

Research Project

National College of Art and Design

**An Examination into the Lack of Creative Design Education within
the Current Irish Post Primary School Art Curriculum**

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When examining the Irish Junior and Leaving Certificate Art curricula from the perspective of a prospective teacher, one can only be left wanting when they arrive at the content specified for design. It is common for many students who are currently studying for their Leaving Certificate to begin an exploration of college courses and career paths, finding one that resonates with them, and more often than not, links back to an element of their education that they found interesting. However, upon examining the educational concepts that underpin the teaching of design in second level education, we are left with much to be desired. From this, I began thinking about our future designers - how can we allow young Irish designers to discover and reach their potential when we have little structure to nourish their interests within the school system? I feel as though the unprecedented events of the Covid-19 pandemic, and their lasting impact on the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations through introduction of calculated grading systems and the suspension of certain exam elements, constitute a re-evaluation and reformation of not only the assessment process, but also the fundamental elements of the post primary curriculum namely, the narrow and somewhat dated curriculum for visual art. Design at its core, as discussed by Vitta (1985), is an amalgamation of the product, process, and the designer themselves; combining both the role of the designed product at hand, with the layers of impact it may have on the designer themselves and the wider world. When examining design from this standpoint, its importance seems undeniably obvious. Despite this, within the Junior and Leaving Certificate curricula, the lack of reference to or inclusion of design is abrupt. In spite of the National Council for

Curriculum Assessment's multitude of references to building upon 'creativity', 'inspiration' and 'guided discovery', the curriculum is resistant to change, and the shape of post primary education has remained the same for close to a century, (NCCA, 2019).

This research essay will explore the lack of emphasis placed on creative design education at post primary level in Ireland, particularly within the area of visual art. It seeks to reveal the reasons as to why practising art teachers are so hesitant to challenge the current curriculum. This will provoke conversation into why design education at post primary level in Ireland seems so overlooked, and will provide the basis for future conversations within this under researched area. Throughout the visual art second level curriculum, the institutionalised gap between fine art and design is extremely prevalent. However, when we turn to the other subject courses expecting to find some element of design, we are left wanting. Consequently, it seems as though the area of design is completely overlooked, and its importance diminished. The perceived lack of emphasis and course structure placed on design perpetuates the idea that only fine art specialisms exist within the visual art curriculum, and design does not hold a place within it. What example is this setting for students when their studied curriculum pushes design aside in favour of fine art, and almost absent mindedly perpetuates an idea of 'design as less than'?

Through extensive research, reading, interviewing practising art teachers and drawing upon my findings, the purpose of this research is to highlight the lack of emphasis on design within the visual art curriculum, and reveal why it is not being brought to the fore. Through interviews with practising art teachers, I have

documented their thoughts, opinions and issues, in order to understand the reasoning behind the lack of design education. This has allowed me to consider whether the issue lies within the curriculum itself, a lack of support for fine art specialist teachers, or is it the perpetuation of fine art as ‘real’ art within the curriculum.

Background to the Current Post Primary Art Curriculum:

When beginning to examine the current Junior and Leaving Certificate Art Curricula, we must begin with the Leaving Certificate Specification. Art, as referred to by the NCCA, is a process through which ‘The generation of new ideas and methods and the making of new work and objects is the definition of what it is to be innovative.’, (NCCA, 2019, p.6). The underpinning of Leaving Certificate Art divides the subject into three strands: Research, Create and Respond. This is a large jump from the three strands at Junior Cycle, namely, Art, Craft and Design. At Leaving Certificate level, the specification seems to be devoid of all direct relevance to creative design, bar its offhand inclusion within Design Communication Graphics. Within the curriculum, art and design are almost completely divided into separate subjects - with art being referred to as a social science and Design Communication Graphics as an applied science. As such, we can already see the curriculum rooting its somewhat meagre mentions of design firmly away from the more creative selection of social science subjects. In short, design is not seen as a creative process.

Despite the changes to both the Leaving and Junior Cycle curricula in recent years, namely the transformative shift to student-centred pedagogy in the 1970s, and the introduction of both the Transition Year and Leaving Cert Applied programmes in the 1990s, the post primary curriculum has been hesitant to change its structure.

Despite the rewording and reformatting of syllabi to become more ‘learner focused’ and to allow students to ‘learn by doing’, the curriculum is still heavily influenced by grading and result systems, and leaves very little room for student and teacher exploration or for experimental teaching methodologies (DES, 2017). While the post primary curriculum will always be somewhat rooted within academia and the need for subject discipline, the more this is challenged by educators, the more likely we are to be able to introduce students to broader ways of learning and thinking. This would allow them access to beneficial skills such as design and design thinking. Furthermore, as Creighton *et al* (2022) suggests, the possibilities and use of creative design education within a reformed curriculum would be endless. This would allow for ‘more divergent student thinking, overcoming the fear of failure and rejecting the constant search for ‘the right answer’ (Creighton *et al.* 2022, p3). The current state of affairs and treatment of design education within the visual art curriculum seems to be as follows; to take the term design and add it into the syllabus for effect. In reality the lack of infrastructure and emphasis within the course system itself prohibits any development of this subject area or any integration into lesson plans for practising art teachers.

