**A Decline in Drawing Ability?**

**Introduction**

Speaking at the 2011 *Thinking through Drawing* symposium, Professor Stephen Farthing described the ‘decline in entry level drawing skills’ he had seen when interviewing undergraduate candidates. His international audience gave mixed responses, but questions remained: is this true? Could it be verified? Do others share the opinion? What ‘drawing skills’ do educators now value?

While teaching Art & Design in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education HE, I saw drastic and contentious changes to the practice of drawing instruction, including the abandonment of life-drawing classes, and partial or total reduction of sustained, supervised studio drawing. I also saw self-directed drawing tasks replaced by lens-based modes of ‘visual research’, or secondary sources. Drawing modules were also phased out, making way for new content. These changes were met with disappointment by many of my colleagues and students, who continued to value drawing practice as the foundation of visual practices and competences, a ‘tool of thought’ as well as a genuine challenge and a source of joy for those who embraced it. I wanted to understand the complex factors behind these changes, and others’ attitudes to them.

After many informal dialogues, I began recording first-hand accounts from those learning, teaching and assessing drawing. This report summarises interviews made between 2016 and 2018, synthesising the core values and concerns of those participating. I have endeavoured to distil the common themes in their experiences, and although this approach lacks the many rich and colourful stories, I hope the study can contribute to clarifying the issues.

**Literature review**

Changing drawing practices are being documented in the creative industries, and also in the educational institutions that feed them. As the ‘paperless studio’ becomes more widely embraced, many scholars are documenting changing practices in design drawing, the most significant being the increasing use of verbal and computer-based methods of ideation in earlier stages of the design process (Johnson 2005). Coyne, Park and Wiszniewski (2002) have called for a new concept of ‘digital design thinking’ to describe such methodologies. However, there has been considerable resistance, particularly in architecture (Andia 2002), from those concerned about what might be lost along with traditional drawing competence. Dickinson (2011) has called for an ‘appropriate balance’ to be struck between the digital and the analogue, to allow designers to remain ‘process creators’ rather than ‘process consumers’.

The rapid pace of technological change calls for educators to keep up, and responses are being studied. Notably, Schenk’s long-term research describes how evolving technologies have shaped drawing practice in graphic design (1991) and, later, in design, architecture and engineering (2014; 2016). Schenk’s work also documents design educators’ acknowledgement that the space for drawing in the curriculum is ‘under threat’ (2005). Much of this discomfort relates to rapid adoption of digitised practice. Academics must constantly update curricula, balancing new tools and software with the core competencies of visual literacy which, in their own training, were underpinned by analogue drawing. Schenk’s work reveals that senior design academics share concerns about drawing ability. Without exception, they perceived a “lack of development of drawing competency in student and novice designers” (2014,49).

Similar studies of secondary education and FE have shown the continuing value attached to drawing. For example, a Scottish study found that pupils desire manual drawing instruction, and that teachers continue to value traditional technical drawing, associating it with “problem solving, visualisation, accuracy, co-ordination, use of standard conventions, personal discipline and artistry” (McLaren 2008, 167). A recent Canadian study found post-secondary teachers to be both critical of, and optimistic about, the effects of digital technologies on drawing pedagogy (Mikolajewski 2014). Although embracing it cautiously, they felt a hybrid approach would empower students.

Ofsted’s most recent (2011) report on Art & Design in schools voices concerns. They describe how “[l]imited provision for teachers’ professional development has meant that weaknesses in the teaching of drawing – a fundamental subject skill – have not been addressed”. They explain, “training that focused on whole-school issues […] had not been interpreted well in [Art & Design]” while ”[t]he implementation of whole-school approaches to assessment also had a similarly negative effect” (2011,1). For schools, this issue appears to go beyond the digital-analogue debate. There is clearly a need for differentiated approaches to Art & Design teaching and assessment, reinforced by specialised professional development.

Participants in Schenk’s (2014) study were concerned that creativity could be impaired if drawing is neglected in schools and universities, emphasising the difference between “repurposing” secondary sources (easily facilitated by digital media) and genuine “creative interpretation” (2014,44) facilitated by drawing. As digital tools are becoming widely adopted, there is clearly a need to depart from traditional teaching methods and find new ways to enable deep learning that both embrace and complement new technologies.

