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Letterpress: A Survey of Print Culture or an Immersive Learning Experience

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Abstract | This paper explores the culture of letterpress printing within Art and Design education in the UK and Ireland. It describes two phases of research over the last four years. The first is based on an immersive collaborative letterpress research project, in which staff and students from six UK Colleges worked together to research, write and print a letterpress publication. The second phase is a comprehensive, systematic field survey of all of the remaining letterpress workshops within Art and Design Higher and Further Education in Britain and Ireland since 1955. The combined findings of these two phases of research enable the authors to form a position in relation to the changing culture of letterpress and its role in education.

KEYWORDS | LETTERPRESS, TYPOGRAPHY, PRINT HISTORY, DESIGN HISTORY, PRINTING

1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the current breadth and depth of letterpress practice within contemporary art and design pedagogy across the UK and Ireland. It is based on the field research data which has been systematically gathered through visiting the letterpress workshops in Further and Higher Education. These research survey visits to Art and Design Schools involved traveling over 8,400 miles between 2014—2019.

Throughout the major part of the twentieth century, the teaching of letterpress was organised through training centres in technical colleges and art and design schools. This 'training' as opposed to 'educational' model is now long redundant, largely due to the growth of digital technologies the 1980s and developments in design Education. Letterpress printing, however, is more popular than at any time in since the 1990's. The current resurgence of interest in the letterpress process makes this research timely as it examines how the education of artists and designers has changed and developed since the 1960s.

The collaboration between the principal researchers began 2011. It has involved two interconnected research projects. The first part linked six colleges with active letterpress workshops from around the UK. Staff and students from each college united in a collaborative project that allowed them to consider both the practical and philosophical approach to letterpress practice. Entitled *6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project,* it provided an insight into the different approaches to letterpress within the six colleges.[1]

The second part grew out of this first collaboration in 2014. The research team asked the question, how widespread is the use of letterpress in art and design education today, as compared to its mid-century heyday?

The research has identified 43 Art and Design institutions which have active letterpress workshops. We have visited and surveyed 41 workshops, the research has systematically identifying and cataloguing the equipment and presses, type sizes and faces, both wood and metal. We have undertaken a measured survey of each workshops which supported the development of orthographic drawings to a common scale providing a physical representation of each space.

[1] The collaboration was between the *University of Brighton*, *Camberwell College of the Arts* (UAL), *London College of Communication* (UAL), *Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design* (UAL), *Lincoln School of Art* and *Glasgow School of Art*. Each had an established history of using the letterpress, and with the exception of Lincoln, had workshops staffed by a dedicated technician. The staff and students involved were all from Graphic Design or Visual Communication programmes.

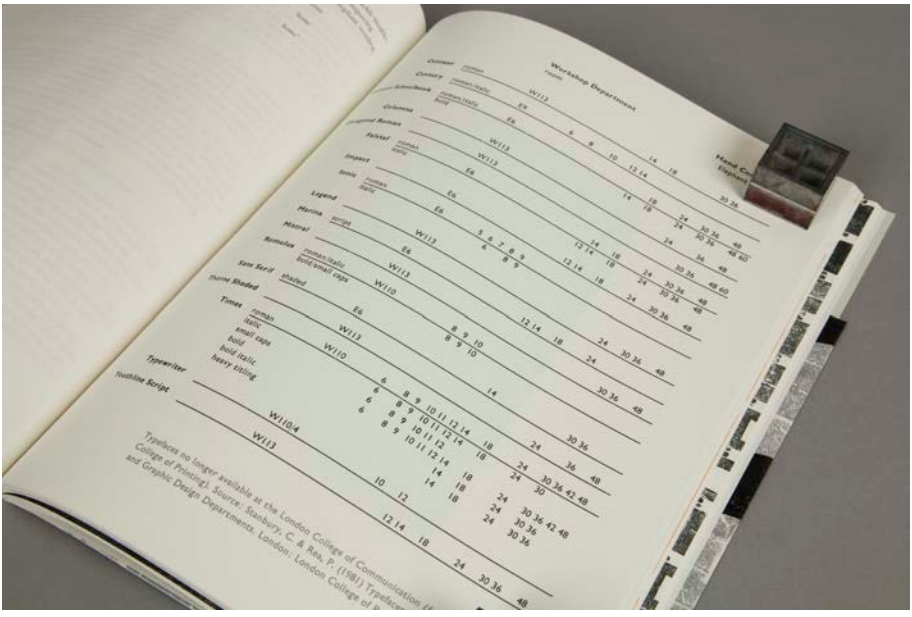

Figure 1. Student work from 6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project, 2014.

