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Endangered Subjects, Crafting Sustainable Minds from Practice Based Education.

Environmental and sustainable issues are often modelled within concepts of ecosystems that describe a delicate balance of interconnected relationships. Closer inspection may reveal these relationships are rarely simplistic equations based on equal measures.

Systems are complex; some elements more vulnerable than others, relationships change and adapt in response to environmental conditions, or become endangered and die. In the twenty-first century sustainability requires a shift from short-term gratification based on profligate consumption, to a more globally connected and long-term view of resources.

This paper proposes sustainability as an attitude of mind. The way we think leads to the development of systems, which govern the relationships of constituents' elements and determines how these are used in the production of products. Education contributes to how we think and see the world. Education through craft based subjects 'contribute to a moral and social development as they possess an inherent lawfulness.' (Sigman, 2008, p.7)¹ 'People learn about themselves through the things they make, that material culture matters.' (Sennet, 2008, p.7)² Why then is there a raft of endangered crafts based courses in the United Kingdom (UK) at a time of expansion in higher education, in response to government aspirations for fifty percent of eighteen to thirty year olds to enter higher education by 2010?

This paper reports on the findings of a National Arts Learning Network (NALN) questionnaire into the experiences of Endangered Subjects at seven leading UK Universities. Course leaders provide fascinating insights into the contemporary educational context, where short-term measures of recruitment and direct employability threaten the existence of many craft subjects. These actions challenge the pedagogic principles of arts based education, without interrogating the long-term implications or consequences for what might remain.

This discussion is complicated as craft practitioners often 'think' through the process of their practice. A defence of the crafts and a shift to a sustainable mindset requires critical analysis of the haptic knowledge on which craft is based and translation into a rigorous discourse. These issues have implications for the broader discussion on how contemporary crafts respond to global environmental and sustainable agendas. Without hands on experience of crafts based subjects, contextualised within a global perspective, individuals may be ill-equipped to appreciate the subtle qualities that reflect the humanity of the crafts, or the analytical skills to translate this knowledge into sustainable industrial contexts.

This is not a Ludite call to arms (Quinn, 2008)³, or plea to subsidise the questionable economic reality of the 'hand made' in Western cultures. This paper proposes raising awareness of the benefits of creative craft based education to 'see' the world through more sustainable and ethical perspectives. Without thriving craft education, fully integrated into curriculum design, not only do we endanger the crafts as subjects, but also the ability to appreciate their value to stimulate the intellectual potential embedded in craft knowledge, to contribute to a more positive force for society.

¹ Sigman, 2008, Practically Minded, The Benefits and Mechanisms Associated with a Crafts-Based Curriculum, Ruskin Mill Hill Trust (RMHT)

² Sennett, R., 2008, The Craftsman, Allen Lane, London

³ Quinn, A. and Hearn, K., 2008, The Need to See: a reflection on the three-dimensional learning process in design, CLTAD 4th International Conference, Enhancing Curricula: using research and enquiry to inform student learning in the disciplines.