A review of changes in assessment processes over the past 25 years helps to explain this. Owen (in press) reviewed the changing language of drawing in Key-Stage 5 assessment material, showing that assessment descriptors and measures have both changed. The word ‘drawing’ is still present in assessment literature, but is replaced by generic terms such as ‘visual recording’ in assessment objectives, which includes any media. For example, Edexcel’s (2016) subject specification for A-Level Art & Design states that drawing is ‘an essential skill for studying Art & Design at GCE and degree level’ (2016, 8), and an ‘essential part of the development process’ in Fine Art (2016, 12). However, definitions of drawing offered are extremely broad, including lens-based media, and students are in fact required to ‘develop skills’ in ‘drawing *or* other appropriate visual forms’ (2016, 6 [emphasis added]). Assessment criteria do not require drawing at all (2016, 33-35), and this is true across exam-boards (cf. AQA 2016; OCR, 2014). It is unsurprising, therefore, that students would avoid drawing when their skill level is not up to standard, seeking instead the expediency of readily available digital tools.

**Methodology**

Despite abundant literature on approaches to drawing, little is written about the prevalence of those approaches in teaching, let alone how this has changed. This study therefore sought individual experiences, gathered through survey, interview and focus groups, in order to better understand the changing landscape of drawing education. Combining multiple accounts, including expert insights and diverse perspectives, offered a rich picture. As an investigation of a relatively unexplored area, the purpose of the study was to build understanding of the complex factors surrounding the issue, rather than to falsify hypotheses (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

At pilot stage (in 2016), I used survey and interviews with Art & Design academics internationally. This initial data indicated that while macro-trends in professional practice are quite consistent between the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA, changes to the education sector are not. In particular, curricular continuity from school to university was a concern of UK participants. Therefore, subsequent data collection in the main study focused on the UK, in order to look at this issue.

Between 2016 and 2017, forty-eight academics responded to a survey, followed by sixteen interviews, and a further nine in a focus group. Collectively, these represented a range of disciplines, including Fine Art, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Product Design, Interior Design, Architecture, Illustration, Visual Culture, Fashion, Printmaking, Media Design, Games Design, Visual Communication and Drawing (as a discrete discipline). Academic respondents’ teaching experience ranged from three to forty-five years. I sought to interview educators with lengthy teaching careers, and those with recent industry experience, to understand both a long-view of gradual changes, and how recent trends in the creative industries have informed teaching practice. Following this, in 2018, eighteen first-year degree students from a variety of design disciplines participated in focus groups. In the next phase, four Key Stage 5[[1]](#footnote-1) teachers were interviewed, two of whom had also acted as external moderators (visiting other schools to review assessment outcomes), followed by two examiners who had participated in devising and evaluating assessment materials for Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, for two exam boards. All respondents were assured that their comments would be fully anonymised.

Initial survey questions aimed to gain ‘a broad sweep’ inviting open-ended responses, which informed more specific questions in subsequent interviews and focus groups, which used a semi-structured format (Kvale 2008). These lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, allowing enough time for detailed exploration of experiences. I included closed questions for ease of comparison, with opportunity for open-ended comment after each question, to enable critical responses (Bogdan & Biklen 1992; Kelley et al. 2002).

Transcripts were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006), using open coding within two main categories: ‘values’ and ‘concerns’. Combining open-ended questions with an open coding process allowed space for unanticipated emergent themes.

**Findings**

Common themes reflecting changing practices and definitions of drawing ability outlined in the following sections, were distilled from the rich and varied accounts offered.

## ***A perceived decline in school leavers’ drawing ability***

HE lecturers considered entry-level drawing skills to be static or declining. Of the 48 respondents, only two reported an improvement, both were from outside the UK. Generally, those with longer teaching experience held more negative views. Table i compares responses.

