Educating Risk: How fear of failure is stifling creative practice within Higher Education

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2019

Introduction

We are in a crisis, students don't want to fail, institutions don't want students to fail and as a result we as educationalists and academics find ourselves in the predicament where few want to take risks because they are afraid of failure. This is stifling innovation and creativity.

There is an increasing concern within higher education that students are no longer prepared to take risks, try new things and develop their practice. This is problematic as it stifles creative play, experimentation, the development of new knowledge and ultimately innovation. Clifford asserts that, "Teaching students to take risks as a means of learning and motivation facilitates learning and increases effort in academics". (Clifford, 1991). Encouraging students to take risks, stimulates and creates an environment where uncertainty and ambiguity arise; because of this, students must learn to be critical and reflect upon their learning. A key aspect to developing risk taking to encourage all involved in the activities to discuss their learning and that of others. As such it's vital that learners are equipped with strong communication skills to articulate their thinking. Creative play allows the student to explore, experiment and test out skills, knowledge and their understanding of a problem without the fear of failure, or indeed assessment.

Successive governments from the 1980's to the present day proposed and implemented radical changes to education and assessment of learners, as well as handing out funding cuts to schools and further education colleges have meant there have needed to be many changes to the curriculum. The national curriculum with its focus on assessment and judgements based on performance have increased the amount of testing of children to the point where primary, secondary and further education establishments have had to make difficult decisions about where the creative arts fit within now STEM (Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) based schooling systems instead embracing STEAM (Science Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics). This privileged focus on 'academic' subjects is too focussed and deemed short sighted by those working within the creative arts, reducing or in some cases removing access to the creative arts. This prescriptive education, where constant testing, reductive and binary answers are often part of examinations has had a profound impact on the way that students think, leading to the perception that there is only one approach to arriving at an answer, or a single solution to a problem. As a result of this we now have a generation(s) of students entering education who have had fewer than ever opportunities to explore, test challenge and engage in alternative ways of thinking

The simplistic view that creative arts are just about painting pictures, design or drama is damaging. They are about risk taking and experimentation to in order to question ideologies, raise issues, solve problems and tell stories; in short, they require creative problem solving and thinking.

The Problems

The fear of failure is a real concern for many students entering Higher Education. How many times have we all been asked, "How much do I need to do to get a pass?" This is problematic as it stifles creative play, experimentation, the development of new knowledge and ultimately innovation. Ken Robinson suggests that, "Creativity requires and atmosphere where risk taking and experimentation are encouraged rather than stifled" (Robinson 2001). Higher Education should be a place where that culture and atmosphere is fostered and it is, but it is taking longer and longer for it to manifest itself within student work.

The QAA subject benchmark for Art and Design 2017 articulates that undergraduates by the end of their course should possess not only subject specialist knowledge, but also the ability to understand and demonstrate 'personal innovation, risk-taking, independent enquiry, effective communication, negotiation, interpersonal, management, presentation'. My observations are that there are several factors that can come into play that are frequently presented as barriers to creative play, risk taking and ultimately creative problem solving.

Transition from FE to HE

Due to the factors mentioned briefly in the introduction, an increasing number of students simply aren't prepared with core communication skills to articulate their thoughts and opinions. Students have frequently never had a job, undertaken a work placement through school or simply not had the opportunities to discuss producing creative work. Developmental psychologist Howard Gardner suggests that.

"Mastering disciplines, learning to communicate effectively, engaging civilly in discussion and argument – these have been, and should remain, at the forefront of all education." (Gardner, H. 2017) Higher education is increasingly having to pick up elements of tenents due to the lack of opportunities offered within the UK compulsory educational system.

Other difficulties we face are that students often have not had the time to develop their own creative ambitions. One could assert that this is in part due to the reduction/removal of art & design at GCSE and A Level within the curriculum in schools. It means that students are not developing/mastering drawing skills and as a result not strong as they should be, which frequently leads to lack of confidence when it is time to do presentations, pitches or critiques this in turn can lead to an increase in individuals struggling with anxiety. Some students will describe their work or ability as good or bad before they have committed pencil to paper or pointer to screen. As lecturers our role is to provide feedback about work and encourage reflection on progress and how to move forward with it, difficult when students already have a negative mind set.

The anxiety of getting something wrong can be quite paralysing for some students. The UK's National Curriculum for schools, where summative assessment across all subject and testing through SATs is binary, this right or wrong is so destructive. According to Clifford, "Through this approach we have removed the element of play and risk taking to a point where weaker students are risk averse." (Clifford 1991). Failure simply is not an option for the student. The overriding factor that inhibits risk taking and experimentation is fear. The perception of what people think, be it disapproval/tutors, parents or indeed their peers. As Ponticell explains, "Fear of failure is the most significant negative emotion expressed because this emotion leads to more cautious behaviour patterns" (Ponticell 2003).

