

RCast_ChrisMitchell

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SPEAKERS

Chris Mitchell, Benji Jeffrey

B Benji Jeffrey 00:07

Hello, and welcome to Rcast. A podcast from the Royal College of Art, home to the next generation of creatives and the world's number one art and design University, representing the largest concentration of postgraduate artists and designers on the planet. We'll be bringing you insight into the philosophy behind the programmes at the RCA by talking to staff, students and the wider RCA community about what we do here and how the work of architects, artists, communicators, designers and researchers affect the world at large. I'm Benji Jeffrey and today I'll be talking to Chris Mitchell, about creative education and how this form of education can help people respond to the challenges of living with uncertainty. Chris is an experienced leader in UK Higher Education with expertise in strategy development, curriculum design and educational innovation. And he is the deputy director of academic development here at the RCA. Thank you for joining us today, Chris. It's a pleasure. How you doing?

C Chris Mitchell 01:06

Very well.

B Benji Jeffrey 01:06

Good. So let's just jump in with the big difficult question straightaway. So what makes a creative education distinct from other forms of education?

C Chris Mitchell 01:16

I think this is such an interesting question. And I think one of the things for me that makes it it's so distinctive, is the immediacy of some of these kind of fundamental educational principles. Because we have done exercises with a whole range of different disciplines. And ask them, What is learning? What is teaching these really basic questions? And what's interesting is, when you ask creative artists, that question, very quickly, they get to the answers, really

fundamental answers, like learning how to be learning that that fires your imagination, that then allows you to then apply that imagination to the problems that you're facing. Now, what's I think fascinating about that is if you spend time with other disciplines, they will get to the same point often. But it takes a lot longer, right is that immediacy you get with creative artists as a really clear sense of this is what I'm here to do. And also, compared to a lot of other disciplines, it's quite content light. Like, if you sit down and talk to a whole range of different academics from different disciplines, they'll say, well, the things you need to know if you are a geologist, or if you're an economist at this, this and this, and this. So that's the kind of fundamentals and you'll build from that. I don't think there is that in the creative arts and arguably, in some areas like architecture, or some of the designs areas, there's things definitely they will want to kind of teach you in order to be able to be a functioning architect or designer. But a lot of the time, the canon is a quite small and be very fluid. And that's a really interesting part of the kind of creative arts is that notion of that the rules, there aren't very many fixed rules to play with and that gives you quite a large playground and gives you quite a lot of space for your own imagination.

B

Benji Jeffrey 03:06

Hm It's almost like there's there's two different tracks isn't there within this education, there's the technical side of things. And then there's the cognitive side of things, wh-which sometimes are more to do with undoing than than doing.

C

Chris Mitchell 03:19

Yeah that's a really interesting point. I mean, we've debated at length the notion of, of undoing. And this came into kind of sharp relief for us when we were talking about the changes that are have been to a whole range of different disciplines. So the RCA, obviously, it's a postgraduate institution. And we've got very used to the idea that there's a whole range of undergraduate institutions providing us with students. And what happens when the sector changes, is that the backgrounds that students bring with them changes. So for example, in our case, ceramics and glass, we've got a ceramics and glass course but we've had it for many, many years, it's been incredibly successful and it built on the idea that you will probably have done an undergraduate degree in ceramics and/or glass. What's interesting is that that has changed, the sector has changed, there are fewer of those undergraduate degrees and some of the assumptions that people might bring with them, that people understand sort of the technical side, the material how material behaves around clay or with glass, is when you take those out. Initially, I think there's that temptation to kind of go well, that's a shame. But I think what's been really interesting in order to continue to flourish as a postgraduate degrees saying, is that the idea of saying, well, they don't necessarily have an understanding of grounding in the technical property. So maybe we aren't going to have to do that as well at postgraduate level, but what do they bring instead? What do we get from having students from a whole range of different backgrounds coming here? And I think that it's been a really interesting process and a really good example for me of the different ways in which this institution and other institutions like it have had to adapt to the changing worlds and some of the assumptions that we've made once upon about students no longer being relevant.

