

PERFORMANCE DESIGN EDUCATION: FUTURE GRADUATE SKILLSETS



On 2nd December 2020, In the midst of COVID-19 restrictions, the Society of British Theatre Designers held the fourth in a series of dynamic dialogues with practitioners based in the East Midlands (and further afield), connected to the *Staging Places* exhibition at the NCCD (National Centre for Craft and Design). The event, *Performance Design Education: future graduate skillsets* was led by the SBTD Education Working Group and facilitated by Nadia Malik (London College of Fashion, UAL). The aim of the three 2-hour seminar sessions was to invite dialogue touching on some of the pressing issues in Performance Design education, with no speakers, only provocations, guided discussions and ‘what ifs’ in a forum for performance practitioners, educators and students alike. The open call for participants was based on this premise:

Performance practice is morphing into a new realm where creative boundaries are porous: practitioners will be able to harness the power of physical proximity and the reach of remote practice in symbiosis. Now is the moment to be to be curious about and playful with the full range of tools and opportunities available to us, to learn to speak the language of other disciplines and to take risks. As we move forward, graduates with expanded perspectives will pioneer fresh forms of storytelling. Through the continuous exchange of industry and education, young practitioners will invent new practices for a future industry that embraces and celebrates the diversity of performance design and making into the future.

Flex: embedding emerging technologies (session 1) aimed to capture thoughts about how we embed the use of technology in artistic practice, the technical support and infrastructures that Higher Education (henceforth referred to as HE) may need to enable this and how we might re-educate and re-skill ourselves as tech-savvy educators.

Flux: remodelling the landscape (session 2) aimed to garner responses around what performance-relevant HE structures and departments might look like, what we might learn from Performance Design education around the world and how we might harness knowledge exchange between students and practitioners.

Fly: imagining the future (session 3) aimed to bring together ideas about as-yet non-existent potential jobs in Performance design and making and think about what skills graduates might need for these future practices.

Below is a summary of the thoughts of a shifting group of academics, practitioners and students over the course of the day. The content does not necessarily represent the personal position of the author or any other individual present, but rather represents the flow of a wide ranging group discussion. There were many points of connection across each session, hence, thoughts are presented here under themed headings without strictly following the named session categories above. The aim is to summarise only the main discussion points of the day and to encourage ongoing frank conversation.

Many thanks to all those who attended and contributed, in particular the co-hosts and ‘provocateurs’: Helen Davies (Nottingham Trent University), Emma Donovan and Jason Wiggin (University of Lincoln), Kate Lane (Central Saint Martins, UAL) and Rob Halliday (freelance Lighting Designer).

The Academic Question

- As part of the wider subject of Design, Design for Performance integrates research, conceptual thinking, prototyping, revisiting, reshaping, making and looking at new technologies and other ways of working. It is a living, iterative process that constitutes critical thinking in its own right: design-led and research-led. This conflicts with the often-held assumption that ‘vocational’ professions are ‘non-academic’, calling into question the value of such degrees more widely in society. In turn, this forces the justification of Design for Performance courses at HE level to be couched in traditionally academic language and activities, such as the written ‘dissertation’, meant to be the synthesised proof of student capacity for critical thinking. While there are courses that offer different options and alternatives to the traditional dissertation, the main reason for being able to talk about design practice in writing might not be to display skill as a critical thinker or to validate the ‘academic-ness’ of HE level design degrees but, rather, to be useful in real professional practice: writing funding applications, applying for residencies etc. Even the REF (Research Excellence Framework), in recent years, has embraced the idea of practice-led research by opening out submission categories which acknowledge the high level of research activity and new knowledge creation inherent and embedded in design practice.
- Careful choices of curriculum and delivery on HE courses could legitimately contribute to, and lead, the shifting landscape of the industry if they were based around design thinking and curriculum innovation, not based around justifying themselves through traditional academic activity and language.

