# Towards a Radical Pedagogy: Provisional Notes on Learning and Teaching in Art & Design
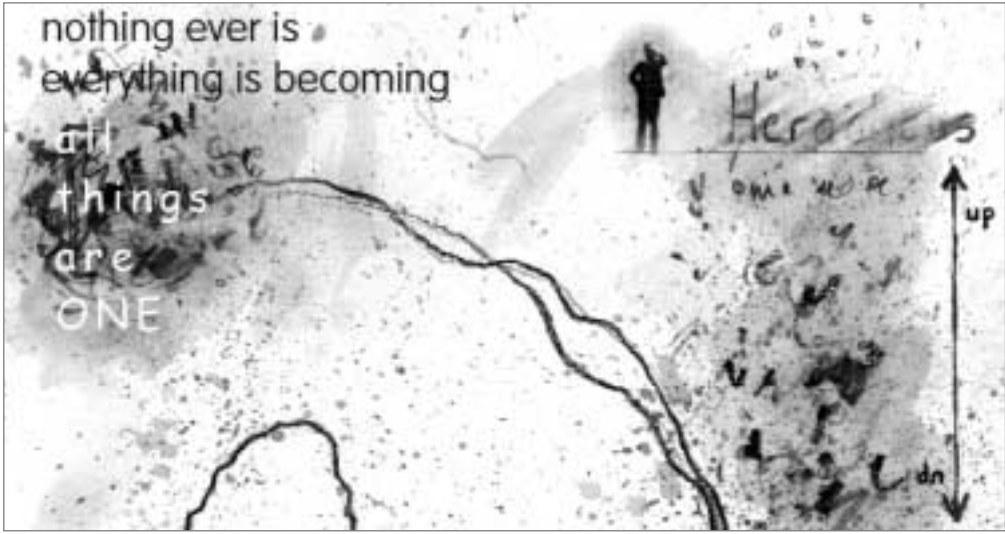
John Danvers

