

Editorial

Art and Design as Agent for Change

iJADE 2017 Conference Issue

Jeff Adams

The iJADE conference in November 2017 took place in the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin. The conference comprised a wide range of presentations delivered by fellow researchers, art educators and colleagues from across the world. The conference theme chosen was 'Art and design as agent for change', since social justice has become a growing focus for many educators and practitioners in the visual arts, and the idea of art and design education having agency in the process of social change has gained traction. The 2017 conference addressed this topic from a variety of angles, such as: the impact of new media on education; agency and activism in young people; collaborative practices; curricular reform; transformative pedagogies; widening participation, and critical spaces for learning. All of the papers in this issue are written by delegates from the conference who, by popular demand, were invited to write up their presentations for publication in the journal.

Recently I reviewed Dennis Atkinson's latest book on art education and pedagogy, in which he discusses his idea of 'disobedience' (2018). It seems to me that this is an important practice that helps us to further our thinking in terms of learning and teaching. If, as Atkinson claims, learning ('real' learning, as he expresses it) is dependent on unknowing, this necessitates acts of learning which take on the appearance and identity of 'disobedience', since they do not conform to any preconceived notion of anticipated action or outcome. This singular moment of disjuncture when, through practice, the student creates, crafts or performs an event or artefact which was neither predicted nor expected by any of the participants, including the teacher, then, in Atkinson's words, the 'adventure of pedagogy' has truly begun.

As most artists know, the realm of art and design education is especially amenable to these concepts of unknowing and creative adventure. It is therefore also a domain where practitioners, be they learners or teachers, can work alongside each other in these moments of real learning, employing dynamic pedagogical support strategies.

If this scenario has credence, then it would seem to me that it dovetails well with the idea of social change brought about by the conjunction of art and education.

Social change as a concept is inextricably linked with profound social struggles such as the civil rights movement in the USA, anti-apartheid in South Africa, equal rights and equal pay for women, or the class struggles to overcome capitalist exploitation and oppression. The arts played a well-documented part in each of the struggles, but equally in the realm of arts education there have been important shifts in our understanding of the nature and function of creative education (e.g. Adams 2013), the ways in which it might foster wider social changes. In other words, ways of thinking and doing in pedagogical practices that were hitherto considered inappropriate or taboo may, with the art practitioner and under the attentive stewardship of a practitioner teacher, enable intellectual and practical realisations that nurture creative learning and also, crucially, open up the potential for change. Less a case of 'breaking the mould', and more a case of making new moulds; or, to push the analogy further, an endless series of new frameworks for ways of thinking and doing that enable things to happen differently.

As radical education theorists such as Giroux (2014) and Gielen (2017) have pointed out, the social fabric of community, the means for solidarity, is under constant threat from neoliberal individualism, most commonly manifest in the ubiquity of performativity and competition. The task for educational practitioners is as much to resist these pressures as it is to produce space for the progressive ideas of 'real' learning. This is no mean feat, given the irrevocable pressure to conform and the plethora of 'off-the-shelf' teaching and learning strategies that inevitably lead to predictable and compliant outcomes. The authority of compliance is now an educational behemoth to which contemporary art practices are fundamentally ill suited. Art in this context is seen as a threat to the existing order – which it is. Change, social or otherwise, imbued in artefacts and creative events in the classroom offer a powerful and significant alternative to these prevailing orthodoxies, where teachers and students work in parallel, in a creative pedagogical performance in which the choreography can only be post- rather than pre- determined.

Social change necessitates agency, which can be mobilised only in the free space of the imagination. It is incumbent upon teachers to protect and maintain this powerful but vulnerable liberty in our students in order that they can create unfettered, and in turn conjure new ways of making, and with it better ways of living and being together.

References

- Adams, J. (2013) The artful dodger: Creative resistance to neo-liberalism in education, *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 35, No.4, pp. 242-255.
- Atkinson D. (2018) *Art, Disobedience and Ethics: The Adventure of Pedagogy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gielen, P. (2017) Artistic constitutions of the civil domain: On art, education and democracy. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 134–140.
- Giroux, H. (2014) *Neoliberalism's War on Democracy* (online). Available at: <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/23306-neoliberalisms-war-on-democracy> (accessed 2 October 2018).