

## Review

# Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education: Knowledge, values and ambiguity in the creative curriculum

Orr, S. and Shreeve, A. (2018) *Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education*.

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*"I am for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning." (p16)*

This quote from Venturi's *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* (Venturi, 1984, p. 16) sprang to mind whilst reading Susan Orr and Alison Shreeve's new book *Art and design education practices*. This type of paradox is the constant subject of this book – complexities and contradictions that will be immediately familiar to anyone working in learning and teaching in art and design education in the UK. The book's accessibility to what is a tangled and difficult topic is what makes it well worth a read if you are involved in art and design education in any capacity.

*Art and design education practices* considers the contemporary UK higher education landscape in art and design and presents an overview, providing some general characteristics and features identified by the authors. Both Susan Orr and Alison Shreeve have extensive knowledge and experience in this domain and the book clearly demonstrates this, using both their own research and teaching experience, as well as being well grounded in the wider literature.

The volume is divided into two main sections, the first considering the territories of, and the second presenting practices in, higher art and design education. Generally, the former deals with common theoretical paradigms in most art and design education approaches, and the latter turns to how such learning and teaching is practiced and made tangible. Between these two familiar anchors of theory and practice Orr and Shreeve present a series of discussions summarising current thinking, often demonstrating how interdependent the two are.

Part 1 begins with the main introduction, in which the metaphor of stickiness is introduced to hold the work together theoretically (more on this later). Chapter 2 considers knowledge in and knowing, with particular reference to a broad overview of what this means in a pedagogic sense. Chapter 3 explores meaning and value(s) which continually recur in art and design curricula and how these are (re)constructed in learning and teaching. Finally, Chapter 4 tries to address ambiguity and uncertainty in creative education and concludes that it is both of these things!

Part 2 continues in a similar tone with Chapter 5 on identity and engagement as part of the sticky curriculum – both in terms of student identity and its construction in art and design education but also that of the tutor. Chapter 6 outline common teaching practices and uses many of the ideas presented elsewhere in the book to place these in context. Chapter 7 presents an excellent treatment of the project – something that they note needs much more attention in research and scholarship. Chapter 8 looks in a bit more detail at some of the ‘operational’ parts of art and design education: process, product and person. Part 2, and the book as a whole, is brought together in Chapter 9 to draw conclusions, although I took much of this to be an invitation to continue the discussion rather than any firm conclusion.

From this last, you may infer that this was a book I thoroughly enjoyed reading and then giving thought to. The main structure of the book worked well and I found Part 2 to be a particularly considered, contextualised and well-researched set of readings. I read this as a design educator, tutor *and* practitioner and it made me think about all of those aspects of what I do.

Dealing with such a complex and encompassing territory does, however, mean that some sacrifices have to be made. Part 1 does suffer slightly from this in terms of introducing some very large concepts with their own bodies of knowledge: for example, creativity in education, theories of design epistemology, power relations, postcolonialism, and many more make an appearance. This must have meant some difficult choices for the authors to make and it was clear which topics they were more interested. But art and design education does not take place in a deterministic, top-down, declarative classroom where a simple set of inter-disciplinary topics exist. It is necessarily part of the whole within which its students mean to one day practice and anyone aware of current design PhD methodologies will understand the breadth of knowledge domains that contemporary design researchers make use of, work within, or even contribute to. It is, as the authors make very clear, a messy and well-distributed business.

For me, the real strength of this book was how it grounded itself. Art and design pedagogy may be messy and difficult and complex and paradoxical and contradictory and... but we still have to *do* something. Part 2 demonstrates how this takes place across a range of subjects, in a range of modes and how these interrelate to the ideas introduced in Part 1, as well as the values within the broader college of art and design in the UK. This interrelation of doing and theorising is one that will be immediately recognisable to any design teacher or practitioner.

This is (necessarily) a UK-centric book, very much grounded in the Western paradigm of the arts and art education traditions, as the authors make clear throughout, despite the international influence of the subject itself. The book touches briefly on issues of culture and curricula, as well as some issues in representation, visibility and postcolonialism and this felt an appropriate level of detail given the scope. But the focus on traditional, proximate studio modes did leave some gaps in the territory with respect to technology, distance education, and modern practice-based learning. Some discussion of these took place towards the end of the book but I felt that some further acknowledgement of these modes would have benefited the work in terms of generally supporting many of the ideas presented. In fact, ongoing research into virtual design studios allows us to compare alternative and traditional studios in ways that have not been possible until now. The sticky,

messy, contradictory socius that is a traditional, proximate studio is just as important in a virtual one and many of the sticky concepts presented here are just as relevant.

### **Ambiguity, uncertainty, paradoxes and stickiness**

Central to the book is the paradox of a subject that is both necessarily subjective but that also has to be objective in some particular ways. This, and many other dualities, are presented throughout. For example, assessing individuals ... in groupwork (p73); the real world versus academic institution (p99); the learning expectation of unpredictable creative responses (p129); and, of course, the zen of teaching but not teaching, among many others.

Balancing the many paradoxes identified is presented as the business of both teachers and students in art and design. I did wonder why so much of this was framed as a series of dualities. Or that it is simply that we have to accept that it is complex or uncertain. Perhaps these are mainly second hand contradictions, passed on from practitioner to practitioner over time but I do think that the contemporary design teacher has to do better than that for all the reasons outlined in this book.