2. Identifying a timeframe and the extent of the field of research

In order to trace how letterpress workshops and teaching have changed within Further and Higher Education it was important to establish a clear datum point from which to start. Two key sources from the *Charles Pickering Archive* LCC provided this datum point within an appropriate time frame. The typed and hand-annotated list entitled *List of Establishments for Further Education Where Courses or Classes in Printing are held 1955* is believed to have been compiled by Beatrice Warde and the *Guides to Educational Courses in the Printing Industry 1967.* The 1955 list has 72 colleges and 1967 44 colleges (44 colleges appear on both lists) and provides a list of courses leading to qualifications that could be studied relating to training for the print trade. The two principal sources were combined together with the eight additional institutions, and organised into a single list alphabetically by city or town. The total number of letterpress workshops within educational art and design FE and HE schools and colleges responsible for the training of designers and printers was established as 104 in 1967.

Tracing the history of institutions on the combined list reflect the major changes in art and design education in the UK during the twentieth century. The first significant change was the

move from the *National Diploma in Design* (NDD, 1946–1961). In 1960, the *Coldstream Report* outlined decisions to develop a *Diploma in Design* (Dip AD, 1962 – 1974) (H.M.S.O. 1960), with only sixteen colleges awarded it in the first round. It is this legacy that is evidenced in the absence of many of the original colleges listed, for '*Coldstream had promised institutional autonomy but his committee's reforms led to increased centralisation and the closure of almost two hundred art schools across Britain'* (Llewellyn, 2015). This was a significant watershed as Technical Colleges and Art and Design Schools either retained pre-degree courses, in Further Education, or developed degrees within Higher Education. The next substantial change came in 1992, when Polytechnics were granted degree awarding powers. This has been referred to as *'The polytechnic era'* (Llewellyn,2015), the period 1965—1992 that was dominated by the *Council for National Academic Awards* (CNAA, from 1974 –1992). The last major educational change was the shift from a student grant to student fees and the adoption of student loans first introduced in 1998, followed in 2009, by a rise in student fees to £9000. The dates 1967–2020, provide bookends for our research.

2.1 Research Methodology: The Field Survey

The field survey set out to answer four interrelated research questions:

1. How many active letterpress workshops are operating within British and Irish Higher and Further Education?
2. Where are they located and within which Institutions?
3. What do they contain and how are they arranged?
4. How are they being used?

Having established the number of institutions which could have active letterpress workshops we began to systematically contact each by phone and then email. We established that 43 Institutions from 104 had retained letterpress equipment. The field research was supported by small funding streams from a range of sources.

2.3 Plotting the Scale of the Survey

Using an OS map~~s~~ of the UK and Ireland we began to plot the position of the 104 workshops using a single yellow dot for the 1955 list, single orange dot for the 1967 list and an orange roundel with a yellow bull for those institutions identified as entries on both lists. We now had a distribution pattern that revealed the post-war period had a significant number of small institutions located across the UK (Beck and Cornford, 2012). The distribution pattern linked, as might be expected, to major cities towns or urban conurbations. We developed a second map plotting the 43 institutions which had confirmed letterpress workshops. These colleges can be broken down geographically: Scotland (4), The North England (10), The

Midlands (5,) Wales (1), Republic of Ireland (2), South East England (15), South West England (7).

2.4 Ensuring Consistent Data Gathering

To ensure consistency and comparable results it was important to develop a transferable methodology for collecting the data. Letterpress type is stored in cases within cabinets which characteristically have space for 22 cases. We designed a simple form with 22 lines, and columns for: font, weight, size points/didots, foundry/manufacture to catalogue wood and metal type. A comments section at the bottom was used to record the cabinet maker, where this could be identified. As all the workshops contained several cabinets each form was numbered. This systematic process has provided a record of every cabinet and every case, workshop by workshop. A second form was designed to record the equipment.

2.5 Surveying Physical Workshop Spaces

As well as the type and equipment we wanted to survey the physical space. We made the 1:50 digital scale drawings. The scale drawings enabled us to compare workshops: size, organisation, workflow and student capacity. A combination of the survey and conversations with technical and academic staff, revealed how many students could be taught in ~~t~~each workshop. This is a critical feature of modern HE education where institution wide staff student ratios (SSR) are often applied to funding models which can restrict small group workshop teaching or make it prohibitively expensive.