Perfectionism and Messiness

- The constant assessment of young people through the algorithms of the UK primary and secondary education system leaves many students reward driven and grade-obsessed as grades are seen as a marker of progress. This system is at odds with the idea that low or middling marks (considered by many students as ‘failure’) are a point of growth and challenge and an opportunity for change. HE assessment systems do not encourage a culture that mirrors a professional design practice where some projects work well and some offer a greater chance to learn and reapply lessons in the future. It is not surprising that for hitherto high achieving students the final year ‘wobble’ occurs as the realisation dawns that metrics will become meaningless in the next stages of their unknown futures.
- Due to the ‘pay to qualify’ nature of HE, moments to be able to reflect are rare because of packed tick-box curricula, the content of which is impossible to fully absorb. It is not surprising that students coming into the current HE design education environment feel ill at ease.
- Individual or even shared studio areas as a standard requirement of Performance Design education are becoming a thing of the past as universities grow student numbers and so compromise on working spaces: think of the police procedural ‘connections’ wall, but with drawings and research images (although there are digital version of this pinboard style working process). It is not surprising that students find the idea of making a literal or figurative mess hard to understand and accept as a necessary part of artistic practice.
- Multi-screen relationships (computer games, phone and social media, TV) can be said to create a culture of validation through ‘perfectionism’ for young people through the constant consumption of highly manipulated, filtered images disseminated as ‘reality’. There

is a strong sense of students having a practical sense of survival while at university (with many being carers or working their way through their studies) but there is also a strong sense of living through the media moderated pressure of presenting a perfect existence. This comes with restrictions on imagination and no clear headspace in which to be creative / free / messy. It is not surprising that large numbers of students in creative subjects are accessing wellbeing services.

- The above factors combined lead to a sense of privacy in students which makes the sharing of process a less natural, more alien habit. Often, good ideas are missed through the curation of development processes where drawings are left out as they are considered too ‘messy’ to show. This makes it increasingly difficult to persuade students that the link between conceptual thinking and a finished outcome requires a sideways-branching continuous amorphous feedback process and that *that* probing and building towards something unknown is part of the point of working with other people and a large part of how to develop an artistic practice. Therefore, the basis of an artistic education, and fundamental to a design educator’s role might be approaches such as:
 - building student confidence in feeling like the individual artistic expression of one’s voice is worth pursuing and that people want to hear it. With this focus on confidence first, the person is better developed to engage in a meaningful way with the digital and / or physical skills they learn through their course *because* they want to use those skills to express something.
 - providing the experience of being someone who is prepared to share both development and finished work and accept different incarnations of feedback.

- providing the means to spend three years developing a clear personal independent practice, regardless of which area is studied, in order to emerge as a ‘survivalist’ knowing how to use particular skills to flex and make money.
- embedding inventive ways to facilitate clear headspace, time for play and time for taking part in activities which are not directly related to courses. By offering time for such activities (mindfulness, planting, cycling etc.) we can improve attention span and create the kinds of moments where reflection and problem solving naturally happen.

The Emerging Creative Technologies Transition

- The labour of educational practice is shifting its focus due to blended learning. At the forefront of the discussion around staff wellbeing are a) the time and workload of planning and preparing different kinds of content and delivery and b) the exhaustion of constantly animating and engaging online classrooms. This long-term shift in teaching practice should be supported by agile and long-term shifts in institutional structures and expectations (such as different kinds of technical support and teaching buy-out for training / upskilling).
- It is important to realise that educators are facilitators: individuals do not necessarily need to become experts in every piece of available creative software. Rather, teams collectively need to enable the next generation of designers to become the experts in digital creative practice by letting students loose to play with both software that is (made) available to them through institutions and through software that is more widely available to them directly for free or at low cost. Like any artistic practice, no two practitioners will use a piece of software in the same way, not everyone will like or suit every piece of

software, there may be access issues and software may quickly become redundant without constant updates. The facilitation, then, becomes enabling students to feel that they are able to pick up any creative digital software with the understanding that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is life-long.

- Students often have more knowledge than tutors regarding the culture and use of apps and social media and they could teach us how to change our teaching practices using these kinds of platforms in order to bridge gaps which may exist.
- Software acquisition and yearly licence maintenance is expensive when graduates no longer have institutional licenses and some employers expect designers to have certain programmes. As there is not a standardised digital landscape within the performance industry and all software programmes don't necessarily 'talk' to each other, part of learning how to use different software should be about the real life cost of maintaining a creative digital practice: factoring in software licencing into fees, ways to ask employers to subsidise software etc.
- Experienced practitioners and educators have a shared shorthand vocabulary of industry terminologies that refer to physical things (for example '8 x 4 rostra' or 'godet') which students who are expressing digital design work for physical realisation would not automatically have as reference points. Exchanges in the development of digital design work may need to nurture these reference points so that students have an understanding of a) whether something might be possible in real life and b) the kind of vocabulary they might be receiving as graduates in industry.
- There is a shared responsibility through education and industry to develop a vocabulary that fits different modes of communication

across digital and physical platforms so that collaborators select the right words to get what is wanted or needed.

