Art by Design: projects in culture and identity

1. Colour - The race equality divide

In education we spend much of our time pursuing common practice, benchmark standards and overarching policies. The scientific thinking that dominates the culture in which we exist forces us towards single, singular solutions to what are often complex, diverse problems.

Prior to joining Higher education I had worked as an independent designer and community activist very much outside of the mainstream. My political work had been developed alongside such groups as the All African People's Revolutionary Party and the Pan African Congress Movement. The former is an international party established by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Toure of Guinea and led at the time by Kwame Toure formerly known as Stokely Carmichael. The latter was at the time one of the largest African people's organisations in the UK. Whilst based in Bristol undertaking undergraduate studies in fashion design I joined an organisation called the Black Peoples Movement (BPM). There were a number of black community organisations operating in Bristol at the time however, whilst most claimed St. Pauls, only the BPM really worked with and knew the African heritage community that lived there. The other groups were generally occupied in discussions with the local authorities, sitting on official committees, developing academic research or securing funding to actually spend time in the African heritage community or understand the problems. An old mentor of mine affectionately known as Brother Koka was a founding member of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. He once relayed a story about how the movement had to learn how to engage with its own community. He

told me that the organisation had become frustrated with the peoples of the townships who appeared blasé about action concerning the government's policies and practices. The movement tried unsuccessfully to engage people from the townships in discussions around government policies etc. They eventually realised that the problem was not with the people of the townships but with the movement itself. They had become so focussed on the government and problems with white people that their language, topics for discussion and political demeanour was entirely dominated by this and had become alien to their community. After adjusting their stance, their language and re-focussing their issues they found the community very responsive and ready to take action.

Whilst I was in Bristol St. Pauls suffered the first of the inner city riots that later spread to other areas such as Brixton, Handsworth and Toxteth. It was revealing that when known legal activist Rudi Narayan arrived to help with the defence of people in the community he approached the BPM to advise and guide him locally.

In 1985 I was invited to apply for a post in the then Lancashire Polytechnic by its Director, the late Eric Robinson. The institution had been successful in an application for section 11 funding to establish a Racial Equality Unit. This was to be the first of its kind in higher education. I accepted the offer curious to experience work inside the mainstream. Would it be possible to bring some of the lessons learned from independent community activity into more mainstream programmes?

The contrast between practice on the inside and practice on the outside of the mainstream was stark. There appeared to be tacit acceptance in mainstream equal opportunities practice that discrimination takes place on the grounds of colour. This lead to a belief that an increase in the number of black people or a greater black presence will bring

about change. Working within the so-called black community on issues of identity and consciousness taught me something different. Even when everyone is of the same colour you still witness racial discrimination and conflict (it is possible to be guilty of unfair discrimination against a particular race even though you may belong to that same race). In addition colour is neither the issue nor the solution. The world's population consists of a wide range of peoples of colour (non-white) the majority of who face racial discrimination but not always in the same manner. Not all share the same history or have experienced the same issues therefore not all benefit from the same strategies or solutions. This could be seen from the directions taken by the communities themselves. Whilst one community shouted slogans such as 'Here to stay, here to fight!'[1] Another proclaimed "Repatriation is a must!" and "Back to Africa!" Whilst one community suffered a generational conflict between young people adopting British cultural values and older people who believed in conserving their non-British culture. Another community's inter-generational conflict centred on young people rejecting British culture and trying find their African roots whilst older people fought to maintain their belief in the Queen and all things Empire.

The perspective within mainstream thinking was heavily skewed by members of minority communities who had gained access to the mainstream by committing to the dominant culture. In some cases this meant rejecting their historic or natural cultural heritage. This has left the mainstream with a mix of peoples from different ethnic backgrounds and of different colours but of the same or very similar cultural perspective.

---

[1] Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements Pluto Press (5 Sep 2013) Anandi Ramamurthy

I was invited to an equal opportunities event on Merseyside where I witnessed a presentation by a prominent equal opportunities practitioner. He made a very aggressive speech about his right to be accepted as British. During this expressive presentation he held up his British passport as a sign of his passion for all things British. He then took out his Indian passport and with equal passion threw it to the ground. I thought to myself isn't this a racist act, a British person insulting a symbol of Indian identity whilst proudly holding aloft a symbol of British identity? Does it matter what colour this man was?