To help approach such paradoxes the authors introduce the concept of stickiness at the start of the book and return to it throughout. Early on they provide several characteristics of this conceptual gestalt to help orient readers. I have to confess that I found this difficult to begin with - the subject in itself is a sufficiently ill-defined problem that using a metaphor like this didn't (for me) add much. There may be something that binds art and design education but maybe, as they suggest in the book, this is not a traditionally representational idea.

What I did wonder was whether a design approach might be more appropriate here: for example, we might not know what the end result will be *specifically*, but under no circumstances does that mean that no progress can be made. The design process is strange blend of directional uncertainty and a common fallacy in the study of design epistemology is to consider uncertainty to be the same as ignorance. Knowing that something doesn't work is as important in finding possible solutions. Perhaps we need to be a bit more confident about how we use concepts such as uncertainty. For example, I have to admit that I found the 'teaching but not teaching' a difficult one to accept because it ignores the other major element here: learning. A good studio tutor flips between teaching and allowing space for learning and it doesn't necessarily need a contradiction to allow this to take place. Perhaps much of our thinking around these issues has been clouded by the tyranny of simplified dualities. Returning quickly to Venturi, it perhaps doesn't have to be 'either-or', we can have 'both-and' (Venturi, 1984). Good art and design schools and curricula have been providing 'both-and' for a long time and it is perhaps only now that we have the intra-disciplinary confidence to make stronger claims about what we do as a group of practitioners in both the subjects themselves and their teaching. I think we can tell richer stories about the complexities and contradictions in art and design education.

My impression of this book is that the authors intend this too: the moments that delighted were those where they really got down to the difficult, messy business of art and design pedagogy and really presented these confidently and unashamedly as part of the tradition and contemporary practice of art and design education. Shreeve and Orr show how concepts such as contradiction might be reframed in significantly positive and productive

ways; where the balance between tensions is the perfect space within which design learning might take place. As examples, take away their summaries of 'the opportunistic curriculum' (p61); 'productive ambiguity' (p63); or simply their articulation of 'the project' (ch 7).

I have to confess that I wanted much more of this as I neared the end of the book...

## Power

One of the most important tensions to arise from the central subject of uncertainty is that of power relationships. Most of the examples given in the book show positive examples of using uncertainty, paradox, ambiguity, etc. in supporting novice designers to learn. But these concepts can easily generate a far less positive outcome. The authors refer to the bad old days of studio education where power asymmetries arising from uncertainty were simply part of the pedagogy – students 'learned' what not to do and quickly adopted behaviours to suit, or they dropped out.

It is harder to imagine some of these practices taking place in contemporary art and design education but this does not mean that it's no longer an issue. In fact, because such explicit power asymmetries are not in evidence, there may exist a range of other more implicit forms of imbalance, far harder to identify and address. With a side reference to student agency and socio-cultural backgrounds, they quite rightly state, "We do not need, however, the obscured cultural practices which can serve to disadvantage some." (p148). I do think this and others could have been considered further in places. If, at the heart of art and design pedagogy there lie intransigent paradoxes that require negotiation, then the central paradox is that this is necessarily an emerging (and changing) power asymmetry. Thus, it becomes the core business of teachers to be aware of this and practice with such an awareness. Whilst the book gives examples of tutors for whom this "...was an ideal which they aspired to" (p78), how problems arising from this may be addressed is less well covered and there were a few opportunities to refer to some excellent critical literature in this area.

The book, however, prefers to concentrate on good practice and giving examples of how such practice might be propagated as part of a community of practice and I can understand this from a practitioner's point of view. For example, they note how effective the crit can be in terms of semi-public staff development: a negotiation of tutor beliefs and preferences. I can easily imagine this being taken much further as part of broader, collegiate approach.

And this is where, again, I think the book's strength really lies – as an introduction to *more properly explore and develop* the difficult task of working in the grey area(s) of art and design higher education. The stark lesson suggested here is that, if we wish to maintain the blurriness of paradox in art and design education, we have to take seriously our responsibility for the how power is deployed, displayed and negotiated between all parties in such a context. These difficult topics and spaces of interpersonal learning are a welcome addition to the book and such discussions must become central elements in the praxis of art and design education. As a quick example, the authors refer to the sex/gender imbalances in Art and Design education, particularly in relation to expected gender congruence (p78). This is an example of a single, core, implicit bias that many of us hold, whether we wish to or not. But it is how we respond to such bias that usually makes the greatest difference:

gender equity, like art and design, is perhaps best practised regularly, not taught once and forgotten (Robertson et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this book presents a good overview of the current landscape of pedagogical practice in art and design education and its theoretical basis is drawn from that practice in and of itself. This situates it in its own knowledge domain and makes it far more approachable to both teachers and scholars in this area. Whilst I do think there are some areas that could have had more depth and detail, it captures well current practice and values. Unfortunately, it is priced at the 'University Library' end of the scale (£105 at the time of writing), which might limit its audience.

I'll end with the same approach I took in reading the book, as a design tutor, and ask: Was this useful? Did it make me think about my practice? Did it make me uncomfortable about some of my practice? Did it change my thinking? Did I keep coming back to some of the concepts at utterly inappropriate times of the day?

The answer to all of those was a definite yes. You can't really ask more than that: unspecified, but rich, personal learning outcome complete....

## References

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