- There is a huge lag in terms of applying creative digital technologies in Performance Design education. We could learn from architecture and other fields to embed and embrace a broader scope of skills and knowledge and empower the student body for their futures. The conversation and sensory feedback between eyes and hands and brain may not go away in terms of a thinking process and critical enquiry, but how a design proposal is communicated could be through any platform, physical or digital.
- As with physical processes, educators cannot assume the level of digital literacy that each new student starts with, but students are specifically asking for more creative digital skills because they understand digital fluency as something useful for their employability in a competitive industry.
- Technology can become a tool to enable one to complete a design job or a material for content production for those who want to become auteur-director-designers. There is Research & Development money available to creative technologists for content driven immersive technology, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, all of which relate or can relate to performance making.
- Although there are very large and exciting areas of design as a collaborative practice which embraces new skills based on emerging innovations, this idea is not transferring into theatres very smoothly. Such environments can feel stuck in a 'theatre-only' mode which does not readily speak across other design disciplines. This potentially renders theatre placements unappealing and 'dull' to a generation that understands the influence and language of screen media more easily through its accessibility.

- There is a note of caution regarding the aim to become multiskilled designers as quickly as possible in every piece of available software, that is, the technological transition is likely to be a slow burning change for the whole industry so we need to take as many people as possible with us on this journey at an effective pace. As well as students, we need to educate wider industry collaborators on how to absorb and integrate into their own practices ‘different ways of looking’. For example, 3D virtual bodies and environments can confuse some collaborators in terms of understanding how scale, perspective and moving / flying through a scene might translate into a workable live format.
- There may be a divide between graduates that want to become individual practitioner pioneers (flexible working across design, events, exhibitions, performance collectives, community work etc. who need agility in software skills) and those that want to work for a company/institution. There may continue to be a slightly uneasy compromise within curricula in relation to this and some courses may embrace or reject this compromise more easily than others. Overall a range of courses with unique identities should exist that collectively appeal to a range of young people wanting to join the creative industries in different ways.

HE Structures

- The modular / options model of HE is coming back into conversations about degree structures so that students can be offered choice and are enabled to self-navigate through their education.
- Pre-degree art and design foundation courses are a time to ‘learn to unlearn’ the ingrained conventions of secondary education curriculum content and structures. With fewer young people choosing this route

before attending a design-related degree course (the differences in artistic and contextual thinking, personal maturity, willingness to experiment and quality of design thinking are clear) there is good reason to re-consider running the first year of design-related degrees like a foundation year. The next two years might then become specialist or modular, moving more towards the idea of two-year or 'accelerated' degrees which are starting to be adopted.

- In some ways, the performance industry is insular in the sense that there is a tendency to talk about the benefits and necessity of collaboration but then only collaborate with each other, without considering the whole design sector or other sectors. A revised version of what were once termed 'electives' may be an interesting way of enabling students to bring true interdisciplinary thinking and influence back to their main subjects, which is when the most interesting work happens.
- As educators we should / could be enabled able to think about the long term possibilities and best structures that extend outwards from and support the central subject of Design for Performance, embracing concept driven and narrative led projects, for example, the screen and interactive digital performance, gaming etc.
- HE Design for Performance courses are well practiced and good at articulating what the most useful skills are in current professional practice and providing students with the opportunities to learn them, enabling employability for current, known job roles. However, HE may not be brave enough in supporting the development of academic degrees that dare to challenge this status quo and aim to develop the practitioners that will redesign and reinvent what current professional practices could be. This status quo exists in the UK not because of a failure to recognise the value of reinvention but because of the risk to

economic sustainability. There is a strength in the state funded university system of other countries which allow courses and students to feel entitled to reinvent what they want their futures to be, rather than be successful in what happens already. As 'academia' heads in one direction, perhaps Performance Design education should seek out alternative platforms and structures that are equally as valid or aim to radically rethink internal structures. The following ideas were discussed that would require universities to be brave enough to embrace or pilot different ways of working with Design for Performance courses:

- Move to a Bauhaus or LEM model, equally known for innovative approaches to performance / design education.
- Create courses that do not run inside particular buildings and are not necessarily attached to one / a university, but that are run by pooling hubs of students into communities to create hive minds that explore design possibilities virtually.
- Move to a degree model based on a series of residencies and / or laboratories, focusing on play, sharing, experimentation, exploration and process (akin to some Arts council R&D grants), not on end results. This would build in the ability to understand a real learning journey that does not consist of tick boxes and that dispels perfectionism through assessing process (if assessed at all), not final outcomes.
- Get rid of universities all together.
- Remove grades and grade boundaries or move to pass / fail modules only in order to create innovative practitioners. The continuation of grading feels like a prehistoric and pointless approach for a creative industry where portfolio work is key (no-

one asks about degree results and good grades do not automatically lead to employment), staff workloads are too high, there is not a magic formula that ensures high-level achievement and the idea of 'loosing marks' restricts students from real experimentation / making a mess / making mistakes.

