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# Responding, reframing and re-thinking – a new era in creative education for our sector?

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## **GLAD-HE Post-Conference Publication**

### **Responding • Reframing • Re-thinking A new era in creative education for our sector?**

## **Editorial**

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This special edition post-conference publication is a collection of practitioner led studies from the 2021 virtual conference 'Responding, Reframing, Re-thinking: A new era in creative education for our sector'. Organised by the Group for Learning in Art and Design (GLAD HE), in partnership with the host institution Nottingham Trent University, this conference brought together the art and design sector to both acknowledge and evaluate the work of staff and students during the 2020-2021 COVID Lockdown. Further acknowledgement of the changed landscape of higher education brought about by the pandemic came in the form of the conference itself, which was conducted entirely online, and made use of innovative SpatialChat software, which allowed delegates to mix informally outside of the organised sessions. The conference attracted over 100 delegates from regional, national and international locations. It provided a much needed pause after a sustained period of intensity, uncertainty and change.

The two day event, 22-23<sup>rd</sup> April 2021, included four key note speakers: Cal Swann (Curtin Technology University, Perth, Australia), Michael Marsden (Nottingham Trent University, UK), Professor Stella Devitt-Jones (Staffordshire University, UK) and Rt. Hon. Greg Clark (Chair of Parliamentary Science and Technology Committee and former Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy). Their contributions helped to set the scene for the event. The conference began with an evening gathering in conversation with Cal Swann. Together we were taken through the transformative journey of his five decades of

Art and Design Education, both in the UK and Australia. His contribution took the form of an interview by GLAD's Chairman, Michael Gorman (Manchester Metropolitan University), within the SpatialChat environment, providing a much needed social haven for creative discussion, dialogue and debate.

The second day began with Michael Marsden (Executive Dean, School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University) together with colleagues Amy Twigger-Holroyd and Theodore Hughes-Riley introducing the university's C3 space. This insightful presentation showcased how Nottingham Trent has accommodated research, opportunities for collaboration and curriculum spanning innovation, both prior to, during and beyond the lockdown. The second keynote of the day was delivered by Professor Stella Jones-Devitt, who synthesised the hidden curriculum post-COVID, providing a much needed insight into strategy and critical pedagogy within art and design and the wider higher education sector. Her focus was on promoting social mobility, using evidence informed practice. The final keynote speaker, Rt Hon. Greg Clark, focused on the economy and the contribution of the creative sector. There was a strong emphasis on the road to recovery post COVID, and on the vital role art and design will play in this journey.

Scheduled across the two days were a combination of twenty presentations, workshops and seminars, which together demonstrated the depth of the creative sector's resilience and the variety of pedagogic innovations, both in response to the global pandemic and in preparation for a transformed future. A selection of the conference recordings can be found on the GLAD website: <https://gladhe.com/>. This publication draws on the contribution of eight of the conference presentations, which have been carefully selected and re-worked to capture: how art and design pedagogy has influenced other disciplines; new theoretical frameworks for the creative sector; innovative approaches in studio adaptations; and the development of belonging through passionate pedagogy, co-curricular collaborations and communities of practice.

The conference was split into three distinct strands, which were aligned to the overarching themes:

Strand 1: RESPONDING - a reflective stream, which enabled practitioners to disseminate major innovations in learning and teaching. It encouraged individuals to share narratives,

and reflect on the immediate actions taken to ensure that learning continued during lockdown. The transition to digital learning was certainly challenging for higher education, but the speed of change impacted on creative subjects perhaps more than some other disciplines, since traditional studio cultures, workshops and technical spaces ceased to exist in the normal sense. This theme explored responses and implementation strategies; it also challenged delegates to assess the wider impact of blended learning and greater digital capabilities, which were introduced at an increasing pace through online learning.

Strand 2: REFRAMING – the focus of this strand was “self, students and sector”. It provided an opportunity to share personal narratives and reflect on the experiences of students. It posed the question of how we should respond to the changing external environment, including opportunities for transnational education, interdisciplinarity, and the transformational potential of creativity.

Strand 3: RE-THINKING – the final strand energized the delegates by shining a spotlight on the contribution of the creative industries, and the vital role they have to play in the economic recovery. It challenged us as leaders and innovators within art and design to explore alternative pedagogies, based on our learning and understanding of what is possible in this new digital era.

To conclude, the conference themes were discussed by a cross-disciplinary and multi-institution student panel, facilitated by Jenee Marie Gardner, a fashion/knitwear design masters student from Nottingham Trent University. The panel consisted of five forward-thinking students: James Fisher (theatre student from Nottingham Trent University), Ciara Evans (drama student from Staffordshire University), Caitlin Macintyre (film student from Manchester Metropolitan University), Luke James (illustration student from Anglia Ruskin University) and Ryan Pilkington (graphic design postgraduate student from University of Huddersfield). The six students provided a narrative of their experiences during COVID lockdown from the perspective of these UK higher education institutions, creating a rich tapestry of innovation, flexibility and agile pedagogy, woven together through storytelling the lived experience. The panel also offered their views of the conference, reflecting on the presentations and their potential impact on the student experience and community.