Abstract

This paper presents a personal perspective on some of the ideas and issues that currently surround learning and teaching in art and design within higher education. It aims to stimulate debate and to raise questions about the direction in which an increasingly monolithic educational culture is moving. It identifies a number of beliefs and values that the author considers to be particularly important to the development of a radical pedagogy and argues that the sector needs to counter the drift towards a technocratic and overly deterministic approach to education. While being intentionally wide-ranging and polemical the paper seeks to bring together a number of disparate ideas into a useful and coherent interaction. The continuing relevance of education as an emancipatory and transformative project is affirmed, while certain features of modernism inscribed into current educational practices are questioned (for instance, exclusivity, subjectivism and absolutism). Changes in the ways in which knowledge is viewed are discussed in relation to assessment, learning, research and the construction of the 'self'. A re-orientation of learning and teaching is suggested around a process-based pedagogy that places particular emphasis on indeterminacy, pluralism, revisibility and dialogue.
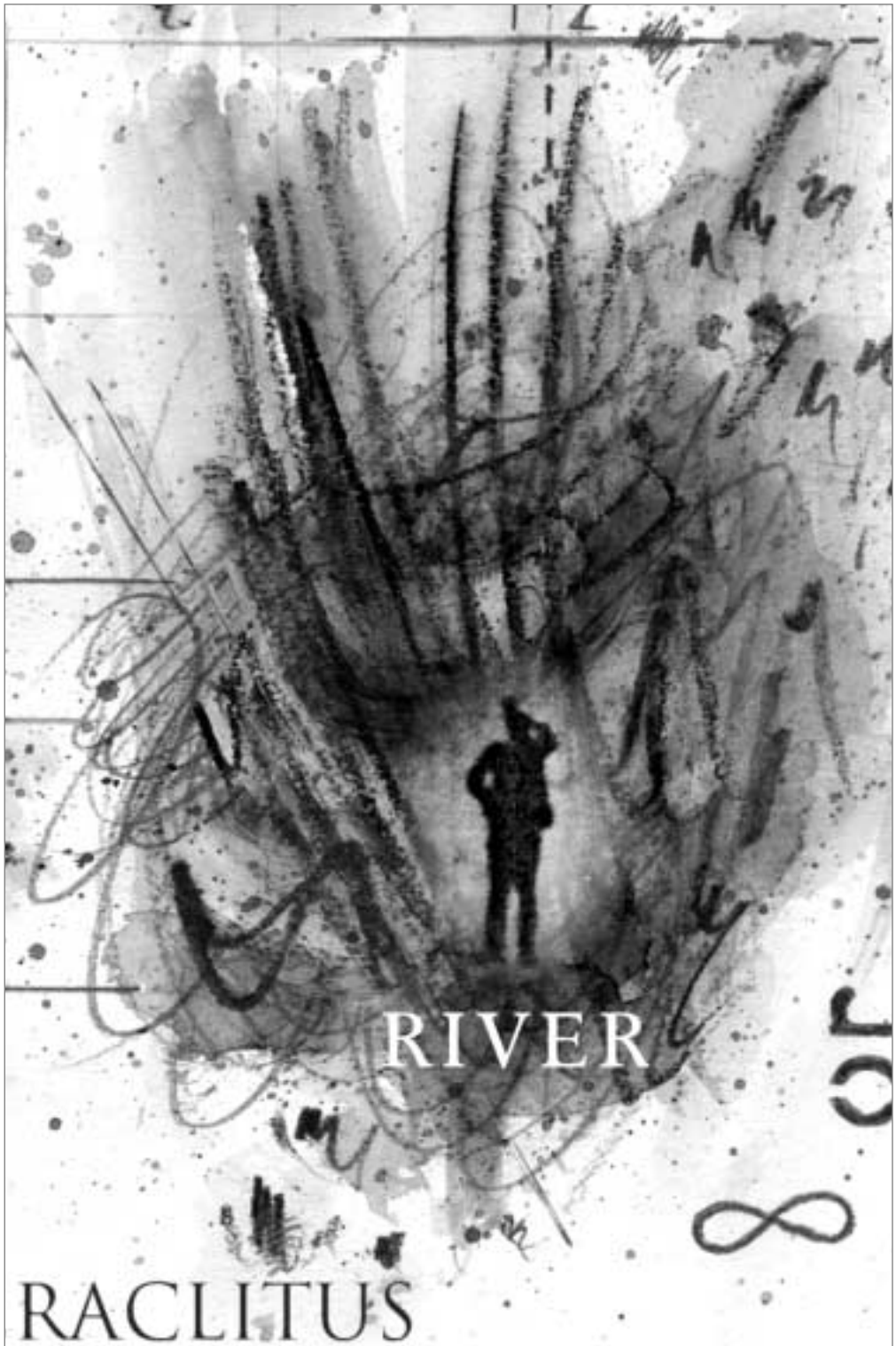
Opposite & Above:

Figures 1, 2 & 3 *According to Heraclitus*, from *The Heraclitus Pages*, a work in progress by John Danvers. A4 digital print in book format. The content and construction of this and other recent works relate to many of the ideas touched on in the paper.

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Introduction

The following notes are intended to stimulate debate about learning and teaching within the art and design higher education sector, and to promote a wider understanding of some of the distinctive features of practice-based art and design education. As well as raising a number of issues that I consider to be important at a time when universities seem increasingly to act as agents of government – Her Majesty's Suppliers of Skilled Labour! I also want to put forward a few suggestions for the development of a radical pedagogy grounded in the distinctive beliefs and values of art and design subjects. My comments deal with interrelated topics, each of which can be seen as arising from a consideration of, and concern about, the increasing centralisation of higher education – a tendency towards ever-greater uniformity and standardisation of educational values, curriculum content, and teaching and learning methods.

Expressed in a benign language of 'accountability', 'student-centredness' and 'quality-enhancement' numerous initiatives are being implemented which can be viewed as disempowering students, staff and their communities of learning. Benchmarking, level descriptors, KGAS, quality thresholds, etc. can be seen as symptomatic of a situation in which students, academics and institutions are distrusted, and in which diversity and difference are suspect – 'problems' to be 'ironed out'. These processes of centralisation and disempowerment and the accompanying suspiciousness towards diversity and divergence don't figure prominently in the publications of government or in mission statements from institutions. Indeed they seem at odds with what government and institutions say they are aiming to achieve.