The current curriculum at Junior Cycle level is also underpinned by the teaching of eight specific student-centred key skills, something that may hopefully make its way into the Leaving Certificate curriculum. These skills, to be addressed across all subject areas within the three year curriculum, highlight *inter alia* the importance of ‘creativity’, ‘working with others’ and ‘managing myself’. The current view on the Junior Cycle examinations are slowly but surely moving away from the traditional rote learning approach, and more emphasis is placed on classroom assessment rather

than nationwide certification (NCCA, 2019). Furthermore, when considering these new adaptations in relation to visual art:

The curriculum approach embodies much of the essential language of design: the emphasis on problem-solving, promotion of collaborative work and crucially the shift from the rote learning model fostered by a rigid terminal exam to one that fosters divergent thinking (Creighton *et al* 2022, p3).

However, this contrasts greatly with the current Leaving Certificate specification. Despite the advances made at Junior Cycle level, the overall Leaving Certificate art curriculum leaves much to be desired. Specifically, the lack of opportunity within lessons for the inclusion and education of creative design is disappointing at best. Students currently view the subject as one they should give little consideration to, if not leave off their radar altogether. Evidence of this comes directly from a finding by the Art Teachers Association of Ireland (ATAI) (2016, cited in Jordan and O'Donohue, 2018, p.577), that between 2011 to 2016, the uptake of art at Leaving Cert level dropped by over 10%. This decline has also seen a large negative impact on the amount of funding and attention allocated to the art department within various schools, along with the introduction of more part-time contracts for art teachers than any other subject area (McGrath, 2016). This, accompanied by the lack of inclusion of design within the curriculum in the first place, demonstrates the need for inclusivity and change. The subject area is not going to reform itself, and it behoves prospective teachers like myself and practising educators to highlight this. The recent campaign by the ATAI is a step in the right direction where both art teachers and students created a campaign to persuade Irish policymakers to reform the outdated curriculum for Leaving Certificate art. By taking 'to the corridors of schools and the streets of their towns to highlight the power of the arts and call for reform' (Keogh,

2019, p.1), they demonstrated the desire and need for a new curriculum - one that encourages the use and education of design within it.

As defined by the NCCA (2019, p.6), 'Art' in its broadest sense, is referred to as 'fine art, design and craft in a range of traditional, contemporary, new and/or digital media'. Within the curriculum, art and design are strongly separated into separate subject strands, namely art and design communication graphics. Herein lies the issue, why has the NCCA been so divisive in the splitting of these areas, to then reinclude design within the art curriculum specification, without providing any infrastructure or support for it to become viable?

A lack of Design at Leaving Cert Level - an interview with Leigh Ellis (2022)

When drawing upon the aforementioned research into the current curriculum, I began to wonder why many practising art teachers are so hesitant to advocate for change within such a rigid curriculum, particularly with the recent uptake of applications to single discipline art colleges (HEA, 2022). I interviewed practising art teacher Leigh Ellis to gain a further insight into the discrepancy between Art and Design at Leaving Certificate level. It seems as though design is placed within the art classroom and the curriculum as a token measure, when in reality it does not hold the same standard of importance as fine art disciplines. When discussing the lack of emphasis placed on design education, it seems that there are two issues to be identified - the lack of information and infrastructure within the curriculum, and the lack of comfortability fine art specialist teachers have within this area. When asked, Ellis (2022) confessed that her teaching, albeit not heavily considered before, may be a 'bit one sided', leaning more toward the art areas of the curriculum, rather than the

limited design ones. Specialising in ceramics herself, Ellis believes that for many teachers there is ‘fear within the unknown’, especially when it comes to introducing design elements into the classroom. Not having previously specialised within a design area, these teachers may not be able to provide the support needed when bringing students through a design based scheme, so would rather avoid it altogether.

Ellis also draws on an aforementioned point - the categorising of design into an applied science subject (NCCA, 2019), stating that while the DCG curriculum may touch on the more functional aspects of design, ‘there are very few ‘play’ opportunities where students can try to expand/adapt or enhance a product’ (Ellis, 2022). Conversely, we have the seemingly more playful art curriculum, yet a large discrepancy in the amount of emphasis placed on design elements. Even when considering curating lessons for students myself, as a hopeful graduate in a design field, I and many other teachers are left in a catch-22 situation particularly when preparing students for the Leaving Certificate Art examination; design is either to be ignored completely, or taught in a way which the process is misaligned within the marking scheme.

