

EFS at Plymouth College of Art

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Education For Sustainability can inhabit a spectrum which moves from (and should progressively move from) education *about* sustainability, in which students are informed about and engaged in learning the structures underpinning sustainability (social and ecological), towards education *for* sustainability, in which students are prepared holistically for a sustainable future. EFS in many educational institutions (including our own) is primarily engaged at the former end of the spectrum. There are many reasons for this.

Most obviously, people's general experience of debates or initiatives around sustainability usually centres around *stuff* – the recycling we put out for collection; the organic food we do or don't select; the decisions we make on what car or what dishwasher to buy. The sustainability we know about is the sustainability we can see. In a holistic sense this fits in with the predominance of visual culture theory taught in art and design departments and institutions. We know things because we see them, in a practical and in a theoretical sense. Forgive me if I invoke John Berger¹ and say that there are other ways of seeing sustainability; but often we stop at the obvious.

And not only because we can't be bothered or lack the insight to see beyond the simple actions we can take. Looking any deeper into sustainability can give one a sense of staring into a deep pit. You begin to be afraid. In part we stick with knowledge of what we can do ourselves because so much of what we discover about what needs to happen in order for us to live sustainably on the earth is beyond our control, out of our sphere of influence, subject to forces that may seem more motivated by greed, say, than ethics or even survival. We feel powerless; or perhaps we begin to see that it is

¹ Berger, John (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: [British Broadcasting Corporation](#) and [Penguin Books](#)

not necessarily the actions we undertake but the thinking, which underpins the actions, which is the root of the problem. And tackling the way we think means not just changing the way we consume, but our entire way of being in the world; our entire cultural experience. To us, to educators, as consumers, critics and analysts of cultural influences, the realisation that everything is up for change can be profoundly disorienting and disturbing.

Take, for example, the very obvious point that the current system of grading students presupposes and extends competition rather than cooperation and sharing. For the past twenty years or so, and more recently popularised by books such as Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*,² the dominant theory has been that it is natural for humans to compete; but more recent research stresses rather the importance of social networks, interpersonal attachments, and coalitions. This shows that in fact, humans are not merely competitive hunter-gatherers but are at least as predisposed to cooperate. As Mother Teresa said, "There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread." Implementing change based on this research might result in an atmosphere that would mean some students at least could be much more comfortable, achieve better, and behave better, in a cooperative arena. If we were to truly make our institutions sustainable we might have to consider a move away from league tables and bell-shaped assessment graphs, towards greater emphasis on cooperative learning. However much we might be convinced of the desirability of this way of teaching and learning – and we accept that not all of us are – we can't implement it because it doesn't so much fall foul of government policy as outside of its radar entirely. Fittingly, we only count results we can see represented in a graph or spreadsheet, and certainly not those, which occur five to ten years after students have left the institution. A more holistic approach is a long way off.

Having said this, education about sustainability is better than nothing, and a positive first step towards EFS. At Plymouth College of Art, a NALN-funded research initiative based within the Applied

² Dawkins, Richard (1976) *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: OUP

Arts discipline has resulted in a cross- (and multi-) disciplinary curricular approach towards EFS based within the Critical, Contextual and Historical Studies department. The project title was “Ideological Constructs - Past Visions/Future Possibilities: Evaluating the Minority Specialist Subjects in the Context of Emerging Global Sustainability and Environmental Agendas”. The principal aims of this research were two-fold:

- to understand the ways in which the Applied Arts, as Minority Specialist Subjects, are being affected by, and/or are responding to, concerns represented by the emerging sustainability and environmental movements

- to explore whether the agendas developing around sustainability and environmental issues offer opportunities for the applied arts to (re) formulate new practices, identities, positions and markets, in ways that might reconnect them to contemporary social, cultural and economic imperatives, i.e. recover an ideological purpose. So the key question for the research was whether emerging environmental and sustainability issues provided ground for a public re-engagement with applied arts practice. A secondary objective was to ascertain the potential for reframing aspects of applied arts practice; to ascertain the potential for reframing aspects of applied arts education.

Even during the active research phase of the project it became apparent that there was a groundswell of interest in this area from staff and students. Alongside my position as research associate, I was also employed at the same institution as a lecturer in Critical, Contextual and Historical Studies. This is a department, which works across the disciplines in the college, and it seemed the ideal fit for inclusion into the curriculum of the ideas and concepts in the research. We decided to see how we could combine the two.

Perhaps a little bit on our operating context would help:

We have 15 members of staff, most of who hold permanent proportional (salaried p/t) posts from 0.2-0.7 (1 member of staff is f/t teaching 828 contact hours across FE and HE).

In regards to our HE provision;

9 staff support FD 1 – practice in context (applied arts, film, fashion, games, graphics, illustration, photography, spatial design and fine art)

9 staff contribute to the FD 2 module – practice in context 2 (mixed disciplinary groups – themed lectures)

13 supervisors work across our BA programmes – supervisors are allocated according to their research interests and subject specific knowledge – but they are not programme/discipline specific.

This cross-disciplinary approach is working very well and offers a number of opportunities.

The Critical, Contextual and Historical Studies staff, teach across all of the Foundation Degrees (including level 0) and BA (Hons) degrees and contribute to the new MA Entrepreneurship in Creative Practice.

It is worth remembering that as a specialist college of art and design we offer a curriculum from FE to Post-grad (14-19 – MA) in practical/vocational arts education and this in itself provides an interesting set of challenges.

Some staff members may also teach on FE courses and have full teaching commitments, making the opportunity to engage in research challenging. The way we have recently re-designed our CCHS curriculum on HE, has enabled us to create space for research that feeds directly into the curriculum and is therefore supported and encouraged by the Research Sub-committee and the Senior Management Team.