It seems to me that we have reached a point at which some of these initiatives need to be challenged and scrutinised, not necessarily to stop them per se, but rather to restore a balance to our thinking about education and to encourage an academic climate in which profoundly different positions, practices and values can be voiced and realised. The current dominance of a reductive, deterministic and instrumentalist view of education (as evidenced in much government policy, QAA operations, and some SEDA and staff development approaches) impoverishes the experiences of teaching and learning, and stifles critical debate and creative enquiry.

Teaching and learning in art and design education – some characteristics, ideas and issues

Listed below are a number of characteristics, ideas and issues that I believe are, or should be, central to art and design programmes. We tend to take many of them for granted, as self-evident features of our academic landscape. In fact, for many outside our subjects and disciplines, these features may be very unusual, somewhat controversial and probably open to misunderstanding. Perhaps because they are not considered to be central to many other fields of education, and because we have not been very vocal in promoting or even identifying them, they may well not appear in lists of generic qualities or values. This may lead to the marginalisation of art and design education at a time when our collective pedagogic thinking and practice may actually be very relevant to the wider academic community.

Divergent learning and teaching

Within art and design there is a tendency to value and affirm divergence in learning and teaching. Learners are encouraged to progressively extend the arena of possibilities within which they operate, not to seek enduring solutions or answers but to open up unfamiliar territory and new ideas. By encouraging divergent thinking, trying out different ways of doing and making, and exploring different meanings and interpretations, learning is experienced as a continuum of changing opportunities for revision, renewal and self-constitution. Individuals explore and articulate a range of different ideas and material constructs within a framework of collective experimentation, risk-taking and mutual responsiveness. Outcomes are sought which are more

rather than less unpredictable. The emphasis is on inventiveness, innovation and going beyond the status quo. Individuals and groups within a particular cohort may develop radically different modes of learning and signification grounded in divergent beliefs and values. In contrast to convergent learning in which learners are drawn towards a common body of knowledge, beliefs and values – towards definite conclusions and pre-established solutions – in which differences of opinions, ideas and practices may be discouraged, and risk-taking minimised (perhaps for good reason, e.g. in medical or engineering fields!).

Dialogical learning and teaching

These are approaches built around the idea that education consists of a continuum of dialogues between participants rather than a monological approach centred on the words, opinions and values of the teacher. In the former the participants include students, teachers and support staff all of whom take part in the collective enterprise of learning. Transactions between participants are conducted on the basis of exchanges of experience, knowledge and ideas between individuals – all of whom have a voice and need to be taken seriously. Dialogue is a central element in the democratisation of learning that should accompany increasing accessibility and widening participation. The learning culture should provide a supportive and open forum within which dialogues are encouraged in as many different forms as possible. Participants need to be able to identify and analyse the power relations inscribed in particular dialogues in order to understand the ideologies operating in particular institutional and professional contexts. Ways need to be found to devolve power and to decentralise systems if the move to 'student-centred learning' is to be a meaningful process [1].

Transformative learning

Underpinning much art and design education is a belief in learning as fundamentally about 'changing one's mind', an educational encounter that leads to some change in one's ideas, beliefs,

values, ways of being, knowing and doing. This is an open-ended process of growth in knowledge, action and self-constitution which has value for its own sake (enhancing the quality of living and richness of experience, increasing adaptability and responsiveness, and extending the repertoire of skills in handling ideas and materials). Because this process involves dialogue and interaction with others it leads to collective transformations – maintaining the vitality and fluidity of culture and society at all levels [2].

Participation in practice

Within art and design participation is axiomatic to the process of learning through practice. In this participatory view of learning engagement, involvement and action are prerequisites for the development of understanding. Importance is placed on activity and interactivity, rather than passive reception. Practices are developed by participating in their constituent material and cognitive processes. Ideas, issues, traditions of making, and histories of meaning are encountered through direct involvement and experience – rather than from the perspective of a spectator. Questioning, trying things out, exploring, investigating and making meanings are typical participatory modes.

Perspectivalism

Perspectivalism involves a belief that knowledge is always partial, incomplete and contingent. There can be no absolute, objective or complete view of any subject, topic, idea or issue. Our learning is always informed and guided by earlier learning, by our needs, intentions and expectations, and by our beliefs and values. Each perspective needs to be considered on its merits, as shedding light from a different angle, and in relation to other perspectives, as providing a more rounded picture. No perspective should be considered as definitive or as representing the final word on a particular topic. There can be no neutral, omniscient or 'objective' view. Multiple perspectives are to be welcomed. Diversity, difference and pluralism are factors to be affirmed in all educational contexts.

