

*I'm not sure if it matters whether what I am/we are involved in is called 'art' or not (though this is a constant source of contemplation); whatever we call it, its privileges, our creativity and our agency as cultural producers, are a democratic right that should be available to all!*

## **Presentation to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design in Education.**

The National Association for Fine Art Education is a members' network for the UK that is open to academics, practitioners and students. We are the Subject Association for Fine Art Education; primarily engaging with Higher and Further Education. NAFAE is a vehicle for dialogue and advocacy that promotes the exchange of practices and ideas. We are connected, via association, with CHEAD and the HEAD TRUST and we have collaborated with NSEAD. We actively engage with PARADOX (the European Forum for Fine Art).

We understand that the very concept of democracy should imply that each individual has the right to access resources that might develop their capacity, drive and desire to contribute their own content, values and time to the cultural interactions of their society and community. Each individual has the right to make in response to their cultural identity and priorities. Educators in the Arts, and Design and Craft, have a responsibility to facilitate and encourage such forms of engagement (and expression) and, as education practitioners, we are aware of an urgent and essential task to defend a principle of access and fairness.

NAFAE seeks, and largely manages, to offer very affordable membership rates to individuals as well as to institutions. That then enables us to: run annual conferences on Fine Art pedagogies, hosted in different regions of the country, run one student practice and research symposium annually, partner the Journal of Visual Arts Practice and contribute to publications, support the programme of PARADOX conferences in Europe, and co-operate with the HEAD Trust and others to offer representation for our members.

As educators in Fine Art we are concerned with:

- Structures and tactics for cultural production; technical and methodological approaches to making and strategies for engagement in the production of new content.
- Sensibilities towards cultural production and consumption and the agency of the individual, working within socialized and political spaces, to compose their production from material, technological and interpersonal resources.
- Sense, in reference to informed reflections and the exploration of critical, ethical and philosophical reasoning in response to cultural productions and encounters.
- Situation and contexts for production and for cultural encounter, and for the political,

special and interpersonal impacts that arise from cultural initiative and the making of content.

- Seriousness and discursive practices; critical thinking as an act of making, embedded into methods of creative or constructive production, that produce deliberative and probing reflections relating to content and context.

We propose a set of co-ordinates that offer a focus for Fine Art education:

- There are multiple art worlds and the field of reference for students and practitioners is expanding.
- Cultural Democracy is a human need and condition; this is a source of joyous complexity and evolution affecting Fine Art practices.
- The discovery or exposure of different practices is a source of opportunity for each individual.
- Education that is primarily concerned with realizing aspects of human agency can also empower voices within and across communities; it is a source of democracy.
- It is essential that we respect and challenge the truth and truths (critical perspectives) of individuals; another source of democracy.
- The privileging of making and material thinking supports a form of intimacy with the world around us that encourages sense through sensitivity and reflection.
- Aspiring to meet with the real ambitions of students of Fine Art requires of us that we should be cautious of certainty and suspicious of conservatism.

Improving social justice is a principal theme as that is a common motive for cultural production. The academic community delivering education in Fine Art is packed full of people who are determined to make a difference; to disrupt where systems, ideas and practices present barriers to cultural enrichment, to innovate and initiate change where opportunity remains abstruse or difficult to access, to invent or embrace challenge for the sake of expanding their field. Fine Art Education operates as a creative engine that has essential and fundamental worth for all areas of society and our economy. We have broad reach and very broad relevance and it is, therefore, dangerous to assume to presuppose or instrumentally constrain our purpose. The very concept of a Creative Industries sector suggests a marginalisation of the activity and is, thereby, diminishing and constraining. It is our feeling, and experience, that policy makers, commentators and professional politicians have eagerly adopted reductive terms of reference such as this, precisely for reasons of containment and the production of control metrics.

Fine Art education has a long history of:

- Producing education that is primarily and principally focused on human agency and the development of capacity in people who have the drive and desire to contribute their own content, values and time to the cultural interactions and well-being of our society.
- Working within and across localized communities and internationalized networks.
- Responding to change at a level of personal innovation and social evolution.
- Respecting the intelligence of making as an embodied response to material, social and spiritual realities

- NAFAE (The National Association for Fine Art Education) has a long history and has witnessed many versions of Fine Art Education but these consistent themes prevail.

Throughout the history of our network we have witnessed:

- Endless interfering from the policy environment.
- Countless adjustments to systems of learning.
- Repeated rationalizations in the area of resourcing.
- The same repeated innovations in the policy landscape, often presented as new.
- The launching and relaunching of future systems; a cycle and recycle of change dressed as novelty.
- A constantly diminishing resource base.
- And from time to time, significant and lasting change, provoked by political dogma and national policy, examples of which are inflicting serious harm on the quality and reach of Arts education right now; this problem is very current.