At surface level, the NCCA specification notes art as a subject open to both fine art and design practices. However, when examining past successful Leaving Certificate submissions, and looking at the overarching curriculum, two options seem apparent. We can break away from what has always been successful, that is, fine art practice, and instead focus on design based practices, but risk unknown consequences with our students around results time. Or, conversely, we can perpetuate the standard that design is almost nonexistent within the art curriculum. Students are left with little to

no options, stuck within a curriculum that looks at design as something strictly functional, something that exists to do, rather than to be and create, and teachers are left in uncertainty, unable to show students design as a creative process, and a viable option at third level. Many teachers themselves avoid the introduction of design schemes as the grading ‘could be pretty detailed, and extremely harsh at times’ (Ellis, 2022), and through this fear of the unknown, teachers are hesitant to push for change within the curriculum.

In an international educational review in 1991, Ireland’s post primary curriculum was described as ‘a derivation from the classical humanist tradition with an overlay of technological subjects’ (OECD, 1991, p. 68), and while the new and proposed curriculum models give way for elements of change, without the support and infrastructure for practising and training teachers our education system will be unable to take advantage of these changes and utilise them. Consequently, our education system will remain overlain with technological subjects, without any successful implementation or cross curricular action. A key example of this arose when speaking to Ellis, who discussed an increasing interest in digital drawing among her students. Yet, this is avoided within exam work due to a perceived lack of support from the Department of Education, and a lack of training surrounding this subject matter. As Ellis noted, teachers are left wondering ‘how do I support or grade this work?’. Furthermore, in recent years there have been criticisms of the use of technology in classrooms, and of technology subject areas as a whole, ‘as they typically place a dominant focus on the artefact over the process’ that led to its development. (Creighton *et al*, (2022) p3). Through the use of technology in education, we are often product driven, removing the exploration and development

phases. ‘This is commonly as a result of the traditional vocational emphasis within the subject areas and an assessment-driven culture within the post-primary school system’ (Creighton, *et al*, 2022). In an art classroom, there is much more emphasis on the process over the product, (NCCA, 2019) and practising teachers have the baseline knowledge of how to implement technology in a way that counteracts its natural product over process perspective, but they are simply not given the opportunity. As Ellis puts it, teachers want clarity; the interest in implementing technology is there, they just need continuing professional development and the correct support (Ellis, 202).

Toward change: a movement toward the incorporation of design in the classroom

Despite the curriculum’s resistance to change, there have been a number of developments in the right direction, and I believe that with time and the correct support, these developments will allow us to incorporate design into the curriculum in a much more impactful and meaningful way. One of these developments is the introduction of the PME-DET (Professional Master of Education in Design, Engineering and Technology), established in NCAD as a result of the collaborative work between the Schools of Education and Design, (NCAD, 2022). This qualification, when ratified by the Teaching Council of Ireland, will provide an alternative route for teachers, giving them a choice to move from the common and somewhat dated strict woodwork, metalwork and technology qualification paths to teaching. It will allow for more hands-on collaboration across curriculums, as these graduates will be able to provide niche and complex design education expertise that

will hopefully fill the gaps in the knowledge of other specialist education graduates (Creighton, *et al*, 2022). While the knowledge of the existing professional art teachers is not to be dismissed, it has been lovingly crafted and nurtured to a point of comfortability, and the introduction of educational qualifications coming from a more design-heavy space will allow for much more experimentation within classrooms and design inclusivity. This should also provide existing teachers with an opportunity to upskill, and share knowledge in the comfortable and supportive environment of their school community.

As the national curricula are very resistant to change; for example the new Junior Cycle curriculum was met with severe resistance when proposed in 2012, to then only be implemented on a phased basis from 2014 to 2021. This inside knowledge from new PME-DET graduates within school departments and staff rooms will provide much easier access to support for not only visual art teachers wanting to up their design knowledge, but it will extend across the school to hopefully reach a much wider breadth of staff and students. This will provide a much deeper and more enriched sense of fulfilment to the teaching profession. As stated by Friedman (2012, p.137) ‘the profession for which we educate designers today takes place against a context with several dimensions’ - to succeed as a successful designer, or as a visual art student with a design interest, students need access to various thought processes, artistic methods and frames of reference. These may now be found directly on their doorstep, and as any department within the school system would be foolish not to utilise this to their advantage, to not only prepare students for the regimented exam routine, but also for their life past secondary school.

Over the past number of years, we have seen distinct curriculum developments outside the realm of visual art - namely, the introduction of Leaving Certificate Technology, and the review of the Junior Cycle framework to create a revised curriculum for all technological based subjects, with a distinct focus on design - and more importantly, the creative element within the discipline, (NCCA, 2019). Hopefully, with time, and when considering the previously mentioned increase in continuation from post primary to design based third level courses, this predicts a trend and a hopeful increase in the uptake of art at Leaving Certificate level, and the introduction of design as an area to be seriously considered when filling out CAO forms.

