

**See what happens!** - The value of creative experimentation through materials

## **Interim Report**

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### **Abstract**

Experimentation is widely recognised as being fundamental to developing an individual and agile creative practise within art and design. From our experience as educator-practitioners we have perceived a decline in our students' ability to experiment with materials as part of the creative process in the making of 3D objects and artefacts. Therefore the primary purpose of this research is to strengthen the relationship between the role and value of creative experimentation through materials and risk taking and the Higher Education curricula in Three Dimensional Art and Design.

We are using case study methodology to collect qualitative data, observing and interviewing students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and professional practitioners. The first phase of data collection focuses on gathering baseline information on student and professional attitudes and engagement with material experimentation. The research looks specifically at the field of Metalwork and expects to uncover a variety of definitions of material experimentation within this field. The final phase explores teaching strategies to support experimentation through a series of Creative Workshop Forums.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is material experimentation in Three Dimensional Art and Design practice - is there a coherent methodology?
2. Why do students and professional makers need to experiment?
3. How do they experiment?
4. What impinges on this experience and what stimulates creative play?
5. How can experimentation and risk taking be supported within a Higher Education curriculum?

### **Research Methodology**

This research project is predominantly qualitative using a flexible approach with some quantitative data produced through questionnaires. The individualistic nature of creativity is reflected in allowing theories to emerge from the research (grounded theory), for example allowing a definition, or definitions of material experimentation to emerge through interviews with artists. We are essentially looking for rich, detailed information that would be found within methods such as: semi-structured interviews and unobtrusive observation. Data is triangulated through collection by several methods.

The research project is essentially a case study of undergraduate and postgraduate students and professional metalwork artists and designers. We are collecting data on 22 Level 1 students who are in the early stages of their development from the MDES/MFA 3D Materials Practice and 3D Design course at the University of Brighton.

Baseline information, on how and why undergraduate students experiment, will be collected by a variety of methods. We are using **detached observation** to observe behaviour directly i.e. listening to what is said and watching what is done. We are adopting a naturalistic approach, which will minimize interference with the natural progression of students' work. Initially we ask the students to make a **mind map** to define material experimentation, which is a process that they are generally familiar with. We are also asking students to keep **journals**: a short document recording their process and thinking chronologically alongside their activities throughout the project. This will be useful to triangulate information alongside observation and to draw out information for further interviews. Each student will also fill in a **self-completion questionnaire** in order for us to gain specific and background information.

Looking at the **artefacts** students generate will enable collection of primary evidence, again observing directly what people actually do, rather than what they say or write that they do. Throughout we will use a variety of **recording methods** including, photography, video and audio where appropriate. For comparison we are interviewing and looking at the work of 4-6 postgraduate level students on the MA Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Jewellery and Metalwork course at RCA, who are at an advanced level of learning. We are also interviewing 4 metalwork artists who are fully established and recognised in a professional context through the inclusion of their work in the V&A collections. From this we expect to establish definitions of material experimentation and values placed on it, as well as methods employed in experimentation.

In both cases, we will use **semi-structured interviews** based on a schedule of topics, including: open questions, probes and prompts. This will enable some comparability across interview and importantly will allow the interviewee's own individual narrative to emerge. The professional artist interviews will be accompanied by audio/video recording.

The small sample size will result in observations specific to this community but we consider that they are likely to be relevant to a wider community of students in other UK Universities and professionals from metalwork and other three dimensional fields.

This baseline research will form the basis for the planning and delivery of four **Creative Workshop Forums**, working with groups of students and professional artists. These will set up and explore teaching strategies, which

create situations and environments, which impinge and stimulate creative experimentation, risk-taking, and playing with materials. Information will be gathered through observation, interview, journals and the creative work made. Both the Forums and the CETLD Design Scholarship Seminar to be held on the 17th September 2008, with invited students/staff and artists, will enable discussion and offer feedback on the project.

### **Ethical Considerations**

We are collecting data from students who we also teach and assess, raising questions of impartiality at subsequent assessments, confidentiality, and obligation for students to take part in the research. The following solutions were presented and approved at the University of Brighton Faculty of Art and Design Ethic Committee.

We removed the connection between research and assessment by the same staff by employing a research assistant to collect data and employing a Visiting Lecturer to teach the learning project to the students. We also communicated clearly to the students that taking part in the research observation was separate to the learning project, and would have no affect on assessment of the work.

Taking part in the research was voluntary and we ensured that there was no coercion of the students to take part in the research. We used consent forms and also verbally informed the students of all the implications of taking part in the study before they participated.

We have ensured that the students' anonymity and confidentiality is kept as far as possible in the collection and storage of data and the research project as a whole, for example, photography includes work and working hands rather than faces and questionnaires are anonymous.

We have been careful to ensure that the learning experience was the same for all students whether involved in the research or not, and that their learning experiences were not changed through the process of collecting data. Where ever possible employing unobtrusive methods for example: observation with minimal intervention and recording normal discussion occurring in teaching and learning reviews.

### **Project Progress**

We have gathered a range of data from a one-day project run with two groups of 11 undergraduate students in March 2008. The project brief (see appendix 1) listed three groups of words relating to metal qualities, process, and concept / actions. The students were asked to produce a series of experiments that explored and made connections between selected words from the three groups. Each experiment was made using a square of copper or gilding metal sheet 30 x 30 x 0.9mm in size and the students could use of a

variety of metal hand techniques that they were already familiar with which included Piercing, Soldering, Drilling, Forming, Doming, etc. Alongside this they were asked to reflect on what they were doing in a written and visual journal.

The day began with the research assistant introducing the research project, outlining the methods of data collection, student participation and the consent forms (see appendix 2). The students then completed a mind map for the phrase 'Material Experimentation'. The lecturer approached teaching the students in the usual way, introducing the project, discussing work with individual students as the work progressed, questioning decisions and assisting with technical help. The project was closed with completion of the written questionnaire\*, (see appendix 3) with a spoken version offered to students if preferred, allowing for dyslexia. This was followed by a group discussion to reflect on the work led by the lecturer, which lasted half an hour.

Work in progress was photographed, written observation made by the researcher assistant, and end of day review was recorded. A parallel nonrecorded review was available for students who opted out of participating in the research. However in both projects all students agreed to take part.

Analysis of post hoc data starts with a meeting in May with the full team, followed by selection and interview of 4 professional metalwork artists from the V&A collections (see appendix 4) and interviews with postgraduate students.

Further research and development includes:

- attending a workshop for writing for research journals run by The Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton and a CETLD seminar in ethics.
- attending 'Materials in Art and Design Education' - a one day conference to explore the role of materials in art and design education at the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining, London.
- establishing subject links such as: Arts Council, Hove Museum, Craft Innovation and a description of the project has been included in Artist Profile on Cynthia Cousens for Artist Newsletter ([www.a-n.net](http://www.a-n.net))

\*The questionnaire was piloted with 4 students in February 2008, particularly on how long it took them to complete, and whether the information and questions were clear. It took between 9 and 14 minutes to complete and some minor adjustments were made to the information and questions.

### **Project Timetable**

Nov 2007 - Oct 2008

(for a full timetable see appendix 5)

CETLD Design Scholarship Seminar 4 pm 17<sup>th</sup> September 2008

**Project Team**

Cynthia Cousens project leader

Avril Wilson project leader

Patrick Letchska

Hans Stofer

Tom Ainsworth research assistant for undergraduate data collection