Following the conference, Kerry Gough and Jess Power hosted a writing retreat (May 2021) to support presenters in developing their work into papers or posters, and thus ensure further dissemination of the art and design higher education response to the 2020-2021 COVID pandemic. The work presented in this special edition extends the knowledge presented at the conference, in relation to art and design practice and the transformative nature of the creative disciplines. The practitioner narratives demonstrate a wide range of action research, founded in practice-based scholarly work, which created new narratives for future practitioners to build into recognised art and design pedagogical practices. A common threads throughout the papers selected for this special edition is the value of learning through working in, preserving and adapting the studio, within the new digital landscape. The narratives illustrate the creative sector's agile nature and the ability of arts educators to change underlining pedagogical approaches, in order to reinvent curricula. Throughout the collection of work housed in these eight publications the students and staff demonstrate repeatedly their ability to adapt, respond and acclimatize to the fluidity of the situation over a sustained period of learning.

This special edition opens with a reflective account from a management perspective, based in the host institution. Gough captures a period of time, and reflects on the initial shock experienced by the sector. Her account details the emotions and perceived challenges, before the innovative wheels of the creative thinkers started turning. Once they did so, they provided novel and pragmatic solutions that ensured students and staff were supported in studying during the initial lockdown. Our second article, by Turner and Hall, presents the world as always complex and uncertain, often challenging, sometimes chaotic and messy. They ascertain that students in other disciplines benefited from the methodologies used in creative subjects, which include personal expression. They synthesise the use of a theoretical and symbiotic framework under the umbrella of aesthoecology, and contextualise this within the art and design sector. They propose this as a particularly relevant pedagogical framework due to its relationship with events at this time of significant change and challenge.

Holtham et al. reaffirm the wider values and positive impact of using pedagogy with its origins in art and design disciplines. They use zines as a method of reflective practice within business and management courses, thus demonstrating the wider implications of simple creative practices, not only as a learning support mechanism but also as a means to

increase wellbeing and a sense of belonging. There are similarities in the papers by Lord and Sykes, and Power et al. Both focus on the themes of learning through doing, and exploring creative mechanisms to enhance the student's learning experience. Lord and Sykes take the approach of providing innovative methods of building simple textile design equipment in the home environment, to support the validated curriculum, reflecting Turner and Hall's ideology of making learning a transformative event which is central to learning. Lord and Sykes' paper provides an insightful and creative practitioner's response to initiating transformational events which impact on learning within the lived experience of the COVID pandemic.

The world got smaller and digital transformation within higher education increased at an unprecedented rate. Power et al. focus on bridging discipline gaps online, through providing creative, design-led and commercial challenges as essential co-curricular activities. They argue that PhBL networking opportunities can bridge gaps between industry, academia and society, enabling participating students to develop integrated skill sets for the 21st century. Both Power et al. and Turner and Hall recognise the need to create education systems which transcend disciplines, to enable the knowledge creation and acquisition which can provide solutions to the urgent challenges of our time.

Bunting and Hill's extensive literature review into compassionate pedagogy explores the tacit assumptions which often go unnoticed, and the unexamined normative practices which are key sites for transformation, particularly from an educational development perspective. They offer insights into where and how pedagogical change might be most impactful. The paper presents the work of educational developers across a specialist art provider in supporting academics to nurture students within the creative disciplines. They draw on the importance of relationships between lecturer and students, particularly in the studio context, a thread that regularly appeared throughout the two days of the conference. The poster with voiceover presented by Watson and Thomas continues this theme and realigns the creative disciplines to support hybrid models of learning. They introduce digital communities of practice, to re-define the studio through sharing, developing knowledge and co-creating a visual narrative. The paper raises the much publicised challenge of digital poverty within our diverse learning body, and also the challenges posed to both staff and students to initiate digital showcases from the vast offer of available hardware and software. They recognise that social positioning greatly influences the level of engagement and interaction of the

virtual studio, and acknowledge that many students benefited from the social interaction of the virtual studio when the country was in complete lockdown. The final paper of this special edition (Velez Vago and Strachan) presents collaborative experiences through the lenses of the practitioner; they introduce a rich narrative of the artists' experience and the value of new interdisciplinary intersections, reflecting on transdisciplinary collaborations, and opening up new knowledge experiences that promote practice as a catalyst for healing and recovery.

Together the seven papers and poster present a time capsule of the art and design sector's response to the 2020-2021 COVID pandemic. They illustrate the diversity, creative thinking and resilience of the sector during what has become known as "lockdown learning". We RESPONDED, we REFRAMED and we RE-THOUGHT learning; we transcended disciplines and traditional studio practices, to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for both the creative and other sectors. Our staff and students embraced challenging circumstances head-on, and their narratives are captured in this special edition for future generations to reflect upon, discuss and debate, in order to enhance future art and design pedagogy.

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