

Q-Art Foundation Course Leader Questions, e-book version

Q-Art interview with Bella Kerr

Programme Director, Foundation Art & Design course, Swansea [via email]

Are you independent or part of a sixth form/ college/ Higher Education institution?

Part of an HE institution.

What is the size, duration and cost of the course?

+/- 100 students per year, most are full-time students completing the course in 1 academic year, between 5 and 10 are part-time, studying over 2 years. The University does not, at present, charge any students attending the course.

Who are you validated by and what level is the course?

The course is validated by the Welsh Joint Education committee. It is a Level 3 and 4 course. The WJEC offers the choice to teach either: Stages 1 and 2 at Level 3 and the final stage of the course at Level 4, or to teach Stage 1 at level 3 and the second two stages at level 4. The University has chosen the first option.

What in your view is the purpose of the Foundation course and who is it for?

The Foundation course offers an introduction to the study and practice of art and design. The majority of students are school leavers wishing to progress to study at undergraduate level, most within art and design. There are usually a number of students on the course who progress to undergraduate study in other areas - they use the course to assist in making that decision or as an extra 'layer' in their education.

The course offers places to students of all ages and at all stages of their lives and careers - recent graduates, those making career changes and reviews (due to redundancy, early retirement or after periods of parenting, caring or illness), those retired after a long career in another area, such as medicine or teaching. We often have students - those who are already graduates - who progress directly to post-graduate study.

Where do you recruit students from?

The majority are recruited from local schools and colleges, recent graduates from local universities and others from the local community. We have one or two overseas or EU students each year and a few from other parts of the UK.

How is the course structured from beginning to end? What is your approach/ philosophy?

The basic course structure is provided by the WJEC specification - available at www.wjec.co.uk. This outlines 6 (of 8 available) modules to be taught over 3 Stages, and provides grading and assessment criteria. The first two stages of the course are not graded - students must simply pass to progress, while the final stage has two graded modules - Units 7 and 8 - which are graded as Pass, Merit or Distinction, with Unit 8, the practice element, providing the final grade for students completing the course. Within this structure the WJEC encourages individual centres to deliver the course as they wish.

Stage 1: students travel through 5 specialist areas - Fine art, Lens-based Media, Visual Communication, 3D Design and Fashion/Textiles - completing projects, workshops and drawing classes within each area. Students complete a written assignment and attend a series of lectures, seminars and reading, writing and research workshops. At the end of this Stage students join a specialist area.

Stage 2: students complete a number of projects, most make a Ucas application, prepare a portfolio and attend interviews.

Stage 3: students produce a piece of written work and make work towards a final exhibition.

Our delivery encourages experimentation and introduces the basic principles of practice, rather than teaching advanced skills. There is an emphasis on process and conceptual development through making, and the development of strategies for learning, rather than on product. Self-knowledge and independence are developed as key to successful study and career.

Winnicott's idea of 'potential space' is useful when considering the Foundation studio and the idea of play as a valid approach to learning.

Is there anything you'd identify as being unique about your foundation course? (anything from staff, history, course structure, location, approach, activity, etc)

Our students: South Wales is a network of small communities in which several generations of family often live in close proximity. There is probably a smaller wealth gap than in many other parts of the UK, so that there is a sense of equality in the studio, if not diversity, and a constant and lively dialogue between staff and students and within the student group. Possibly as a result of these factors the students are enthusiastic, polite and ambitious.

Ours is a very successful course - most students progress to their destination of choice and the work is often of a very high standard - but these are the characteristics of many Foundation courses and I consider Foundation courses, together, as a very valuable and high performing strata of education.

Do you teach visual literacy?

In every forum within the studio - critiques, tutorials, seminars, lectures, contextual studies workshops and project work - students are invited to describe, analyse and contextualise - to make and find meaning.

What are your views on the importance of drawing/ making skills?

Drawing and making are the essentials of art and design - and we define them very widely on the course.

Drawing classes range from observational drawing including life, landscape and perspective drawing, to more expressive approaches, 3D drawing with materials and drawing through processes such as mono-printing. We consider the performance of drawing, focusing on the definition as verb and noun.

We introduce the basic principles of many making skills through workshops and projects, with an emphasis on how process and concept are visible or expressed through making, and what might be meant by skill - and how all this is being and will be applied through current and future practice. We include writing within the definition of making - that it can be done visibly in the studio, as knitting or drawing are - and that, as with visual expressions, it is a skill to be developed through taught techniques, experimentation, application and practice.

Does your location impact on your teaching in any way?

