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Creativity and Conflict

How theory and practice shape student identities in design education

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ABSTRACT

By exploring the role of student identities in shaping attitudes to learning, this study asks how design students draw on experience to work across theory and practice. It explores how a specific group of design undergraduate students in a UK university perform on two distinct learning experiences on their course: work placement and dissertation. In particular, it considers the context for learning: the value placed on practice and scholarship; the role of social identity; links between art and design education. Using Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' the discussion considers the role of experience and motivation in learning in design education, and questions how useful historical divisions drawn between theory and practice are to student learning in design education. By questioning the value of internal disciplinary conflicts to student learning, it asks how we distinguish between vital pedagogic processes and divisive practices in higher education.

KEYWORDS *design education, experience, learner identities, habitus, motivation*

ART AND DESIGN: ARTS, HUMANITIES OR SCIENCES?

DESIGN MIGHT BE a vocational subject in UK higher education, but it is firmly positioned within the arts. Bound together historically, art and design subjects continue to be coupled for the purposes of higher education funding. They are allied through the creative processes that characterize both art and

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design higher education. If the fine arts supply the link between humanities and vocational arts subjects, why then, with the expansion of design courses and their fit with an official agenda of instrumentality, do we feel more comfortable describing the sector through the idea of the 'art school'? This can be traced back to the emergence of public art and design education in Britain in the mid nineteenth century and the official desire to use the arts to elevate the work of the mechanic. Indeed, this historical interdependence of art and design was responsible for forming a discourse of creative practice education, one that deployed the language of art to construct a 'higher' educational model linked to manufacturing (Tynan, 2008). However, by defining itself against traditional higher education models, art and design education nurtured a suspicion of 'academic' tasks valued by the humanities. Since the Coldstream report in 1960, a series of official interventions sought to reform art and design higher education to create parity with degrees in the humanities, making entry standards more stringent in terms of conventional academic requirements and emphasizing the teaching of art history and other academic subjects (Ashwin, 1975). This set the scene for internal conflicts that developed into a discourse that promoted the integrity of practice through a resistance to scholarship. More recently, teachers of design such as John Wood articulate this classic opposition between practice and scholarship, when he argues that design courses do not need the academic rigour associated with humanities higher education: 'whereas we associate scholastic knowledge mainly with "truth" claims, design knowledge is orientated to making practical, appropriate, and elegant interventions within actual situations' (Wood, 1998:1).

Discourses of opposition, it appears, are not exclusive to design education. As Ben Knights argues, learner identities are formed through the 'mutually constitutive relations of pedagogic and scholarly practice' (Knights, 2005: 33); learners of English Literary Studies are routinely socialized into discourses through rituals of opposition. While Knights' analysis focuses on the way students of English literature lay claim to a specialism by marking off their activity from ordinary readers (2005: 35), design students professionalize through claims to taste and tacit knowledge of how to manipulate materials. Knights does offer an insight into how humanities higher education has sought to launch 'educational crusades [to] promote forms of asceticism where the initiate aspires to cast off the baggage of a former, deplored, identity. To have seen through and discarded previous educational identities becomes the badge of the successful student' (Knights, 2005: 38). Learner identities can be formed through rituals of resistance in the arts and humanities, especially in 'soft' subjects where students might feel forced to mark off their activity from others in the drive to professionalize. In art and design education, while scholarship might not always be valued, much of the

objection to academic work centres on the inappropriateness of the act of writing (Grove-White, 2003) to students of creative practice and on the perceived unfairness of imposing this model on students thought to have a different kind of learning style. Moreover, the essay model has become the focus for debate about the troubled relationship between theory and practice in art and design education (Orr et al., 2004; Wood, 1998). It is not clear how postgraduate art and design education can develop a rigorous approach to research without scholarship, but what is clear is that this long and unconventional history in higher education has meant that UK undergraduate art and design courses appear caught between the arts and humanities.

Design discourse in higher education clearly fits the official employability agenda in the way it deploys innovation and entrepreneurialism. However, while the link between arts and manufacturing was evident in the establishment of a public art and design education in nineteenth-century Britain, when wider issues of mass production threatened to undermine the autonomy of the artisan, the designer still derives enhanced status from the perceived virtues of art. Recent debates, however, may be disturbing the natural coupling of art and design in higher education. When STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects were prioritized in the recent distribution of research funding for UK universities, senior academics of art and design institutions (led by Sir Christopher Frayling, rector of the Royal College of Art) argued that the decision impacted negatively on funding for art and design, and called for design education to be reconsidered as a science subject (Hodges, 2009). The contribution of art and design to the UK economy, however, is not in dispute. As Gabriele Griffin points out, cultural production is widely acknowledged as part of national and European wealth, borne out by statistics from the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (Griffin, 2006). Nor is this lost on the wider society, as participation in art and design education remains very high. A recent document from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2009) showed that creative arts and design students in higher education in the UK outnumbered all other student categories – architecture, law, mass communication and documentation, languages, and historical and philosophical subjects.

