministers to realise the implications for education!

A current inquiry into 14-19 education appears to be coming up with some interesting ideas. Among other problems the committee recognises that:

- Many young people find that GCSE and Advanced level [examination] courses focus too much on passing examinations and not enough on developing a wider or deeper understanding of the subjects they are studying.

- There is too much emphasis on traditional written examinations, sometimes at the expense of wider learning, skills and personal development . [17]

The committee is considering the possibility that young people might work towards a high-status diploma qualification covering the whole of their

learning programme, rather than the wide and often confusing range of exist-ing qualifications. It is proposed that, 'Over the course of the 14-19 phase, young people would take fewer written examinations than now; and there would be more assessment by their teachers, lecturers and trainers'. [18] The report is very cautious but these would be significant and, in my view, very worthwhile reforms.

So what happens now? How easily can change come about? How can art and design education benefit from the change? The timetable for change to the assessment system could take ten years. There do seem to be some obstacles including deep-seated attitudes to the comparative worth of curriculum subjects, the need for further investment and issues of continuing over-prescription and perhaps teacher confidence. But the pace of change appears to be quickening and the National Society for Education in Art and Design is involved in an increasing number of meetings with government departments to discuss new initiatives, for example, a project to embed Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in art and design.

The Society obviously welcomes the proposed changes and will explore ways to help take forward innovative developments and constructive change. Art and design teachers no doubt will wish to remind colleagues and senior management of the subject's role in these enlightened times whilst demon-strating the benefits of truly innovative, creative and enjoyable art and design education! But the need to re-think the art and design curriculum has not gone away and at the very least we need to broaden the curriculum again to embrace craft, design and the new technologies. We need to do it, not just talk about it.

More broadly, nearly five years ago, John Swift and I wrote A *Manifesto for Art in Schools* [19] in which we called for more autonomous decision-making and authority for teachers and learners within a climate of enquiry, risk-taking and creative opportunity. We recognised that this would involve re-addressing the contents of art education, developing different approaches to it, and finding improved ways of encouraging diversity and innovation through difference, plurality and independent thought. We called for much greater flexibility than allowed by the present statutory Orders and for investment in innovative and creative curriculum development designed to

develop rigorous new and effective teaching and learning strategies. We recognised the implications of this for initial teacher education and CPD and for all forms of assessment and evaluation regimes, including teacher appraisal.

It is clear that the opportunity is now there to take some of these ideas forward. It is possible that we are about to witness real progress towards fulfilling these ambitions and support for art and design education that previously we have only dreamed about. But to be taken seriously we will need to do a lot more than just continue in the old sweet way.

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