



Resource Review

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Review:

This volume arose as an accompaniment to the 3rd European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA) Teachers' Academy, held at the University of Brighton July 12–14 2007. ELIA is an independent network of around 360 arts education institutions from 47 countries covering the subject areas of dance, design, theatre, fine art, music, media arts and architecture. The book collects 40 short 'trigger' papers and their associated bibliographies into 9 'loosely themed' Strands, each of which are introduced by contextual essays, and it concludes with a summary description of the Workshops and Showcases which also took place during the Academy. Whilst the majority of papers come from academics based in the UK, there are several significant contributions from colleagues across Europe, the Americas and Australasia, which offer fresh opportunities to reflect upon issues of teaching, learning and research across a broad range of creative disciplines and different global perspectives.

The papers oscillate between optimism and pessimism about the possibilities for creative education within the broader H.E context, from those who rail wholeheartedly against the current status quo, to those who seek modest modifications to existing practice. It was stimulating to see evidence of the debates taking place within institutions, as when papers from two Glasgow School of Art academics offer entirely opposite points of view: Stephen Felmington discusses a 'systems approach' to creativity that recognises the 'unstable pedagogy' of art and

design education, and argues against the use of learning outcomes, whilst Jo Petty insists learning outcomes are an invaluable aid for students even within highly conceptual modules/projects. Approaches vary from the philosophical, as exemplified by John Danvers' (University of Plymouth) argument against the very idea of quantitative assessment, to the almost entirely pragmatic, as in Elizabeth Gaston's consideration of how little teaching is 'too little' when her programme was faced with demands from University managers to reduce staff contact hours. The topics reflect the wide continuum of debates within contemporary Higher Education, and are a frank recognition of the practical and theoretical issues faced by the sector.

The book makes very clear the sheer diversity of teaching practices and facilities across the sector and within disciplines, such that one might reflect anew upon one's own strategies and environment. (It was salutary to discover that methods one had long imagined consigned to the pedagogic scrapheap still persist: a description of the 'Review' on an architecture course in which a 'Wall' of tutors stood at the front to make their critique left me shivering with horror!) And whilst some colleagues described their purpose built creative environments, where it seemed little expense had been spared (InQbate, Brighton), others spoke of the realities of clearing rubbish from rooms before teaching began, or finding themselves timetabled to teach entrepreneurship last thing on a Friday afternoon when all concerned were much more concerned with the approaching weekend than design enterprise! Whilst the well-resourced, innovative environments were suggestive, the willingness to speak honestly about the grimmer realities of H.E. was refreshing, not least because proposals were made for actual solutions and modifications.

The volume contains a number of case studies referring to particular pedagogic projects. Some of these were especially useful because they provided a sound factual narrative of the process as well as a critical review of its effects. Examples include the contribution from Bernard J. Canniffe (Maryland Institute of Art) on how an alternative approach to teaching Graphic Design made a difference to the East Baltimore area in which the programme is taught, and the paper from David MacWilliam and Renee Van Halm (Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design) exploring the successful development of online teaching for studio courses. Dina Zoe Belluigi (Rhodes University, South Africa) presents the findings of a project to improve the construction and design of feedback questionnaires, which suggests that the design/visual weighting of elements significantly sets the tone for evaluations and can enable teachers and students to be truly reflective. However, some other case studies suffered from being reported upon too early, being mere descriptions of what was about to happen, which left one yearning to know how things turned out and what conclusions might be drawn for future practice.

The relationship of the educational institution to subsequent professional practice is a recurrent theme throughout the book, and several contributors reflect upon the difficulties and possibilities for keeping professional knowledge up to date and relevant. Diverse potential strategies are proposed, from using students themselves as primary researchers, to more effective use of projects/placements to gather contemporary knowledge and finally to defending the continuing role of the academic as a practitioner in their field. Several papers in the book offer challenges to what may have become accepted academic wisdom. For instance there is a useful discussion about the relative values of placements and projects, which recognises the personal and economic difficulties faced by students undertaking placement, and argues that a well-run project can offer equal benefit to the (conventionally superior) professional placement. An entirely different issue is tackled by Oona Rankin (Royal College of Art) and Howard Riley (Swansea Institute of Higher Education), who consider if there may be previously unrecognised links between dyslexia, visual and spatial sensibility and drawing ability.

The brevity of the papers makes for a somewhat staccato reading experience, and the decision to preface many papers by their abstract, a list of questions addressed, and the key words associated with the paper, followed by an introductory paragraph, (which naturally tends to recapitulate all of the above) adds to a certain feeling of repetition. Thus, the papers are most useful as a resource to which one might refer, using the keywording, etc. as a form of index to determine one's attention, rather than a volume one would choose to read right through (as I did for this review!) The bibliographical references are certainly very helpful as starting points for one's own further reading and research. The sense of repetition is reinforced a little because the acknowledged looseness of the organising themes results in some papers reprising ideas explored earlier in the volume. A further frustration, for those encountering this collection subsequent to the actual Academy, is that there is no attempt to report upon the debate triggered by the papers or the plenary discussion, something I would have found informative, and neither is there anything more than the briefest summary of the presentations from distinguished invited speakers such as Professor Paul Greenhalgh, Wayne Hemingway, Karen Blincoe or Dr Dragan Klaić, all of which would have set the papers into their broader philosophical context. That said, this book has such a variety of material that the majority of readers working within the creative H.E. sector will find something new and useful to develop within their own pedagogic practice, and the diversity of disciplinary perspectives represented will enable most of us to see our own particular issues afresh.