

Mentoring Artists Today

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Being an artist today involves many challenges. In our demographically, technologically, and economically evolving society young people trained as artists must redefine their role. Years ago, artistic skills training seemed perfectly fine; nowadays this is very much in question. It is important that students receive more balanced training that prepares them for the current society.

When I entered Higher Arts Education in 2009, first as lecturer and then Head of Department and later on as Dean and professor of four art campuses that covered all aspects of art and design, we were aware that we had to prepare the students for the 21st century. This meant not just train them as good artists but also providing them with other skills needed to make a career.

I was lucky myself to work at the PhD level on practice-based topic in arts education. The School of Education at the University of Leeds already had experience in this area. This gave me the opportunity to research and reflect on the domain I had been active in for the previous ten years as a practitioner – opera educator. When I started my career, we learned by doing.

In Flanders there was no formal training in arts education at the time. This has changed vastly over the years, but back we were all pioneers.

The background was very helpful in rethinking curricula in the arts as practice and academia came together. At the Faculty, we had lengthy discussions and reflections on the future role of artists and artists as arts education and how to combine art research, theory and practice into our courses. Art curricula require a combination of hard technique combined with soft skills. Practice-based research and projects with an interdisciplinary component connect with the student's creative skills seemed critical.

We wanted to train people very specific artistic skills, as well as skills they could use to challenge today's technological, economic and social issues. Thus, we wanted them to be ready for jobs that might not even exist yet. When digital media design course started in 2000, for instance, barely anyone was talking about digital strategy let alone about online advertising, yet many of our students moved into that area upon graduation and made a difference.

I strongly believe that artists can make us think about and reflect on social issues, creating a certain uneasiness with the status quo and even defining new standards. In Dutch we call this 'de onmaat van de Kunst' (going against the beat). Art is not always on the same pace and that is how it makes reflect. Artists today have an important role in making us aware of the unseen and showing us what needs our attention. An artist must question everything to make us question everything.

As such, Artists play important roles on interdisciplinary teams working on organizational and societal issues. Their

creative skills should be harnessed in domains other than the arts. In an age where technology and artificial intelligence are taking over in science and society, someone who can think differently, critical and in fresh ways is of utmost values.

When looking at the 21st skills now needed in education, many of them are related to the arts: creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving (although I would prefer to call it ‘going for the best possible solution’) solution based working and going for the best possible solution), collaboration, social and cross-cultural interaction as well as communication and leadership. These could easily be integrated into the BA, MA and PhD level in higher arts education and beyond.

Many of these skills are implicit to the arts. What it needs extra attention is creative leadership, collaboration and co-creation, interdisciplinary work and cross-cultural interaction. I have always supported interdisciplinary projects within the faculty and have been pleased to give shape to courses such as Design Thinking and Active Design Processes. These courses focus on societal and human-centred issues, where collaboration, co-creation with non-designers/artists, creative leadership, and solution-based work are key. In this way, we teach future artists look beyond their comfort zone and show them how their expertise impact society.

Teaching them how to function in an interdisciplinary team is my new mission. The nicest complement you can get as an educator is to meet one of your students few years later and be told how much they learned from the course.