Design as a whole within the post primary world, provides opportunities to cross boundaries between classes, and to break away from the confinement of the subject based curriculum, (Adams, 2013; Davis *et al.*, 1997). It provides opportunities for iterations, for risk taking, failure, and the ability to learn from it. It also provides opportunities for discovery learning, something not often found in the traditional syllabi - this provides students with an opportunity to enhance their problem solving skills, and demonstrate the difference between learning to solve an individual problem, and applying a rote-learned solution to a similar problem they may have encountered previously, resulting in much more interesting creations and experiments when brought back to the context of the visual art classroom, (McDaniel and Schlager, 2019). Experiential learning through trial and error allows opportunities for students to engage with lateral thinking processes, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, which relates back in many areas to the key skills and learning outcomes stated within the specifications, perhaps more so

than the current level within the curriculum at present, (Davis, *et al*, 1997; NCCA, 2019).

When considering the opportunity for cross curricular education, combining the new PME qualification with increased support for art teachers may also result in new opportunities for students to engage with real world scenarios, and practising designers. The BLAST: Arts in Education residency initiative was developed in 2021 by the Department of Education to create opportunities for practising artists and designers to work with secondary schools all over the country to plan, develop and create projects under the coordination of the cooperating school and Education Support Centre, (DOE, 2021). The initiative also offers opportunities for second level students to interact, ask questions, and see the process from conception to realisation of a project, and allows them to be thrust into the world of creative design. It also allows students to explore the range of fields and approaches that exist within the overall domain of design, including interaction design, service design, co-design, participatory design and design for social innovation, to name a few, (Creighton, *et al*, 2022). This allows students to grasp a greater understanding of the role design plays in regards to contemporary issues, and opens them up to new courses of study within the visual art classroom and beyond.

In conclusion, what impact does this have?:

The current overarching system of art education at post primary level in Ireland stems from the influence of the arts and crafts movement of 1885 to 1925, with a heavy emphasis on craft, form and function. (Turpin, 1995). As I have previously

examined, this dated approach to both post primary, and also student teacher art education results in the upholding of a rigid fine art based curriculum that fails to expand students' thinking and develop their abilities beyond the narrow finish line of the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. The lack of support for fine art specialist teachers combined with the multitude of questions surrounding the grading of design based schemes leads practising art teachers to veer away from this area, residing in something much more comfortable and close to the projects they are already fluent in. The effect the lack of design education has on the state of Irish secondary school students' ability to engage with design thinking was summarised by a report published by the Scandinavian Design Group on the state of design education within Ireland, stating that 'the Irish school child is visually and artistically among the most under-educated in Europe', (Franck et al. 1961, p.49, cited in Jordan & O'Donohue, 2018). Despite the fact that on average, Irish second level students are performing significantly above the average of that of their peers, according to major international assessments in literacy, mathematics and science, (O'Leary and Scully, 2018), the level at which design education and design thinking is upheld to, alongside the entire visual art curriculum is in serious need of reform.

Despite the current and ongoing advances in this area, the art syllabus overall still appears to be streets behind that of english, maths or science, and there proves at present to be little opportunity for teacher and student rebellion or experimentation within the rigid curriculum, without placing these students national certifications in jeopardy. Prospective teachers exist in a place where within college courses, there seems to be a slight shift within their education toward a more design based approach to teaching and thinking, (NCAD, 2022), but without proper CPD, support,

and cultivation of skills outside a degree programme, both prospective and practising teachers are left at a loose end when trying to fit students' interest in design into the strict post primary art curriculum. I believe that while the current advances will hopefully make a difference, not enough is being said or done to improve this issue. Teachers are at a loss for how to assess, present or even generally support students with design based interests, and more often than not end up inadvertently veering students away from this subject area, (Ellis, 2022). It's frustrating that when discussing the increasing level of interest in design based courses and projects in secondary schools, there seems to be nowhere at present for teachers to turn to for aid when planning these schemes. Their own studied courses and taught curriculum are working in tandem against them, creating an unwillingness to change within a system that so harshly pushes design into the corner in favour of fine art practises, resulting in a lack of broad training within the art education curriculum, which can be seen as "the strangest anomaly in Irish Teacher education", (Benson, 1979, p.79). The current state of design education at second level, particularly within the visual art curriculum, leaves us at a loss - how can something so influential be left steadily in the background time and time again; it's unfair to both students and teachers alike, and despite the current propositions for a more inclusive curriculum, unless serious ground work is done, the potential for students to progress into design careers and realise their full potential will be diminished, placing Ireland's future design scene in serious jeopardy.

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