We feel we have come a long way. Much of what we've developed in relation to EFS in Critical, Contextual and Historical Studies has happened over the past 2 years and has largely built upon the hard work, interests and experience of staff and the curriculum changes that we have largely been responsible for shaping.

We have moved a long way from the art history lecture (an hour a week), which seemed to bear little relevance to the students practice; it was somehow removed, cold, distant.

In 2006/7 the college had a review of provision, had a big re-structure, validated all of its HE provision through the OUVS and had a massive shakeup – part of that shakeup resulted in dispensing with

subject areas and the critical, contextual and historical modules became less discipline specific towards a cross-disciplinary / interdisciplinary field.

This change allowed us to re-think our role and purpose and to really take hold of the subject to ensure that what we covered in our curriculum offered a rich, interesting and relevant experience for students (and staff/researchers)

We brought groups together, who had previously been divided by subject area, and we began to introduce subjects/topics and themes from a broader spectrum – firstly to shake them up a bit, to get them to think outside of their box, but also to consider more fully their practice and the various contexts within which their practices operate – placing less emphasis on the ‘dead grey men’ approach to the histories and focused much more on processes, materials, economic considerations, production and distribution and contemporary concerns – such as the economic or technical future of their discipline and the impact of their practice on the environment.

The Academic Leader of CCHS adopted the model of large delivery of core material, break-out seminars, small group and 1-1 tutorials that had been used effectively in media and photography and applied it to the whole provision (Applied Arts, Animation, Fashion, Fine Art, Film, Photography, Spatial Design, Design for Games, Graphic Design and Illustration and Print).

As a team we unpacked and re-thought the content and approach.

This strengthening and re-positioning (new modules and learning outcomes) allowed us to build upon our earlier successes and address academic challenges, to reinvigorate our delivery of, and approach to the subject.

What has been challenging but extremely rewarding is to take the best ideas that were located in subject-specific silos, and some of the emerging issues and fields of research and interest of a new staff team, to really move things in the CCHS department.

We have developed an approach, which introduces ALL level 4 (FD1) students to a range of historical and contemporary discourses (large-scale lecture delivery with discipline specific seminars to embed the topics – to encourage students to relate theory to practice. **all students are presented with some sustainability lectures;**

As the programme progresses level 5 students (FD2) engage in a number of core/key lectures (cross-disciplinary) exploring areas of shared concern, that cut across the boundaries of discipline, in terms of their practice (social, ethical, economic aspects) after these core lectures, students then sign up for a particular themed lecture series in which sustainability is one of the areas they may choose to study in more depth. Students come from a broad range of disciplines and throughout the module relate sustainability to their discipline and their wider life. Uptake has doubled from the first to the second year of offering the option. We are convinced that a cross-curricular and culturally-aware approach is an important element in EFS – students are encouraged to explore deeply the issues leading to unsustainable practice in order to better understand and create effective alternatives. Students work across disciplines but within a subject area. I could see the benefits of this mixed-discipline approach, shared dialogue between students and staff.

It has been extremely inspiring to work with developing artists as they take on the challenges offered by grappling with sustainability issues. Some of the work we have recently assessed includes an animation student discussing the depiction of Gaia Theory in the movie Avatar; a film arts student exploring the treatment of trophic cascades in film; an applied arts student exploring the legacy of William Morris with regard to maker collectives as an appropriate structure for post peak oil working; another applied arts student looking at the social justice issue involved in the use of craftspeople in fine art works; and a graphic design student's examination of the ways in which packaging could be made more sustainable, or at least ecologically less damaging. To each of these subjects these new artists have brought not only their logical minds and approaches to reading, writing, and academic work in general, but also their particular strength as artists. Acts of creation are, perhaps surprisingly, very much about practical problem solving. In the future we will need many different creative approaches to solving sustainability problems; artists are used to thinking in ways outside of the norm (or at least they should be when they graduate, or we haven't done our work well). The recent alignment of art and science seems to be viewed by many as a way for scientists to broadcast their work in an accessible fashion, but arguably artists can have a particular way of viewing the world, which is adaptable, reflective, and resilient. In other words, not just the artist's work, but also the

artistic mind, is useful in collaboration and in problem solving. Even more reason to circumvent the “art for art’s sake” mentality for a more critical and culturally aware approach.

With proposed carbon budgets for educational institutions making areas like the applied arts feel defensive about their energy intensive practices, it may also be important to recognise that these materially-aware subjects are the kind of skills-based subjects that may well become more important in a post-peak oil future. EFS should continue to be a culturally aware, cross-disciplinary concern; but some art subjects have immediate potential for widening participation in less academic forms. Eventually EFS in academic institutions would ideally cover a range from vocational training to higher degrees. This is what is called ‘the great re-skilling’ amongst the transition movement and others. Although the new coalition government has immediate plans to implement a ‘Freedom’ or ‘Great Repeal’ Bill, which states explicitly that man made climate change is only a hypothesis and not an established fact, my own belief is that the dual challenges of peak oil and climate change are certain to impact our lives in general and our educational institutions specifically, within our working lifetimes. A broader base of ways of teaching, assessment and access to facilities would be more economically resilient as well as more socially robust in times of change. Part of the pedagogical implications of EFS is to anticipate and facilitate these changes.

We make no claims to best practice in the area of EFS; we are keenly aware that we are only inching towards sustainability in its widest or perhaps truest sense. But it’s in the spirit of cooperation and sharing that we talk about our own journey and experiences with you today, and we are very interested in hearing your own thoughts and experiences.