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**Table i. Survey responses show UK lecturers with longer teaching careers more likely to consider drawing skills to be declining.**

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In their comments, a lower proportion of students with Foundation Diplomas (FAD) was lamented, and many stressed that differences *between* feeder schools were far greater than any overall decline. Digital tools were also considered a factor:

Looking back to the portfolios we saw thirty years ago, all students had observational work. Now there are so many digital short-cuts available, many students seem to get stuck with screen-based reference and never really understand the difference between drawing what the human eyes see and drawing something that has already been framed by a lens. ...We still see very good observational work from some FAD students, rarely from A-Level students. (Drawing Lecturer)

Respondents maintained that drawing is still valued as ever. However, they also reported reduced contact hours for drawing on undergraduate courses, compared to their early careers, and fewer still than during their own undergraduate education. Increased digital content and a general reduction in contact time were notable factors. These results suggest a strong trend, albeit anecdotal. Extensive further research would be required to ascertain accurate figures. Table ii shows averages of the responses given by HE lecturers.

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**Table ii. Survey responses show declining contact time for undergraduate drawing, across UK and International samples. Design courses reported fewer hours overall, with a comparable decline.**

Both ability and contact time are seen to be declining. Some considered this the result of a lack of staff ability:

‘[An issue is] staff expertise in drawing [which is] far less common amongst younger staff, and an unwillingness to teach it even if they are able’ (Fine Art lecturer)

Others maintained that reduced hours were due to the shift away from group instruction towards ‘student-centred’, individualised tuition of undergraduates, where students mainly draw outside taught hours, and lecturers use contact time to evaluate and plan integrated work. This enables a more responsive approach, facilitating the nurturing of individuality and divergent outcomes within a single group. Students celebrated this. They stated in focus groups that they valued this approach, as it enabled them to develop a unique style, which they felt was important, both personally and for a competitive professional advantage.

The student-centred approach also raised concerns. Lecturers acknowledged that to draw purposefully outside a guided learning context requires core competencies and confidence, previously instilled in guided tuition. They saw students lacking confidence as unlikely to improve their drawing during the course of their degree:

‘The students who already have some confidence... when they arrive, do progress. The ones who come in that don’t have any skill or any practice, they leave not having any either’ (Graphic Design lecturer)

***Drawing is ‘no longer essential’***

Respondents acknowledged that these trends involve a complex set of factors; unsurprisingly, these include changing recruitment practices; ‘erosion’ of the FAD (where drawing would traditionally be instilled) and of school-level art education in general; as well as broader curricula, which now encompass a greater range of media and techniques. There was also clearly an underlying tension regarding the concept of ‘drawing ability’, evidenced by many lengthy responses arguing against traditional definitions of skill, associated with rendering and accuracy, especially from Fine Art lecturers.

It was widely agreed that ‘traditional’ drawing is ‘no longer essential’ for artists or designers, even in illustration and graphic design, where it can be acceptable for students to make collage the entirety of their practice if they wish. This shift was accepted, but also flagged as a concern: it did not encourage inexperienced students to challenge themselves:

Those lacking the confidence to draw keep it secret. They find alternatives. They can still do well, but they are limited. (Graphic Design Lecturer)

Interior and product designers still valued design sketching, but conceded that CAD (Computer Aided Design) tools were more pressing:

CAD skills [are] what gets jobs initially (Engineering & Design lecturer)

Typically, the industry uses CAD for all development (Product Design lecturer)

There was a consensus that drawing was still desirable. Every academic who interviewed undergraduates wished to see evidence of ’strong drawing’ in their portfolios. This was underpinned by a general belief in the benefits of drawing practice for perceptive and creative aptitudes, as well as for students’ overall confidence. However, lecturers also noted the wide disparity between applicants’ school provision, as the majority would have had little to no formal drawing tuition. Several lecturers reported making offers based on ‘potential’, not wishing to discriminate based on schooling.

The expedient use of digital tools was held to be a factor in the decline of drawing. However, many participants (both lecturers and students) stressed that collage and digital ideation *are forms of drawing*. This is especially true as digital tools become increasingly sophisticated and able to mimic physical materials. While the students debated whether or not one could learn the basics in a digital environment (some insisted they had), the educators did not consider the problem as one of digital versus analogue tools, rather, they located the tension between process-driven and outcome-driven creative work.

***Over-emphasis on outcomes at school level***

Lecturers celebrated excellent examples of drawing practice (some apparently self-taught) but noted disparity between schools. As well as concerns about inconsistent access to drawing tuition, academics were concerned about the *manner* in which they believed schools taught drawing, and art in general, as evidenced in applicants’ portfolios. A-Level programmes were most frequently cited as problematic, being seen to miss-prepare students for HE by instilling false expectations.

