**21st Century Art School Curriculum: Highways, by-ways and leaving a trail**

What would Bauhaus tutors and students think of our 21st Century art schools? What would feel familiar and what would feel alien and remote from their experience? How would our contemporary understandings of art school curriculum differ from early 20th century contexts?

In this article I want to discuss the concept of the art school ‘sticky curriculum’. This is a way of understanding art school curriculum that Alison Shreeve and I introduce in our book **Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education: Knowledge, Values and Ambiguity in the Creative Curriculum** published by Routledge in 2018.

**Mapping the Territory**

Art school students are explorers who forge their own paths into new creative territories. Using a navigational metaphor for this article I will argue that a sense of *lostness* is a crucial part of an art school education.

**Route Maps**

Consider a student arriving at art school today to study design. There will be elements of the course mapped out in formal written documentation. There will be on-line information and the student will have access to quite detailed information about how the course is structured and how they will be graded. I suspect this would have been very different in the Bauhaus. In today’s art school there is much greater written codification. This reflects the wider political climate of low trust, audit and public accountability coupled with a desire to surface and make explicit the hidden curriculum to address concerns of mystique or elitism. The influences of the Bologna Process, and the wider academization of the art school have resulted in arts schools becoming part of the university sector in some countries. The formalising and documenting of art school higher education has meant that course leaders feel compelled to set out in very precise terms what the learning offer is. The print and online information given to art school students today might be described as the formal curriculum, a route map which guides the learning, but it certainly can not encompass everything a student might learn.

Students do not navigate the creative curriculum in the way they might follow a route on a App on their mobile. The art school needs to retain its position as a liminal and ambiguous space that helps students to play and to find their own creative solutions. The contemporary art school is an ontologically ambiguous space where students experience disruption and uncertainty. Students need to experience risk and failure in order to develop their creative practice. In other words: they need to feel lost….

Clearly it is impossible for contemporary art schools to codify the ‘route’ for getting lost…this is where the art school goes beyond the written documentation. In our book we describe this as the ‘non-reified aspects of learning in the curriculum, sticky elements because they are harder to pin down, are less formally acknowledged’. The key point is that there needs to be an element of getting lost in order to support, develop and sustain creativity and to prepare students for the uncertainty of 21st Century work contexts and world challenges. Alison and I refer to the teaching approach that is required in these contexts as a ‘pedagogy of ambiguity’. Our concept of the sticky curriculum comprises the formal (reified and documented) and informal (harder to identify, messy and elusive) aspects of knowing and practicing and both aspects of the curriculum co-exist in the art school.

**The Sticky Curriculum**

I want to offer an explanation about why Alison and I adopted the word sticky to describe the art school curriculum. Sticky is a term which has multiple meanings in English and we used it to convey the challenges, conflicts, dilemmas and ambiguity that are entangled in the creative curriculum. Sticky simultaneously has positive, negative and indeed perplexing connotations. We talk about sticking points, sticky places, being stuck, getting stuck, getting stuck in, sticky weather and sticky patches. More recently university leaders and website designers talk about the need for their campuses or websites to be sticky- they want students or users to stay engaged and on site. Stickiness is usefully ambiguous. The sticky curriculum carries the potential for serendipitous outcomes. A sticking point is difficult to negotiate and working through a sticky patch is challenging. Students need to develop tolerance to push through the stickiness to engage in deep learning. Students can find that a lost and sticky place can; with engagement, patience and determination; transform and open access to new creative territory. Built-in stickiness can be a deliberate pedagogic strategy to develop and deepen students’ learning. For example, students might be given a one word assignment brief or they might be given a future dystopian design challenge to address. Stickiness in the curriculum offers the possibility for diverse and personalised creative responses. The sticky curriculum is a term that captures the multiple and complex meanings and layerings that comprise the art school curriculum.

Within the sticky curriculum *lostness* is to be cherished; but this is not about abandoning our students in the middle of a desert and driving off[[1]](#footnote-1) The art school route map is perhaps more like a compass- we show the student the overall direction of creative education but leave creative space for the students to chart their own route to create personalised learning. Students pursue individual journeys that are uncharted by tutors. This mode of teaching and learning is a form of enquiry-based learning.

**The ‘theory’ curriculum**

In popular parlance curriculum is the word used to describe the content of a course. In the famous Gropius curriculum wheel image we see that all students were offered a foundational course in, amongst other things, colour theory. I would argue that today there is very little agreement about the foundational knowledge an art school student needs. The so-called ‘theory’ aspect of an art school curriculum differs enormously across departments, colleges and countries. Contemporary design education theory borrows from ethnography, sociology, history, politics, architecture, philosophy, cultural theory, design thinking, history of art and more besides. The curriculum is determined by local, educational, economic and political parameters as well as being shaped by the expertise and interests of individual tutors. Foundational design curriculum is wide ranging and highly contested. We know this intuitively when we recognise the differences between student graduate shows from diverse college/region/country boundaries and across the years/decades.