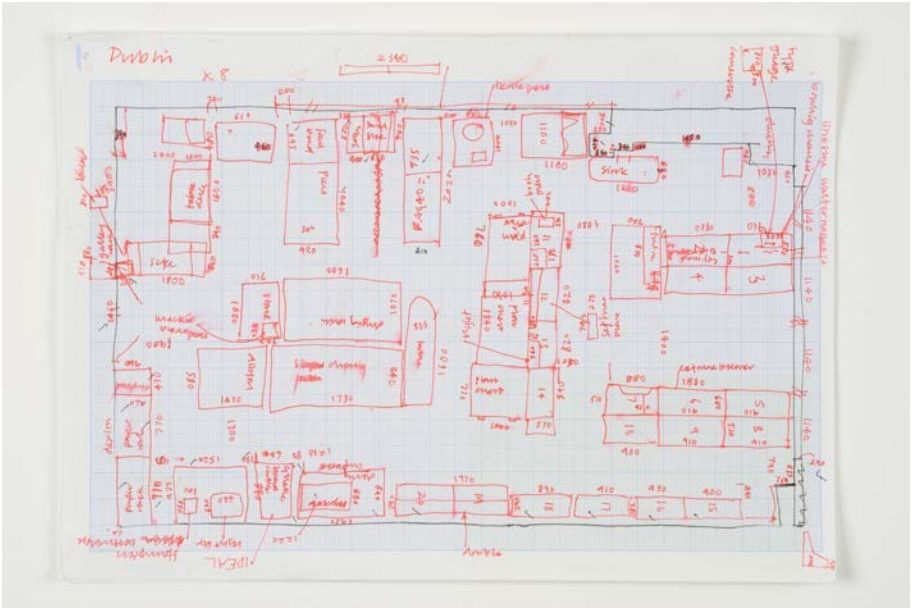

Figure 2. A sketch of the workshop at National College of Art and Design, Dublin. This information was gathered onsite and worked up into a digital map afterwards.

3. Workshop Initial Findings: Type

We have completed surveys of 41 of the 43 institutions (44 workshops), a further three surveys have yet to be undertaken. The 41 workshops surveyed to date contain a total of 490 cabinets or type frames, which hold 9,272 cases of type. This figure can be further broken down into lead type, 8,132 cases, wood type 1,140, cases and 22 cases of Acrylic type. Today there are no institutions working with 'hot metal composition'. No college has the capacity to cast their own type. The restrictions of contemporary Health and Safety practices identify the risks involved of working with molten lead. The *Monotype* casters from the *London College of Communication* (formerly *London College of Printing*) were donated to the Type Archive (London) in 2003. As a consequence of this loss, the quality of the type catalogued varied tremendously across different workshops. Some had seen heavy usage, some remained pristine in cases – particularly smaller, composition sizes that are labour-intensive to typeset and print.

Collections of wood type are vulnerable to theft as the attraction of acquiring a large wooden initial has appealed to generations of design students and as a result we found many cases of wood type labelled 'mixed', where incomplete cases had been combined. Modern digital technology has enabled laser cutting, 3D printing and CNC routing. In several

workshops we saw student and staff designed fonts and type blocks cut on end-grain wood as per historical manufacture and single designs mounted on type-high MDF in the manner of relief block printing, letterpress is not now exclusively defined by the use of moveable type.