On another occasion I was engaged in a discussion with a number of black equal opportunities practitioners about community projects and mentioned a community organisation that had adopted an African name. One of the practitioners mocked the name by saying "If I can't pronounce your name, I can't work with you!" Had this comment been made by a white person there is no doubt in my mind how it would have been received. Both of the above professionals had been honoured in the Queen's honours list for their services to equal opportunities.

My focus in the Racial Equality Unit was developing projects that explored and challenged the values of all community members in relation to minority ethnic cultures in the UK, including their own. In addition I was keen to explore opportunities for individuals to progress in terms of careers and personal development without feeling the need to throw-away their identity in favour of a more politically acceptable one.

2. Culture is the Key – values, ideals, notions and beliefs.

Community partners

The university has a culture of its own. In part this is a product of its purpose which defines the way in which it is able to operate. However the culture of the university is also heavily shaped by the wider cultural context of the society in which it exists. That culture also defines the other institutions, industries and professions with which the university is integrated. As an institution we can tinker with our values but we cannot make fundamental changes without possibly ceasing to be. Our cultural values define what we believe to be right and wrong, good and bad. They define how we value learning and how we understand our roles in society. Cultural values are not universal, they vary according to environment and experience. It is important both to the institution and to those we recruit to ensure that the culture each party represents can be mutually accommodated and if not, that we are aware of the compromises necessary. This will not happen if we rely on individual students or staff from within the institution. These individuals might not be culturally representative, as mentioned above cultural representation cannot be identified by colour or even ethnicity. Even if an individual does represent a different cultural position they might feel isolated within a large organisation that has a direct influence on their careers and future prosperity. This would greatly affect any criticism they may have. It is important to have relationships with larger, more culturally representative organisations outside of our influence with which we can have exchanges concerning values and ideals. These exchanges have to be more substantial than mere consultation.

As a member of the Racial Equality Unit my area of academic responsibility was art & design. I was also tasked with developing links with the African heritage community. At the time there were no community organisations with whom we could liaise. It would have been easy to resign to this fact and do nothing. Institutions feel that it is not their place to

become too intricately involved with local community organisation i.e. establishing and participating in the running of groups and/or projects. Being a member of the local community I had no such qualms. Over a number of years I worked with local people supporting projects within the African heritage community as well a community based arts projects. These projects formed the basis for building larger organisations such as: Preston Community Arts Project (Prescap); the Nguzo Saba Centre and the Lancashire BME pact.

My post at the university included time that could be spent outside of the university engaged with community activity. This allowed me to take a leading role in the development of these organisations however, in each case it was important to work with individuals and groups from the community and not push the university agenda. There had to be a real need for these groups and real support. It was also important that university resources did not play a substantial role in the setting up of these groups. Whilst the university agenda could not be used to push the development of these groups I was more than merely a catalyst. I was an active member of the community and engaged fully in the establishment and development of these groups. I had witnessed the demise of community groups who were driven by external agencies or funding bodies with the lure of money or services to either become established or change their structures. When the agency or funder changed their policies or staffing and withdrew support the groups simply crumbled.

Funding for these groups came from a range of sources. All received local authority funding and lotteries funding, additional funders were the Arts Council, EEC, a number of trusts and government agencies. Each was constituted as a company limited by guarantee and had charitable status. Each group had a different focus: creativity and the arts, African people's cultural heritage and community infrastructure. Each developed their own

relationships with funders, agencies and local government departments working in their respective area. This meant the development of pools of expertise based in the wider community alongside the university. All of the groups provided infrastructure support to the wider community and were often able to directly support smaller groups or projects extending the breadth and depth of their relationship with the local community. Each organisation also took on a strategic role within their area of activity rather than simply running ad hoc projects. This led to them being consulted by a range of agencies who respected their input and advice at a number of levels included policy development and planning. In many ways these organisations became as respected for their knowledge and expertise as universities.

