The Curriculum is Out There

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The title echoes Slavoj Zizek's appropriation of the 'X Files' slogan 'The Truth is Out There'. For Zizek, the truth of ideology and power is not concealed in depth, hidden in structures, waiting to be revealed by the initiated. Instead it is 'out there', stark, and visible. All that requires is for it to be spoken, to be acknowledged. We have, perhaps clumsily, appropriated it again to draw attention to the shift in power within education, away from a hierarchy in which knowledge is held inside the institution, and released gradually to the initiated within, toward an idea of education that looks outward to the world, and whose 'content' is that world.

The presentation began with four questions, as we had been invited to propose questions for discussion after the presentation. What follows is a slightly more formalised 'talking to the slides', as took place for the presentation in Nantes.

1) FINE ART BA (HONS) - a qualification, or an experience?

The first question relates to the distinction between understanding the undergraduate degree course as a defined outcome, or a graded qualification, and defining the activity of the time spent on that course as an experience. This presentation aimed to emphasise the experience over the qualification, arguing that the increasing focus on equivalence in educational qualification tended to negate the importance for the student of the experiences that they underwent as part of their degree course, experiences whose utility for the student might emerge differently for each student depending on their path following the course, being as various as the number of students qualifying.

> *The curriculum is shifting position from the centre of education, the core, to the boundary where it is camped between education and the outside world. Some teachers and most administrators have become fixated on the EXIT sign, with the chief question being - what do students need to get a job?*

Gareth Jones, Education: a Mirror or a Lamp? Art Monthly, October 2008

To oppose this focus on the exit sign is not to simply propose an idealistic or romantic vision of the student disconnecting from the world, but a recognition that in this, as in so many disciplines, the qualification is less valued by employers than the additional activities pursued while the degree is being undertaken. This presentation paper argues that Fine Art can offer that diversity of experience with the academic boundaries of the qualification, if the student determines the direction of their own learning. The solely competitive emphasis on the graded level of qualification lessens the values of the experiential learning that the student undergoes during the time of study. A focus on the experience helps the student to better understand how different levels of achievement can be beneficial at different stages in the students career, and how the latent usefulness of an experience may sometimes find it's value years after the qualification is attained.

2) Is education always teleological?

The second question raised the definition of purpose within education. The presentation intended to challenge ideas of utility and teleology applied to the act of learning, and proposed discipline-specific ways in which the suspension of 'outcome'-driven practices

in favour of open-ended curiosity, experimentation, and the embrace of failure which are so much a part of contemporary fine art activity, on both a theoretical and a directly practical level. As Lisa le Feuvre writes:

> *Failure, when divorced from a defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position, is shifted from being a simply judgemental term. Between the two subjective poles of success and failure lies a space of potentially productive operations. Rather than being a space of mediocrity, failure is required in order to keep a system open and to raise questions rather than answers. Without the doubt that failure ushers in, any situation becomes closed and in danger of becoming dogmatic.*

Lisa Le Feuvre, 'Art Failure', Art Monthly 313, February 2008

3) "…more like the studio, less like the classroom" - must online learning always be distant?

The third question is framed by a quotation from our own research projects, discussed in detail later in this presentation paper. The project entitled 'The Reflexive Archive' looked into ways in which online activity could enhance the learning experience of artist's talks delivered to large groups and concluded that, among other things, the university's approach to the online environment would be more productive if it resembled the studio space in it's open-ness, rather than the classroom, into which on those whose names are registered on a list are allowed to enter. The report contrasted the social spaces into which online students went in their spare time, with the regulated and enclosed spaces of University networks.

4) Who does the education serve?

The final question was intended to provoke discussion concerning proposals within the UK of employers being active in determining the 'content' of education, and question whether a students education should be designed to serve business by making students suited for the current requirements of employers, when those requirements might be limited to the short-term and immediate

If we are to speak of a purpose to education, then for whom does that purpose exist? Does it serve a social purpose in providing students ready prepared for the existing labour market? Is this only of short-term benefit to the student in a changing and unstable labour market?