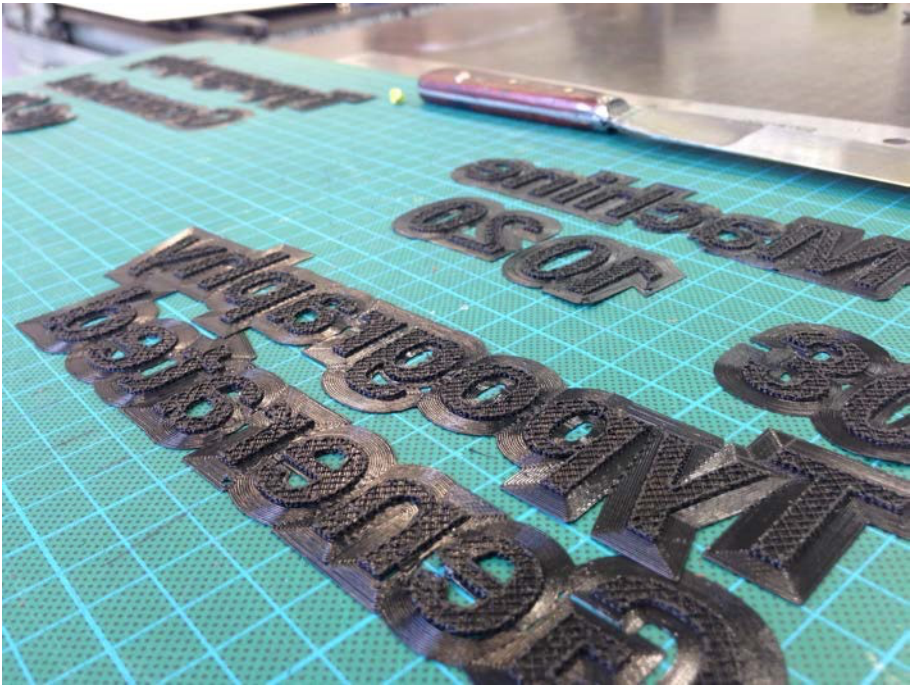

Figure 3. 3D printed type, in the process of being mounted to type height to print.

3.1 Workshop Initial Findings: Presses

The workshop survey only records the position on the measured drawings of presses which were used for letterpress printing. It does not record all the relief printing presses in each institution in a printmaking workshops which may be used for, lithography, etching or mezzotints *etc*, nor those unused presses displayed in entrance lobbies as artefacts. The range of equipment, and particularly presses, varied across the different workshops. The 41 workshops surveyed to date contain a total of 84 large presses located in fixed positions within the workshops.

Today each workshop contained galley and/or proofing presses, there advantage is that students can use them under supervision. As each pull relies on hand feeding the press it is

only possible to produce small volumes This has democratically opened up the possibilities of print production, students have authorship over each stage of the process of their work and are physically responsible for its execution. The student is in a position to produce multiple editions. By contrast, digital printing is often used by students to prototype, or produce a one off for a critique or review. Letterpress is not a facsimile of print, it is the actual print. It offers the student opportunity of working with: metallic inks, florescent colours, pastels and printing white over a colour. Students can emboss, deboss and foil block. Educationally, this promotes a freedom and a range of print that is not possible within digital production.

3.2 Workshop Initial Findings: Layouts and Patterns of Use

At each workshop visited, the space survey and the making of measured drawings provided an insight into how the workshops are used for teaching and experimentation. The set-up had significant influence over the teaching and use. There are workshops in which the type is stored separately from the presses which enable students to set type when technical or academic staff are not supervising but do not support independent printing. We identified workshops in which all the equipment the paper, type, presses and drying racks are contained within a lockable space supported by a dedicated letterpress technician in which students can compose, proof, print and diss type under supervision. There are workshops in which the letterpress equipment is contained within a larger general printmaking room which may also support, mono printing, etching, mezzotints, lithography, and screen-printing *etc* and is supported by several technical staff with a range of printmaking expertise. There were also studio spaces containing type cabinets and a hand proofing press, characteristically a *Farley*, which enables students to compose and print independently. Only two dedicated workshops that had escaped closure were largely unused and without technical staff.

Figure 4. The workshop at Birmingham City University, with type cabinets and a Farley proofing press.

4. Reinstating Letterpress

Many of the staff with responsibility for the workshops are more investment and influence on the type collections within the workshops. At *Arts University Bournemouth* Sally Hope Course Leader Visual Communication has built up a collection of wood and metal type, acquired cabinets and cases, a stone and a *Farley Press* through which she introduces students to the process. Designers and academics Barry Tullett and Philippa Wood at the *University of Lincoln* house *The Caseroom Press* within the undergraduate Graphic Design Department. Their collection of predominantly wood type and typewriters is closely connected to their practice led research (Tullett, 2014) and this, in turn, informs their teaching. Students across all three years are taught the process through workshops which respond to Tullett and Wood's own experiences as students.

The latest Letterpress workshop to be reinstated is at Kingston School of Art (KSA), *Kingston University London*, the *'**noble**press'* was founded in May 2017. *Kingston Polytechnic* had a letterpress workshop until 1992 (the same year it gained University status) when with the

retirement of the technician and an investment in new Macintosh Computers the workshop was dismantled and the presses sold.. The set-up costs of £67,000 to establish the workshop must be considered in relation to the durability and longevity of the equipment. If serviced regularly the presses could be rolling for well over 100 years, as is demonstrated by Camberwell's workshop which is the oldest in the same location since 1906. Letterpress equipment is rising in cost and so the presses and type are increasingly valuable assets.