Courses create cultures or micro-cultures with their own characteristics and practices which imbue the students’ design practices. In some art schools these micro-cultures reflect values and content that ex-art school student leader Shelley Asquith called ‘pale, male and stale’ and many art school students campaign to bring in to the curriculum previously marginalised and intersectional perspectives. These debates point to the struggles linked to the construction and legitimisation of particular forms and kinds of design knowledge. There are developing global debates about the need to decolonise the design curriculum. Leading this work is Dr Dori Tunstall who has placed the need to decolonise the design curriculum at the centre of her leadership as Dean of the Faculty of Design at Ontario College of Art and Design. Female, LGBTQ, Black, Indigenous and/or Disabled designers bring insight and new perspectives that remind us that the sticky curriculum is not inert or unchanging. At my own university (University of the Arts London) students and tutors have worked in partnership to create our first Decolonising the Arts Curriculum: Perspectives on Higher Education Zine (http://decolonisingtheartscurriculum.myblog.arts.ac.uk/). Issues linked to the role of women and the Bauhaus have been discussed elsewhere but wider intersectional and decolonising debates have only emerged more recently. Multiple views and perspectives add to the complexity and stickiness of the design curriculum, where students need to build empathy and concern for others, holding fragmented and fused views of the world’s needs.

**Getting lost**

The most successful contemporary art schools offer students carefully planned learning scaffolds within which students are safe to take creative risks and ‘do their own thing’. There is a central tension between clarity (setting out the route) and ambiguity (you need to feel ok being lost). This is the stickiness of the indeterminate creative curriculum. The design curriculum supports the development of students’ knowledges, practices and ways of being. It is concerned with supporting the development of the students’ professional design identity. Students combine dual identities as students and professionals from the moment they arrive in the studio. Art school is about a becoming.

**Teaching the sticky curriculum**

Some art school students report that they feel like they are teaching themselves and whilst to an extent this is true because they direct their own learning an effective creative educator will be able to support and accelerate students’ learning. In other words studio tutors have a powerful educative role. The academization of the contemporary art school serves to foreground the teaching and learning approaches adopted by tutors. In early art school contexts the emphasis for many art school tutors was on developing a peer community of artist/designers working together (as in Bauhaus) or more traditional master/apprentice ‘atelier’ methods. I don’t regard these as separate approaches. In all communities of student and tutor designers and artists there are (often unacknowledged) power relations and hierarchies that can serve to advantage and disadvantage certain students. For example an apparently harmless ‘let’s continue this crit in the pub’ is exclusionary to certain faith students who don’t drink or students who need to get home to look after their children.

Today’s art schools teach greater numbers and more diverse students than 100 years ago and there is more recognition that design educators need to be able to teach as well as design. They need to be both creative **and** educational practitioners. Tutors today increasingly have formal opportunities to develop the teaching approaches they have at their disposal to support diverse students’ learning needs. For example, at my own university over eighty tutors a year study on our bespoke Post Graduate Certificate and Masters in Academic Practice in Art, Design and Communication. An effective art school tutor will help students make decisions about their creative development and will ensure they apportion their attention fairly so that students don’t feel that the tutor has favourites (a common challenge in studio contexts).

Rancière’s (1991) ‘ignorant school master’ has much to teach the contemporary art school tutor. Rancière introduces the ignorant school master as someone who has ‘given [the students] the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself [sic] had not discovered’. The students’ *will to learn* becomes their learning compass and the school master (or mistress) follows rather than leads the students through the creative learning forest.

**Sticky Curriculum Wheel[[2]](#footnote-2)**

In the sticky curriculum wheel that Alison and I created for our book the students are placed at the centre to emphasise their agency and stress the importance of student-centred learning. The contemporary art school curriculum comprises of knowledge, practices, processes and materials. Studio learning is nested within the socio-cultural and political discourses of their time and geographic location. All art schools are imbued with values (often at a very tacit level) that help to determine the ways that students’ developing design practices are shaped, accepted, rejected and valorised. Woven through the curriculum are digital practices that are enmeshed with analogue practices. The interconnected layerings in the wheel combine to support the development of the creative self that is at the centre of the students’ design learning journey.

**Looking forward:**

This edition is concerned with celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Bauhaus. Here I will very tentatively suggest two aspects of contemporary design education that I believe will look quaint or irrelevant in one hundred years’ time. In 2118 I suspect that the term *sustainable design* will be obsolete because to be other than sustainable will be unimaginable. This is hinted at in the current development of circular design curriculum. I propose that gender based design (for example women’s wear fashion courses) will appear to be hopelessly outdated because our conceptions of gender and identity will be transformed. These changes are hinted at by current debates re post binary, gender fluid and Trans. I believe (and hope) that design students in the future will be able to see themselves in all their rich and intersectional diversity reflected and celebrated in the core design curriculum.

**Sticky conclusions**

The sticky curriculum comprises of skills, practices and theories and the ways that these components stick together creates a personalized curriculum for each student. If students successfully negotiate the sticky curriculum, they learn to manage and work through uncertainty. This prepares them for the unpredictable demands to solve sticky design challenges in the future.

All art schools need to decide when to give students a map and directions and when to leave them so that they find their own path and leave a trail. This is a lot more difficult than it sounds. One student might relish creative ambiguity which another student experiences as a chaotic nightmare. Students have wide ranging capacities to tolerate ambiguity. The central question to explore is ‘What is the best ecology of structure and openness to support creative learning?’.

We don’t deliver creative education to students because our students do not follow a set path. Working in the Art School sector I regard the creative, educative and emancipatory potential of the art school as exciting and as full of promise as it was in the Bauhaus. Perhaps in that regard little has changed and the Sticky Curriculum and the Gropius Curriculum Wheel share common territory. The art school studio (whether virtual or physical) is still at the centre of creative education.

Everything changes, nothing changes.

Professor Susan Orr

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1. However I do know of one art school in the UK where a tutor did take her students to remote moorland. Once there she asked them to remain out of contact with her and with other students for over two hours as part of an art school induction, [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a visual depiction of the ideas explored in this article please see: Sticky Curriculum film: <http://bit.ly/StickyCurr> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)