B

Benji Jeffrey 05:02

Hm and I guess that kind of ties into the idea of the questioning of the canon as well. Right? The the questioning of what modes of knowledge are seen as important, or you know, what forms of knowledge move between being a hobbyist and being a professional as well.

C Chris Mitchell 05:17

Yeah Absolutely. And again, that that fundamental question is, if there isn't a well established canon, what is it that we're doing here? That's a really fundamental question, you're spending a lot of time you're spending a lot of uh effort and and resource in coming to study at a place like the RCA. And it's sometimes really difficult from a curriculum designers point of view, is, it's a well, in the absence of that canon, what am I getting? Now, for for our answer is often we're creating the environment for you to develop the sort of intellectual, technical and professional skills to be able to flourish beyond. But it's a lot harder sell than it is, I think, for us than it is for some other disciplines who can be much more explicit. It's, it's about this, this and this.

B Benji Jeffrey 05:59

Hm and you've been taking the lead on the postgraduate certificate in art and design education here at the RCA. So are there any kind of examples of how like, because again, the next layer, I guess, is how do you teach people to teach something that doesn't have anything to be taught? Or, you know, I'm being a bit cheeky with? Yeah yeah no and that is the often the thing about any kind of educational degrees or educational development is that that notion of the snake eating itself. Is that that you're teaching about teaching. And I think for us, I mean, the the PG cert that that we launched here four years ago, and it has been through sort of many different hands other people, lots of people have been the programme lead for that I was there at the start, but I haven't always been the programme lead. Is it changes, it morphs, but it is about looking at the assumptions that people make, and about making all the decisions that you make as an educator, explicit ones. So I think I've looked at a lot of different kind of programmes and a lot of different institutions, and some institutions will will mandate people to go on these kinds of internal PG certs. And then you get a lot of crossed arms. You get a lot of people saying, Oh, I have to do this. And I think a lot of the fear about people who are mandated to do this kind of thing is, you're going to tell me what I'm doing is wrong. Right.

C Chris Mitchell 06:16

And I don't think that's ever the case. Because it's not as if we can say, what's right.

B Benji Jeffrey 07:19

No one is going to be able to say, oh, there's been lots of research. And we know that the best way for someone to learn is this.

C Chris Mitchell 07:30

In fact, I've seen lots of people not necessarily in this institution, but a lot of different contexts

saying, research says this, and thinking, yeah, give me 10 minutes, and I'll find some researcher says exactly the opposite. But I think is that thing of, is not necessarily telling you, you're wrong. It's also not telling you you're right. It's about making sure that the decisions that you make as an educator are informed you understand what it is that's informing them and you'll make explicit about that. So for me, it would be a success if someone comes out of that as I actually decisions are making I still think a good ones but I understand why I'm making them and I understand what the impact of those decisions now are.

B Benji Jeffrey 07:41

Yeah Yeah. And I wonder because, there, there's a difficulty isn't there it went when education becomes more and more standardised, that you you can sometimes lose that flavour, that individual, that individual flavour, which is which is a real shame so I think it's good that people, erm, I suppose he's teaching programmes are about emboldening people to trust what they do rather than standardising.

C Chris Mitchell 08:33

Yeah, and I think that's a that's a really interesting tension. Because I'm in my role, uh I spent a lot of time teaching education but also in another part of my role is looking at curriculum design from an institutional point of view. And I'm often the sort of one on the other side of the table, kind of saying, well, write your learning outcomes, design the curriculum, evidence why you're doing this and what you're doing. And I think it comes fundamentally down to what is your approach to learning?

B Benji Jeffrey 09:03

Hm

C Chris Mitchell 09:03

What do you fundamentally think learning is, and I am an advocate of curriculum designers writing things down in learning outcomes in that kind of well structured um curriculum. But fundamentally, I think, my point of view, there are others, is that learning is it is a fundamentally messy thing.

B Benji Jeffrey 09:24

Yeah

C Chris Mitchell 09:24

It cannot be pinned down.

