Afterword

Treating change within Art & Design education as a design problem. Some reflections on the CLTAD 2006 Changing Curricula conference in Lisbon

In the engaging and informative Enhancing Curricula conference hosted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning in Art and Design (CLTAD) in Lisbon, 2006, several themes kept reappearing from a number of presenters. There were plenty of engaging case studies of reflective practice both in teachers and students as well as the development of design processes and projects. Another common theme was the global, multi-cultural nature of our students. It is not news that we have a growing international student body and one that is fluid in both cultural identity and location (and this includes our 'local' students). What became apparent at the conference, however, was the fact that academic staff are far less able to be similarly fluid in their cultural experiences. We have some exchange programmes, of course, but the nature of academia is to remain in the same place for a very long time to work one's way up the ladder. This kind of working environment is increasingly rare and certainly it is markedly different to those of our students who will be likely to have at least twenty jobs, several careers, possibly in several countries and professions, in their lifetimes.

Although we strive to be inclusive and value the multiple cultural identities within our student and staff cohorts – and there are several case studies of this being very successful – we seem to know

precious little about our international students' rationales for studying overseas. In some cases they are the privileged member of a family that may only be able to afford one member to go onto higher education, at least overseas. In other cases they may be part of a cultural elite who are educated and wealthy enough to enter our Western educational institutions. None of this really answers the question of why they choose to study overseas and the rather colonial answer that it is for a 'better' education is almost certainly too simplistic.

It is essential to find ways to include those working in art and design education in countries less fortunate, and less wealthy, in gatherings such as these conferences. There are many practices and philosophies of art and design within cultures in places like India, North Africa, South-East Asia (and I am aware these are wide geographical generalisations), which do not make it into conference presentations and journals. Yet clearly many of our international students come through those local school and possibly higher education systems that informs their way of thinking in this area and these have the potential for adding great value to our own enterprises. It is difficult enough for many of us to find the funding (whether in terms of money or time) to research, write papers, apply for, fly to and present at conferences or publish in journals. For many of our colleagues in developing and Third World nations this is virtually impossible. Without addressing this issue within our own, academic, professions our rhetoric of sustainable design, multi-cultural awareness and ethical concerns in our discipline professions rings hollow.

Ethical issues and socially aware design processes formed another pressing theme at the Enhancing Curricula conference and some of the ways of thinking highlighted, for me, an issue closer to home. Apart from the multicultural point outlined above, we also face what I believe to be a significant ethical issue in our own back yards – our collective exhaustion from the treadmill of excessive auditing of our educational institutions and practices coupled to the continual withdrawal of funding.

Tina Barnes-Powell gave a paper on the contradictions that exist between our creative professions and educational institutions. She argued that business has taken on board the rhetoric of the creative economy and clearly sees it as the future of knowledge production. As we move away from competing against countries like China in physical production, we appear unable to claim this creative economy for ourselves in our own crossover area of art and design education. She cited an exhausting, if not exhaustive, list of government quangos, reports, committees and auditing frameworks that leech enormous amounts of our time as academics and appear to achieve very little except a detrimental effect on our own teaching, research and practice. We are, at least in Australia, continually facing reduced funding and informed that we need to be more efficient in our teaching as well as producing research that has commercialisation potential.

Yet the statistics of our profession speak loudly. In the USA and Europe more people visit galleries and museums than attend football matches (something that sports-obsessed Australia could take note of). Anne Bamford, in her report for the United Nations on art and design education around the world at the conference, pointed out that design is a huge multiplier of economic investment. For every dollar spent by companies on design (branding for an insurance company, for example) there is a 28-fold multiplication of that investment. In other words, that insurance company generates (and most likely earns) 28 times its investment through the power of design. Bamford went on to explain that no other industry in the world has that kind of multiplying effect.

Those working in sectors commonly thought of as wealth generating such as banking, management and law all consume enormous amounts of the cultural product design and the arts create. Most people read books, magazines or newspapers on their way to work. Perhaps they listen to music on their (beautifully designed) iPods and then come home to watch television or go to see a film. Creative capital is everywhere and because of this ubiquity its value becomes almost invisible.

