

Critical and Cultural Studies

INTRODUCTION

Critical and Cultural Studies (CCS) goes by different names in different institutions: Historical and Critical Studies, Contextual Studies and so on. It is usually, though not always, separated from the “main” course and taught by different staff, in different locations and on a day when students won’t be in the studio for other lessons.

If you were an art and design student and experienced CCS, how did you perceive it? How did your peers see it?	
If you teach in the studio, do you know the names of the people who take your students for CCS?	
Without looking it up can you describe the syllabus for CCS on your course?	

<p>Do you know what assessment task students are doing for CCS at any one time, and how much time they are spending on it?</p>	
<p>If you teach CCS, can you answer the last three questions but from a studio work perspective?</p>	
<p>Why should students study CCS?</p>	

QUESTIONS

In the first round of subject reviews, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) made a general remark on the lack of integration of theory and practice in art and design nationally. The two areas are taught separately, and students are assessed in theory through essays, but rarely asked to demonstrate their understanding in their practical work.

The isolation of theory from practice in many courses ignores a simple fact about design – it is a practical manifestation of many theoretical concepts. As the Design Council puts it: “There are many misconceptions about design. Sunday supplements and glossy magazines often use ‘design’ as a buzzword denoting style and fashion. While the toaster or corkscrew being featured may be well designed, the result is to feed the belief of would-be design clients that design is restricted to the surface of things and how they look, and that it’s best employed at the end of the product development process. But good design isn’t simply about the surface. Aesthetics are important, but only a part of a bigger picture.”¹

¹ www.designcouncil.org.uk

QUESTION

<p>Why do we split theory and practice at all? That is the challenge set by the QAA, the Design Council and, increasingly, students. What are the historic reasons, and what arguments for and against integration can you think of?</p>	
--	--

The following case study has been written by a teacher of CCS. In it he/she says a little about their background. What is interesting here is that this “theoretician” has a practical understanding of art and design. This is not always the case and if that is true in your situation it may be worth giving some thought to how the practice-based staff and the theory-based staff can share their understanding of each other’s areas.

When you read the case study ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. HOW DOES THE TUTOR PREVENT THE SESSIONS BEING BORING? WHAT OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT HE/SHE SUCCEEDS?**
- 2. WHAT ARE THE THREE MAIN ISSUES RAISED AND HOW MIGHT THE TUTOR AVOID THEM?**
- 3. WHY ARE THE TYPES OF LESSONS DESCRIBED OFTEN SEPARATED FROM THE STUDIO PRACTICE PART OF THE COURSE?**
- 4. HOW MIGHT YOU INTEGRATE THEORY AND PRACTICE MORE, AND WOULD THIS SOLVE ANY OF THE PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED ABOVE?**

Case Study

I originally trained as a furniture designer and taught in further education on lots of topics. I did a PGCE in design and technology and taught in schools for ten years, then did a full-time masters in Education. My thesis compared design process in the real world with that taught in education. Then I was Education Manager at the Design Museum. I use elements of all of that in my work now.

I teach first and second years, and occasionally do dissertation supervision as a stand-in. I cover everything from media culture to history of technology. All the topics I teach overlap and help to give context to each other. The subject contextualises what they're doing and helps them to see themselves as part of a continuum. It teaches them how to research and write, which are important career skills, and to explore areas they may not be aware of. It teaches them critical analysis.

I take a very accessible approach – I'm not an academic lecturer. I approach it through stories in an interesting way – using lots of products and activities. I think the key is to bring it to life, and where you're dealing with theoretical contexts spend as little time as possible explaining and as much as possible for them to experience it. I believe in Confucius' saying: "I hear and I forget, I see and I may remember, I do and I understand".

I provide a lot of materials for lectures and seminars – products, photocopied articles about the topic – and get the students to compare and discuss in groups and feed back, rather than just me giving my perception. For example, this week we're looking at branding in contemporary design and criticism. I took in half a dozen articles from papers about ethical issues around global organisations: sweatshops and that kind of thing. I gave the articles out for them to read in pairs and to bring out the key points. It's easy to manage the discussion to bring out the points you want to make.

I do lecture as well, but I try not to make it last too long. Talking for more than twenty minutes is pointless. I can normally cover the material they need

in half an hour, then I do the rest by exercises. I enjoy the lectures and seminars, and the students getting involved and taking part. I like the research and the realisations that come about.

Students' attitudes vary a lot; the levels of motivation and academic achievement often depend on which programme they are on. Most students get involved, though, and see the relevance of the subject.

The biggest recurring problem I have is absent students: the small minority who just don't turn up and then do badly. The office staff are very good and they write to all those who don't attend each week. Some still won't show, and then of course they panic at the end and send in a dreadful essay. Apathy is the thing I dislike most. I'll bend over backwards for students who are keen but struggling, but late, sloppy, apathetic students make me feel slighted when I've put a lot of work into preparation. I don't see how they're going to hack it in the real world.

