Re-imagining Higher Education

Recently I have been giving much thought to the structure and issues that most of us in Higher Education have been struggling with for several years. There are three areas of thought that come together when re-imagining education, particularly within Art and Design education. The theory of the Long Tail [1], the Play Ethic [2] and Cradle to Cradle [3] sustainability. Each of these requires a radical turn-around in current ways of thinking. Tweaking the edges won't do. What if we thought about education the same way we thought about our other precious resources or the same way that we think about the changing face of the media?

Play versus Work

My background includes co-founding a creative group in the UK called Antirom [4] that had very little structure, certainly no deliberate hierarchy. We played a great deal and got paid for it sometimes too. In general Antirom was successful as a group that managed to combine play and work, or rather we managed to make a living from our play (and that doesn't mean it wasn't sometimes hard).

Importantly we ensured we had enough time to experiment and play and think of new ideas in our workplace. Work, in short, didn't feel like that Protestant industrialist work ethic most of us submit to. We had a play ethic and it produced an abundance of ideas. We pruned those ideas to pick the best ones for our projects but always with the knowledge that all the 'left-overs' were important if only so we could know which were better. Those 'waste' ideas usually ended up being 'food' for new ideas in the future too. That's the Cradle to Cradle [3] way of thinking. Waste equals Food.

Art and Design institutions, and indeed all places of learning, should be a similar hive of creativity and playfulness - playing with ideas, with concepts, with new ways of thinking. A humming hub of excitement and knowledge generation. I expect few teachers would recognise this as a description of their daily lives. So what's going on?

Audit Culture

As Tina Barnes-Powell from De Montfort University recently wrote [5], education, along with public healthcare, has been one of the most over-audited and policed environments of the past 20 years, yet at the

same time governments and business are touting the value of the creative economy and post-industrial society. Frankly we don't need more audits and policies, they suck the life out of that creative society as The Play Ethic's author, Pat Kane, eloquently argues [2].

In the UK and Australia most institutions have some kind of Learning and Teaching Performance Indicators (along with similar audits for research) handed down from on high. Auditing in this way isn't about excellence in teaching or research. Measuring a process (badly) does not magically fix any problems or make it better. It makes people tick the boxes and get on with what they were doing anyway. In fact it is worse, because it is easy to hide behind the auditing process and it covers up problems instead of exposing them. With the work-ethic whip in full force people are afraid to be open and transparent, whereas in a play-ethical environment it is okay to try something new, even okay to fail if you learn something from it. Is that not what we might say to our students?

The over-auditing and policing is about economic efficiency not excellence. Economic efficiency is a viewpoint on the verge of extinction as we move fully into a post-industrial economy. As Pat Kane says, it is a way of thinking that suited industry 250 years ago, but it doesn't work if you are trying to cultivate creative knowledge workers [2]. What is efficient knowledge after all, knowing too much or just enough? We need to think about how we might achieve greater excellence and effectiveness and what these actually mean in contemporary culture.

Higher Education cannot continue to 'do more with less'. We are, however, trapped in a political framework that believes education should be profitable (I wonder if the military are ever asked to make a profit and be self-sustaining?). This trap, this wearing down of education makes it difficult to think beyond bleating for more money. More money is unlikely to arrive from government and corporate 'sponsorship' is not without its problems. So it is worth tackling this from another point of view.

Sustainable Education

Doing 'more with less', or being 'less bad' as Cradle to Cradle authors William McDonough and Michael Braungart [3] phrase it, is the general level of thinking in many pro-environment campaigns. But making 'efficient' cars that pollute a bit less just masks the problem and simply slows down the destruction of diversity and the environment. McDonough and Braungart argue that we need to create objects,

buildings, technologies and cultures that are eco-effective. That means cars that clean the air when we drive them, factories that pump out water cleaner than that which it takes in (these factories can and do exist) [3].