Prescap

This was a general community or participatory arts company. Its purpose was to engage the wider community in creative practice and through this practice explore and even combat issues that affected their community. For me it also facilitated the exploration of the engagement with creative practice (Art) without the higher-level cultural and political contrivances and barriers (Art). The company was formed by a coalition of the local Trades Council, the Regional Arts Board, the local authorities, the then Youth Service, representatives of community groups and me. The company was eventually established with core funding from the Arts Council, the county council and the city council. The company grew from employing 2 part-time workers in an industrial unit to 15 core staff and numerous freelance contracts based in its own media centre. Along the way Prescap became a major player in a region that already celebrated some of the country's leading community and

participatory arts companies and was recognised as a national model of good practice by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Whilst growing in size and stature Prescap was able to keep in touch with its local community by employing a team of arts workers whose focus was on small projects engaging local people. In this way the company also became a strong influence on and powerful forum for community matters attracting active, creative people from across the region. It established a community radio station, Preston FM which continues to broadcast today. Prescap provided support for other local community organisations. It helped the local carnival and arts association establish arts workshops to support new bands with little or no costume making experience. It supported the establishment of LGBT groups providing a base for their activities and worker support.

Prescap engaged on a number of levels with the university's Fine Art degree providing placements for students and employing graduates. Students gained both experience in community arts and access to the local community via Prescap's activities and networks. Prescap became the largest employer of the university's fine art graduates in the region. Prescap projects introduced many local people to creative practice. Participants who wanted to further their experience of creative practice were supported in applying to the university's Art and Design foundation entry programme. These individuals arrived with a broader understanding of creative practice and a stronger sense of their own creativity than those who came via more standard routes such as A-Levels or foundation diplomas.

The Nguzo Saba Centre

This was the largest African heritage community organisation in Lancashire. The Nguzo Saba Centre came out of a number of projects in the African heritage community. It became

evident that there was a need for a building-based central organisation to support general activity in the wider community. At the time there only existed 2 sports & social clubs and an economic development organisation that had all but folded. Working with a number of participants from past projects a group was formed and approaches were made to the city council. Funding was agreed and a building secured. The organisation had two main aims: to develop projects exploring issues of identity and culture affecting the African heritage community and to provide a physical space as well as administrative and financial support to groups and projects in the African heritage community. The centre's activities were very wide in range. They included holistic health, arts and design, a homework centre, young people, sport, carnival, men's health and African people's (Black) history. The organisation worked with the university on numerous projects across most of these areas. It provided support in the recruitment of undergraduates and provided support to undergraduates, particularly African heritage people from outside of the county who had difficulty settling in the local area. The centre also supported local student organisations such as the African Caribbean Society and provided employment for undergraduates and graduates.

Lancashire BME Pact (Lancashire BME Network)

A number of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) organisations from across the county came together supported by representatives of the County Council to establish an infrastructure organisation that could support BME groups across the county. Changes in funding led to small groups finding it harder to get financial support. There were also demographic changes. New groups were forming from the Eastern European communities and the East Asian communities were growing as a result of the University's increased

involvement in countries such as China. I was invited to join this group which eventually led to the formation of the Lancashire BME Pact. With funding from the local authority and eventually the Big Lottery the organisation helped seed and grow community groups as well as providing training and project support to existing groups. The BME Pact did not work directly with the university but did provide support to new communities increasingly being represented in the university. The BME Pact initially focussed its support in the East of the county, an area identified by the university as a priority for recruitment and development. The university established a new campus in Burnley which franchised our Art & Design Foundation Entry programme and developed a new degree in Eastern Fashion Design.

All of the above organisations had a life and identity of their own. The university's involvement was never such that it would affect the policies or existence of these groups. They each developed an expertise and level of respect in their cultural fields that could never have been achieved by the university and they engaged in activities broadening equal opportunities and cultural diversity beyond the institutions capabilities and remit. A university tries to develop a community in which students can live. It provides accommodation, shops, entertainment, health care and facilities for social interaction. These should not be exclusive of what exists in the wider community of which the university and its students, and staff are a part. In the early years of this university there was much friction between students and local people. Students were seen to be apart from the community and not generally accepted locally. Much was done by the university to encourage local people to study here. However without wider community support we might have alienated these people, encouraging them to move away from their community. The university has done

much to engage with the local authorities and agencies. I saw my work as complimenting this by making the university an important partner at a community level.

