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Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Swansea
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Arts Education: The Domino Crisis of Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

‘Arts education is in crisis’.

This is the statement made in a 2019 article by TATE (‘Why Study Art’ [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)) highlighting the benefits and difficulties of studying art in a time of systematic changes.

Is it a question of curriculum content, or the comparisons of academic achievement between different disciplines in a time where degree outcomes are held to a higher standard than perhaps the quality of the teaching? Perhaps it is both.

Due to the magnitude of this field, this essay aims to look at the impacts that a wider perception of creative disciplines may have on students and ultimately our staff’s mental health.

Government Reviews and Covid-19

Many changes have been made to the structure of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David over the past two years with government cuts and the spread of Covid-19.

In March 2019, the publishing of a report by Dr. Phillip Augar [1] dubbed the 'Augar Report' suggested a motion be put in place to shift funding 'away from universities towards further education (FE) and vocational training,' all the while criticising universities for providing 'too many "low value" courses (Adams, 2019). The idea was to shift money from discerningly frivolous areas of education and transfer them into 'rewarding institutions whose students go on to high-paying graduate jobs' (Adams, 2019).

Vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex, Adam Tickell warned that the cuts to tuition fees would 'leave institutions with less to spend on teaching and student support... universities would potentially have £2bn less to invest in teaching, mental-health support, and infrastructure.' (Adams, 2019).

The effects of this rippled through establishments across the country and affected many across South Wales as cuts were being made in the hopes of reducing operating costs by £6.5 million (Williams, 2019) [2].

Earlier that year members of the University and College Union (UCU) representing lecturers, researchers and academic staff were pushing forward a voluntary redundancy scheme in the hopes of '[developing] more efficient and cost effective ways of working and targeting alternative sources of income.'

A spokesman for the scheme announced that amidst their strategy to redefine the future of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, a number of initiatives would be launched to 'strengthen the distinctiveness of the UWTSD dual sector offer, better contribute to Wales' economic and societal challenges and secure its future resilience as it continues to serve the needs of its learners and stakeholders' (Williams, 2019).

Although teachers do fall under the latter category, it can be argued that the priority of teachers is low on the hierarchy within that. The question remains, what about the teaching staff? Have they no say in the development of their educational

environment? Teaching is not defined by the grades it produces, 'the art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery' (Mark Van Doren, n.d).

Alongside the drop in staff numbers, 2020 brought about the Covid-19 lockdowns. Studies in 2020 show, that the affects of lockdowns have impacted student's mental health existentially in the last year; with loneliness being a key factor [3].

An investigation conducted by Mind (2020) examined how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the nation's mental health, with their demographic ranging among different age groups and ethnicities.

The consequences of Covid-19 lie heavily on those who have previously suffered from mental health afflictions as well as provoking those who have had underlying difficulties. Loss of life, isolations and job losses all play a part in these provocations. In their study the researchers found that 60% of adults and 68% of young people have seen a decline in their mental health during lockdown with the percentage rising to 74% in the 18-24-age bracket, with university students following a similar pattern with 73% plummeting. Those with disabilities, learning differences and long-term illnesses reported having their health worsen due to lack of in-person care and simply set their confidence back (Khan, 2020).

How to Engage Creative Minds

It can be argued that the responsibility of learning lies solely with the learner (Von Glaserfeld, 1989). This applies to all subjects in higher education with the majority of time being spent on independent study, however it could be said that for a creative discipline it would apply more so.

For example, the aim of teaching Illustration is for the student to learn and develop skills that will enable them to develop their own ways of working, along with transferable skills that can be aptly applied to any career that they decide to pursue after they leave, (not just for art since it is such a subjective category).

We regularly communicate with students to ensure they're confidently developing their work and engaging with the brief's requirements and many themes and ideas from the wider world. Our job is to inspire imagination and creativity, to think outside the box and to see how the things they learn can be applied to a wider source.

How can this be done when funding is lessened for subjects deemed as "less valuable" due to lower expectations of overall achievement by the majority of people who graduate?