5. Workshops and Curriculum Developments

The use of the letterpress process within each workshop varies according to the history and culture of the institution. The technical teaching of letterpress composition was phased out at all colleges by the late 1980's. Digital composition rendered print apprenticeships irrelevant. The impact, scale and speed of change on the print industry and its knock-on effect on technical education which supported it in the was colossal through the mid 1980's. Little more than a decade earlier, the print industry of 1970 employed 300,000 people in the UK. As late as 1985, 266 printers traded in the City of London, one of London's major print areas, 111 of these were letterpress workshops.

Today, the workshops are used by a broader community of art and design students. Groups of Graphic Design, Visual Communication and Illustrators and printmakers use the space. When open access policies are adopted photographers, fashion students, architects and product students are often working alongside each other. The mode of teaching delivery varies from institution to institution, but the majority of colleges have an induction process to the workshop area, which is delivered by technical staff. This enables students to work independently with access to specialist support and technical guidance. Students at the majority of colleges are encouraged to explore design briefs through a range of media which may include: interaction, film, publication, print and print processes including letterpress. Some, including *Cambridge, Glasgow*, *Kingston* and *Lincoln*, stipulate a letterpress outcome on workshop or project briefs and therefore ensure that all students gain an induction into the area. Others have attempted to further embed it within curriculum through assessment submission requirements. In a strategic move to protect the workshops, courses have explicitly mentioned the letterpress process within validation documents, ensuring the preservation of the workshop. This was achieved when the workshop at *London College of Communication* was under threat in the early 2000s after several years without a dedicated technician. Both of these approaches mean that each student on the course in question can gain experience of the process, and work on the assumption that the most engaged students will return to undertake longer projects throughout the duration of their course. The wider adoption of letterpress as a medium by students is therefore primarily through self-selection.

Following the survey visits we conducted a series of telephone interviews with the staff responsible for the workshops which provided an insight into the way they are used in relation to curriculum. Edwin Pickston at *Glasgow School of Art* (GSA) identifies the advantages of the *'Caseroom'* to *Visual Communication* students. For Pickstone the workshop presents the history of type. This is important as, *'The principals of metal type underpin the systems which controls what's going on digitally today.'* Letterpress provides the todays Graphic Design students with a direct link to the process of reproduction key to the historical dissemination of knowledge through the printed book. For students who are familiar with digital type through word processing the origins of, typeface, size, columns, alignment, kerning (horizontal spacing), leading (vertical spacing) and alignment are made real through metal. The letterforms of type can be traced back to calligraphy, notation and writing systems leading to the origins of the alphabet. The link with history was a common thread with staff responsible for workshops. Pickstone states *'In some ways "Graphic Design" has very short history, unlike architecture, the term "Graphic Design" was only really coined in the 20th Century',* the workshop prompts discussion about type development *'through history'.* Digital outputs are often used to present work for review and critique but these are presentations anticipating reproduction through lithography. Pickstone notes with letterpress *'the prototypes are the real thing'*. Students can make decisions about *'…paper stock and mix and test ink, experiment with over printing using the full range of pantone inks: metallics, fluorescents, and pastels and opaque whites.'* Pickstone describes the process as learning: *'discipline, explanation, endeavour and development'.* He recognises in both his own work and that of the students the workshop naturally supports collaborative practice. The disadvantages of letterpress are that the students have to be taught in small groups at GSA 8-10 at a time. The process is slow and there is a significant learning *'attrition rate'*, the number of students who complete inductions but don't return to the workshop. However, for those students who don't choose to use the process again they have acquired an understanding. Pickstone reflects, *'Perhaps not all knowledge gained through practical learning needs to be applied'*. He describes the letterpress workshop as integrated into the curriculum as all the third-year students in *Visual Communication* Illustrators, Designers and Photographers have to compete an assessed piece of work within the workshop.

6. People

As the function of the letterpress workshops have changed between 1967 and 2020 so the experience and the demographic of the those responsible for the workshops has changed. The interviews with staff responsible for the workshops have revealed a range of routes into letterpress and a variety of career journeys. The workshops within Trade Schools of 1960's where characteristically run by male technicians trained as a compositor or printers with commercial experience of working within the print trade. Through the early 1990's there was a period of transition, some technicians retired and others retrained transferring their analogue knowledge of type to digital composition. Today the gender balance is improving,

staff responsible for the 41 of the workshops surveyed to date include 21 female staff and 28 men.

Both *Manchester School of Art* (surveyed in November 2017) and *Plymouth University* (surveyed July 2017) have trained compositors. Paul Collier at Plymouth had begun work as apprentice printer and learnt to set type by hand in a *'jobbing printers'* in Plymouth. He then trained as a *Monotype* compositor before joining the University.

