

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

Editorial

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We launched *Spark* as a new space for talking about learning and teaching in creative arts disciplines at the University of the Arts London. The university has a long history of pedagogic innovation, development and dissemination. This year we are holding our 10th annual cross-university Learning and Teaching Day and our colleges host regular learning and teaching conferences and events. We have well-established and successful curriculum funding schemes to support teachers to develop their practice and a track record of external pedagogic funding. We have also achieved outstanding recognition nationally for our teachers through the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. What additional contribution can *Spark* make to this longstanding culture of educational enquiry?

When we announced the call for contributions for the first issue in mid-2015 we talked about providing a developmental and supportive context for contributors new to publication. We argued *Spark* would help us to build confidence and expertise to undertake and share educational enquiry and enhancement work with a wider audience. As an online journal for creative arts educators, we were also able to solicit text and non-text submissions in a range of visual, audio and mixed formats that would challenge the accepted norms of text-based scholarship about learning and teaching. Yet it was only as we progressed through the processes of peer review and revision for the first issue that we became truly aware of the potential of the journal. We understood that *Spark* could function as more than just a place to disseminate enquiry into creative practice education or support our contributors to submit future work to other educational journals. The contributions we include in this first issue provide us with an opportunity to begin that debate about what counts as educational enquiry, how we create knowledge about learning and teaching and how we can communicate it to others in meaningful ways.

For many teachers, engaging in the enhancement of learning and teaching can mean encountering for the first time the sometimes uncomfortable discourses, methodologies and values of social sciences. Similarly, textual modes of communication are often a default for signalling research rigour and academic legitimisation in a text dominated sector. Increasingly, however, we are recognising that there are what Trowler (2013) describes as ‘lacunae in dominant research forms [...] especially around human experience and perception’ (p. 57) that art and design research methods can specifically address. We can use the ‘tools and design instruments of [our] subject (visual methods, online exchanges, video, textual outcomes, observation of studio practice, performance, exhibition and critique) to explore and develop the spaces and interactions of learning and teaching in creative contexts’ (Orr and McDougall, 2014, p.167).

If creative arts methodologies provide us with alternative, plausibly richer ways to investigate and understand our students' learning experiences, the outputs from that research can also pose new ways for us to respond. Art and design research demands an attention to its audience in ways that other research approaches often do not heed. Even in our own disciplines we can defer to what Melles and Lockheart (2012) have described as 'contested and "outmoded" forms of communication in academic contexts' rather than value the 'interplay between visual, verbal and artefactual' as the 'visible and material demonstration of research' (p. 352). Unlike the 'fixedness' of traditional journal or conference papers, creative research outputs can 'evoke emotional and aesthetic responses in their audience as well as cognitive ones' (Trowler, 2013, p. 64). We believe *Spark* has the potential not only to share but also to foster educational enquiry and dialogic modes of communication that are reflective of the wealth of our disciplines and practices.

The contributions in this first issue are diverse in their interests, origins, aims and methodologies but also engage with these same questions about how we can seek to understand what it means to teach and learn creative practices. In her work, Emily Huggard reports on an action research project to explore what student engagement means in the context of the London College of Fashion. Her conclusions suggest the need to challenge dominant behavioural and performative definitions of engagement and instead to critically reflect on what it means to learn in the discipline. She argues that in doing so we need to recognise 'communication as culture' and frame our students' understanding of the discipline as a 'rhetorical process'. Similarly in his case study, Tim Williams looks at how a digital university platform 'Workflow' can be used to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaborative working as part of a live industry project. As students and teachers slip between virtual and face-to-face spaces, he points to the experiences of students as they confront the disparities between the modes of textual, oral and visual communication across disciplines and across contexts.

While the first two contributors have used primarily text to present their work, Lipi Begum's photo essay on the Jamdani Project demonstrates an alternative way of exploring the experiences of transnational, cross-cultural and transgenerational learning. In describing the history of the muslin trade, she points to the way the fabric operated as a mode of communication between diverse cultures along the Silk Road. The interplay of text and image, of what is said and what is unsaid, of what is seen and what is unseen in the photographic account raise important questions for us as educational researchers about how we capture, interpret and communicate our students' learning experience.

The provocation piece by Kieron Devlin addresses head-on the dilemma we face in teaching our students to write in creative arts settings. He points to inconsistencies in the way we frame academic writing and the continued legitimisation of written outputs over making practices in ways that are often incomprehensible to our students. The suggestion, however, is not to withdraw from those contradictions but to use them as a way to regenerate creative arts writing practices.

As recent graduates from the London College of Communication, Rachel Littlewood and Sean Wyatt-Livesley interrogate one of the rites of passage for creative arts students – the degree show – undertaken during a summer residency with the student union (SUARTS). Their interviews with staff and their reflection on the different ways the degree show is conceptualised by stakeholders inform their recommendations to future students. Their conclusions frame the degree show as an interconnected, collaborative, interpersonal and multimodal learning experience.

Our final contribution is Emily Wood's review of the inaugural meeting of the Graphic Design Educators' Network. Wood highlights the key issue of how design subjects must develop the validity of their research outputs in the context of traditional academic subjects. In summarising the debate of network colleagues, she advocates for graphic design practitioners to recognise their practice as research and to explore how artefacts can sit alongside academic papers as legitimate research outputs.

As *Spark* evolves, we hope that the questions that have emerged in response to our first call will challenge us to find alternative ways to carry out and share enquiry into our pedagogic practice. This should also include how we introduce, connect and respond to contributions as editors. For example, how would this editorial be different if it was a concept map, a photographic record of editorial board meetings or indeed written in a different genre? As we launch the journal, therefore, we look forward to having our own disciplinary assumptions, practices and responses challenged, revised and reimaged. We invite you to participate in this debate by reflecting on your own emotional, aesthetic and cognitive responses to the contributions included here as well as contributing your own forms of knowledge-making to educational enquiry in creative arts contexts.

References

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