Higher education has found itself spending more and more time helping students understand that there are (in the context of creativity and animation in our case) students no right or wrong answers but nuance and shades of grey, a range of possible solutions or approaches to solving a problem, all with their own merits or weaknesses.

Parental/Family/External Pressures

According to the Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2017/18 - Student numbers and characteristics. 50% of under 30-year olds UK population entered higher education. There pressure from parents and students to see visible success on their courses through not only passing modules but also good grades and not just through the quality of work produced. With increasing numbers of students who are the first within their families (POLAR 4 – Quintile 1 & 2 Socio economically disadvantaged backgrounds) to go to university and do well there is even more pressure to succeed.

Transactional Education/Student as Customer.

"Just tell me what to do to pass." or, "What do I need to do to get a first?" This is not to say that all students are like this, but in recent years and especially since full fees of £9000 a year were allowed, there has been a shift in the relationship between student and lecturer/university. There is an expectation from *some* students that the purpose of lecturers it to tell a student the answer and not to talk around the problem to enable them to find the most appropriate answer. In the 2014 report, Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education, Michael Tomlinson suggests that higher fees are contributing to shifting expectations of what universities should provide. Tomlinson observes,

"While students are concerned that institutions should enhance the value of the university experience in accordance with increased fees, they also feel it is up to them to 'get as much out' of the experience as they can and maximise whatever opportunities HEIs provide." (Tomlinson 2014).

Data from his research suggested that there were differing levels of student as consumer, the *active consumer, the positioned consumer and the resistors.*

The active consumers expect to 'get things out of' the university experience,

"I do think that I'm paying for a service and I expect something out of it. And also I think I would definitely think that more so if I was paying the higher fee. So if you can't get through to your lecturers, or if they're not replying I do think that's rude because at the end of the day

you're paying for service. You wouldn't go to a supermarket and just pay for half a sandwich – do you know what I mean?" (Response to questionnaire in (Tomlinson 2014)).

This approach to education changes the very dynamic of education from a discursive one to a transactional one.

Positioned consumers tend to have a more measured approach with commentary such as, "Like you're paying for a service, but it's a two-way street... like if you haven't done any work for a seminar you can't engage ... they've provided the hour of teaching and if you haven't done any work it's your fault that you have got anything out of it. Like there's rights and responsibilities on both parts."

Finally, the 'resistors' to this transactional model of education, refute that they aren't consumers and that is not what education is about. "Consumption is passive". These types of students talked critically about their engagement with the subject they were learning and that there was a clear intellectual effort involved in their studies.

All students obviously want to do well and succeed, nobody want to but since the rise of student as consumer conversations around how do I get a 2:1 or 1st? are common place. The desire to reach a particular threshold, whilst favourable can prevent students from taking risks, experimenting or challenging their own practice.

Curriculum Development - (Animation as a case study?)

Institutions all have their own focus and agendas regarding curriculum development, all of which will give a course its own unique flavour or pedagogical approach to course delivery at

undergraduate level. The QAA benchmark for Art and Design 2017 articulates places emphases on employability, technical and specialist skillsets, group and teamwork as key attributes of undergraduate provision and learning.

As an external examiner on undergraduate and post graduate animation courses I have observed module frameworks determined at institutional mean that there can be several points of summative assessment, in the 1st 2nd and 3rd year of courses. This may be appropriate for non-creative courses but not necessarily, art & design-based studies where the need for research, development, iteration, production and time for reflection need to take place. The pressure on students can be quite significant, juggling multiple modules concurrently, jumping through numerous hoops to meet study tasks.

Many creative practices require teamwork or collaborative practice in order to maximise the full potential of a project. The animation industry requires teamwork. Pipelines and workflows are key to ensure that animation can be produced quickly, on budget and on time. A horizon scan of courses within the UK identifies that one of the key focusses of many undergraduate animation courses is the emphasis on developing technical and specialist skills within an animation pipeline.

 Ken Robinson suggests, "Creativity is not purely an individual performance. It arises out of our interaction with ideas and achievement of other people" (Robinson 2001). As individuals we engage with others, we share experiences relaying stories and information to each other to develop knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Specialisation, or rather exploring a specialist practice as part of a BA(Hons) Animation course allows students to develop a deeper understanding of an area of practice. Within the context of animation this could be a 2D animator, modelmaker, texture artist, VFX technician and many more besides. There are numerous examples of this master/apprentice approach to learning today, particularly in craft-based practices that work well, but there should be more than one approach. One could assert that this is a sensible approach to developing skills knowledge and understanding that will enable a graduate to gain employment upon completion of their studies. Sarah Kennedy raises the question, "Is this 'group work training' a short sighted solution for today's industry creatives and directors to solve an immediate skills shortage rather than a longer term solution for the durability of the British animation industry?"