Revisibility

Given the relative, ever-changing and perspectival condition of knowledge, it follows that all views, theories & opinions are subject to revision. Indeed effective learning, if it is to avoid dogmatism, prejudice and eventually bigotry, involves a constant willingness to revise, re-think and re-formulate – to be open to new 'facts' and ideas, and to seek out alternative perspectives that are challenging and revitalising. The inherent revisibility of knowledge has implications for our thinking about assessment. Judgements can only ever be tentative and conditional, subject to continuing revision over time. Assessments are made from a particular perspective, at a specific moment in a continuum of changing views. Any mis-representation or reification of this process (for example, by representing a particular judgement as final and summative, or as a fixed measurement or a quantitative 'fact' rather than as a qualitative opinion) ought not to go unchallenged. Contradictions and tensions are likely to arise from the imposition of assessment regimes which have not kept pace with changes in ideas about knowledge and learning [3].

Intuition

Within art and design education intuitive modes of learning and doing are very important. Value is placed on the ability to solve problems, sometimes to develop complex skills (for instance in drawing, CAD, material production) and to generate ideas and images, in ways which may not be easily rationalised. Under various labels (tacit knowledge, implicit knowledge, non-verbal learning, learning-by-doing, etc.) these intuitive modes may be very resistant to analysis or conscious awareness but are central features of practice and learning in the arts and in design [4].

Creativity, inventiveness and innovation

Creativity, inventiveness and innovation are seen as common attributes of artists and designers. That these should also be central to art and design education is therefore no surprise.

However how these attributes are to be developed or even identified are matters about which there is less clarity and not a great deal of explicit thought or action. There is often an assumption that these are qualities that students either have or haven't got – which explains the common practice of using interviews and entry procedures as a filtering process – resulting in a tendency towards exclusivity rather than inclusivity. This picture is changing – not always because there's a genuine wish to be more inclusive, but because of increased competition to attract and maintain student numbers. As a result of this *de facto* widening of access and increased inclusivity more attention is being given to the ways in which creativity can be developed in all learners. Inventiveness, and innovative thinking and doing, have to be seen as fundamental capacities of all individuals, not just the few. How this potential is to be released, nurtured and guided is, even more than in the past, a crucial matter for debate, research and educational experiment.

Just as important is the question of how creativity, inventiveness and innovation can be developed and promoted in teaching and learning. These are as much ontological issues as they are epistemological. Creativity thrives in an atmosphere that is supportive, dynamic, and receptive to fresh ideas and activities. The learning environment has to encourage interactions between learners in which: action and reflection are carefully counter-balanced; open-ended periods of play and 'blue-sky' thinking alternate with goal-orientated problem-solving; stimulating inputs and staff interventions are interwoven with periods in which learners develop ideas and constructs at their own pace; critical thinking and robust debate co-exist with a supportive 'space' in which risk-taking, imaginative exploration and productive failure are accepted as positive processes of learning and, the development of meanings and interpretations is inseparable from material processes and production.

As far as possible a similarly balanced set of conditions need to be in operation for staff to

develop creative ideas, innovative programmes of study and inventive modes and patterns of delivery. Overloaded teaching and assessment timetables, and a huge increase in administrative duties (to feed a voracious bureaucracy – both institutional and governmental) are factors that do not facilitate the development of a creative and innovative culture of learning and teaching. Some radical thinking and action needs to be directed at changing this situation – at all levels, from programmes, to institutions and, maybe as a result of more forceful lobbying, within government [5].