Continuing to bend to the audits and policies that plague Higher Education, from Government and within the institutions themselves, to attempt to scrimp and scrape and still develop excellence, to be 'efficient' is unsustainable in the exactly same way. To attempt to do more with less simply masks the fact that things are not as bad as they seem. They're much worse.

I have had numerous conversations with colleagues around the world and everyone feels this without exception. None of us wants to feel burned out by teaching, or by the pressures of excessive admin or overcrowded classrooms. We are all aware of the affect that has on teaching and learning 'excellence' (a most over-used word in education). We need to re-imagine a working (or playing rather) environment that makes life better as it grows, that is effective (and affective) rather than 'efficient'. This can still be economically sustainable; in fact I would argue it is the only way to achieve this goal.

What might an institution look like that works in this way? My feeling is that we need to turn to Kane's play-ethic and not the work-ethic as well as the abundance model of Cradle to Cradle thinking. McDonough and Braungart use the cherry tree as their example of effectiveness over efficiency. An 'efficient' cherry tree would have just enough leaves to survive, have one blossom, drop one cherry to grow into another tree. But a cherry tree is abundant, it provides for more than itself in many, many ways, and nothing is waste for waste equals food [3].

What kind of changes would we have to make to the way we do things and the way we think for this to be the case in our universities and colleges? What's the educational equivalent of a sustainable building that produces more energy than it uses, that nurtures the environment around it (including the staff, students and community)? How can we harness what seems to be so much wasted time chasing our tails or filling in forms for audits to actually produce an abundance of creativity and positive learning experiences? What kind of conduits of communication and socialisation would create that humming hive of creativity?

How can the situation be better the more students we take in, instead of worse? These are the questions to ask, not whether your course template contains the required triggers for a positive audit result.

This kind of thinking about corporate efficiency is the last gasp of industrial economics that have dominated working life for the past 250 years. In an environment where the nature of knowledge and work is shifting rapidly from industrial economies to knowledge economies what place does a university have? In theory they should be in the right game, they are institutions of knowledge after all, so why does it all feel so awry? I believe higher education institutions will have massive changed forced upon them because very few have been proactive about real change instead of economic rationalisation.

The Long Tail of Education?

Education is more than training people for industry. Education is the development of people to prepare them to engage and change a world in a lifetime that will constantly change, more so than any of us have so far experienced. Do our students come for knowledge? Maybe, but they can and do get that easily elsewhere, although we should teach them how to critically appraise that knowledge. Do they come for the credentials? Sometimes more often than the education itself, but in many disciplines of knowledge economies what you can demonstrate and your ideas often count for more than the piece of paper. In fact, why do students bother turning up to the ugly, over-crowded buildings at all if they can get their lectures as podcasts, collaborate and learn online and access other valuable teaching materials off the Web? Enter the Chris Anderson's Long Tail theory [1] - a powerful understanding that, for many industries, the culture of selling 'hits' is on its way out.

Diversity is critical (much like the environment). Taking a look at the shifting mediascape it is not hard to see where universities might be left in ten years' time (or less). They may end up with a whole load of (usually ugly and environmentally unsound) buildings and no students on campus. Universities in their present models are audience aggregators, just like broadcast networks. If you can get enough people in front of the content (usually the lectures and tutorials) and it becomes economically 'efficient' to run the class. As long as the student is viewed as a unit of product that brings in funds this way of thinking is an unsustainable view of education. What it leads to is the equivalent of Hollywood re-makes and top-twenty chart music - a culture of popular hits rather than educational diversity because the 'audience' under financial pressure to find value-for-money go for the safe options, the hits, as does the institution.

Now imagine you could put on a course in say, basket weaving (this is my Dean's particular favourite example of an obscure subject), and anyone in the world can enroll. More to the point, anyone can access the course online and pay for it (as well as get the accreditation). Now you can create your own 'rip, mix and burn' degree programme. I can hear the cries of 'what about the pedagogy?' but those issues have long been argued in the e-learning literature (and most 'problems' found to be mythical).