A-level education approaches mostly are not suitable. (Fine Art lecturer)

Such concerns all shared a common thread: drawing at school was too heavily weighted in favour of expedient or outcome-driven work:

[A-Level] students have often got a lot of fine rendered drawing and almost zero quick 'thinking' drawings. (Illustration lecturer)

Their focus is on presentation/finish not process. (Fine Art lecturer)

Often they are more concerned with a particular skill development, quantifiable outcomes, design, rather than experimental approach (Curator and Sculpture lecturer)

Their emphasis on ‘technique, finish and control’ (Drawing lecturer), was thought to engender a ‘reluctance to take risks’ (Product Design lecturer). Many students seemed to avoid drawing when they felt the outcome would be inadequate, while others were overly concerned with appearance, to the detriment of genuine engagement. Thus, over-emphasis on outcome was perceived to relate to anxiety around, even fear of, drawing, which was considered increasingly prevalent:

HE [drawing] standards are suddenly considerably higher [than at school], this can lead to crippling anxiety and stress, it can split a classroom, and it can consume much of our time in an effort to salvage the skill to a useful level. (Interior Design lecturer)

Some of the A-Level students get a little bit freaked out when they arrive and they see the Foundation students. (Illustration lecturer)

Lecturers commonly shared concerns about students’ apparently increasing reluctance to engage with the ambiguous mid-stages of design process. Some opined that students’ drawing anxiety related to overly prescriptive ‘spoon-feeding’ approaches to teaching at lower levels, stemming from assessment-driven school climates:

I’m aware that teachers... are under massive pressure to show results....that’s not necessarily going to give the conditions for as much experimentation and enquiry. It can lead to... short term formulae for getting things to look good. That seems to be pretty widespread across GCSE and A-Level. (Graphic Design lecturer)

School teachers and moderators interviewed explained how pupils would be encouraged to ‘work to their strengths’ to maximise achievement (equating to grades and UCAS points), which can result in poor drawing skills being glossed over, rather than targeted as areas for improvement. They mentioned increasing pressures over the years. Some mentioned strict targets for achievement. One teacher described A-Level failure as ‘not an option’ at their school.

Student’s concerns about their outcomes related more to authenticity than grades. Some reported being told exactly what to produce and its appearance, feeling such instruction reflected individual teachers’ aesthetic preferences. Students acknowledged the influence of assessment pressures, on both themselves and their school teachers. This was coupled with relief at being ‘allowed more creative freedom’ at university, and (for some) frustration that the same approach had not been taken at school. Such accounts surprised other students, who described experiences ranging from supportive atmospheres of creative freedom to being almost entirely unsupervised. Others gave accounts of extensive post-hoc ‘process work’ and annotation (a topic of great perplexity for many) being added to portfolios and sketchbooks after outcomes had been completed. ‘Faking it’ to meet criteria for ‘idea development’. Thus, students also treated ‘process work’ as an outcome in itself, due to assessment requirements.

The differing accounts of students taking the same qualifications in different schools supported lecturers’ concerns about inconsistency in the delivery of core skills. Students’ experiences also reflected lecturers’ concerns that prescriptive approaches at school can be detrimental to confidence later on, when they face independent learning.

Moderators were aware of these concerns but remained positive. They reported having seen many examples of overly prescriptive teaching, although many schools struck a good balance in their view. They cited some recent examples of good practice, including one submission of almost entirely video-based work for A-Level Art. They celebrated an increase in both the quality and diversity of school art education during their long careers. When moderating, they wished to see divergent and progressive outcomes both within and between schools, feeling that this encouraged diversity of artistic practice, and fostered approaches to student-focused learning.