Indeterminacy and improvisation
Art and design practices often tend to manifest high levels of indeterminacy, and make use of improvisatory modes of thinking and action. On many occasions artists may have no clear objective in mind when they embark on a piece of work (other than to produce 'something' or to see what happens). While making use of established patterns of production and ways of thinking, they respond to all kinds of stimuli and changing circumstances. Both the responses and the stimuli may be unpredictable – indeed the unexpected is something that is actively sought. The focus and content of the work may emerge in the process of making rather than as a pre-determined objective. Deterministic, goal-orientated ways of thinking and making are often counter-balanced by periods of activity in which outcomes cannot be determined and open-ended play is a more accurate description of what takes place. Playing with ideas, processes, images and materials, the individual may suspend critical, analytical and rationalistic abilities in order to 'see what happens', to let things develop in ways which accommodate chance, randomness and intuition. When something emerges that is interesting or unexpected, or with a strong sense of 'rightness', it is only then that critical reflection is re-engaged and an understanding of what has happened may develop. Periods of working 'in the dark', or when being 'not sure of what is happening', can be as exciting and productive as periods of lucid control. These situations are highly complex and unstable, requiring flexible thinking and responsive handling of material processes. Meaning and making are in a state of flux, with countless possibilities rapidly presenting themselves. Decisions may have to be made with little time for conscious thought. Developing the ability to improvise (with ideas as well as materials), and to generate and make use of situations in which indeterminacy prevails, are key aspects of learning within art and design. The need for time and opportunities to develop these abilities can run counter to the increasingly deterministic emphasis on goal-orientated behaviour in which linear systematic processes lead to predictable outcomes.

Instability and uncertainty
Linked to the previous points instability and uncertainty are often seen as positive states of mind within art and design. The need to support and encourage individuals to take risks, to deal with a fundamental instability of meanings and definitions, and high levels of uncertainty in relation to knowledge and practice, require particular kinds of learning environments in which these needs are recognised and valued. Within higher education at present there is a tendency to view stability and certainty of knowledge as goals of learning and as objects of assessment. This reification of learning and knowing leads academics to consider complex processes and events as if they were relatively simple objects. The continuum of learning is broken down into a series of identifiable objectives and measurable attainments. While this may be an effective way of negotiating some kinds of learning (for instance, the accumulation of information/data-based knowledge), it is grossly inappropriate in relation to many activities within art and design, and other arts and humanities subjects in which knowledge is inherently unstable and uncertain.

Ontology of learning
Within most fields of the arts, and design, there tends to be a clear acknowledgement of the interconnectedness and synergy between knowing,

doing and being. The development of knowledge, practical skills, cognition and technical expertise, are closely interwoven with the development of feeling, perception, confidence, sense of purpose and identity, and a tangible enrichment of lived experience – a revitalised sense of being, and increased 'well-being'. To disconnect this ontological dimension from the epistemological and performative dimensions leads to an impoverishment of the learning (and teaching) experiences. Unfortunately there is currently a tendency in higher education to do precisely this. A technocratic approach is too often taken which prioritises technical solutions to perceived problems or weaknesses in teaching and learning, dividing techniques from purposes, beliefs and values. Teaching and learning are seen as essentially technical, skills-based processes rather than as cognitive, ontological and performative processes that are grounded in beliefs, needs and purposes. This can lead to an over-simplistic, misleading and often ineffective tendency to prescribe a set of routines and formulaic techniques which, if followed, will lead to 'good' practice in teaching and increased effectiveness in learning.

Sadly what participants find is that the formulae are very hit-and-miss, because learning and teaching are not formulaic processes, and any technocratic approach is inherently flawed. Just as our sense of being, our experiences, feelings and thoughts, are contingent upon the circumstances and changing contexts within which we find ourselves, so also are learning and teaching. This contingency can only be negotiated and addressed through attentiveness, dispassionate engagement, responsiveness, flexibility, quick-wittedness, a sense of humour, inventiveness, imagination, etc. – all of which many of us would agree are important attributes of the effective teacher and learner, but are rarely included in the '50 Ways of Doing This or That' approach that epitomises the technocratic mentality.

This is not to say that techniques do not have a role to play in learning and teaching. Techniques enable us to translate beliefs, feelings, purposes and values into action – but they should not become an end in themselves or be allowed to set the agenda for improvements in learning and teaching.

