No Ground beneath our Feet: Arts Education in a Digital Age

Sean Buffington 16 May 2012

In arts education, something profound is happening. We who seek to educate and train the next generation of artists, designers, performers and media-makers—as my colleagues do at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia—are living through momentous changes that will force us to re-think what and how we teach.

The old metaphor for change of this sort is the tectonic shift: the change is massive and transformative, but its meaning becomes apparent only after new terrain has been created and fully inhabited and by then is seen as natural and inevitable. The changes we're experiencing now may be more akin to volcanic activity, in which firm ground is made liquid and there's nowhere to stand any longer. The terrain is remaking itself under our feet; the idea of terrain itself is rendered obsolete.

Those in the field of arts education can probably rehearse many of the changes and developments in artistic practice in recent years almost by rote. Artists and makers of all kinds have become increasingly interested in crossing disciplinary boundaries and making use of media

that might once have seemed foreign to them; new technologies have begun to enable new kinds of work that defy traditional categorization; cross-field and cross-national collaboration have become de rigueur; art and design and the principles of art and design have become pervasive; policymakers and business people have embraced, in name and occasionally in practice, the precepts and possibilities of the so-called creative economy.

These developments have already affected and will continue to affect how the arts are taught. But in referencing transformational changes in our field, I'm not referring to the multi/inter/trans-disciplinary revolution. Nor to the globalization of artistic discourse. Nor even to the impact of technology on artistic practice—though this hits closer to the mark.

Rather, I'm pointing to a shift that is occurring that is more subtle and, ultimately, more fundamentally destabilizing to institutions like mine—requiring a significantly different approach to education and training. The shift that interests, worries and perplexes me is what I might call the broad dissemination, the "massification" of the means of artistic production—or meaningful making—which has, in turn, resulted in a radical democratization of artistic expression.

It is possible now, at very low cost, to acquire extremely sophisticated creative tools and to utilize them without

much training. Indeed, the tools themselves can provide significant guidance to the novice user and even make creative decisions for him or her. And, of course, it goes almost without saying today that work produced in this way can be disseminated almost instantly to potentially enormous audiences—as free content, or packaged and sold as consumer products.

Now, one might question whether such cultural production ought properly to be called artistic. Artistry or design intelligence is manifested not in the fact of visual or aural or narrative production but in the judgment exercised in the use of new tools to produce work. Cheap paper and writing implements didn't make everyone an artist—though it surely did facilitate the emergence of sketching as a hobby. In the same way, the Polaroid and the instamatic might have made us all vacation photographers, but most of us never became Garry Winogrand or Lee Friedlander.

Diehard conceptualists might even go further, arguing that it's the idea even more (or in place of) its crafted form that makes art meaningful and sets it apart from mere expression or observation. And neither conceptual rigor nor craft are at risk from the technological changes we are witnessing. The ease of expression and communication enabled by new technologies will not entail the rapid or even ultimate obsolescence of art, of skilled making or of the educational system that prepares makers.

These changes, though—what I have called the radical democratization of the means of creative expression—are changing in turn what we mean by making and what counts as meaningful, crafted expression. To say so is not to judge the quality of expression. This is no lament about the rise of vulgarity and the lowering of standards brought about by the rise of, say, the internet. The democratization of the means of expression is a consequence of the technological revolution we're living through, and it will, inevitably, fundamentally alter how students—aspiring artists—think about craft, about art, and about making meaning by making things.

These phenomena will also alter in basic ways the professions for which institutions like mine seek to prepare students. After all, if technological tools become smart enough to make design decisions, then designers could increasingly become technicians, operators of machines instead of creative professionals. But the more profound—and less visible—impact will be on how students think about making.

Today, it is nearly impossible to say with any precision or certainty what this impact will be. After all, the first generation of so-called digital natives is only reaching college now; the environment they grew up in, the one that seemed so radical and new to many of us just a decade and a half ago, is already a punch-line and is soon to be an antiquated joke that doesn't even make sense anymore. Remember AOL? Remember plugging in to

access the 'net? Today's students don't.

The present generation of collegians is arriving at our doors having shot and edited video, manipulated photographs, recorded music or at least sampled and remixed someone else's music, designed their own animated avatars and even virtual environments, "painted" an image on their iPhone. The next generation will have designed and printed three-dimensional images, customized consumer products, perhaps rapid prototyped new products—I can't imagine what else.