Guy Claxton (1999) said learners should to develop resourcefulness, reflectiveness and relatedness, all of which are important for learners to grow.

According to a Royal Academy article (Phillips, 2019) the worry about students owing thousands of pounds of debt weighs heavily on the view of the taxpayer. Students should be concentrating on careers that allow them to quickly pay back what they owe the system.

For a freelance illustrator/designer, the minimum amount that they must make to start paying taxes is just over £12,000 a year. When we're looking at a literal handful of students from all disciplines making a decent living from their degree (and even then they may not meet this quota yearly), it's evident as to why the government would be concerned about having no money come forward from freelance or self employed people, and why in Dr Phillip Augar's 2019 report it was suggested that funds for creative disciplines be capped to £6,500 a year and STEM subjects were increased to £13,500 [4].

That's not to say that the report was all doom and gloom, in fact in an article written earlier this year, it was made clear that '[the Augar report] was vital for post-18 provision to address labour makers needs' [5]. This could ultimately improve the lives of many disadvantaged people with the ability to attend a degree course with government aid by prolonging the payback time by ten years. This can give encouragement to students who once believed that they might not have been able to attend university, giving them a brighter future. However, this only applies to STEM students, not those who are pursuing a creative discipline.

People choose not to learn when they are under high stress, they have no confidence in their ability to learn, they have no time or encouragement and when they believe that the sacrifices involved are too great and hold no significance. (Claxton, 2006).

The shortfall in funding by reducing expenditure can have major impacts that directly affect the quality of the students' learning.

Within the UWTSD Swansea College of Art campus, the Illustration department has two studio rooms that are meant to house up to forty students per class. This equates to near one hundred on the undergraduate course (excluding those on the Masters), the largest number of students on any course in the university.

These students are already struggling for extra space, and the Illustration staff has been annually applying for any extra rooms that become available. The department also has a computer suite on the floor, but unlike the graphics or advertising departments who have multiple rooms than can accommodate every student, Illustration only has fourteen computers and two scanners for the whole class.

Luckily the numbers of students who use their own iPads and other portable drawing technologies has risen each year allowing them to have better access to developing their work. There are problems that arise with this too, mainly being the complicated downloading of software and it's compatibility with certain pieces of tech (but this fault lies mainly with the manufacturers). Needless to say lecturers should have the ability remain up-to-date with all of the latest digital art forms. Not to mention students who cannot afford the new technology should have access to the latest software too and have the same opportunities as those who can afford it.

When students see the government taking away their department's funding and transferring it to students intent on applying to STEM subjects, this perfectly reinforces Claxton's (2006) belief of students not wanting to learn when they believe their life choices hold no significance for the future. After all, 'creativity takes courage' (Matisse, n.d) so we should be showing those interested in the course that what they want to do has value.

Many cannot handle the stresses of university. A lot of the time they seem to lack the necessary personal resources to cope with the challenges they face. The university offers counseling where it can [6], however due to budget cuts not only have the lecturing staff decreased but so have the councilors. With the decline of mental health among students increasing, [3] it's becoming a greater concern when more come forward with problems that lead to needing extenuating circumstances because they can't meet deadlines.

This places immense pressure on teachers from higher stakeholders because the numbers don't add up. It's a stressful time, and the changes of Covid-19 are an added nightmare.

In the Illustration department the domino effects have taken their tolls on students and staff alike.

In early 2020 teachers were already dealing with added workloads due to loss of colleagues and imminent lockdowns didn't ease the pressure. They were ultimately forced to take on more work when lecturers who were in the vulnerable category were made to stay home and isolate. At this time there were no online classes, and so students' time with lecturers decreased while their workload went up. This began to make students lose confidence in them because they were not garnering as much support as they had before, and their work lacked development and improvement.

By the end of the 2020 academic year multiple students had come forward with complaints about staff professionalism and even went as far as to complain to the Dean. Since then staff have had regular reviews with the heads of department to keep an eye on circumstances.