The two examiners interviewed were less optimistic. They reported declining investment in Art and Design education nationally, stressing the importance of school leadership in valuing the arts. They shared Ofsted’s concerns about teachers lacking professional experience, stating that less qualified staff would often be employed because they were ‘cheaper’. They also voiced concerns about the demoralising nature of ‘continuous over-assessment’, volunteering an example of a pupil’s sketchbook which included ‘excessive’ multiple copies of assessment matrices throughout. While the examiners acknowledged institutional performance pressures as a factor - especially at schools in which the arts are not a priority - in their view, lack of drawing tuition, over-assessment and undue pressure on students are all results of inexperienced (non-subject specialist) teaching staff. Similarly, a lack of investment in teaching expertise was seen as the main obstacle to devising assessment criteria that more stringently made drawing a requirement. Exam boards must offer assessment criteria that all schools can teach to, and that all students are able to do well at.

***Drawing ‘as process’ is emphasised in HE***

Hand-in-hand with lecturers’ concerns about over-emphasis on outcome, are values attached to ‘drawing as process’, which is considered to enrich idea development. Their agreement that drawing is ‘no longer essential’ to practice refers mainly to *outcomes*. While outcomes are rarely drawn any longer, drawing remains an important part of the development *process*.

The reason for sketching skills is driven by the benefit to their design thinking skill rather than industry requirements. (Product Design lecturer)

They described how confidence, resulting from experience, enables the use of drawing for idea development and problem solving. They consider the ability to use drawing in the design thinking process, a key component of innovative and high-level work.

Students arriving with reasonable sketching and drawing skills appear to adapt to challenging design problems more quickly and confidently. (Product Design lecturer)

When asked what constituted drawing ability in their disciplinary context, and which practices they valued, many lecturers questioned conventional notions of ability, particularly in Fine Art, where there was an apparent tension around the idea of skill. Fine Art lecturers from differing institutions confirmed this:

Drawing can be subverted and need not conform 'objectively' to rules’.

Our course has a sort of aversion to the word "skill", not that I agree with this. Where we might talk about skills is in reference to an ability to "play" purposefully with materials and forms

The skill is in how they use the process and materials to convey ideas.

Definitions of ‘ability’ shared a common emphasis on process across disciplines. Along with conventional skills (i.e. compositional planning, formal elements, control of media), lecturers emphasised the importance of cognitive and process-based aspects of drawing. They stressed the importance of drawing for looking deeply, for ideation, interrogation (of imagery and ideas), and experimentation:

We look for an experimental and problem-solving approach to drawing.  
(Painting and Visual Culture lecturer)

the ability to observe and record, also the ability to develop ideas through drawing. producing alternative options for work. (Sculpture lecturer)

Capacity to think in 3D terms and produce tangible results (not necessarily 3D in themselves). (Illustration lecturer)

The ability to think ‘on your feet’, (i.e., quick sketching) was also emphasised, especially in design disciplines:

in terms of the industry you need to be doing things quickly... you need to be able to do a quick technical drawing, or a quick sketch… We’ve always called it speed translation or speed designing as one approach to design thinking, ‘cause you don’t have a lot of time. (Fashion Design lecturer)

Other design lecturers explained that the ability to draw quickly and spontaneously distinguishes graduates likely reach the top of their profession. Such designers are able to create rough sketches in front of others, performing iterations of ideas while responding to feedback from clients or collaborators in real time.

So, while drawn outcomes are often replaced by computer generated designs, in both HE and industry, drawing *process* remains important although less visible. However, this kind of drawing does not appear to be explicitly ‘taught’:

A lot of the kind of drawing we do here isn’t taught actually. But it’s a thinking process. Using drawing as thinking is what we’re really interested in (Interior Design lecturer)

Participants variously described this as a cluster of processes: ‘exploratory’, ‘enabling perception’, ‘ideational’, ‘problem solving’, ‘developmental’ ‘iterative’ and (with reference to the FAD) ‘foundation style’. Lecturers noted the importance of two main functions of process drawing: the ability of quick sketching to accelerate and enrich the design process; and slow observation to aid reflection and provide a foundation for design thinking.

**Implications of the study**

Participants’ perspectives show that drawing remains highly valued, but in a new professional context, and with renewed emphasis on process. Drawing in Fine Art is alive and well, with an expanded definition that need not rely on conventional notions of skill. CAD systems, now commonly used in the early stages of design process, have largely replaced design drawing. Consequently, the unique function of drawing to augment open-ended thought process is surfacing as a valuable, possibly irreplaceable, asset. Students need certain basic abilities for this, along with the confidence to use them. However, in the absence of sustained instruction, it falls on students to teach themselves such skills. While many do so with a high degree of proficiency and individuality, many more leave school without basic drawing skills or with low confidence, even a “crippling anxiety around drawing” (Illustration lecturer), that is hard to remedy at university amid competing demands of other learning.