Interrogative disposition

Within art and design there is an expectation that received opinions, dogmas and assumptions will be challenged by students and staff (reinforcing the need for a dialogical approach, see above). Although there are boundaries to the fields of interrogation, (sometimes clearly acknowledged, sometimes tacit and only vaguely perceived), the scope for fundamental questioning is enormous – probably more so in art than in design, where commercial and market forces may exercise greater influence (though the effect of these forces in relation to art should not be underestimated). Compared to many other subjects the constant process of critical interrogation, revision and even redefinition within art and design leads to an inherent instability that is seen as positive, dynamic and productive. Taking a diversity of practitioners as models (both to emulate and critique) students are encouraged to take as little as possible as 'given', and to develop a critical stance in relation to the orthodoxies of practice, matters of taste, style and aesthetic codification, and to recognise and question ideological positions wherever possible. More importantly perhaps, they are also encouraged to translate and externalise this critical thinking into material form – to concretise questions and challenges in artefacts and design solutions. There is a danger that this distinctive 'rattling of the cage door' may become less and less common as bureaucratisation, utilitarianism and coercive assessment practices lead to conformity and uniformity across higher education.

This critical and interrogative stance needs to be translated into our educational practices, and into our approaches to learning and teaching. The traditions of educational experiment and innovation (typified by the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Dartington in its prime, Ruskin, Morris, Beuys,

Hudson at Cardiff and Leeds, St. Martins in the 60s, Goldsmiths in the 70s and 80s, etc.) must be maintained and re-energised. The need for critical alternatives to dominant ideologies and practices is as great now as at any time in the past century.

Self-construction, self-realisation and changing notions of 'self'

Beliefs in an essential self, a singular fixed identity at the centre of each individual, the author and subject of all our actions and ideas, have been challenged from many quarters since the 1940s. Though these beliefs were foundational to modernist ideas of subjectivity, authenticity, self-expression and so on, they have been seen as problematic and debatable issues within a postmodern context. Lacan, R.D.Laing and others within psychology, research in neurology and consciousness studies, reinforced by Buddhist ideas and practices, and other influential thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, have presented a very different picture of the self/subject as a mutable and multi-facetted social, cultural and linguistic construction.

Seen from these perspectives our sense of identity and selfhood is open to change and revision. We are constantly re-making our selves. The 'self' is a process rather than a thing or essence, and may take many forms. We may recognise within 'ourselves' multiple identities – multi-facetted and at times conflicting dimensions to our self-hood – which are constructed and reconstructed in relation to changing contexts, experiences, circumstances and situations.

Questions arise as to how we can reconcile these changing views of the self and identity with the widespread belief in art as an expressive mode of communication in which subjective feelings are to be transmitted as directly as possible from artist to audience via the artwork. How can the 'death of the author', the absence of an essential self, the illusory or multiple nature of the subject, be reconciled with the still largely subjectivist view of the arts operational within higher education establishments?

The formative processes of self-constitution identified by Merleau-Ponty as being particularly significant within the practices of the arts may provide an important focus for development within art and design education. This may be a key factor in our understanding and facilitation of student-centred learning, and in our understanding of what constitute student-centred approaches and why they are so important.

Research-based practice > research-based learning and teaching

Research (in the widest sense of the term) is a central feature of art and design practices. Ideas, processes and products are developed through experimental, exploratory and connective modes of enquiry. Arising from particular needs and purposes, knowledge is gained and externalised through a continuous process of finding out, trying out and making, within a framework of critical reflection and contextualisation. Many research methods and approaches are used including: data collection and analysis; visual research; reviewing appropriate literatures and other bodies of knowledge; play and open-ended improvisatory modes of exploring materials, processes and ideas; making imaginative connections; more formal action research; empirical and experiential investigations of sites, issues, states of mind and emotions; etc. Related research (negotiating theories surrounding, or implicated in, practice), utilises methods drawn from other disciplines, including, art history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, cultural studies and media theory.

Research needs to be seen in relation to its particular purposes and uses. Within art and design the synergy between research and practice is very important. While in general terms research enables an individual or group to elucidate underlying ideas, issues and theoretical perspectives, and to understand the contexts within which work is made, research is also particularly important as a lubricant, stimulus and ongoing critical dimension to practice itself. It is

often used to generate ideas, images, processes and issues that are then integrated into new work. This aspect of the use of research raises interesting issues about the status and quality of the research itself. Divergent interpretations, misreadings, misunderstandings and inversions of research data/material can, and do, lead to innovative and interesting developments in practice. The magpie-like appropriation of miscellaneous and sometimes conflicting source material can be imaginatively integrated into work that 'makes sense' in aesthetic, cultural and design terms. The measure of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the research may be at odds with the apparent quality of the research itself. In many cases investigations which generate a state of confusion or uncertainty can be as productive as those which generate clarity and certainty (see notes on creativity and indeterminacy above).