In this scenario institutions do not need to deal with the economies of space and place, they no longer need to find 22 students within the university who are interested your subject, just need 22 people from the entire planet. That's not such a hard task and it would probably be a more interesting group of people. Much of this is already happening thanks to the likes of iTunes U. What is happening to media and the theory of the Longtail, is happening to education. Online education is not cheaper in terms of running courses (staff still need to be paid) or infrastructure (at least at the outset), but the accessibility does mean that there are other avenues for revenue and higher education institutions will eventually take them because they have no choice (and because, actually, they can be of higher quality than face-to-face classes sometimes).

The choice is react to these changes long after the fact and not terribly competently (witness the witless conversations about blogs at UNSW's Academic Board) or to re-imagine what we do and make use of the changing world for the benefit of us all. The worst-case scenario is that higher education becomes irrelevant because it remains stuck in an outmoded framework.

Three Buzzwords: Interdisciplinarity, Sustainability and Integrity

I was recently at Saxion University in the Netherlands and their Head of Innovation (yes, they have one) told us about how they have restructured their courses. All students do the same first two years, grounding them in the essential skills, and then they have no classes in the final two years. They are mentored by two or three staff but choose their own projects and combinations of disciplines and colleagues. (Incidentally, the staff still teach the same face-to-face hours, but they mentor more than lecture). This encourages them to do their own research, beginning at undergraduate level, but more importantly it recognises the essential interdisciplinarity of the contemporary world. Intensive workshops (e.g., every day for five days) supplement this, but it's the final work that counts.

How can art and design institutions possibly have any integrity when talking the talk of interdisciplinarity when we are unable to even function this way ourselves? Why is it so hard for students from different programmes to learn, work and play together? (The same goes for sustainability and diversity when we are teaching in buildings, and building more, that are an enormous drain of resources, shoddily built and consume enormous amounts of energy without contributing anything to the local environment).

University learning is changing, as NESTA's Peter Cochrane says, we are moving from the "sage on the stage to the guide by the side" [6]. The world for our students changed long ago, long enough for many of them not to even know a time before the Internet, before self-organising social networks, before mobile phones, blogs, Google and Wikipedia. The way education is thought about and talked about hasn't changed much for 200 years. We may as well give our students a slate, a stick of chalk and a cup of gruel.

What If?

We ask that our students should be questioning individuals and groups. I tell them that 'What If?' are the two most powerful words in our language. But we are awful at doing this with our own institutions. So instead of trying to jam more people into classrooms, what if we think differently and get rid of half of the classrooms and make bookable meeting/play places instead? When the students have no real reason to be on campus in terms of the course content, what should we be offering? Flexible spaces, well serviced and guidance and mentoring. Many libraries, those other previously dusty secular institutions, have already made this shift as Charles Leadbeater has discussed. They are no longer 'special places for special people" but social, open places of play and learning [7].

There is still great value in meeting face to face (I say this as an advocate for online learning and collaboration too). So maybe it is better that we re-think the campus as a place where self-organised groups (perhaps organised online) can meet in a pleasant environment, with free access to fast broadband, good coffee and rooms they can feel comfortable playing in. What if some of the resources that this frees up (in terms of admin, time, staff, equipment and running costs) enable us to help those less able to purchase their own laptop and properly deal with accessibility and cultural diversity? Would students object to this lack of 'service' for their money (because they're not being 'trained') or would they embrace this as the

intellectual environment they came to university for in the first place? Maybe we should ask them.

What if we re-organise our time so that we, as staff, are facilitators, mentors and guides rather than slaves to a system of administration and processing? I do not want to be forced to see my students as product, as income units. I want to recognise them as living, thinking, feeling human beings with social lives and responsibilities.

