Opening the Cabinet: Approaching a Framework for the Research of Higher Education in the Visual Arts from the Outskirts

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1. Looking for a key

"Experienced evaluators know that decisions on method often need to be perceived in shades of grey rather than black and white" (Patton cit. Braveman & Arnold, 2008, p. 75)

When one starts to explore databases like ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre) looking for material under the descriptors "program assessment," "program evaluation," "stakeholders" or a mix of them, and then the area is narrowed to "Higher Education," the number of results won't be so high. Number of "hits" will be even lower if we keep narrowing and highlight documents produced during last 5 to 10 years.

ERIC is considered to be one of the main and biggest online sources for research in education: an online library sponsored by the United States Department of Education that lists more than 1.4 million indexed written records regarding teaching and its fields. Materials in the database belong mostly to peer-reviewed journals, but also include a huge number of institutional reports elaborated by

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accreditation agencies and universities from around the globe. Individuals can also submit their own materials (theses, dissertations) under certain conditions.

When it comes to search the term "Art," "Visual Art" or "Fine Art" in the Thesaurus, and then narrow to "Higher Education" –not even including any of the aforementioned terms in our first search– results are rather poor or even null. One conclusion to which we can quickly arrive is that there might be not so many journals interested specifically in Art indexed in the database. The answer is somewhat correct: about ten between few hundreds, if we do not distinguish between "Art" and "Arts." But, given the fact that our field of research is in the premises of "Art teaching in Higher Education," and ERIC is one of the biggest, aren't results a bit worrying?

The reason why I'm starting my speech with this environment is in order to introduce the research I have been involved lately. ERIC and its contents have been accompanying me for the last several months: to confirm some suspicions I had beforehand and to rise up several questions.

2. A bit of background

Understandably, I was already interested in relationships between art school and professional world long before starting this dissertation. As student of Fine Art, I remember a common feeling between classmates that college was completely isolated from what was happening in that terrifying place so called "after grad." We rarely saw other people than our teachers or technicians around. Outdoor collaborations occurred because our own initiative or the one of few committed professors. Internships were rare, and if we wanted to exhibit our work or start a community project, we had to look for the places to do it by ourselves. Prospectively, this made us gain independence and self-confidence –learning outcomes at last– but

we all matched in the idea that people from *outside* should be more engaged with what was happening *inside…* and vice versa.

But this didn't look easy. In general, the impression we had was that external stakeholders (such as cultural managers but also sculpture workshop owners, for example) didn't have a very positive view about art faculties, its studies and the competence of graduates. Referring personal experience, one wonders if this could be due to some reasons: either because they didn't trust about the validity of what was being taught –because they didn't know about it or because they were not agreeing with it– but also because some of them had already bad experiences in previous collaborations.

Later on, after graduating in a Masters in Education and various international exchanges, I started working as associate professor in the faculty were I pursued my degree. There I faced the other side of the coin and discovered how difficult it was to actually engage *any* kind of exterior collaboration: money constraints, difficulties to match academic deadlines with professional ones, and uneasy bureaucracy. I also discovered items like accreditation, quality assessment or this catchy phrase, *publish or perish*. However, art college had got into some renewal due to the controversial Bologna process and the impulse of some individuals: Service-Learning was starting to be recognized as a real deal and there were artist seminars during the course. Initiatives were, nevertheless, still a few. Happily, I found some of the committed professors I met as student years ago, and eventually entered in ODAS (Observatory for Education in the Arts), a long-term multi-departmental university research group interested into improve the quality of the teaching in the art field. They were involved in a new, exciting project…

3. Methodology

"Perhaps art school is destined to remain caught between conflicting sets of values: it should be progressive and experimental, as well as conservative; it should both promote personally experiencing art in all its forms, and cultivate a knowledge of impersonal, uninteresting formal techniques in order to educate selfless dreamers; it should also, and at the same time, forge sophisticated strategic manipulators of the art market and be a haven for intellectuals and madmen. Moreover, it should be a well-managed, rational institution and an open agora –a marketplace for ideas." (Wasilewski, 2013, p. 767)

"Higher education has become 'market-obsessed,' competing for students in a world where university marketing predominates, and where considerable effort is focused on ensuring that the product is perceived as superior to any other in the field." (Storey & Asadoorian, 2014, p. 2)

As a small part of the ODAS project *Resources for Analysing the Informational Quality of Teaching Guides in Arts Teaching at University* to improve the self-assessment of Arts Teaching in University of Barcelona, the doctoral research in which I am involved under the title *Higher Education in the Visual Arts from the Outskirts: Strategies to reinforce links between university, cultural industries and territory* aims to three objectives: (1) Involve different external Stakeholders in the assessment of informative quality of the study programs in Masters in Art; (2) Perform a qualitative analysis of the representations and expectations that these professional cultures have on Higher Education in Art; (3) Establish a map of centres in art, nature and territory and similar bodies in the Catalan region, and study the

possibilities to integrate them and their practices in the formative action of graduate programs offered by University of Barcelona.