Just as research is an integral part of art and design it can also be the locus of effective learning and dynamic teaching. Elucidating the purposes of research, and developing an appropriate repertoire of methods and skills, empowers both students and educators – enabling students to be focused in their learning, able to access fields of knowledge and practice with confidence and resourcefulness. Educators likewise can develop a firmer grounding for their teaching through research into relevant philosophical ideas and issues, and through a deepening understanding of methods and approaches. By becoming familiar with the available research on learning and teaching, critically analysing and reflecting on their own teaching, and exploring new ideas and trying out different approaches, educators can re-energise and strengthen their practice. Maintaining belief in the validity and importance of each teacher's contribution to education, combined with opportunities to be creative and pro-active, are key factors in ensuring that teaching is a dynamic and fulfilling activity for all concerned [6].

New thinking about knowledge

Many of the above points take account of the profound shifts that have taken place in our under-standing of, and approach to, knowledge since the first quarter of the 20th Century. Developments in quantum physics, Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle', research in ecology, psychology and neurology, underpinned by the widening understanding and influence of evolutionary theories, have been accompanied by major developments in philosophical thinking. These factors, along with many others, typify a move away from absolutist, essentialist and reductivist ideas of knowledge. Instead they propose, or are grounded in, a relativist approach in which the contingency of knowledge is emphasised. Knowledge is viewed as a set of conditional interpretations, descriptions and models, subject to continual change and revision. Notions of 'objectivity' have tended to be replaced by ideas in which observer and observed, subject and object, are interdependent rather than discrete. Grand narratives, universal truths and even the search for certainty have given way to an acknowledgement of the importance of multiple perspectives, pluralism, indeterminacy, and questions of usefulness, in our thinking about knowledge. Different cultures of knowledge are now widely recognised, as are the influences of beliefs, values and intentions upon the kinds of questions we ask, how we seek to answer those questions, and the ways in which we interpret and apply the knowledge gained [7].

References

1. Applebee provides an interesting slant on dialogical approaches to education in his book: *Curriculum as Conversation*. The ideas of Paolo Freire (particularly his analysis of power relations in education and the potential of learning to empower individuals and groups – especially disadvantaged and marginalised peoples) ought to be more widely discussed and tested in programmes of study. Applebee, A. (1996) *Curriculum as Conversation*. University of Chicago Press. Freire, P. (1985) *The Politics of education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. Macmillan.

2. John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, suggests the following definition of education: 'It is that reconstruction or re-organisation of experience which adds to the meaning of expe-rience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences'. In other words it is about empowerment, the making of meaning, and transformation. Dewey, J. (1966) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Free Press, N.York.

3. Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Richard Rorty, Foucault, Derrida and others all emphasise the importance of the conditional nature of knowl-edge. They all argue, from different perspectives, against notions of absolute truth, and in favour of the endless revisibility of knowl-edge. Rorty, R. (1999) *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin Books.

4. Guy Claxton's ideas about implicit learning and intuition, and Michael Polanyi's writings about 'tacit knowledge', are particularly interest-ing – suggesting a theoretical framework for art and design education which is still relatively undeveloped. Atkinson, T. & Claxton, G. [Eds] (2000) *The Intuitive Practitioner*. Open University Press. Polanyi, M. (1967) *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge.

5. Merleau-Ponty argues that human perception is itself a creative process of 'handling the world' – making meanings and making ourselves through transactions with the world and with other beings. Brian Goodwin writes about 'creative emergence' arising from interactions within complex systems. Joseph Beuys and John Cage argue for creativity and transformation as key features of making and participating in art. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1976]) *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.

6. Joe L. Kincheloe and his associates have interesting ideas about research-based learning and the implications for power relations in educational institutions. Steinberg, S. & Kincheloe, J. [Eds] (1998) *Students as Researchers: Creating Classrooms that Matter,* London: Falmer Press.

7. As well as the other writers mentioned elsewhere in the paper the following have inter-esting things to say about knowledge: Foucault – on 'discursive practices'; Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn – on scientific knowledge; Nelson Goodman – on 'constructivist' ideas of knowledge; Lyotard – on knowledge, modernism and postmodernism.