They are not simply bombarded by images, consuming them in great gulps; they are making images, they are making the environments they inhabit, they are making meaningful connections among images, stories and mythologies and value systems. They are creative and creating.

But their notion of what it means to create may be much different. It's something one does to communicate with others, to participate in a social network, to entertain oneself. Making is mundane, not sacred. It's a component of everyday experience, woven tightly into the fabric of the daily. If this is so, then what is the task of arts educators? Is it to disabuse them of their misconceptions? Is it to inculcate in them an understanding of the "proper" way to make or the "proper" way to think about making? Is it to sort out the truly artistic from the great mass of creative chatterers—and to initiate them into the sacred

tradition?

Maybe. Yes. Maybe not.

Or maybe the task of the educator is to help them to develop judgment, to help them to see that making, which they do natively, almost unconsciously, is a way of learning, of knowing, of making arguments and observations, of affecting and transforming their environment. And perhaps that's not so very different from what we do now in arts education.

We do it now, though, in the context of a curriculum and institutional histories oriented toward specific professional training and preparation. We seek to develop in students the critical faculties needed to thrive in clearly defined professions. But in the future, if indeed these changes come to pass, then we may have to re-think our purpose and objectives. We may have to re-imagine our curricula, recast the BFA as foundational—not professional—preparation.

In a media-saturated culture in which everyone is both maker and consumer of images, products and meaningful media experiences, and in which professional opportunities must be invented by the alert as much as pursued by the well- and deeply-trained—in such an environment, isn't the BFA the most appropriate general educational experience? If the MFA is the new MBA, then perhaps the BFA is the new BA.

Which in turn poses significant challenges for those of us who offer art and design instruction. We are very good at equipping students—students, that is, who come to us with a reasonably firm commitment to pursuing a career in art or design—with the skills and judgment necessary to succeed in artistic fields and creative professions that are still reasonably well-defined.

We are perhaps less good at educating them broadly, at equipping them to put their visual acuity and design sensibility and experience as makers in the service of a wide range of problems, challenges and opportunities. That would require a different curricular structure, derived from a very different sense of mission and aspiration. Indeed, it might require a very different conception of what it means to teach in an institution of higher education.

Teaching in such an institution might look a lot more like what we call now mentorship or advising. Rather than assume young people know what they want and that we know how to prepare them to do that thing they want, we would have to help them interrogate their interests and aspirations, to enable them to explore, and to work with them to create an educational experience that meets their needs.

Curricula would not be configured as linear, progressive pathways but as component structures. Components would not necessarily be defined as traditional, semester-

long courses but might include short workshops, online courses, intensive tutorials, etc. Students would pick and choose among components, arranging and rearranging them, according to what they need at a particular moment. Have a problem that requires that you use a particular software program? Go learn it in order to solve that problem or complete that project. Want to pursue a traditional illustration training program? Take multiple drawing and painting studios.

Linking all of this together would be not a traditional liberal arts curriculum but what one of our faculty members at the University of the Arts has called a liberal art curriculum—a curriculum focused on making as thinking, on design as problem-solving, on artistic expression as articulation and interrogation of ideas.

This begins to veer into utopianism—and vague utopianism at that! The brief and glib sketch above of an alternate future for arts education is fantastical in that it would be virtually impossible to administer and to offer to students in a cost-effective way. Moreover, at the present moment, most of our students would find it more perplexing than liberating.

But in sketching this alternative even as blithely and broadly as this, I am groping toward a different approach, trying to point to what is an urgent need for new models—models that speak to the changing and changed conditions affecting higher education. And more than that,

models that are adapted to conditions that are in constant flux, or at least rapidly changing, and to what is an emerging intelligence among young people that is more entrepreneurial, adaptable and alert than our curricula are designed to accommodate.

I am pointing us toward an educational structure that takes instability and unpredictability as its starting point, its fundamental assumption. If a university is not made up of stable, enduring structures arranged linearly or hierarchically—schools, departments, majors, minors—but is rather made up of components that can be used or deployed according to demand and need, then invention instead of convention becomes the governing institutional dynamic.

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