B Benji Jeffrey 09:26
Yeah Yeah

C Chris Mitchell 09:26
It cannot be tangled. If I do this, then that will happen. And yeah, so many studies have tried to demonstrate, in a good way, if we do this, will it achieve what we want to achieve? And the answer is always well, you might be able to, at best demonstrate that someone can do something that they didn't do, couldn't do previously. It's almost impossible to demonstrate the thing you did, your intervention is a thing because it's not a scientific experiment. You can't isolate them for the the kind of multifarious variations of the world. Yeah, but that's okay. So as a curriculum designer, absolutely, you need to be really clear what you're doing, why you're doing it. My particular take on on what learning is, is expect it to be messy.

B Benji Jeffrey 10:15
Yeah

C Chris Mitchell 10:15
expect students to go off in their own directions and glory in that.

B Benji Jeffrey 10:18
Yeah. And in this, this idea of messiness, and in a world where we can find YouTube tutorials, and wherever we can find conversations with people, why would someone go into a creative education and not just build it themselves?

C Chris Mitchell 10:32
Or? Well, part of me thinks if you can, great!

B Benji Jeffrey 10:36
Yeah

C Chris Mitchell 10:36
I think what, what, studying or enrolling in a programme of study gives you is, is yes, you've got a lot of expertise. Behind you, you've got a lot of institutional structures behind you saying, look, we have made all these decisions, because we have tried and tested this in lots of

different ways and we'll provide you with the structure. But also, I think it really, really helps to provide the structure of kind of motivations, in a sense

B Benji Jeffrey 11:02
Hm

C Chris Mitchell 11:02
is, it's very easy to say if you're entirely on your own, and maybe I won't do it.

B Benji Jeffrey 11:08
Hm

C Chris Mitchell 11:08
Whereas if someone is saying, right, we expect you to be doing this so you'll be opened up to more ideas than necessarily you would do if you're entirely guided by a YouTube algorithm. But it also creates a structured features that can keep your motivation up. And I think crucially, it provides you other people to study with.

B Benji Jeffrey 11:25
Uh-hm

C Chris Mitchell 11:29
And one of the things that we say to curriculum designers here at the college and keep on saying I'm sure I'll keep on saying it, as long as I am at the college, is all this stuff matters. Your curriculum design, your discipline, all that matters, you matter, as a teacher, it doesn't matter quite as much as the other students. We've asked this question, in the student survey every single year for as long as I can remember, what is the best thing about the college? And the answer is always the same thing. Other students. Now, for some people, I could find that quite depressing, because you spent a lot of time and resource in developing their their kind of physical and intellectual atmosphere, but I think it's great. I think you're tapping into the fundamental thing is learning alongside other people. And I think that is quite a difficult thing to replicate on your own.

B Benji Jeffrey 12:14
And I think there's the the joy in that of people that are on these kind of flexible paths, coming back to what you were saying about ceramics and glass before, you know, being part of a

network where maybe someone's done physics, someone's done fine art, someone's done textiles and actually, you're all together doing digital direction, for example, it's quite a kind of like, there's some great friction there and excitement.

C Chris Mitchell 12:34

Yeah, absolutely. And I think what's really interesting about some of these new programmes that we're offering in September is that they're being developed at the same time. And it enables us to put in the structures. To do it proper electives. So, you can come in on this programme. And from my point of view, I'm thinking, well, you know, in order to be able to kind of progress the programme on what you have done this unit, and this unit, and this unit builds on that. But at various points, whether it's the part time or the full time option, they're going to get to go off and do an elective in a completely different school with a completely different staff. And I think it's brilliant.

B Benji Jeffrey 13:06

Hm and one of these pathways, which I believe you're leading on is the creative education pathway. What does that look like?

C Chris Mitchell 13:13

Well, what's we've done is it's not a sort of introduction to education.

B Benji Jeffrey 13:18

Right.