We work in institutions that are now primarily economically driven, for all the rhetoric of graduate attributes and 'excellence' (the most overused word in education) in teaching and research. The pressures of dwindling government funding, sticks rather than carrots constructed from research quality frameworks and learning and teaching funding based on student satisfaction surveys mean that the lofty ideals of most institutions are continually undermined by the need to tick the boxes and jump through the correct hoops. So why is art and design education treated with increasing disdain by governments and even within our own institutions and what can we do about it?

Barnes-Powell, in conversation after her presentation, said that she still did not have an ending to her argument, namely the 'how' of how we might effect much needed change. I believe one of the factors will be a generational shift. In my own university the majority of the upper management (Deputy Vice Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, Chancellors and even Heads of Schools) is dominated by, to put it bluntly, old men. Compounding this is the issue that most of these people have come through the academy and gained their professorships as prominent, often exceptional, researchers, but many have little or no experience or training in management and the knowledge that they do possess is often an outdated worldview of organisational structures. Many have spent their entire careers developing a culture of difference and deference. Although experts in their own research fields they are essentially working as amateurs when it comes to running the business of multi-billion dollar universities. This situation is largely a product of an ancient system, a relic of what innovation thinker John Leadbeater described in his report on the British library system as the "secular priesthood" of academia or "special places for special people" (2006).

Much of the world is moving on from this point of view. More and more organisational structures are flatter, inclusive and participatory networks and communities, not pyramids. Collective and creative collaboration, social networks, personalised swarm-based media spaces

(as opposed to top-down broadcasting) and public conversations and debate are the landscapes within which our students and, indeed, many of us now exist. Our upper management are still trying understand what blogs are let alone whether or not to use them. Yet our students' work and voices are reaching millions of people online and causing vibrant debate way beyond that of the traditional culture of academic publishing and citation.

There are of course exceptions to the above generalisation and differences in different countries, but in my many conversations with colleagues around the world I would suggest that the scenario I have described is very familiar. Any generational shift in culture takes time and I do not intend to be ageist in my comments. Although age is a factor, worldview is more important. I am speaking rather of a mental generational change than a physical one and this is one in which educators (of all ages) in creative disciplines are well positioned to push for.

The past few decade or so of research literature on teaching and learning has uncovered the necessity to change educational practices from ones of knowledge transfer to those which develop the individual, that stress high levels of self-reflective practice often in collaborative groups and process over final results. This is part and parcel of design (and increasingly art) practice and we should be staking our claim of expertise in this area.

The lifeblood of art and design is cultural change. We strive to develop works, ideas and products (which are increasingly the same thing) through which encourage society to see the world differently - to create Spinoza's 'moment of wonder' that Richard Buchanan spoke of in his opening keynote speech of the conference. As Michael Rodber argued in his paper, the design process is now about finding problems, understanding patterns, people and needs and only then developing new solutions, methodologies and products to change the way people think and do. Rodber was passionate about design moving up the food chain of new product development, not just to implement solutions but to find out what exactly needs to be solved.

It is essential we bring these process to bear onto our own institutions rather than merely reacting to (or coping with) government, regulatory and institutional mindsets that turn our teaching, research, staff and students into products to be measured, counted and processed. Rather than moving towards a creative, knowledge-based economy within higher education, we are in danger of sliding backwards into a Protestant industrial mentality of production efficiency imposed upon education, whilst the rest of society is moving in another direction. Students are not cars. And they are certainly not cars that come in any colour as long as it is white.

I have a friend in Australia who is a school art teacher. As a child, his introduction to art began when he was sent to art classes as a punishment at school. Although this was twenty-odd years ago, it is difficult to imagine that attitudes have changed much based on anecdotal evidence from new art and design students and the concerns of their parents who often ask how their child is going to possibly get a 'real' job when they leave art college. Changing these cultural attitudes is crucial.

I believe we should view the necessary change in our institutions as a design brief. We have plenty of evidence of the value of what we do and we have an enormous amount of knowledge of how to create and manage change through design thinking. Starting from schools right the way through to professional life it is essential that we champion our abilities using this evidence and argue the economic case on its own ground. We have nothing to apologise for and no reason to ask for special consideration. Creating this change is the social responsibility that we all must take on and we need to build and nurture our communities of practice for this joint voice to have the impact it needs. Engaging with cultures and nationalities that may have quite different ways of valuing art and design's position within society compared to that in our Western academic pecking order may be a good place to start.

References

Leadbeater, C. (2006) Libraries and the Creative Economy. Paper presented at the Library of the 21st Century Symposium, State Library of Victoria, 2006.

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