While our geographical location, remote from major galleries, makes organised and DIY study visits essential, students benefit hugely from a local landscape of smaller regional galleries, museums and theatre companies. These institutions are more accessible than larger organisations and offer opportunities for volunteering, exhibiting and other interactions. As a result we, and increasingly the students themselves, programme regular visits and interactions. Our studio space is separate from the main Faculty building, which has resulted in near self-sufficiency in terms of facilities and equipment - while we still use the main art and design library and some facilities such as extra darkrooms when needed. There are negative aspects to this isolation, but I think it has also underpinned a freer approach to studio use and greater cohesion within the course.

What attributes do you think the course gives people? What do you hope that people go on to do?

Confidence, independence and the ability to learn. Our success is in guiding students towards the next step - for most undergraduate study. We keep in touch with former students and are pleased to know that many are working as practitioners, teachers or elsewhere in the 'creative industries'.

Is it essential in your view that people do a foundation in art and design before progressing to a BA?

I would advise it for all students wishing to study within art and design - it provides the opportunity to give full consideration to specialism - or to whether it is art and design - and to hugely expand students practical and contextual knowledge. It is also a very happy experience for most students - a year of transition and personal development.

How well do you think that A-level equips people for further and higher level study in art and design?

Taught well a combination of A levels such as Art and Design with History/English/other provides the ideal basis for further study. A level taught very prescriptively - and we understand the pressure on teachers for 'results' - has to be unraveled by Foundation - self-managing and independence must be developed in place of 'teacher-pleasing' outcomes.

Is your course or others you know of under threat?

Yes - there are indications from our own Faculty that we are a funding problem if we don't provide adequate students for their undergraduate courses and the idea of a '0' year for undergraduate courses comes up at intervals.

Did you do a foundation course? What was it like?

Yes - at Central School of Art and Design. I worked for three years in London before applying to study - I wanted to leave home and in those days Foundation study was funded, but by local authorities for study at the nearest local course.

The course was being run by a temporary course leader and there didn't seem to be much energy in the studios - but I learnt some good basic skills. They were unsupportive about my choice of specialism - Fine Art - and gave little help with my portfolio. I had become very interested in contemporary practice - political and feminist work and the conceptual artists of the preceding decade - but Central at this stage was a rather old fashioned painting school and the Foundation course, apart from one supportive tutor, reflected this bias.

Can you give an example of an interesting brief from your current course?

The project below was given to two specialist area groups - 3D Design and Fine Art. The groups worked together with the option to collaborate - which several students did. Overall 3 members of staff and a student/artist on a teaching placement taught into the project.

Prior to the introduction to the project students had a day during which they were encouraged to read and watch a number of books and films available in the studio - some listed below.

There was, at the start of the project, a walk through Swansea considering history, narrative and physical experience.

The final critique started with all students and staff viewing all work, followed by discussion in smaller groups, with visits to sites used away from the studio.

Project: space and place/site and journey

Aims

Students should:

- Investigate ideas around Space and Place through their own methods and experiences, with reference to the work of relevant artists, designers and theoretical discourse, and a broad range of cultural expressions.
- Research and use methods, materials and media appropriate to the project and consider their potential for future work.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Start to clarify their practice within the context of Fine Art/3D Design through contextual and visual research.
- Devise innovative solutions to problems and realize their potential for further work.

Tasks

Students will produce a body/piece of work, in any medium, developed from their investigations into Space and Place.

Research

From physical and social geography to **psychogeography**, the **Situationists**, **Guy Debord** and the **derive**, cinema from action movies, thrillers and horror to Andrei Tarkovsky and Patrick Keiller, novels from the **Brontës** to **James Joyce** and **Virginia Woolf**, town planning, *Feng Shui*, borders, walking, watching, mapping...

Artists: **Francis Alys** (When I decided to step out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city, but more to absorb what was already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces in between.)

Rachel Whiteread, Anthony Gormley, Richard Long, and many other artists, designers, architects.

Writers: **Ian Sinclair** (psychogeography), **Walter Benjamin** (the flâneur - what about the flâneuse! (<http://virtualdavis.posterous.com/trespassing-flaneuse>)), **Jane Rendell** (look at her website!), **Doreen Massey** (While Massey has argued for the importance of place, her position accords with those arguing against essentialised or static notions, where: places do not have single identities but multiple ones: places are not frozen in time, they are processes: places are not enclosures with a clear inside and outside.), **Beatriz Colomina, Rebecca Solnit**, etc, etc.

Films: **Tarkovsky's** *Stalker* and *The Sacrifice*, **Scorsese's** *Taxi Driver*, **Patrick Keiller's** *London* and *Robinson in Space* and...