- Be brave enough to look at discipline-specific needs rather than considering all students across all subjects as having the same needs – there is some danger in the 'semblance' of parity in all elements of education which can then leave legitimate resourcing requirements lacking in certain areas.
- Become truly interdisciplinary – work meaningfully with music / history / science departments / external partners rather than just across Performance Design specialisms.

Community

- We have an opportunity now to rethink the relationship between design and 'civic-ness' as theatre spaces, while not in use, become less economically viable in their traditional incarnations. A new purpose is needed for these buildings within communities. Students could have the opportunity to claim large mainstage spaces as labs in which to explore, rather than the usual small studio spaces which have limited resources. If mainstage spaces 'belonged' more to the populations who consume their outputs, the impetus to save such spaces from ruin may be more forthcoming. Derby Theatre is currently the only model of a 'learning theatre' (note *learning* rather than *teaching*). A fluid chain of commitment from the Arts Council, theatres and HE institutions could enable universities to use main stages for radical play and radical thinking as well as for training (rigging lights,

flying etc). Towns, cities and localities are crying out for reinvention, which Performance Designers could lead, alongside scientists and engineers, for effective social change.

- We should not underestimate *communal* as part of this process of reinventing *community* spaces. We should celebrate moments of coming together and how energising this is. Out of the best studio practices of being with others, eating together and the empathetic aspects and accidents of human contact, come brave ideas, questions and co-creation.
- While students have / are enjoying the efficiency of blended learning for the most part and institutions and the government may see this as a cheaper model of education delivery long term, Design for Performance students have also expressed a craving for being together and making work together and the guidance and reassurance that comes with this.

Graduate Pathway Potentials

- There is a mythical, unsustainable and dysfunctional Performance Design career trajectory (known designer of a popular show on a main stage at a world-renowned venue) enabled by the idea of ‘worthy’ design work which designers ‘hold out’ for. Practically, this perpetuates insecure future earnings and psychologically this perpetuates the acceptance of commercial work as either soul destroying or something to be kept as a guilty secret. The anxiety and paralysis this brings could be dismantled through embracing a more permeable approach to initiating and participating in conversations within the wider design sector and through alignment with partners other than the Arts Council, for example, the Design Council. Only by

being seen and conversing through wider platforms will those outside Performance Design begin to understand why performance designers are needed in related areas.

- The performance industry is currently under unprecedented threat and there are not enough jobs for the number of graduates coming out of universities year on year. There is common ground between designing for performance and designing for events, exhibitions, retail environments and commercial work. Acknowledging that moving between these roles may come with learning and development, this kind of flexibility is much more widely accepted, even usual, outside the UK as these roles require the ability to visually communicate a narrative. Emerging technologies and creative digital practice should enable students and graduates to communicate proposals without losing the thing that is vital to what we do: understanding the atmosphere and anticipation that designers create in their practice. If performance designers embrace emerging creative technologies perhaps the longevity of practice and employment will build and last in these related areas, (for example, creating retail brand experiences and environments *is* theatre) because Performance Design is so narrative driven. People yearn for an ‘experience’ outside as well as inside traditional performance platforms.
- So that the transition out of university is seamless and expectations are not unrealistic, university structures and content should acknowledge that design work in theatre only keeps very few people afloat which necessitates a revised and honest understanding of what a career ecology in the 21st century might look like. Preparing students to think about the sustainability of a career / practice and a work / life choice may entail how to build a successful design career trajectory over 3 or 4 years which includes simultaneously layering and juggling traditional design jobs, establishing something which

might require entrepreneurial or self-producing drive, pitching for commercial work and taking ‘jobs for money’ as a necessary support. This requires a focus in HE on retaining various sets of problem-solving skills in curricula that can be applied to all environments (including confidence and resilience), not perpetuating an elitist or traditional attitude to the boundaries of art / retail / commerce / events etc.