The link with industry is a source of pride for UK design education. Work-based learning, its key feature, is offered on many courses in the form of an industrial placement. Originating in technological courses from which design degrees emerged historically, the sandwich course approach to work-based learning has been adopted more widely in higher education (Boud and Solomon, 2003: 8) in response to the demand for more meaningful and longer-term work placement. While the current emphasis on work-based learning reflects new kinds of relationships between universities and work

organizations, the more traditional work placement was a significant antecedent (Boud and Solomon, 2003) and offered art and design students the authentic 'hands on' experience valued on practical courses. On the other hand, the dissertation is a specific kind of academic task involving research and writing skills used widely in humanities higher education as both a mode of learning and vehicle for assessment. The central place of essay writing in higher education, and the skills it demands of students, have generated discussion about the role of student writing in university institutional discourse (Lillis, 2001) but has long been a matter for dispute in art and design education. The dissertation is just one of the ways students on art and design courses encounter 'theory', but is the most formal means by which they engage in more traditionally 'academic' practices (Grove-White, 2003).

A recent study that explored student perception of the role of the dissertation on art, media and design courses found variation in student's perceptions of *relevance* as key to their understanding of the context of the academic task (Pritchard et al., 2005). Indeed, the study suggested that on these courses student attitudes to the dissertation were linked to their understandings of the institutional relationship between theory and practice. As already suggested, in the arts and humanities, student identities can be formed through a kind of cultural resistance, or discarding of an old learner identity, which, as Knights argues, is the result of pedagogic discourses that 'work through a model of exclusion' (Knights, 2005: 47). If art and design courses are taken less seriously than more interpretative disciplines (Frayling, 2001), then design teachers fought back by showing their hostility towards activities that resembled traditional university education. Such is the context for looking to the relationship between the work placement and the dissertation on a design course.

CULTURES OF PRACTICE

This article explores how a group of fashion design undergraduate students dealt with the various demands of their course, how specific learning experiences impacted on their performance and shaped their identities as learners. The research arose from a question about whether a year in industry gave these students a better understanding of academic tasks, in particular the final-year dissertation. Work placement and dissertation offer two distinct learning experiences for fashion design students, offering them very different perspectives on their degree subject by requiring them to go through divergent learning processes. In exploring their relationship, this study responded to anecdotal evidence, which suggested that students who opted to spend their third year of study on work placement had enhanced performance in their final-year dissertation. This prompted questions about how a year in industry

could offer students a better grasp of cultural issues, could enhance their critical thinking or better equip them to tackle an academic writing task. The question also allowed space to explore institutional tensions between theory and practice on design courses.

Participants in this study were final-year students from an established BA fashion design course in London. As academic staff who conducted the study, we were involved with the design and delivery of the course, but were also conscious that our experiences were shaped by histories of mergers, rising student numbers, budget cuts, and a not entirely painless entry into the university system. One of us teaches design on the course, the other cultural and historical studies. Two cohorts were selected on the basis of whether or not they chose to do a work placement. The course offers a period of work-based learning through the option of a work placement year following stage two of the three-year degree course. When successfully completed in stage three the work placement results in the award of a diploma in industrial studies, and, as the work placement is optional, the remaining students continue directly to the final year of the degree course. The focus groups we conducted identified key issues that linked or separated student learning experiences on work placement or the dissertation, and we used responses to design questionnaires for distribution to final-year students. There was an 86% response rate, 57% from students who had taken the placement year and 43% from those who had not. All students completed the dissertation during the academic year 2004–5; at the time of gathering data, their work had not yet been assessed. Therefore, questionnaire responses were based on self-assessment and formative assessment in dissertation tutorials.

Fifteen questions were created for the questionnaire in response to the issues raised in focus groups. While there was some variation in phrasing of questions to fit student placement experiences, they were designed to correspond as much as possible to allow for comparative analysis. Four questions sought subjective responses in the form of comment. Six questions were more objective in design, which required a response to a five-point Likert scale with 1 indicating the most and 5 indicating the least. Another seven questions used yes/no answers. Comments were gathered in response to questions where a level of detail was required: for example, to help explain differences in relation to both students' perception of their learning and its relationship to their levels of performance. The questionnaire, designed to elicit a range of responses, could be cross-referenced to address the relationship between student perceptions, student experience and student performance in specific tasks. While variation in dissertation marks was first linked to experience of placement, the research led us to explore other factors such as English language competence. We compared dissertation marks achieved by students who had

completed an IELTS test on entry with students with English A level pass grades. This identified two groups at either end of the scale: students who had taken an IELTS test were interpreted as those for whom English was not their first language, while those with a pass grade (A–E) at English A level were interpreted as proficient users of the language.