3. Project Activity

Over the years these organisations have developed literally hundreds of projects exploring equality, diversity, creativity and cultural development, many of them in partnership with the university. In relation to my own work having community partners broadened the range of research/education activities that could be developed. The range of funding opportunities was considerably greater and there was greater flexibility regarding the processes and outcomes of project activity. I used these opportunities to develop projects that explored issues more directly related to my own area of teaching and research. Examples are:

Designing without drawing

In European culture (this includes North America, Australia and other parts of the world settled and developed by Europeans) drawing is an important part of the design/creative process. Anyone wishing to study art and design in the UK will have to demonstrate that they understand the use of drawing. Universally drawing is not part of the design process. In many cultures crafts people work directly into the materials experimenting with form and decoration as they progress and as their pieces evolve through progressive

productions. This is especially so in less commercialised or industrialised societies. I had identified problems with students who had a very different cultural understanding of the design/creative process. Although these students came from minority ethnic backgrounds this was not the defining factor. Cultural identity was very important. For example there was a difference between Black British students and non-British black students. This was evident not only in their understanding of cultural practice, but also in their ability to adapt. Students who had problems understanding the role and relevance of drawing found projects confusing they also produced less work and poor presentations. Their work in no way reflected the creative potential evident from talking with them individually. Drawing became a barrier to creativity rather than a tool for creative expression. A series of projects were developed exploring ways of helping people to design without the use of drawing. All projects introduced drawing to the participants but this was not seen as core to the creative process. This was in order to help contextualise the use of drawing as part of the process, a useful and powerful tool that could extend their skills. More recent projects have explored the use of digital media in the design process. Participants used packages such as the Corel Draw suite and the Adobe Creative/Master suite with graphics tablets, tablet PC's and digital photography. This has proven to be very successful in engaging people from different cultural backgrounds in the drawing process and helping them to develop drawing and design skills transferrable into mainstream practice.

A number of participants from these projects progressed to the university to study design. One of these projects focused on sewing machinists from some of Preston's many small garment manufacturers. A number of these added their newly developed design skills to their making skills and knowledge of the garment industry and went directly into business.

New work from traditional practice

Two projects were developed in this area. The first project was funded by the Heritage Lottery and involved young people from Preston and Liverpool. It explored the ways of encouraging young talent to create new work that is sensitive to the traditional practices and values of their heritage. We wanted to support young people who often feel pressured to distance themselves from their cultural traditions in order to fit into contemporary art & design practice. The project was developed via the Nguzo Saba Centre in partnership with the Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI). I was responsible for the design element and MDI managed the dance/performance elements. The participants produced a fashion and dance showcase staged in one of the newly constructed performance spaces in the university's Media Factory.

Due to the funding source there was an age restriction on this project but it attracted interest from a number of older people with similar concerns. We decided to run a second project funded by the university. This project operated within the university and focussed on design. We targeted advanced practitioners. These individuals had experience of designing and making garments, some were design graduates or undergraduates. They all had experienced problems trying to fit their practice in to an exclusively European cultural environment. One of the participants went on to complete a BTEC diploma in fashion gaining a grade of three D* another completed her degree in textiles having considered leaving her studies another went into business with her own designs and a fourth found employment in design in her home country. All continued to develop work inspired by their cultural heritage.

As with other projects lessons learnt were introduced to the teaching and learning of students via the foundation entry programme. We have introduced digital work across the course successfully bidding for funds to purchase graphics tablets, mobile tablets and tablet PC's (items of equipment trialled in community projects). These have been used to help students from a variety of backgrounds develop drawing and design skills.

Experience with access courses at the university has shown that simply encouraging people from BME communities into higher education without providing culturally sensitive support or opportunities for people to acclimatise culturally can result in problems. These go beyond academic issues such as learning, assessment and achievement. They may go as far as fractionalising the community even causing family rifts by encouraging individuals to sacrifice their cultural heritage/identity and leave their community. Working in partnership with community organisations has mutual benefits. A good relationship provides access to support for individuals entering university and a means to support those individuals in remaining a part of their community both during and after completing their course of study. It may also help to build a stronger understanding within the wider community of how higher education can be of benefit encouraging more people from a range of cultural backgrounds to take advantage of the opportunities available.

Culture is fundamental to all that we do and the reasons why we do it. It is an extremely complicated area infected by politics, history, need and influence. We cannot apply academic benchmark standards and we will not find singular solutions to problems in this area. Supporting cultural diversity is something that universities cannot do alone. Our own culture militates against this.