This study therefore identifies a need for more focused attention at school level on drawing as process. The following discussion considers the teaching of drawing for process; the existing work in this field; and how to implement such pedagogies more widely.

***Teaching drawing for thinking***

Traditionally, the basic competencies underpinning ‘thinking drawing’ would transfer from standardised rigorous training in, and lengthy practise of, technical and observed drawing. Traditionally, students were not explicitly taught how to use drawing as thought process, rather it would have been assumed that conventional observational and technical skills, perhaps together with Bauhaus-style experimental drawing at FAD level, would naturally enable purposive use. The present erosion of the FAD means the responsibility for teaching drawing falls more strongly on schools.

The teaching of drawing to facilitate thought is a growing field of pedagogy. Hetland et al. (2013) foreground the importance of the ‘habits of mind’ instilled by studio teaching, and provides a framework for teaching that accounts for metacognitive skills associated with creative practice, including drawing. Hafeli (2014) also provides examples of process-oriented drawing exercises that facilitate thought, taking a stance that is overtly critical of prevalent outcome-driven approaches.

While drawing is still celebrated, there remains great disparity in the ability of school leavers. This study shows that entry-level drawing varies enormously, with many students entering HE directly from school lacking the basic skills needed for independent use of drawing. Lecturers and teachers unanimously confirmed the continuing importance of drawing, but the issue appears to be that ‘doing well’ and ‘learning to draw’ are no longer synonymous at school.

***Medium and message***

Educational development is not simply a question of adopting new technologies, but also considering the changing significance of traditional skills. Educators welcome the efficiency of digital tools, but there is often a trade-off between speed and depth. With increasing pace and productivity, new importance is conferred to drawing that enables deep engagement with primary visual enquiry, analysis and ideation. While these have always been important aspects of drawing for design, lecturers perceive the underpinning skills as ‘at risk’, and drawing curricula in need of reappraisal across levels.

Lecturers’ emphasis on the importance of drawing for process mirrors concerns about overly outcome-driven attitudes to learning, which extend to other disciplines. This goes beyond whether or not students are taught to draw, to the learning environment.

A trade-off between efficiency and depth of engagement is associated with the use of digital media and technologies, echoing debates emerging in other disciplines. e.g., shortening attention spans (Prensky 2001) and superficial approaches to information retrieval (Thomas 2011). While there is a lack of evidence to substantiate claims that digital natives ‘think differently’ (Bennett, Maton & Kervin 2008), it seems there is a need to investigate the impact of digital tools on cognitive skills.

While technology is an important factor in educational development, it is not the only factor cited as influencing students’ attitudes to learning and skill acquisition. Coupled with increasing use of digital media are school experiences that increasingly place emphasis on assessment outcomes, which this study shows to be an additional factor in students’ changing attitudes to drawing, and to learning more generally. Although not overtly mentioned by participants, an additional factor may be that art exams are now largely replaced by coursework (partially at A-Level, entirely in BTEC), in which production has primacy over acquired skill. Where exam preparation is conducive to repetitive practice associated with gradual improvement, coursework renders all activity potentially assessable, inviting students to ‘get it right first time’ (Fashion Design student). Thus, the focus is for students to ‘play to their strengths’ rather than develop weaknesses.

It is counterintuitive that moving from exams to coursework would engender outcome-driven attitudes, especially when assessment outcomes explicitly evaluate ‘development of ideas’ (Edexcel 2016,33). However, students’ accounts in this study confirmed lecturers’ suspicions that ‘process work’ would often be made with superficial engagement, simply to fulfil stipulated criteria, when made in assessment-heavy climates. Teachers are aware of the need for a balance between skill-development and producing high-quality coursework outcomes, but are influenced towards the latter by pressure from achievement metrics; a pressure that may be unwarranted, given the inclusive attitudes of external moderators, who hoped to see ‘experimental’ and ‘enquiry-based’ work.

