

# Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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**Elizabeth Gaston, Jane Scott [e.a.gaston@leeds.ac.uk; j.c.scott@leeds.ac.uk]  
School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK**

## THE EXPERIENTIAL EXPERIMENT

### Is design education sustainable in a changing university environment?

#### Abstract

This paper aims to question conventional methods of design education in an attempt to create a sustainable design programme suitable for the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century design community.

Most UK design institutions are now part of the university system. This has led to a change in focus on the requirements of teachers and of learners. Concurrent to this is the changing needs of the design industry that will employ design graduates.

We teach as we were taught. Our experience of being educators is coloured by the education we had and our professional practice. The role of higher education teacher however has developed in light of the changing position of design programmes within a university environment and the developing needs of the design community. Educators who in previous roles were required to teach and continue with professional practice are now also required to take part in academic research, placing strain on time available for teaching. The traditional model of experiential learning (Kolb 1984, reported in Fry, Ketteridge, Marshall 2003,p14) which historically provided the benchmark for teaching styles (Quality Assurances Agency, 2002-3) has been eroded by financial demands resulting in staff cuts and space reduction. This is exacerbated by an increase in student numbers.

This paper reports on research funded by the University of Leeds investigating a future strategy for sustainable teaching in design practice.

To aid the development of new processes in design education it was important to have a clear view of current practice. Analysis of our own current practice highlighted the lack of change in the concepts of design education we support despite the new demands placed upon us. This was followed by a wide review of design education in the UK focussing on textile design with specific reference to knitted fabric design where students are required to combine technical skills with a design aesthetic. It was also important to review wider academic fields including architecture, music and more diverse areas such as dentistry, all of which require students to develop theoretical and practice based skills.

Developments in the curriculum were implemented as a result analysis undertaken. These ranged from minor changes to delivery style to the incorporation of new learning technologies.

The reaction of staff and students to the curriculum developments was monitored through verbal and written feedback. A standard series of questions was answered relating to student satisfaction of teaching. These demonstrated that students responded similarly regardless of curriculum content or style of delivery when students had experience of one style of teaching indicating that they had no

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preconceptions or expectations in teaching styles. More interestingly it was the comments from staff that had experience of a wider variety of teaching methods that indicated dissatisfaction with change in the curriculum. Feed back highlighted a reaction against change indicating that teaching staff were only comfortable with tested methods of teaching similar to their own experience as students.

To ensure that we can provide a sustainable level of education for our design students we as teaching staff must be prepared to embrace change and experiment with the experiential.

## References

Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, *A Handbook For Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Enhancing Academic Practice*. Kogan Page, London, 2003

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education *Benchmarking statement on Art and Design*, QAA, London, 2002