Once lockdowns were in place situations did appear to improve with teaching being moved to online, where students were allocated time slots as they would have had on campus, and all lecturers could return to teaching.

The lockdown coming over halfway through the year proved a challenge for teachers however due to having to change the delivery of lesson plans. The first years' practical and diverse projects halted due to supplies being difficult to order online (postage delays), and again, if funding is cut from student support, how are students meant to afford brand new supplies each week that they may not use again? Art is a very expensive area; although STEM subjects require a large amount of funding for equipment, (i.e. science labs, machinery etc), it can be argued that Art and Design is no different.

In the UWTSD, almost every department requires a computer suite, printing services, studio space, not to mention appropriate machinery for the glass, engineering and technical applications for film and television. These are just to name a few, but funding is also needed for the applications used on each computer (though they are found on a shared computer system. Not to mention that all of these computers are Apple Macs, and there are around 40 in each computer lab.

We teach Art through transmission, transaction and transformation (Miller, 1996).

By transmission we provide students with sequential knowledge pedagogically to provide context for each brief, and when evaluating their work we consider the criteria provided by the AQA.

By transaction we help students build upon their previous knowledge and experiences by showing them different ways of utilizing the materials around them to create and imagine new projects (Santrock, 2004). Everyone's experiences are different culturally, socially and environmentally and it should be harnessed to construct new meaning.

By transformation we strive to better ourselves as learners, be it student or teacher by bettering our understanding of the wider world through research and sharing work amongst their peers (Narve, 2001).

How can this be done when supplies are limited, time is lessened and access to new forms of expression is halted because of government cuts?

What are teachers for?

'Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition' (Jaques Barzun, n.d).

How can we improve the conditions for staff and students?

It is one large domino effect, and I would say that it all begins with the views of our government. There are so many subcategories, all of which I could write a strong case for but for now I will simply refer to art as a whole.

It has so much significance in in our everyday life and to put a "lower value" on it can effect society' belief of it's relevance. At this rate student numbers will plummet equating to less funding over time to the point where thousands of passionate educators are left out of work.

This of course will always be an ongoing battle, for how can we change the views of those who hold their money at a higher value than someone's livelihood?

If money is indeed the issue then perhaps investing it in something comprehensively acknowledged as a growing concern would be better: counseling.

The statistics above show that people need someone to talk to now more than ever. Universities offer free counseling to students and in the past have had a strong network throughout the university. Due to the cuts however it has become trickier for students to speak with someone, and with the numbers growing it will be harder.

And I am not just speaking for students but staff too. Students and their councilors have access by the university to speak with someone about their stresses. Teachers are not granted this instead they must carry the pressures that students put on them everyday. To this I say all should have the ability to access help when needed.

I would also put forward the notion to improve upon the curriculum of teacher training courses. We are taught about how people learn and the theories surrounding ways of teaching but we are not taught how to deal with talking to students regarding a sensitive subject. That is something we learn while doing our job, but not knowing what to do the first time may make a student lose confidence in your ability to be supportive during their study. To this I would say an element of pastoral care should be implemented into the curriculum to at least aid in the understanding of helping

those who need to talk. This would also lessen stress during their waiting time for a counselor.

To Conclude

There will never be a solution to this problem it will always be an ongoing debate, but to help improve bit by bit with small changes could make the biggest difference.

Where in countries teachers are trained following the PISA criteria, a huge value is put on 'the importance of well-trained, highly motivated and well-compensated teachers' (Robinson, 2015). They are required to have extensive training in the discipline and with ways of connecting with the students, mentoring, managing a classroom and assessing aptitudes. This applies mainly to institutions below post-18 education, however I see it as being very beneficial for us too.

After all, 'the roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet' (Aristotle, n.d)

To improve our mental health it must be spoken about and changes are slowly being made in the university; the students' union is now offering a 'Look After Your Mate Training' session with Connect that is designed to help students learn key skills for aiding a friend suffering with their mental health.

We need more 'personalized, compassionate and community-orientated education' (Robinson, 2015)

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