Our presentation defined the contemporary context in this way: The expansion of online media and the growth in availability of information technology forces the University and the Art School to redefine its role. The educational institution is no longer the privileged source of information held for those on the inside. If anything the online experience can be more limited within this password-protected environment. So education must define itself as something other than the repository of content, since content is everywhere – 'out there'.

How can this be made to happen? We propose that the discipline of Fine Art can provide a valuable pedagogical model for this change, since it is formed by practice which is led from outside the institution: arguably contemporary art practice is led more by museums, collectors and artists than by the academy, unlike comparable academic disciplines in

the humanities and sciences. Mutating, self-critical and non-teleological, art since Modernism has tried to avoid incorporation into fixed systems of meaning, and it is this very restlessness that makes the discipline of Fine Art practice forced to address the contemporary world as it's subject matter.

A very simplified account of art's modernity sees the development of it's objectives from the creation of works for a pre-existing context (the collection, the gallery, the museum) to a critique of the context itself. Now (to paraphrase Deleuze's definition of the philosopher) the artist produces concepts rather than, or as well as, objects. This changes the role of the studio from a place for technical training, to a place that is social, and collaborative, where work (and learning) is driven by curiosity and experimentation. In this model, the tutor is no longer required to transmit information that is unique to them, or to be a model of mastery for emulation and mimicry. Instead they enable and participate in critical activity that allows the student to learn. This learning is experiential, rather than instructive. The student is active, not passive.

Our experience of the Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) provided by most institutions is that they do not reflect this active paradigm. On the whole, they are systems of surveillance and control, designed to suit modularised courses (in reality and not just in name as is the case of many of our UK studio based courses), and lecture driven teaching methods. There are many excellent tutors who have stretched the capabilities of these systems, but the power remains firmly in the hands of the instructor by nature of their design. As a result, too often they end up being used on Art and Design courses as expensive filing cabinets.

Whilst there are benefits to be derived from some of their functions, the emphasis on restricting information to students enrolled on a particular module or course, or in a particular institution through links with the student record system makes them inappropriate for interdisciplinary or cross-institutional collaborations.

Finding systems that could break out of narrow course or university boundaries was essential for the first of our collaborative projects between Fine Art students at Nottingham Trent and Kingston University. There follows a description of those projects:

The (Higher Education Academy ADM subject centre funded) Reflexive Archive (2007) looked at ways of enhancing the pedagogical value of the one-off guest lecture by professional practitioners. At NTU, in common with other Art & Design institutions has a regular series of such talks – at NTU these are the 'Live Lecture' Programme. These are public - 'open' – in addition to being timetabled in the teaching programme, but we were aware they could be more integrated into the curriculum. The talks have been recorded on video and archived for many years, but we set out to fine ways of contextualising them into studio practice more fully. A talk would generally last about an hour, and a few brave students would put up their hands to ask a question at the end if time, but then the experience was over.

We wanted more than this, and to be able to revisit the issues raised in talks once the students had had time to reflect and to return to their work in the studios. We tried to improve this learning opportunity in two ways; firstly, by embedding a video of the talk in a blog page, and inviting the artist to continue to engage with the student online over a period of weeks after the talks. Tutors from the host institution contributed and helped

shape the discussion. The whole was archived for future reference. Students from NTU and Kingston were able to watch the video and contribute to the blog.

The second part of the project was more complex to organise technologically and used a mixture of Web 2.0 tools including Second Life on an island hosted by Kingston.The artist participating in this part of the project, Alun Rowlands http://reading.academia.edu/AlunRowlands," whose practice encompasses collaborative writing was our guest. We bought several copies of his small artists book/pamphlet called 3 Communiqués http://www.temporarysite.org/FC/communique4.htm This three-section work revolved around three instances utopian thinking, so the use of Second Life as a platform seemed an interesting parallel.