Student responses to ‘What previous learning experiences best prepared you for the dissertation?’ revealed clear links between prior learning experiences and dissertation performance. There were differences here between what placement and non-placement students reported. Placement students cited school and sixth-form experiences in various ways, from ‘school’ to ‘Sixth Form College’ and ‘A levels’ with specific references to ‘A level English’. However, non-placement students’ responses followed a very different pattern with much less focus on formal learning experiences and much less clarity in responses; they cited a variety of informal learning experiences, the most prominent being ‘reading’. While there may be other intervening variables to account for these responses, those from students choosing placement suggest these students to be a self-selecting group.

Further analysis of questionnaire responses showed a relation between self-reported confidence in ability to communicate in English and student participation in placement. The question that emerged as significant in the analysis of responses was ‘Are you confident about your ability to communicate in written English?’ which found 43% of placement students reporting that they were ‘very confident’ while 24% of non-placement students responded in this way. Both groups had a similar result in the ‘quite confident’ category (24%). However, at the other end of the scale non-placement students registered a low degree of confidence. The difference between group responses formed the basis for arguing that English language competence rather than placement starts to account for any variation in dissertation performance. A weighted comparison of dissertation results over three academic years 2002–3, 2003–4, 2004–5 (and 2005–6 for those who returned from the placement year) with those who did not show these patterns of performance in both groups was similar with some small variation. Therefore, student perception of confidence in ability to communicate in written English was higher in the placement group, but this did not appear to disadvantage the non-placement group significantly in terms of final grades.

Also, students who said that they did some work on their dissertation prior to the final year reported much higher confidence in their ability to communicate in written English than those who did not do any prior work. Doing some work prior to the final year did not appear to be related to whether or not students were on placement. The connections between question 3 and question 9 pointed to confidence in written English

communication as being behind the variation in the quality of the dissertation topics, the lack of correlation with any of questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 eliminating the placement as the reason. That connection became central to the research, indicating that *motivation* may have been linked to English language competence or prior educational experiences which involved a high level of competence in English language use. Scott (1999) sees motivation as key to student learning. His reading of excerpts of student essays shows the role of 'agency' in student writing; new learning situations not only require motivation, but succeed through the way individual experience interprets new challenges. Research in the area of 'academic literacies' (Lea and Street, 1998) offers insights into the position of the learner within institutional practices, and emphasizes the role of cultural issues rather than finding 'problems' with student learning or behaviour (Lea and Street, 1998: 157). If students who can work independently have specific kinds of 'academic literacies', this could account for different responses within the group, but further questions then arise. How does identity shape attitudes to learning? Moreover, do design students draw on their individual (extra-institutional) or collective (institutional) experiences to work across theory and practice?

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' situates the student's subjective disposition within a social 'field', tracing the role of cultural capital in driving individuals to grasp educational opportunity. For art and design students, their making could be considered an embodied practice or habit, their 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990), but this cannot be the whole story. It might be the place from which these learners gain confidence and satisfaction, and arguably the position from which their professional identities are forged. However, student identities are formed in a variety of contexts, and while familiarity with relevant learning processes may be important, the *value* students place in a learning opportunity impacts on their ability and willingness to learn. Student identities are shaped by both personal experience and institutional cultures. Questioning the dominant role of the 'approaches to learning' model, Haggis (2004) offers a pedagogic model that strongly considers issues of student identities and motivation. Her focus on the unique nature of individual learning experiences shows how values ascribed by institutional cultures to certain types of 'motivation' (2004: 350) shape student identities, raising questions about how art and design education structures relationships between different kinds of tasks and how this registers with students' experiences.

WHAT IS A CREATIVE IDENTITY?