These objectives, at the same time, are linked to three key arguments to propose such study: (1) Quality assessment systems of different university programs generally involve students and staff. Even if universities and other bodies see the need of involving social agents and professionals linked to its different degrees, there are few studies regarding this; (2) There is not a systematic knowledge about how university degrees in art are valued by their related professional cultures. There is no awareness about what do they think in terms of educational quality, the profile of graduates and the ways to integrate them in professional practice within the territory; (3) With aim on enhance transference to society and boost interdisciplinary cutting-edge research, postgraduate programs in art need to stimulate the contact with professional world. In addition, they have to explore the inputs of different stakeholders that, even if having an important influence into territory, have no clear influence in university study plans.

To sum up, fist part of research consists in establishing a state of the art: ERIC is thoroughly searched looking for what has been going on during last years regarding program assessment (especially on a postgraduate level) and its results accessed, selected and analysed. Later, according to what is found, a sample of local and already known external stakeholders will be established and interviewed following certain techniques. This will be done in order to gather their impressions and advises. Last part of research consists in building a database, a map, a network of different characters interested in engaging relationships with the college and the department to which I'm ascribed –Sculpture.

4. Early findings

> "Meanwhile, the institutions become more obsessed with their own procedures and qualifications, none of which matter very much at all in the professional art world. It is noticeable how there has been this educational turn *outside* the art school and the debates about pedagogy and artists' education take place much more often within art journals and institutions." (Houghton, 2013, p. 942)

> "Transparency involves accountability." (Babyn & Lykova, 2009, p. 44)

So far, analysed documents obtained from ERIC or derived from its references allow stating some early findings. Even if they might sound expectable for some, they definitely relate to previous key arguments for research:

- Talking in general terms, there is no indexed literature about program assessment in Higher Education in Art, even less specifically on a Master's level. Information to be found focuses on education, technology and business studies.
- In program evaluation, it is mainly about internal stakeholders (students and faculty) and university managers than external professionals.
- Assessment in Program Evaluation exists too often due to accreditation agencies, not because institutions have a culture of self-assessment. If external stakeholders are referenced, they tend to be accreditation agencies.
- Outcomes of assessment and accreditation processes are used in a "cosmetic" manner: changes in the system occur in terms of what is visible (curricula and hired staff), but the invisible remains undisturbed (institutional and school mission, values and long-term objectives).

- Related to accreditation, assessment happens mainly in a quantitative approach. Qualitative methodologies are fairly uncommon alone, but mixed methods to gather data and assess quality are quite used.

- Qualitative methods, as analysis of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, humanize the information and make rich sources of data, allowing a deeper analysis. Qualitative methods, however, are accused of excessive subjectivity.

- External stakeholders, if not accreditation agencies, refer many times to medium-big companies or lobbies instead of local, sustainable, nearby professional initiatives along the urban and rural territory.

5. Opening the cabinet

"Although institutions of Higher Education could also receive system feedback in the form of negative media attention, declining student enrolments or governmental sanctions, it is likely that most institutions and individuals would find feedback in the form of deliberate, continuous self-assessment much more preferable." (Praslova, 2010, p. 218)

The spirit of this study is to use international widely accepted tools and methodologies to act locally, hoping to generate a change from the base in art studies. From there, we can bottom up and assure the quality, meaningfulness and singularity of art teaching in our current society. Since art faculties cannot escape the cultural and economical context of austerity and accountability –which is particularly dramatic in Spain– it is important to produce meaningful information presenting what it's working and what it's not.

Long-term aims of this investigation want to contribute to empowerment of HE in Art and assuring its sustainability; to facilitate prospective and current students clear information about what to certainly expect in their studies; to help giving graduates a boost to their employment opportunities from a sustainable and local perspective; to, at the end, open the door to a more comprehensive teaching-learning environment, where educators learn along with students.

The main purpose of this paper is to present this on-going work in public for the first time and, therefore, to generate discussion and gather feedback and knowledge from the conference attendants. The phrase "hidden curriculum" can refer to underground, covered practices but also to what has not been addressed yet and stays under mist, as critical necessity of qualitative program assessment –and the different ways to conceive and implement it. Questions that could be raised may be:

- How the is the program quality assessment being addressed by (your) art college/faculty? With which methodology? Many universities count on external staff and professionals as collaborators. (If it is your case) are they involved in program assessment?

- What has to be the paper of Fine Art Faculties within research-intensive universities? Which has to be the future, sustainable model of Higher Education in Art? What has to the purpose of a Master in Art?

- Why there is so limited amount of indexed literature on program and quality assessment in Higher Education in Art? Can Higher Education in Art remain foreign to current education and assessment trends and tools?

The mix between program assessment, external stakeholders and qualitative measures in graduate programs in art still pose a terrain to explore –or an exotic cabinet to open. Since it seems that there is no key, any tips using the lock pick?

Acknowledgements

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