Identifying New Cultures of Learning within the Context of Fine Art Education

Jake Jackson, Ph.D student at the University of Wolverhampton

In my experience real subject matter presents itself slowly, and often after a lengthy process of elimination and frustration. In truth, it has taken a number of years for the disparate, the subtle and the fragmented to make sense however, subject has gradually becomes clearer and is now ready for deeper enquiry.

“Meta-meaning potentials”

In certain of my works, I have been interested in how a generative work can enable one to observe meaning as it arises and changes via participant interaction with the system. Since one can operate on these generative works, bringing in different media elements and processes overtime and distributed in space, one can also mindfully witness meaning production as it takes place.”


An educational shift influenced by digital technologies is emerging amongst a percentage of Fine Art students at Glasgow School of Art today. On first reading, this statement sounds positive and will acknowledge what has become evident in most, if not all, educational environments as it is abundantly clear that new technologies have shaped and informed many aspects of Pre-School, Primary, Secondary, Further and Higher educational reform. However, what is becoming increasingly apparent within the context of Fine Art education is that it’s not the experts in the field of Fine Art pedagogy that are determining newer approaches to learning, it is in fact our students. As an educator, having been at close proximity to the Fine Art student body for the past fifteen years, I have been fortunate enough to observe the emergence and evolution of a digitally conversant generation, and therefore feel I can confidently say that they are defining the way. Having also managed a variety of year groups, during this time, and supported a plethora of divergent educational needs and behaviours, I can also say that no amount of sympathetic understanding, academic encouragement and fudging the numbers regarding assessment will return it to how it once was. Any attempt to abate this growth, or appease the increasing demands of this student orientated educational shift, feels futile. I therefore have to concede that we are, without a doubt, in the process of witnessing a significant change in approaches to learning this will become the norm. I am very aware that student trends come and go, especially in creative environments however, what is occurring within this particular educational setting has a consistency to it that can no longer be ignored, or viewed purely as a fad or a passing phase. Given all that I have been witness to, and actively engaged within, I therefore believe there is now a pressing need to acknowledge that a shift has indeed occurred, and that this shift is creating a tension that is unsustainable for everyone involved.

A Timeline of Changing Behaviours

As an academic member of staff, and therefore an interested party, the beginnings of attitudinal changes towards learning started to manifest themselves five years ago with the emergence of a very particular approach to engagement that was evident amongst only a handful of strategically savvy senior Fine Art students. In a very short space of time this calculated mind-set developed into a variety of separate approaches, where strategic thinking, opting out, and superseding the curriculum emerged as a set of patterns, guiding principles,
and learning strategies. However, what began as a singular, selfish approach to commitment and participation has now spread, has further mutated and, more recently, has evolved into an amalgam of three approaches that are quickly becoming a way of life, or, the educational norm for a growing percentage of Fine Art students today. Moreover, these new learning methods present themselves daily and appear to be part and parcel of our student’s academic decision-making process. Furthermore, this tactical behaviour is evident amongst all year groups; it is no longer Honours year specific – it is widespread.

In an educational environment that provides an immersive learning experience for every student, this is a worrying development, and in order to test my theory regarding a shift in 2014 I carried out a student engagement exercise that focused on the participation and engagement of thirty-two second year Fine Art Photography students. The results of which subsequently confirm my hypothesis as 19.4% occupied the Fully Engaged+ (FE+) category, 6.4% occupied the Fully Engaged (FE) category, 3.2% occupied the Engaged+ category (E+), 25.8% occupied the Engaged (E) category, 32.3 % occupied the Partially Engaged (PE) and 12.9 % occupied Non Engaged categories (NE). The categories that my concerns and observations relate to are the Partially Engaged and Non Engaged students as, collectively, they make up more than 45 % of the class.

If this approach is to be the norm, this ratio is of great concern. As the education provided within a Fine Art context is quite specific - it relies heavily on student engagement where, through a variety of academic, technical and critical means, full immersion is actively encouraged, supported and embedded in order for students to experience, understand and attain the many skills required in order for them to become fully formed practicing artists. However, a growing number of students are taking short cuts and are now cherry-picking their way through an education, one which was never designed to be approached in this manner. In the long term, the full consequence of this new methodology gives cause for great concern, not only in relation to the depth and integrity of what is learnt, and what is made, but
more importantly, the effect it will have on their depth and integrity as practicing artists. As with any skilled training the depth of what has to be learnt during the evolution of an artist cannot be rushed, nor can it be achieved by way of fractional, fragmented or partial engagement - even in a technologically advanced age. Regardless of what decade or millennia we occupy, the evolution of becoming an artist does take time, and engagement is still a key component in this very particular journey. In truth, this is where some of my frustrations lie because one cannot convince students that a fully immersive approach will lead to greater discovery: they have already found a quicker way - one that appears to suit them well which also still provides them with a degree at the end of their studies. This is a paradox that I’d also like to address because what is occurring is institutionally accepted yet it is clearly academically and pedagogically unsound.

DETERMINING A NEW CULTURE OF LEARNING

At what point can one confidently say that a new culture of learning exits within the context of Fine Art education? To my knowledge there is not, as yet, a fully comprehensive study into this specific creative environment that will help confirm, deny or conclusively answer this question. Of course, as the new millennium has progressed a plethora of texts have been published regarding art school education in, and for, the 21st Century. However, unlike those documents the perspective of my doctorate studies is not centred around the multifaceted problems related to art schools absorption into universities, or the changing architecture of art school buildings where available space is based on economics rather than education. Nor does it pertain to the rational behind the recent restructuring of courses delivered within the field of Fine Art education. It will instead be an in-depth investigation into the appropriateness of today’s Fine Art education. Consequently, I believe current Fine Art learning and teaching methodologies are outmoded and are quickly becoming irrelevant to a new generation of Fine Art students. This is clearly apparent in student’s behaviour, and is now evident in how, and why, they are choosing to approach their education.