To further explore the questionnaire results, we cross-referenced *self-reported* confidence in ability to communicate in written English with *actual* scores in

English language competence in relation to the two distinct groups. We made a comparative analysis of dissertation marks for students on either end of the scale in terms of confidence to communicate in written English. Completion of an IELTS test on entry was treated as an indicator that a student's first language was not English and a pass at English A level we treated as an indicator of proficiency in written English. The comparison between results of these distinct groups showed that in all years 2003–4, 2004–5, 2005–6 the latter group score between 4% and 10% higher than the former, with an average of around 7% over the three years. Further, while 'cultural studies' was reported as one of the learning experiences that best prepared students for the dissertation, placement and non-placement students had a similar proportion of responses. Both groups felt their dissertation research was shaped by experiences outside of college, but placement students were not particularly convinced their dissertation research was shaped by experiences on placement. A similar proportion of students in both groups thought that they had enough time between the second and the final year to develop their dissertation research, suggesting that neither group could see added value in the time or learning opportunities offered by a placement year to enhance dissertation research. When asked what was the most important criterion for success in the dissertation, placement students offered 'topic', 'organization', 'time management', 'tutorials' and 'interest' as fairly popular answers. However, 'research' and 'having a good tutor' were the criteria perceived to be most important by the non-placement group, which suggests that there is not much difference in the groups' perceptions of the importance of teaching.

In art and design education, where the practice–theory split is used to explain problems with student learning, 'common sense' divisions are regularly drawn between 'practical' and 'scholarly' learning. A recent study of art and design doctoral students shows that these divisions pose problems for research training, as a result of the way undergraduate study had taught students to view 'writing' as difficult, a shorthand for the analytic component of their doctoral study and inconvenient to their creative identities (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2005: 84). Having been encouraged to view analysis as uncreative and writing as alien to their discipline, they struggled to adopt identities as researchers, preferring instead to be viewed as makers. This reflects the ways in which students have been taught to reject the legitimacy of academic tasks in their undergraduate art and design education.

If, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, the social function of education is the reproduction of class relations, then it is instructive to look to a student's prior experience to gauge their response to cultures in higher education. Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of the 'habitus' uncovers an 'homogeneity of

dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) that engenders belief in a social position, while for some it may offer reason to decline opportunity. Differences between one set of students and another may not be readily visible, but Bourdieu argues that habit and disposition are essential elements in certain kinds of social participation. He viewed educational practice as a field where action is determined by experience. 'It is the structural view that postulates "practice provoking dispositions", or the dispositions to act in a certain way, to grasp experience in a certain way, to think in a certain way' (Grenfell and James, 1998: 14–15). Interaction with educational fields shapes individual understandings of specific kinds of tasks and their role in the practice of subject disciplines. While it is clear that educational experience has a role in identity formation, students have diverse responses, depending on the investments and attitudes they have drawn from experience. How and where students find meaning is shaped by a variety of factors, not least their orientation to tasks and perception of their wider relevance. Student identities clearly shape attitudes to learning, and this offers an insight into how design students draw on experience to work across theory and practice.

This research suggests that cultural factors were more meaningful to learning across theory and practice than was at first anticipated. The research shows the motivating influence of confidence for students who opted to take the industrial placement, but it is not clear what this reveals about how they positioned themselves within institutional discourse. However, while these results confirmed the willingness of this group to grasp opportunity, their confidence with both work-based and academic tasks did not necessarily result in significantly higher grades in the dissertation. Both groups had access to similar learning experiences within the design discipline, but results from question 2 suggest that learning experiences prior to entry may have disposed one group of students more favourably to the demands of the dissertation task. These students displayed more confidence in written English, suggesting that this may have also motivated them to take up placement, while giving them reason to feel prepared for the dissertation task on their return. Participation in placement may not have meant significantly better grades for students on completion of their dissertation, but those who felt themselves ready for work-based learning also showed enthusiasm for the dissertation task. In both cases, they were more prepared for the learning opportunities offered to them, and their participation in very different kinds of learning experiences appeared to involve similar kinds of motivation.

Bourdieu's work shows how disposition and habit in the life of an individual eases access to social and cultural institutions and allows a minority to enjoy meaningful participation. It is not so much what is on offer in higher education, but how opportunities speak to students, how they mesh with a

student's experience and how successfully they then situate themselves within institutional structures. The differences found in how students perceived the dissertation task hinged on prior experiences. There were differences in what students perceived to be experiences that best prepared them for the dissertation task; the placement group reported formal education to be the significant factor. Similarly, placement students reported more confidence in their ability to communicate in written English, which may have also given them the confidence to participate in work placement. Also, while the gap between dissertation grades from the two groups may not have been so great as to suggest that this was a decisive factor, experience could have shaped student orientation to tasks. Different responses to the dissertation task may not have resulted in a significant gap in grades, but the confidence displayed may offer insights into the learning process.