C Chris Mitchell 13:18

Well, so we took the decision quite early on, not just to do a sort of kind of basic education programme, because I think it's um because also we want to give options for our own students to potentially choose electives in our area as well. And that wouldn't be particularly palatable to them. So we've got, we're offering up to electives to the rest of the college, which again, our students are free to take as well. One of which is called education for change, which is the idea of, of designing and delivering education, that specifically addressing social issues, which is a massive and increasingly big issue. And it's about, again, providing the kind of intellectual and sort of professional environment to engage with those issues and to try things out, which is the kind of fundamental principle for us. And the second one elected that we're offering up is called Making pedagogy. So it's, it's a reflection on what it means to again, design and deliver education that involves the act of making that involves the act of creating digital and kind of physical artefacts, and how does that change what it is that you're you're doing as a student and what you're designing as a teacher, so those are what we're offering up. I'll be honest, I am as excited about all of the other electives that the other programmes are developing. I'm really looking forward to understanding how an individual student sort of journey changes according

to what they do. So, we'll have some students potentially choosing our options. Great. Well, if some students are going off saying, no, that's fine. I'm going to go off and go and do storytelling. And I'm I'm so looking forward to seeing what happens, to see you know, as students progress throughout the programme and end towards their their independent research project, what influences those electives have on what it is that they are fundamentally interested in and want they want to spend, six under study hours doing for their, their research project.

B

Benji Jeffrey 15:09

And with this idea of the kind of social changes and communities, this maybe a too trickier question, but what is there a distinction then between a teacher and a facilitator?

C

Chris Mitchell 15:20

Oh. I think there is. And I think it goes back to that that question, which is often asked is, do you need a teacher to learn to which I think the obvious answer is, No. You don't need a teacher. And I think it's about the sort of the increasing recognition of the changes of your role, particularly, I would say, at a postgraduate level. Because maybe at previous levels, you could be reasonably assured that you are in a more advanced position than then some of your students. Looking at the people who already to study at the RCA. Some of them, but many of them are already pretty advanced in their careers, I've already got quite a lot to show for it. And we'll be entering into the same competitions and processes as the staff. Again, brilliant. So you've gotten a situation where the student might know more than you about some areas. Again, I think it's a good thing. But I think it does shift the role. And to give you kind of a practical example of how, how my teaching has changed on on this, because we play so much emphasis, and I've always placed so much emphasis on group work, and collaboration. What I noticed is that whenever you kind of go to group work, as long as you've designed it well enough, there's always a momentum, there's always an energy in the room, when people go off and you give them a prompt, they go off and talk about it. And what's really interesting is when they come back, and you ask them to report back, a lot of that energy's just disappears. That excitement people have about engaging with interesting issues with other people, it goes and you go right, group three, can you report back, and again, that energy is is gone. And part of me is thinking, Well, why am I doing this plenary? Why am I doing this feeding back? Who's it for? And thinking? I think it's for me, I think it's for me as a teacher. And what I found interesting is actually, I'm not going to do that so much. They've had a fantastic discussion, they might be evidence of that on the online collaboration board, or whatever the thing might be. Maybe they don't need to tell me what the discussion is. Maybe they can just have that discussion. And again, that for me is that that switch from a teacher, who needs to know it all, to a facilitator who is creating opportunities for students to have interesting conversations with interesting people and leave it there. So that's sort of my answer to that.

B

Benji Jeffrey 17:35

Yeah, I guess it's the distinction, isn't it between what learning is and what evidencing for assessment is. Which I think is has a lot to do with how art school has evolved, right? Because art school was one distinct thing, and then University was kind of blueprinted on top of it.

C Chris Mitchell 17:50

Yeah. And I think there's a really interesting area there is about the notion of experimentation, because you will not find an art school in the world, that doesn't talk about innovation, and experimentation. And I think where that issue comes into sharp relief is when you get to the assessment. And say, be bold, be risky, be innovative, but also get it right. Because your assessment is based around the presentation of the product, whatever the product may be, even the product is a painting or it's a it's a schematic or whatever it might be. And I think that's the really interesting tension. I think, if we are encouraging as we are, students to take risks, and risks inevitably involve by a certain kind of criteria failures. Then I think it's really important that our assessment processes recognise that, mean that the you are not penalised for not turning out beautifully or exactly as you would hope it to be. That the assessment is as much about the process of learning as it is about generating something you can present it to show there's always a time, when actually you do I want to say this I'm really proud of and I want to show it off. But throughout the programme, there should be lots of opportunities to creatively fail, because I think you learn much more from that than about the things that you kind of think that's perfect.