Kennedy suggests that students need a broader experience and that, "This creative freedom gives students the chance to find their own style, and voice." (Kennedy 2016) This approach to find a style to develop an individual voice is certainly one approach that can work very well for a number of students. However, one could question that do all students joining animation courses today all want to auteur animators or filmmakers at this stage in their lives. As educators we need to accept that the nature of students (indeed not just animation) has changed, their hierarchy of needs has changed and a one size fits all, regardless of vocational training type course, or auteur filmmaker approach may not fulfil everybody's needs, a balance needs to be struck. Devising curricula that encourages group work, encourages sharing of ideas, develops and reinforces communication skills, negotiation skills, creative compromise and the space to express oneself is a challenge.

Government drivers/Professional Bodies suggesting Skillset/Screenskills/UK Animation Alliance/Nesta

As a result of the increase in student numbers, the changing nature of student cohorts at university and government drivers to prepare students for the 21st century industries courses are being pressured into changing their curriculum, many are choosing to have a very technical focus with many becoming obsessed with teaching very specific pieces of software in depth, working through tutorials and such like. This is training. The issue with this approach is it does not teach how to apply this knowledge to different situations and be creative with the software. Risk taking and experimentation are required to push the boundaries of what can be done (In addition to being able to tell a good story). However, there are those within the industry that are openly (quite rightly in some instances) asserting that students aren't properly equipped to work within industry and that more must be done to train students in the right software. Training involves teaching the individual to become competent and skilled at an individual task or set of processes. Education is a journey and exploration of a subject or specialist area to become informed and have a deep understanding of a practice or area of specialist study. Training is a part of that engagement, not the whole. Every company I have encountered has different workflows, uses different software, in many instances bespoke or custom plugins and different company ethos. Animation courses simply cannot cater for everyone and the demands from industry and

organisations such as Skillset and Nesta - (Next Gen Report (2013)) are, at times at odds with academia. Key industry players such as Tom Box (Blue Zoo) have said that Higher Education is not doing enough to 'train' students to the level required. Despite this Box (2018) asserts, "You simply cannot train someone to have five or ten years of production experience." It begs the question, are industries expectations of undergraduates simply too high? How are HE providers supposed to *educate* and *train* in three years if industry itself says it can take much longer than three years?

Companies such as Animation Apprentice, Animation Mentor, Escape Studios and more recently Animation Dojo are setting up training courses are taking pedagogically different approaches to the teaching taking place on animation degree. The training courses provided may make up the immediate shortfall in skills, but will they support the animation industry long term, that remains to be seen. Universities are teaching people to be creative individuals who can develop ideas, solve problems, be creative and apply their skills to a wide range of applications.

What can we do about the current problem?

Lobby for change at a government level to increase the access to creative arts through teaching STEAM not STEM. The UK animation industry is under threat due to governments outright failure to value the importance of the creative arts.

It's UK universities responsibility to acknowledge the fact that the UK education has changed considerably, and we have to also adjust to it. We need to acknowledge that the nature of students has and continues to change as the full impact of changes to the National Curriculum fully assert themselves upon Higher Education. We need to encourage play and experimentation that is free from assessment and risk of failure, especially during the 1st year of an undergraduate course . We can do this through inductions, extra-curricular activities, not just showing shining examples of slick animation, but testing, iterative development and showing that others also make mistakes.

We need to look at curriculum models on our courses that reduce assessment fatigue

and introduce more time for making, crafting and reflection. (Good for students and staff!)

We need to look at assessment models, one size does not fit all, especially in large multi-faculty universities, where the same model is applied across all disciplines. Remove technical specificity of learning outcomes and adopting more thematic outcomes the celebrate and encourage play, critical thinking and reflective practice.

We and industry need to sit down and engage in debate to discuss the differences between education and training and the pressures faced on both sides to ensure that between us we can equip students to have a *sustainable* and productive career.

Conclusion

We need action to take action to ensure that Higher Education is appropriate, maintains its standards and doesn't just become a training ground. It needs to maintain its stance on developing students who can be critical, question and engage fully with the academic and creative and technical aspects of our discipline. Animation courses need to equip graduates with the ability to think and question for themselves, to be reflective, to be adaptable and to be lifelong learners and not just equipped with tools and skillsets for today.

At undergraduate level students have 3 years to develop new knowledge and *begin* to develop mastery of a subject upon graduation. However, it is the beginning of a much longer journey not the end of one.

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