By contrast, Edwin Pickstone at *Glasgow School of Art* (surveyed 2017) has a full-time post which is made up of design lecturer/researcher, designer in residence, and letterpress technician. Pickstone was a student on the *BA Visual Communication Design* course at GSA. During his final year in 2004 Senior Tutor Steve Rigley set a project *'What is the value of letterpress?*'. Rigley's project was both a provocation and invitation. In 2005 he combined technical support with *'Designer in residence'* by a small grant from the *National Heritage Print Fund*. Fraser Ross, the technician who had trained as a compositor working at GSA since 1976 was considering retirement. A combination of wise succession planning and serendipitous opportunity enabled a period of handover and from September 2005 until April 2006 Pickstone worked with Ross. Pickstone recognises the importance of this generational handover, *'…though he didn't have six years to train me, I learnt rigour, and discipline from him…'*.

Chris Wilson at *Northumbria University* views the letterpress workshop as a research *'laboratory'* and has used it as a base his practice-based PhD. He was inspired by a week intensive workshop in the Netherlands with Thomas Gravemaker. Wilson's role is multifaceted: design tutor, researcher and technician. *'the workshop provides students with a historical context for typography'* and does not want *'the workshop to become a museum or window dressing for Open Days.'* It has to be *'a place where students actively make work'*. The *'physicality of type'* provides students who are '*…visually aware, with a way to learn through doing, by designing on the press.'* He identifies the constraints as a positive aspect of letterpress, students can *'Overcome the restrictions of limited number of typefaces and sizes.'* But also acknowledges that some students find it *'Difficult to adjust to both the restrictions and the slow and considered approach to design and composition'* as the cultural conditioning of *'the digital world provides instant gratification'*.

7. Conclusion

This research has surveyed all but three of the letterpress workshops. It has established the number of workshops active in 1967 was 104, this figure has dropped to 44 workshops in 43 Institutions in 2020 (there may be some vestiges of type workshops as yet undiscovered). The research has traced the multiple name changes of the institutions and revealed that only 7 of the 104 institutions have retained their original name from the 1967 listings. Of the 43

institutions with workshops 42 are in the Higher Education sector within post '92 Universities, only *Southport College* in the FE Sector has retained a small element of letterpress. None of the 104 institutions identified on our 1967 list offer any of the print apprenticeships. The 43 workshops located within post '92 Universities are providing courses within Art and Design Schools or Faculties offering BA or MA degrees in *Graphic Design*, *Visual Communication*, *Communication Design*, or *Illustration*, though the workshops in some institutions are used by students from many disciplines. We have established that 41 workshops surveyed to date contain a total of 490 cabinets or type frames, which hold a total of 9,272 cases of type. These consist of consisting of: 8,132 cases of lead type, 1,140, cases of wood type and 22 case of Acrylic type and 84 large presses and 17 table top presses.

The demographic of the staff responsible for the workshops has changed. There are two technical staff who have trained as compositors and printers and the remaining 47 members of staff have learnt to use letterpress equipment through a design education. The nature of the curriculum taught within the workshops has changed radically from the acquisition of technical skills interchangeable skills for the print trade, to a creative workspace which places the student designer at the heart of print design and production. The workshops are today are learning and teaching spaces, research spaces, production spaces, and experimental studios where students can play type letterform and image through the integration of analogue and digital technologies.

Looking to the future we will analyse all the material gathered through the survey, including the equipment survey for each workshop which has yet to be collated. We will continue to conduct phone interviews with staff responsible for the workshop spaces to gain greater insight into links with curriculum and workshops use. We aim to create a digital data base which is likely to list over 9,500 cases of type, and provide press and equipment details. This will provide a listing of typefaces and sizes available in each size per workshop and the catalogue of type held within Education.[2] It is our intention to make the catalogue of presses and equipment an interactive data base and web resource so that institutions can update new acquisitions.

[2] The research may be extended up to Universities outside Art and Design Education which have retained letterpress workshops. *Birmingham University* has moved the letterpress workshop *Winterbourne House and Botanical Gardens* as a working Museum run by volunteers. This workshop has already been surveyed but is not counted in the 44 workshops within Art and Design Education. *Oxford University* has a letterpress workshop in the ground floor of the Schola Musicae of the Quadrangle in the Bodleian Library, whilst *Leeds University* and the *University of Stirling* have workshops which have been revitalised.

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