B Benji Jeffrey 19:06

Yeah, I mean, I spoke to Martin about this in the first podcast, I sort of imagined this is going to be a running theme for everything, which is the art school paradox, which is the more you fail, the better you are.

C Chris Mitchell 19:16

Yeah, absolutely.

B Benji Jeffrey 19:17

In some ways. So thinking about the way that the these things are embedded in art school, how do these ideas start to move out into the world?

C Chris Mitchell 19:27

Well, that is a tricky question to answer. I think, in part, it's, well, there's there's two sides to me, one of which is directly engaging with the world through your studies. And I think what's really interesting is you see more in in this institution, but also across the whole kind of UK HE sector, about doing things like Grand Challenges doing things which involve community engagement, so you're directly involving them in that process. And I think that's a really positive thing, although I think there's sometimes a tension there, around the idea that that university is presenting themselves to solving other people's problems. And I think the key thing for me in that relationship between an institution and the communities that engages with this is they aren't doing us a favour, we're not doing them a favour. So and I think that's a key thing to establish when you're, you're engaging with communities beyond your own. Then I

think there's that thing of explicitly talking with students and discussing them and giving them opportunities to try things out to enable them to then engage effectively with the world. And it goes to fundamental questions like ethics, for example. So, you know, as an institution, as with many institutions, we previously took quite a deficit, middle towards ethics, we would say, it's a preventative process, it's preventing you from exposing yourself to harm, it's preventing you from exposing others to harm. But what's been really interesting over the last few years is you switch that model and saying, well, not only can you the experience of, of education and research be a beneficial thing, but it's actually fundamentally setting you up with the ethical tools to be able to engage with the world beyond your graduation. And if it's not doing that, in ethics and and those issue about community engagement is not part of your practice, by the end, when probably we're not doing it quite right. And it's that notion of it's not a deficit model, actually, it's a fundamental part of your practice, is to think, yeah, you might want to create your own work, but then how you engaging with the rest of the world in what you do. And that how can be explicit that can be otherwise, you know, some people who come to the college, want to work quite individually, and find a lot of the collaborative stuff quite problematic and stressful, and that's fine. But still, I think whether you are a kind of a natural collaborator, or a natural individualist, I think that that notion of providing with the framework, intellectual and ethical framework to engage with the world is really, really important.

B Benji Jeffrey 22:00

And it seems like there has been a big switch in the ethics of how people engage with the world at large over the last few years, you know, for example, heart and soul, we work with people who are neurodivergent, to highlight what they do, rather than telling someone, this is a way of doing something.

C Chris Mitchell 22:16

Yeah.

B Benji Jeffrey 22:17

Which is really important. There's also a tricky thing with the ethics as well, right. And in terms of the being willing to fail at an institution, because within group work, that can be tricky stuff, where perhaps people come with difficult relationships, to ethics that we are then asking them to bring to the fore in order to explore which might not be so good for other students.

C Chris Mitchell 22:41

Yeah, we do place a lot of emphasis on collaboration, and you recognise that it often does go wrong. And particularly I think in if you scale up the importance of example, we have, for some of the units, we have collaborative assessment for part of it. So you have to do something, develop something with other people. Which creates, in many cases, some fantastic relationships where everyone is having a wonderful time. And in some cases, not. I think the key thing is, is what kind of framework ie providing for those students to do it. So, I think just saying collaboration is important, you're going to collaborate and abandon them to that is, is a

