

## Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

### Editorial

**David White, Head of Digital Learning, Teaching and Learning Exchange**

Much has taken place since the writing and production of the last issue of *Spark*. An unease about the near future has been realised as UAL attempts to orientate to Brexit and the rise of what is generously referred to as 'Populism'. There are new concerns for our communities of students and scholars, all of which are inflected by complexity and uncertainty. Creative Teaching and Learning, as both a research field and a set of practices, must continue to critically evaluate its role as central to a large institution that actively questions and hopefully holds to account dominant modes of power. While the papers and evaluations in this issue of *Spark* do not directly speak to current politics, they do clearly reveal that an engaged criticality is inherent to art and design pedagogy. This is a form of teaching that accepts that contemporary complexity must not be sifted into convenient taxonomies, but should be approached in ways which reach beyond institutional boundaries, expanding our definition of the disciplines.

An excellent example of this engaged critical approach to teaching is presented by the article on 'Pictorial Construction' by Charlie Abbott, associate lecturer on the BA (Hons) in Graphic Design at Camberwell College of Arts. His paper discusses a workshop in which students respond to sustainability issues through the development of 'Ideograms'. Abbott builds upon Davies' view of design, 'which is about living in the world as a human being which requires a recognition of socio/political contexts which integrate with design' (2002). Here we see an approach to teaching design as a discipline that is non-linear – employing the distinctly visual language of Ideograms – and responds to complex issues that by their nature cannot be 'fixed' and must be understood and negotiated collectively.

Taking us beyond the boundaries of the institution, Judy Willcocks reports on the 'Creative Solutions' adopted by a fascinating project in 'social prescribing' – 'a mechanism for linking patients with non-medical sources of support within the community' (CentreForum, 2014, p.6). Her paper discusses workshop sessions developed by the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection, which used object-based learning to improve the wellbeing of older audiences. Such forms of teaching that go beyond text, accept our embodiment within and engagement with the physical environment, a relationship also explored through the performative aspects of drawing in the event review by John Miers from Central Saint Martins. His detailed account of the *Markings: Illustration and Performance Festival* introduces the notion of abductive reasoning – 'the perception of [the] possible interconnectedness of thoughts' (Houser, Roberts and Evra, 1997, p.473). As with Charlie Abbott and Judy Willcocks, the teaching connects to contexts and concerns which stretch traditional assumptions about the role of the academy, emphasising the importance of situated forms of understanding – 'the social needs to be understood as an embodied field: society is felt, enjoyed and suffered, as well as rationally thought.' (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.xvi, quoted in Nelson, 2006, p.110).

Embodying the practices and thinking suffused in teaching and learning is deftly illustrated by Ollie Cartlidge in his documentation and evaluation of the exhibition *Practices of Enquiry* (organised by the Teaching and Learning Exchange). Ollie, a recent LCC graduate, reviews this groundbreaking method of exhibiting pedagogic activity, in which the creative practices of teaching are reified and celebrated

in visual and physical forms. Teaching and learning are expressed via the language of the exhibition, making visible that which flows under the surface of the University. This process of visualising the invisible is likewise touched upon in 'Towards a Rhizomatic library', in which recent graduates Michel Erler and Carlotta Solari draw on the classic theoretical text *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Erler and Solari discuss their project, which amongst other interventions explicitly embodies flow in the form of students' movements around the library. Whilst students on the BA (Hons) in Interaction Design Arts at London College of Communication, they installed a network of coloured string in the library, to map student user browsing journeys. This and other methods, developed in collaboration with fellow students, allowed them to question the structure of the library and propose new ways of organising and engaging with knowledge.

Both of the aforementioned projects surface often hidden complexities that exist within the University, complexities which stem from an ideology of diversity in an institution that aspires to be an environment where questioning minds can flourish. However, the questioning and creative student is not necessarily well-versed in the traditions and techniques of academia and may understandably be anxious about what they have to offer as they develop their identities as creative practitioners. Caroline Searing and Mustafa Varcin from London College of Fashion consider the tentative nature of the student as an inexperienced scholar, to explore means of encouraging them to read sources beyond those directly 'handed out' by a course. In this article we are reminded of the need to scaffold students and reinforce an understanding of the research process or independent study at its most basic level. In this case Caroline and Mustafa promote a form of group enquiry and reporting that increases confidence and inculcates an understanding of the value of research in their students.

Student confidence is again a key factor that informs Hannah Breslin's discussion of identifying skills. From the perspective of a Student Employability Practitioner, Hannah discusses her re-design of a pre-existing workshop and questionnaire, which aimed to help students perceive and capture the skills that prospective employers might find of value. What is significant in her findings is how uncertain students are about what constitutes expertise. It is clear that uncertain futures and the erosion of traditional professional roles creates anxiety. While students might be uncertain about their futures, we as an institution are, at times, over confident about our understanding of the university. A neatly illustrated example of this is the false assumption that the BAME attainment gap is exacerbated by students from this group not taking advantage of university services such as academic support. At London College of Fashion, Lucy Panesar has analysed the data available to her to show that contrary to this assumption, BAME students have accessed academic support more than their non-BAME peers. This demonstrates that while quantitative data cannot provide any solutions in and of itself, it can point us towards areas that deserve further scrutiny and assumptions that need to be carefully reconsidered.

Within this issue, it is striking to observe that every single direct example of teaching and learning involves some form of group, collaborative or communal co-creation in its approach. This is significant at a time when the character of education is yet again being pushed towards 'teaching to the test' and individual attainment is micro-quantified. Despite this push, we know that our students will be entering environments where collaboration, agility and resilience are key. *Spark* as a journal acts as an important forum for dialogue across that dissonance, as the university continues to seek ways of negotiating the tensions between national agendas, student expectations and what we believe to be transformative education. My hope is that in uncertain times UAL will gain ever more confidence as an ambassador for values that acknowledge complexity and accept diversity.

## References

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## Biography

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