A concentration of students in the placement group reporting A level experiences that best prepared them for the dissertation task suggested that these students drew on a very different set of experiences from those of the non-placement group. Indeed, if these students' choices were informed by experience, they may have been positioned to recognize the value of continued access to learning opportunities. While institutional discourse in art and design higher education may have enlisted students to resist a humanities-style learning process, certain students appear capable of drawing on their extra-institutional experiences to handle these contradictions. Significantly, placement and non-placement groups reported very differently on learning experiences which they believed best prepared them for the dissertation project. Differences in student experience reveal how, in Bourdieu's terms, the educational field appears to offer equal opportunity, but individual students' responses indicate a variation that shows the role of experience in learning. If the educational system reproduces class relations, then it accommodates and nurtures certain student identities more readily than others. If design students draw on experience to work across theory and practice, this could determine how comfortably they negotiate new learning experiences, as well as their fit with the cultures of art and design education.

The high degree of confidence shown by placement students reflected their educational background and confidence in written English. Rather than the placement experience itself being the decisive differentiating factor influencing performance on the dissertation, it is more plausible that these students instead displayed confidence as a result of what they experienced prior to taking up their degree. While further research could examine how these student groups perform in their overall degree and post-degree destinations, this discussion simply raises the question of confidence and its role in enabling students to find meaning in the tasks offered to them. If those who opted for

placement benefited indirectly from 'formal' and 'academic' prior learning experiences, this goes against the received wisdom that such educational opportunities are irrelevant to survival in art and design education. Indeed, it suggests that confidence and motivation are not necessarily linked to specific kinds of aptitudes for practice or theory, but could instead be bound up with issues of identity. Those who have confidence and experience will grasp a range of learning opportunities, while the rest might find their unwillingness to get involved rewarded by a system that insists that art and design students cannot do theory. We must ask ourselves who these students were before they came to art and design education. By viewing practice-based learning processes in direct opposition to more scholarly forms, we may be actually deepening already persistent class and social divisions.

CONCLUSION

This research indicates that how student identities fit with institutional cultures is significant to how and why learning takes place. Within art and design education, differences between theory and practice are given much weight to suit conflicts historically significant to academic staff. The incompatibility of theory and practice in the educational field of art and design education is used to explain 'problems' with student learning. This might reflect internal institutional conflicts but offers us little understanding of how students learn. Students might be socialized into a discourse through rituals of opposition to scholarly forms of learning associated with the humanities, but we cannot pretend that student identities are wholly formed by higher education experiences. Instead, the results of this study suggest that the way students participate in vocational and academic parts of the programme reveals similar kinds of motivation. In our study, the industry experience did not necessarily give students a better understanding of academic tasks, but their motivation was evident in their willingness to get involved in the former and to feel confidence about the latter. While students may be socialized to mark off their activity from mainstream university undergraduate education, and encouraged to discard and censure former learner identities in a bid to 'become' an artist or designer, these results suggest that such rituals of opposition may not be wholly successful or complete. However, these rituals are damaging when they raise barriers to wider social participation.

While the academic literacies demanded of students on work placement and dissertation may appear to vary considerably, it is clear that specific 'ways of knowing' cross theory and practice in higher education design courses. Indeed, one of the early indicators of success for design students is the ability to work independently, which can involve very specific, and for some

mysterious, 'ways of knowing'. This is bound up not just with 'ways of knowing' but – crucial to Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus' – with 'ways of being', as it involves the habit of independent discovery. Different responses within groups of fashion design students, which first appeared to be linked to placement, were instead the result of different academic literacies, where the demand to be *able and willing to work independently* proved important. In the light of the results, students faced with similar choices showed variation in response due to their diverse range of prior learning experiences, whether linked to formal learning experiences in tertiary education, or to English language competence. If students consult their experience to inform an encounter with a new task, the outcome could involve multiple responses within a course group. How and where students find meaning could be shaped by a variety of factors, not least their orientation to tasks and perception of their wider relevance to them.

Understanding students' learning experiences within the course involved looking beyond it. This research suggests that groups of design students bring with them a diversity of experiences, and offers us a glimpse of how students convert experience into motivation. By highlighting the role of experience in learning in design education, this discussion challenges the view that theory and practice demand different kinds of skills and levels of engagement from design students. On the contrary, it appears that those who participate and perform in vocational and academic parts of the programme may have similar kinds of motivation. It also raises the question whether vanity prevents us from appreciating the extra-institutional forces that shape student identities. Clearly, students draw on a range of skills, habits and experiences to learn in higher education. Incubation is neither possible nor desirable. By exploring the vital processes that enable learning on a design course, this study questions the value of internal conflicts to student learning. Moreover, it asks whether we can retain processes vital to creative practice education, while contesting practices that are divisive and that marginalize certain social groups within higher education.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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