problem. I think you've got to kind of say, if we think, for example, that collaboration is a fundamental part of being an educator, or possibly even being someone who has a creative practice, then you've got to then design things around it. So to give people opportunities. So what does this mean? The again, turn that implicit to the explicit, so you give opportunities to people to to start off in a relatively gentle way, which is just maybe a group discussion or something, which is relatively low stakes, and build up, but also keep on reflecting throughout the whole process. So it doesn't mean the avoidance of conflict, right, it doesn't mean that everyone has to have a wonderful time all the time. But it does have to be a supportive process. And again, if the collaboration doesn't work out as you want it to be, then students shouldn't fail. This isn't an example from an art context but I think it's a really interesting one, from another discipline as from economics, where they, they had a group exercise, and the group at the end of it was awarded a single mark, or single set of marks. And the group then got to discuss how they allocated that mark, according to, to people's perceptions of their relative effort. And you'd think that'll be a nightmare. Because everyone's gonna go, well, I should have more. But what was really interesting is seeing the examples of how that's actually done. An institution which does mark you know, you get 75, and you get 72. And you get 58. Is actually there was a much more open and honest discussion about merit than you imagine. And that process is an incredibly instructive one thinking well, if I don't necessarily think I earned that then what do I need to do next time. So, I think that collaboration, again, is a really, really fundamental thought. And we've we've done so much work on sort of developing our collaboration and making it a fundamental aspect of what we do. But you can't just leave people to, you have to support them.

B

Benji Jeffrey 25:16

Yeah. And I guess that's another way of thinking through how to kind of build the world you want to see as well, right? Because hopefully, people will collaborate in these environments. And then when they go out to potentially start businesses, there'll be a memory of that collaborative process, which might come into their employment IDs as well.

C

Chris Mitchell 25:31

And so on that, that we talked a little bit at the start about this notion of generous thinking. And it really is, I think, incredibly important to us is that actually, academic institutions, we can often celebrate ourselves for being kind of wonderful places where you are free to say whatever you want, but some of the things that were maybe we would some of the assumptions that we want to test, or problems that we have about status, competition within institutions, or between institutions, and that thinking, what is happening when someone is presenting their ideas? Are you thinking, well, actually, I want to prove that mine are better. Or that that I'm better than you? Or that notion of generous thinking, which is sort of developed by Kathleen Fitzpatrick, I think, is that notion of not just can you understand what it is that someone is saying? But how can you help them understand? Because often when we're presenting ideas for the first time, we're all over the shop?

B

Benji Jeffrey 26:25

Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 26:26

And actually, rather than saying, I'm going to demonstrate that your ideas aren't as good as you think they are, or I'm going to demonstrate that my ideas are better than yours, is saying, how can I help that person reframe, articulate, question, what it is that they're presenting, in order to support them and then reciprocate so that that I get the same benefit in return? So it's those kinds of things, I think, are really fundamental to set up as an ethos at the start.

B Benji Jeffrey 26:49

And there are really important things in terms of the evolution of art, education and design education, that moving away from this idea of the old master, who knows absolutely everything and they if they haven't said it's not worth it.

C Chris Mitchell 27:02

Yeah. And you often I mean, it's interesting looking, we did a project for years ago, looking back at old prospectuses of college prospectuses.

B Benji Jeffrey 27:09

Right.

C Chris Mitchell 27:10

And you see that kind of writ large, and so many of them that sort of discussion about the Atelier model, as you will, yeah. As you say, learn at the feet of of your master. And that's a really interesting kind of situation when our students average age is 27, hopefully, with some of the new programmes that are for J starts pushing up again, is that, you know, it's actually quite a freeing point of view from a staff members point of view, again, you don't have to be the master. And maybe you will learn as much from them as they will learn from you.

B Benji Jeffrey 27:39

Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 27:39

Great.

B Benji Jeffrey 27:40

Which I think at postgraduate level is what you want to

C Chris Mitchell 27:42

Yeah

B Benji Jeffrey 27:42

be happening much more as well, right? It's less less to do with just being a sponge -

C Chris Mitchell 27:46

Exactly

B Benji Jeffrey 27:47

Perhaps there's a BA is at some point. So do you have any advice for people who want to engage with the idea of creative education? Are there any artists or texts, galleries, events, things like that?