Students are facing huge debt because it has been handed to them by a political generation and a class obsessed with the privatisation of resources in the UK. Creating a transactional and, therefore, contractual environment for higher education has and will, inevitably, engender an expectation of reciprocal value in monetary profit to benefit the consumer of that education. It seems that the mission, the intention, is to create a market for the retail of qualifications on the promise of improving an individual's economic prospects. As might be expected, the model has produced a highly competitive environment focused on economic value and this, in itself, offers a mechanism for central political and governmental control through metrics that have very little to do with education designed for the common good. Were we to embrace this model, we would be diminishing many of the core motivations that are so often demonstrated by Fine Art students and educators and would mitigate against the wider social mission of the arts. Fine Art education is essential to a healthy society because its' constituents so often aspire to disrupt expectations and move beyond the obvious, in doing so, they offer an alternative proposition that is inherently invested with humanitarian perspectives.

The educator has experience of education; it might safely be assumed, more than politicians. Rationally, therefore, the educator should have some authority to determine the nature of educational processes. However, this is not our experience in the current policy environment.

Typically, educators will have knowledge and experience pertinent to their specialised themes; they will be versed in the art of instruction and knowledge transfer from teacher to pupil, a principle function of education but not the top priority. The primary task of the educator is to develop independence in the learner; to develop learning communities and mutual learning gain from peer to peer interaction, to establish habits of lifelong curiosity, critical enquiry and cultural production. These are principal goals that belong to contemporary education but they do have a very long tradition that relates to the way we build society's wisdom through knowledge exchange and sharing. Even though state education is a relatively recent social innovation the role of the educator and our instinct to teach through empowerment has a deep history that is being increasingly challenged and

undermined through a period of growing financialisation and, inevitably and by virtue of the dependencies that arise from the fabrication of a structurally transactional arrangement for the purchase of education, a prescribed return on investment.

It isn't one specific thing that is leading us into crisis, it is a whole series of UK government initiatives:

- Competing policy directives affecting participation and inclusion.
- The transfer of higher education costs into student debt.
- The commercialisation of loans and the introduction of profit (interest).
- Extended differentials in fees between home and overseas students.
- The creation of a market place for knowledge capital feeding concepts of global competitiveness.
- Research metrics and the stratification of academic institutions.
- Teaching Excellence Frameworks and the grading of provision.
- The metrics of the Teaching Excellence Framework that actively seek to presume outcomes and thereby direct, constrain and limit the potency of higher learning for the individual or for the communities that frame their cultural interactions.
- Impact measures and the shifting role of the University in relation to social innovation and tactics for gentrification within communities.
- UKBA changes and adjustments to the rights of international students and, quite possibly, European students.  
The prevent strategy as an example of political instrumentalization with multiple implications and impacts.
- Emerging transitional and changing arrangements affecting borders and treaties and, therefore, the free movement of knowledge and culture.
- A fundamental and systematic withdrawal from Arts and Design education within statutory education as might be demonstrated by the promotion of the Ebacc.

Particularly this last point means that students now entering into Fine Art education beyond statutory education may well be limited in terms of their:

- Breadth of prior experience and learning.
- Awareness of cultural heritage and practices.
- Skills and dexterity with materials and tools.
- Confidence in visual and material senses
- Self-confidence and belief in the student body.
- Maturity and the time for personal growth.
- Genuine faith in the value of education and the arts.

As NAFAE members we are, and should be, deeply anxious about the increasing instrumentalization of education and, primarily, Fine Art Education. We have lived through and witnessed a rapid financialization of the Higher Education offer across the UK that has had a devastating effect on the provision of creative education. The commodification of art and design education is to the detriment of its discrete value to individuals and to society. The assault on creative education in Schools has exacerbated the effects of austerity and deepened inequalities across the country precisely because it has limited the democratic reach of education supporting cultural production.

In brief summary, culture is common; it is not a privilege, and neither is it an exclusive gift of nature. Any improvements in cultural well-being and agency, for any individual, have the capacity to affect gains for our wider society. Rather than argue for the preservation of what was, we should seek to foster optimism and build towards improving democratic and inclusive rights of access to the means of cultural production for all in our society. Art Education is one such means of achieving such a goal. NAFAE proposes greater collaboration, dialogue, debate and argument involving associations representing teacher practitioners, at all levels, such that we can predict and develop a forward looking and inclusive education that, with support, can address the individual needs and aspirations of students as they connect to a broader community and to our common sense of society.