As the contextual material was quite dense, Alun created web pages with supporting contextual material for students to make use of alongside their reading of the book, which we had distributed to them. We then held sessions to set up the technological requirements at both institutions, creating student avatars and familiarising everyone with basic motion and technological function.
We held an initial informal social meeting in Second Life a week before the actual artist led talk and discussion (here adapting Gillys Salmon's 5 stage model for e-moderating discussions boards outlined in *"E-tivities, the Key to Active Online Learning"* 2002), which took place after regular college hours with students joining from many locations including their own homes.

The original estimate of one hour for the discussion was expanded to two, since no one wanted to leave, and only the closure of the building ended the session. We were unable to use the voice-enabled technology as we had hoped due to an unannounced firewall introduced by our IT department at the last minute (particularly in consideration of the needs of our many dyslexic students), but the text chat we used instead was saved, repurposed by Alun as a collaboratively written piece and re-presented to us. For a fuller description of this project, and the student feedback and evaluation please see http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/adm-hea-projects/visual-research-projects .

Following this project, we were invited by the HEA ADM to join their 'Stepping Out' umbrella of projects which are looking in general at the skills agenda which has been strongly voiced by UK Government reports in recent years. The emphasis is on employability, partnerships with creative industries, and 'creative entrepreneurship'. Closer examination, however, reveals a generic 'Design bias, and we felt that a Fine Art education had much to offer that was being overlooked.

Our next project, the Reflexive Practitioner, moved on the idea of the outside entering into the curriculum via the professional guest lecturer who may not be involved otherwise in teaching by now investigating the role of the practitioner teacher, and what they bring to a Fine Art course, from their own practice, and what benefits –if any- their practice derives from their teaching role.

We set up a publicly accessible website http://reflexivepractitioner.org.uk/
offering video clips of artist-tutors, based on semi-structured interviews, and grouped their responses under several heading. The site has a facility for comments that can be added by the anyone, and it was used in a workshop for MA with PGCert students at Kingston last year. Some of the comments recorded by students can be found as a download on the site.

What do we look for in tools to use in e-learning for Art & Design, and Fine Art particularly? Collaboration, peer-learning, student generated content, distributed learning, networks, repurposing, horizontal power structures, and 'openness'. These are also all features of the Open Curriculum in Fine Art.

The final section of our presentation looked at a series of key quotations that had informed our research, and which provided a series of theoretical positions for contextualising the idea of an 'open curriculum' in Fine Art education. For more details on these an other related ides, please follow the links we have given for the earlier research projects.

The first quotation, from Ernesto Pujol, was especially important for understanding the relative concept of success in an artistic practice. To understand it as an ongoing situation of maintaining ones ability to sustain a practice is much more helpful than the fiscal superstar model in which success is so heavily invested that failure is a probable outcome for the majority. Pujol's model is about a continuous way of life, rather than a fixed state.

We accompanied this quotation with images from artist-led activity within Nottingham, which has been closely linked to the ethos of the undergraduate degree course at Nottingham Trent University, and which is sustained by many graduates of that course.

Lane Relyea's quotation exemplifies well the paradox of teaching a critical practice in which disenchantment and dissent might be as important as optimism and innovation.

Irit Rogoff's comments echo the 'experimental' role of the studio, as a place in which the outcome is not constructed in advance of the exploratory activity.

David Goldenberg's words emphasise the role of negotiation in student learning, and the way in which that negotiation – as with Pujol's model – emphasises a continuity, rather than a fixed position.

Anton Vidokle, whose unitednationsplaza project has been a powerful influence on what Irit Rogoff has termed the 'educational turn' in recent collaborative art practices, points out that the educational institution is itself already a cultural institution, not just a training ground for a conatxt that has not yet happened. From the very start our students are artists in the world. This is echoed by Groy's more sweeping conflation of art teaching with the activity of life. The Teagle Working Group have been an important influence on the definition of 'open curriculum' learning, along with the idea that the student is responsible for, rather than merely responsive to, their own curriculum.

The quote from Bourriaud emphasises the mutability of definition within contemporary art, while the concluding quote from Rancière stresses the importance of the 'emancipated' student who is forced to use their own intelligence.

Rob Flint, Lucy Renton October 2010