C Chris Mitchell 27:57

I think, I hear this advice in a whole range of different contexts. But I think it works equally well for education, is when you are experiencing it, education or whether you are experiencing it, as an individual learner or just witnessing it. Think about the choices, that people are making really analyse that situation. Because there's a whole range of different things that in terms of what the room looks like, where the teacher is, what they've asked you to do, what they're kind of moving towards. All of these are active choices that someone has made, some of which they may have more control over than others. But I think it's really a win. I quite enjoyed this one, particularly when the pressure is off me as a teacher is actually looking and saying, Well, what, on what basis are they doing this? Why are they doing that? What are they trying to get to why they have they done that? So I definitely think if you are someone who was interested in education, analyse, be a learner, analyse what happens. And I hesitate to mention this, but you're one of the people who've been through the PG cert. And what's really interesting is that a lot of people like you is that you kind of get used to the role of being a teacher. And suddenly you're back to being a student. And all of that kind of behaviours that a lot of our kind of staff at our students are doing this again, they then exhibit themselves when they become a student. And it's I think it's that really interesting is analyse that what's going on there.

B Benji Jeffrey 29:17

Yeah and I guess that comes back again to the idea of non non standardising the way that things are done. It's more about standardising what the intent of the activity

C Chris Mitchell 29:28
Yeah

B Benji Jeffrey 29:28
is rather than standardising what the activity itself is.

C Chris Mitchell 29:31
Yeah exactly. And I think I mean, there are so many people that worth reading, if you want to sort of get your head around education, but I think it's starting off with people like Bell Hooks, because I think one of the interesting thing but particularly within a sort of creative arts point of view, is that notion of questioning your assumptions, and we exist within kind of powerful structures, and I think is really understanding and we are subject to those powerful structures as well. It's really understanding what it is that the relationship is between the institution and the teacher, the teacher and the student and the student in the institution, I think it's trying to read a little bit more about that is a really fundamental thing, because I've probably done this to you at some point. But I think it's absolutely fascinating, that you walk into a room, and you don't know anyone there. And one human being stands up, often in front of a screen. And they asked you to do stuff, and you do it. I think it's fascinating.

B Benji Jeffrey 30:31
Yeah. Or don't or they don't do it.

C Chris Mitchell 30:35
It's incredible that so often they do.

B Benji Jeffrey 30:38
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 30:39
But it, I mean, this isn't meant to be an interview of me.

B Benji Jeffrey 30:43
But a story that I have, because I like to use Pauline Oliveras' tuning meditation.

C Chris Mitchell 30:47
Yeah.

B Benji Jeffrey 30:48
As a thing that I do have students, which is where basically, everyone contributes vocally, to a texture that's created by matching someone else's note. And whenever I normally whenever I do it, it goes really, really well. And everyone gets involved and even if they're a bit nervous at the beginning, they get into it. But the last time that I did it in a group activity, I spent 20 minutes sitting in silence. With me being the only person that made a noise. And it was it was really difficult, because you get once again, I guess it's about reading the room, right? Because I became so confident in the fact that this is this is the one thing I do that always works. And then when it didn't, it was it was horrible.

C Chris Mitchell 31:26
But I went that's an interesting case. I mean, is it necessarily a bad thing, that everyone sat there in silence? I'm doing remember an old print tutor saying to me, that he had one tutorial with a student and ask them a question. And the student said, can I just have a moment to think about it? And that moment, extended to 20 minutes? Right. And so they sat there in absolute silence in 20 minutes now, I think I would have probably found that quite an uncomfortable experience towards the end.

B Benji Jeffrey 31:53
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 31:53
But they sat there in silence. And at the end of that student said, I think what I want to say is this. And they had a wonderful discussion for the amount of time they had available.

B Benji Jeffrey 32:01
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 32:01
And, again, that tests a lot of assumptions. If you had a 30 minute tutorial, and 20 minutes without the silence, think, is that a good thing? But in that particular case, maybe it was? Yeah. Maybe it created the space for students to have that thought they wouldn't have had

otherwise. So. And I wouldn't, yeah, that issue about silence, I think is a brilliant one. Because I think famously, from a teacher's point of view, silence is so awkward.

B Benji Jeffrey 32:26
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 32:26
And it is a real ha- good habit to get into to hold silence.

B Benji Jeffrey 32:30
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 32:31
Because I think, it as a student, often, I'm I'm sat there and someone asked me a question, I'm thinking, I'm not gonna say anything. Or I've said something already. So I'm going to be quiet. And you wait, and you wait. And that 20 seconds feels like forever. And you think, actually there is a question I have to ask. And if they say watching, oh, if no one's got any questions, and away we go. If somebody just waited that little bit longer. If you held that silence for 30 seconds, someone someone's got a question.