Happy Staff = Happy Students

Staff in higher education also need this environment. Nobody wants to teach worse or to feel burned out. This is not something that will come from a top-down directive, it is something that will grow from the bottom up. Inept as many higher management are in educational institutions, they are as overwhelmed as most of their staff. Often this is because they have been promoted from the ranks having had brilliant research careers but have very little contemporary management experience. In my own faculty we tend to have tiny single-person offices and, more significantly, out-dated notions of discipline expertise silos. We are locked in rooms looking through the keyhole of 'our area' at a wide, intermingled creative field that our students are cavorting in. That needs to change to and we may find there is a much more pleasant way to live, work and play together in the process.

Again this is a question of integrity. If we're to teach a graphic design student the value art history has for practice, or a digital media student how an understanding of semiotics will inform their film-making what are we doing dividing these areas up into programmes, departments and schools? Our students are a smart, savvy generation. They live in a world that is much more blurred with permeable layers of culture. They are acutely aware of the hypocrisy of hype not matching reality - they process it all the time in their cynical views of contemporary advertising (which, like education, is also in a crisis for the same reasons).

What better way to demonstrate the value of creative collaboration and interdisciplinarity or to experience cultural diversity than to facilitate these spaces and ways of creating and thinking together? This sounds to me like a much more creative and playful environment, exactly what our higher education institutions should be.

The irony is that the rise of the creative class and the global shift towards playful, creative, self-organising communities are exactly what

we should be embracing, yet we might find that universities are left behind in the process, clunking along with their out-dated research and pedagogical aspirations.

A play ethic that facilitates the development of both students and staff as people, and the abundance that creates in the process, has enormous value economically and culturally (and those two need to be brought together anyway). Radically re-thinking institutional structures, the role of education and the relationships with students and staff is in order. We cannot simply carry on doing more with less, nibbling at the edges.

Something will give and the recent industrial disputes are only the beginning. We need to think how we can create more to create more. To be effective rather than efficient. To create conduits and spaces that flourish the more people use them, rather than crumble. In turn this means pushing back upwards, refusing to work with ill-thought out strategies, audits and policies, but only with something better in hand to offer instead. We all need to think what that might be and be bold enough to voice it.

We may not have all the answers to this by any means, but I strongly believe we need to start by asking the right questions because there is a great deal of knowledge already out there that can help. Thinking as a designer I see it as design problem and there are enough creative brains in our institutions (especially if you include the students) to come up with some imaginative solutions. But we need the time and space to do it and that is perhaps the first place to start.

If you've read this far, thank you. If you think its idealistic, great. It should be, otherwise what are we thinking future generations are going to do? If you want to know more or want the references, let me know. If you think it's nonsense, let me know too (but let me know why and offer an alternative to 'more money').

Andy Polaine is a researcher, academic, designer and writer. The original version of this article was posted at <http://www.polaine.com/playpen> and the permalink URL is: http://www.polaine.com/playpen/2006/07/26/re-imagining-higher-education/. Andy can be contacted via http://www.polaine.com/playpen/contact.

References

1. Anderson, C., *Long Tail: How Endless Choice Is Creating Unlimited Demand*. 2006, London Random House Business Bks, 2006.
2. Kane, P., *The play ethic: a manifesto for a different way of living*. 2004, London: Macmillan. 448.
3. McDonough, W. and M. Braungart, *Cradle to cradle: remaking the way we make things*. 2002, New York: North Point Press. 193 p.
4. Allenson, A., et al., *Anti-Rom*. 1994, Antirom: London.
5. Barnes-Powell, T. *Blurring boundaries, extending horizons and creating new opportunities.* in *Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design 2006 Enhancing Curricula Conference*. 2006. Lisbon.
6. Thomas, K., *Putting computers in school is a really dumb move: An interview with Peter Cochrane, founder of ConceptLabs*. 2005, NESTA.
7. Leadbeater, C. *Libraries and the Creative Economy*. in *Library of the 21st Century Symposium*. 2006. State Library of Victoria: State Library of Victoria.