The other perennial problem is missing equipment and double-booked rooms. I am very dependent on having a slide projector, and yesterday there wasn't one, then when I telephoned they brought one that didn't work, so we wasted 25 minutes of the session. You have to think on your feet, and try to find another way of organising the session. It pays to have back-up material if the technology lets you down!

International students have contexts of their own which may be really interesting. I bring in an essay question which, for example, asks them to compare Britain with another country of their choice. I also try to bring the international context into my lectures; it's interesting for everyone. For example, we've just been looking at how countries picked themselves up after war – each has done it in a different way and it's part of their visual identity. It helps the students to look at design in a different way.

I try to frame essay questions so that they can choose something interesting and relevant without losing academic rigour. I like to know what course they're on, but we're not given that information at the moment so I ask them. I try to slant the content to the topic they're studying.

It does generate a lot of essays to mark – sometimes in a short time. There can be 120 to mark, and I have to fit it in where I can which is difficult because I have other work as well. I get satisfaction out of a good essay, but some are hard work and it's difficult to concentrate when you're marking late at night or early in the morning. I do spend a lot of time on feedback for essays. Most put a lot of effort into essays and deserve useful feedback. I try to put it positively and give them something to work on for next time. Art and design students are not chosen for writing skills, they're interested but some don't write well, and I try to encourage them to do better. However poor they are at writing essays they may be brilliant at their main subject so my job is to support that side and help their future career.

HAVING READ THE CASE STUDY, TRY TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

Critical and Cultural Studies

<p>1. How does the tutor prevent the sessions being boring?</p> <p>What objective evidence is there that he/she succeeds?</p>	
<p>2. What are the three main issues raised and how might the tutor avoid them?</p>	
<p>3. Why are the types of lessons described often separated from the studio practice part of the course?</p> <p>How might you integrate theory and practice more, and would this solve any of the problems identified above?</p>	

Exercise

Integrating theory and practice

Visit the Design Council's web site (www.designcouncil.org.uk) and download PDFs of the various documents they have published on design. How might you develop similar ways of discussing the theory and practice of design?

STUDIO STAFF

- Look at your own teaching and ask yourself what elements of “theory” or “context” could be built in to what you cover. How do you make sure your teaching, and students’ learning, does not just focus on aesthetics and mechanical skills?
- Consider your assessments. How do you make sure you reward students who demonstrate an understanding of critical studies, even if you don’t “like” the piece they have produced?

CCS STAFF

- What ways could you think of to assess students differently so that they could demonstrate their understanding of key concepts through art and design rather than essays?
- What different types of writing might excite students’ interest more than traditional essays?

ALL STAFF

- Make a point of reading the curriculum for the “other” part of the course and finding out what students are doing, and how they are being assessed.
- Make time for a quick meeting of practical and theoretical staff to get to know each other, ensure assessments don’t clash, and identify ways of reinforcing each others’ teaching by making connections for students.
- Writing pad is a HEFCE funded project designed to promote the adoption of models of good practice that encourage inclusive approaches to the purposes and possibilities of writing. Further details are available on www.writing-pad.ac.uk

Follow Up Notes

SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO THE
THREE QUESTIONS POSED BEFORE
THE CASE STUDY ARE:

1

It sounds like this tutor is making laudable efforts to keep his/her sessions interesting. But the point of this question is to challenge our assumptions that just because something sounds interesting then it must be. Does a “fun” session always result in learning, or might the “fun” get in the way? How do we know our sessions and techniques work? How do we tell the difference between a student who does badly in assessment because they are not very good, and a student who does badly because we are not very good? It’s a question worth reflecting upon.

2

ATTENDANCE

If students are not attending it could be for reasons other than that they are “lazy” or “uncommitted”. Non-attendance can be a sign of dissatisfaction with the teaching methods or curriculum, or disaffection with the subject. One way of increasing attendance is to make sure students know what will be covered each week, and why. Giving out a fairly detailed course plan at the start of term (including what has to be done before and after sessions) can be an easy way of improving attendance or, at the very least, ensuring students who don’t turn up do so with an understanding of what they have missed.

TECHNOLOGY

If there is a strong chance that technology will let you down or not be available, don’t plan on using it. 25 minutes is too long to mess around with a projector. Some lecturers find that “letting go” of the idea that you *have* to teach in a particular way is quite liberating. There are alternatives to slide shows that are more engaging. What might they be?

ASSESSMENT

If marking a lot of essays is a problem, why set essays? Are there other ways that learning can be assessed? Could other methods help integrate theory and practice? Why assess the course separately from practice at all?

3

Question 3 is worth thinking about and perhaps discussing with colleagues.