

## Review

# When Two Conferences Meet... Perspectives on Learning in Design and Technology Education

PATT 25 & CRIPT 8: 1 – 5 July 2011

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There is always so much to be gained from a conference that I'm rather puzzled by those who are quick to write them off. Perhaps they have expectations that can't be realised or they don't do their homework. Some folk write off conferences wholesale – seeing them as so much hot air, or perks, or irrelevant. It seems to me that, at least in education where our game must be one of continuous reflection and improvement, they are invaluable. In the case of Design and Technology Education, I would go further and say that they are a necessity.

Wherever we are working in Design and Technology, there's a high chance that we are relatively isolated – geographically, academically, collegially – and we need the sustenance of others to maintain our intellectual and our spiritual professional wellbeing. In their respective ways the PATT (Pupils Attitude to Technology) and CRIPT (Centre for Research into Primary Technology) have been sustenance indeed to many travellers on the Design and Technology journey, often a meandering journey without mapped-out routes. (Our lot in Design and Technology is the 'journey hopeful' rather than any particular arrival.)

We continue to live in complex and fraught times with Design and Technology colleagues across the world, regardless of jurisdiction, feeling that their work is ill-valued and misunderstood. Of course, I would be one who would point to the international political agendas of an elite of nations shaping the curriculum through testing regimes that valorise some subjects and at the cost of others. For many of us the league tables of 'performance' run all the way from classroom and school to nation state.

In a way, such matters can be seen as of little concern to Design and Technology because there is a sense that we are fortunate in not being prone to testing that stifles our subject integrity and our professional judgement. But it would be foolish to ignore the pressures that, by default, shape our curriculum existences. While the world of some 'subjects' becomes more tightly constrained, we find ourselves in the curious position, at once difficult yet enviable, of having more curriculum freedom than others. But, also, as we know, we are an emergent field that struggles with its identity and its integrity in the world of curriculum contestation. Further, and we sometimes forget this, we are a continuously emerging or re-inventing field and such a dynamic does not sit well with the (currently) dominant instrumental curriculum paradigm.

In such times and circumstances we find two of our principal international conferences collaborating most productively to create a special event rich in many dimensions. (Given the timing and the location it is unfortunate that the Design and Technology Association's conference wasn't able to be included too.) It seems to me that it is increasingly the case that collaboration is needed at many levels to shape and affirm our identity and integrity. None the less, this blended event did what such gatherings can do so well – it offered a wide range of topics (too many to include in this review – see hardcopy, online, and the programme references below), breadth in the genres of presentation (research methodologies; philosophies; sociological, pedagogical, and theoretical perspectives), and depth in curriculum coverage (from kindergarten to the world of work with links to other curriculum interests).

Taking the above into consideration and having five days, over fifty papers, other conference inclusions, and the interests of over a hundred attendees at heart, it is unsurprising that the traditional PATT model of no parallel papers ("where everyone's a keynote") was modified to include some parallel paper sessions. For a field in need of much curriculum and research conversation it matters that our conferences are conducted at appropriate pace without exhaustion. It is so important to get such balances as well met as possible and this was a plus of the event and a credit to the organisers.

As an ever-emerging field we need to be able to do what a conference can allow us to do – to *confer* – and to do this we need time, collegiality and appropriate ambience. By conferring, and engaging with the presenters, our perspectives are enhanced, our positions tested, and our thinking is deepened. When papers are brought and presented for critique what is called for is *critical friendship* rather than brusque interrogation or posturing by 'colleagues'. In this regard, this conference witnessed on a couple of occasions an inconsistency of treatment towards presenters with, on the one hand, unwarranted challenges to less-experienced researcher-presenters while, on the other, well-experienced presenters escaped robust methodological critique where it would have been appropriate. In the picture of the whole event, observations such as this are lesser but they do matter if our collegiality and learning are to grow.

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A possible weakness of our field is the persistence of some conferences which, having served their worthy aims well, could both welcome some revitalisation and contribute to new ventures. There is much conference experience around and it is perhaps time to explore new joint venture possibilities. That conferences move to new, especially international, venues is important but new synergies must also be lying in wait. Formulaic conference models, I suspect, may not offer the best for our shared professional future. I am not advocating some kind of super-conference but there is certainly room for thinking about ventures such as PATT25:CRIP8 has modelled. Special interest groups (SIGs) have long played particular roles in relation to conferences and journals and there is room for some particularly dynamic SIGs in Design and Technology – ones which can contribute to common goals of improvement, celebration, and strengthening subject identity and integrity. Such groups work well in the combinatory arenas of the online and face-to-face events such as this which has celebrated a richer spectrum than might be found at either 'parent' event alone. (Online events such as IDATER online bring new potentials too.)

This bringing together of the 25th PATT and 8th (biennial) CRIPT conferences was a most fruitful partnership. I've attended several PATT and CRIPT conferences in their own right and this blending brought the best of both into play. The international spectrum was well represented in attendance, jurisdictions represented, and in the range of issues addressed. In true CRIPT style there was the ever-important inclusion of school students' and practising teachers' presentations – always a legitimisation of good practice as affirmation of our field's worth.

Thirty-minute limits calling for tight delivery and chairing of papers as well as smooth room changeovers were an asset to the event. Inevitably there were presenters who, having conducted fine projects, ran over their time either because they had enough material for more than one paper or they had not prepared well enough. But this is the conference as learning experience and it is the place for support and sharing where new partnerships, interests and ventures develop.

What was notable, and is a credit to the organisers (Clare Benson, Kay Stables and their teams), was the structuring and management of the conference in such a way that over one hundred attendees could engage with the event

Feet were very well catered for at this event with supporting social and cultural activities ranging from a pre-conference shoe workshop and an early-morning bike ride through historic walking tours of Bloomsbury and the City of London to a variety of collaborative and creative walking ventures both pre-and post-prandial. The organisers are also to be congratulated for their achievements in maintaining a most appropriate balance of head, hands and heart through the conference programme.

meaningfully and in not-too-stressed ways. If conferences are to be (internationally) inclusive then the budget matters and to have secured the premises they did in London's Bloomsbury was an achievement indeed. Delegates may have been sated by the truly British breakfasts and lunches but the town was theirs in the evening.

Both PATT and CRIPT have established pedigrees with the former beginning as a workshop in 1985 and the latter running biennially since 1997. These worthy events synergised successfully in London in July. As in all good Design and Technology education, long may the sum be greater than the parts!

## References

Stables, K., Benson, C. & de Vries, M., (2011) *Perspectives on Learning in Design and Technology Education*, Proceedings of the PATT25:CRIP8 Conference, London, July 1-5 2011, Technology Education Research Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London. ISBN 978-1-906897-10-9

Web version of PATT25:CRIP8 Conference Booklet:  
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/Patt%20Cript%20conference%20booklet%20X-webversion-web.pdf>

PATT25:CRIP8 Conference programme:  
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/PATTCRIPT%20PROGRAMME.pdf>

IDATER Online Conference site: <http://idater.lboro.ac.uk/>

PATT 2012 will be held in Stockholm, June 26th – 30th 2012, under a joint arrangement by The National Centre for School Technology Education (CETIS) and The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH). Site for contact:  
<http://www.liu.se/cetis/patt-stockholm/patt-stockholm.shtml>