**Conclusion**

There is a general perception among A&D HE lecturers that school-leavers' drawing skills have been gradually declining for over twenty years. Although still widely valued, lecturers are devoting less contact time to group drawing instruction at undergraduate level, schools no longer require drawing, and the FAD, where drawing practice would traditionally be instilled, is being 'eroded'. Lecturers also commonly share related concerns about students' apparently increasing reluctance to embrace ambiguity or engage deeply with design process through drawing. They also recognise a

need to re-think drawing instruction at school level for better continuity with HE and professional practices.

The literature on changing drawing practices frames the issue in terms of the shift from analogue to digital tools. This research indicates that the problematic tension, in the eyes of educators, is not a competition between analogue and digital tools, but rather between education that is process or outcome-oriented. This tension is related to new technologies: a trade-off between speed and depth of engagement may be unavoidable, and the efficiency of digital tools carry a risk that designers become 'processes users' rather than 'process creators', as Dickinson (2011) warns. But this can be mitigated through appropriate design methodologies that include space for observation and reflection. Indeed, the time saved by such tools can provide more opportunity for creative reflection.

A second point of concern is the prevalence of assessment-heavy approaches, which respondents believed to engender outcome-driven attitudes to coursework. Furthermore, current assessment materials encourage weaker students to replace drawing with more expedient tools. This is encouraged, inadvertently, by well-meaning teachers hoping to ‘maximise’ achievement. This is clearly not the intention of assessment materials provided but, in many instances, the combination of ambiguous criteria, poorly resourced art-departments and institutional pressure to raise achievement can lead to this situation. Any solution to the problem of declining drawing ability, therefore, needs to account for assessment methodology as well as pedagogy. Disparities between schools in the status of Art and Design is a closely related issue.

Such debates are relevant beyond the discipline of drawing: with the instant gratification of new media and increased pressures on students to achieve, we need to create space for deep engagement and sense-making. Such a space has traditionally been offered by drawing practice, but for this to remain a part of education, time must be reserved for it.

Although some lecturers see it as 'no longer essential' to creative practice, most still widely value drawing practice (digital or analogue), albeit with shifting definitions of 'drawing ability'. While some hold to traditional ideas of composition and formal elements, others question and subvert the notion of 'skill', seeing it as outdated. Both wish to see diverse practices flourishing; a desire reflected in individualised approaches to instruction, in which the work happens outside contact time. Widely shared among lecturers’ definitions of ‘drawing ability’ was an emphasis on the capacity of drawing to enable deeper engagement with processes of perception and ideation. This has always been true, but is of renewed importance in the current climate. For drawing to function in this way, one needs basic competencies and, importantly, the confidence to draw purposefully and independently.

The challenge is how best to teach and assess drawing in a way that complements the use of new technologies, while maintaining the deep engagement enabled by dedicating time to drawing. Although, creative careers no longer strictly require drawing, it is resurfacing as a discrete discipline, evident by the emergence of degrees in drawing practice. Drawing is also becoming more widespread in other disciplines, such as graphic facilitation and visual communication. With lower uptake of Art & Design subjects at school, it may be timely to consider more integration of visual literacy in non-art curricula.

These results suggest that wider secondary-level adoption of ‘foundation style’ drawing instruction, with greater standardisation of core drawing competencies of observation and imagination, embedded in subject-specific assessment practices, would help prepare students for progression to HE. Moreover, a renewed emphasis on drawing 'as process' could contribute to enabling deeper engagement, a possible remedy to balance the increasingly fast pace engendered by digital tools and media.

Further research should explore a possible causal relationship between assessment approaches and attitudes to learning. This study has identified the issue as a concern to both students and educators. Ultimately, approaches to developing drawing pedagogy must account for both the medium and the message: drawing instruction must embrace and complement the use of technology, while teaching and assessing drawing must allow space for skill acquisition and deep engagement with process.

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1. In the UK, key stage 5 describes the two sixth form years for 16-18 year olds which results in UCAS points, for application to universities. Key stage 2, correspond to ages 7-11, key stage 3 to ages 11-14 and key stage 4 to ages 14-16. UK FE colleges offer a broader range of qualifications at these levels than schools, and also admit underperforming students to re-sit these levels. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)