- Students need to be tech conversant to be employable – some performance designers employ interior architecture and product design graduates as assistants because these students have the 3D modelling skills that performance students are not currently using as standard or embedded practice.
- Learn from the architecture studio practice model: a group of practitioners at different points in their career and experience who work together on multiple projects at one time and can provide different services; a studio of design thinkers that local theatres, the public health board, commercial companies, politicians etc. could come to as a group practice of problem solving design thinkers.
- Learn from the fashion ‘incubator’ model: some European universities fund a studio space / shared practice for a set number of years beyond graduation which allows transitional development with business support.

Potential Considerations for the SBTD

Technology

- Investigate the possibility of software licensing (like institutional licensing) that becomes an optional member benefit (with an annual

fee supplement) to reduce ongoing subscription and software licensing costs for individual designers.

- Facilitate blogposts or videos from different practitioners using a wide range of software from basic to complicated and from free to expensive. Additionally, 'compare and contrast' blogposts (for example Autocad v Vectorworks) would be useful.
- Compile an annual report on available digital tools from free / low cost to high-end.

Pedagogy

- Compile a list of Performance Design courses from around world that are using exciting / unusual pedagogical approaches.

Mentoring students and staff

- Invite students and graduates to talk to designers about working both in an analogue way and digitally – a voice from outside courses to talk about digital futures.
- Provide digital portfolio surgeries.
- Facilitate regular conversations or spaces for cross institutional Performance Design educators to 'play' and learn from each other - a safe space for radical provocations, outrageous thinking and developing the confidence and support mechanisms to be able to make change where it might be needed.

Wider conversations

- Discuss ways in which the Arts council could request budget for tech support, perhaps through funding applications, so that companies and employers are obliged to financially support whatever software a designer might be using in some way.
- Digital showcasing: digital platforms have allowed us to showcase student work in more exciting ways with a wider reach than in previous years without the usual cost of mounting poorly attended exhibitions, however, the concurrent influx of 2020 online showcases may have saturated industry interest. Maintaining industry engagement with online exhibitions is something that the SBTD could help HE performance educators to think about because this showcasing format could remain a first choice for institutions.
- Physical showcasing: theatres can house and enable traditional skillsets within them but not necessarily multidisciplinary skillsets. SBTD could help to negotiate / support a manifesto where theatres, as partners, guarantee an opportunity for graduate shows locally so that graduates and institutions take examples of multidisciplinary to local theatres and audiences (revisit the 'learning theatre' model that the performance courses at Derby University are part of).

Summary Speculations

- As educators we are open to and aware of the value of multidisciplinary as part of student learning. We are training, or want to train, students to have skills across multiple areas and across digital and physical landscapes so that they can lead the future of the industry, however courses and institutional structures separate specialisms from one another and limit innovation. There is also

evidence that industry may be slow and / or reticent to embrace multidisciplinary. This is a circle which maintains a status quo, even though students want to acquire multidisciplinary and more creative digital skills.

- There is a school of thought which champions design and design led thinking as a third pathway which draws on both sides of the split between humanities and sciences in secondary education. Design, by its very nature, is a cross platform, cross disciplinary, problem-solving practice. Performance Design in particular is an indefinable, rebellious art form with many moving components meaning that it is, above all, collaborative. We have to work *with* and *for* teams and audiences and there is an ongoing need for multidisciplinary as well as for core skills and specialisms. HE should reflect this by finding brave ways to create the gamechangers of tomorrow. More vital now than ever is the ability to be flexible and innovative in HE and to bring to graduation cohorts of students who have broad skillsets and the adaptability and flexibility to be able to pick up new creative technologies with ease and fluency.
- There is a need to educate for versatility: basic physical making with basic physical tools with restrictions and with simplistic, resourceful ways of achieving required results as well as methods of working with creative technologies. Students will have and develop different competencies and relate to different formats and different modes of live and mediated performance differently. For students, practitioners and educators our journey together is about finding and expressing our individual voice within the possibilities that exist and balancing exact processes and creativity as innovative, resilient, pragmatic problem solvers.

- While Continuous Professional Development is ongoing, we are in a particular period of enforced change with opportunities to rethink our ways of being in the world as educators of artistic practice. The hope is that we can collectively transition to a more effective combination of the uses of physical and virtual creative competencies in our practices and teaching and that a blended combination of tools and experience will evolve for individuals and across teams. However, this transition cannot come at the cost of our health and it is up to us, our institutions, our industry and our students to keep these conversations live, together, so our borders remain porous.
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