B Benji Jeffrey 32:59
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 32:59
And I think it's a real effort of will to hold silences. And sometimes we used to do a thing where, we'd say we're just going to hold a silence now. There's no question. We're just gonna, we're gonna get together in this room and hold the silence. And 20 seconds feels like a long time.

B Benji Jeffrey 33:14
Yeah. But it's worth it again sitting in that kind of discomfort is normally a really, really useful thing.

C Chris Mitchell 33:19
Yeah. And another example, for me is that issue of forced silences and one of the Students

Union, sabbatical teams did a big project about what they call the equal voices in the room. And that notion of how do you ensure that there's fairness in group discussions which form so much part of the creative arts?

B Benji Jeffrey 33:37

Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 33:38

And they introduced me and other people who attended the session to the sort of the long table etiquette from Lois Weaver. That notion of, you imagining that learning space as a sort of a, like a dinner table. And only the people around the dinner table can speak. So it's sort of it's a grip tutorial. So you have a theme, you're talking, but only the people are on around the table can speak, everyone else is an audience around the edge. And it was really interesting for a lot of people how, uncomfortable they were with not being able to speak. Now you could come into that conversation, what you could do is if you wanted to contribute, you walked up to someone, just tap them on the shoulder, and ask them if you could come in, and they would leave the table. And you would sit down on the table. And then you were one of those kind of six to eight people who were then contributing to it. And I thought it was fascinating. And I thought it's fascinating to see, the different dynamics. Some people may be being encouraged to speak, who wouldn't necessarily step forward. Also chatterboxes like me, going, Oh, I've got something I really want to say. But you can't set the rules of the the this engagement or that you can't say anything. So say well, I can't say anything. I'm going to listen instead. And that was brilliant for me.

B Benji Jeffrey 33:45

Yeah. Right,

C Chris Mitchell 33:48

So in the end, I think I I don't think I ever came to the table or if I did, I came very briefly and thinking I'm really really going to enjoy sitting and listening. But, and again, it's that taking of of something as an implicit assumption, and say explicit creating rules to tweak it. And so now you're going to react. I thought it was brilliant.

B Benji Jeffrey 35:12

It it sounds brilliant. I was just saw something the other day about ADHD, and the impulse for someone who has ADHD to interrupt not because they want to interrupt but because they simply have something that they need to say at that particular time. So I guess if they're all tricky, these things aren't maybe as you would hope this sounds, things good bit must be. I mean, I'm one of those people that you know, kind of in my head has some some form of like, neuro divergence that's undiagnosed, because I just yeah, it's, it's, it's difficult sometimes

C Chris Mitchell 35:43
Yeah

B Benji Jeffrey 35:43
To hold back to these things.

C Chris Mitchell 35:44
And I think that's a really good example of the fact that competing interests, sometimes a little bit, people are very different people have different preferences. And and when you are a teacher, when you're designing, teaching, you have this impossible situation to some extent that you've got incredible diversity of interests and experiences and perspectives around the table, and how do you accommodate it all. And that was a really big trend sort of probably about 20 years ago, to define learning styles, everyone was very excited about learning styles. And the idea is, you would diagnose exactly what your preferences are, how your brain thinks. And everyone was very enthusiastic about it, and lots of different kind of mechanisms that kind of came out. And as always, back to the fundamental question, then what do you do, as a teacher, when you've got such a variety of people around the kind of the virtual or physical table, and learning styles as, as sort of died out a little bit, in part, because it's not very robust as a kind of methodology, not reliable look kind of valid, necessarily, or can't be demonstrated to be, and people change over time? Well and also people must say what they they wish, their learning style was. Yeah of course. But I think, for me that that sort of learning style discussion is really kind of helped, not necessarily to everyone to diagnose themselves, and for a teacher to know all of this and be able to respond to all of this. But to actually have that open, explicit discussion. Rather than me knowing everything about everyone in the room, tell me and you creating opportunities? What do you like? What are you going? What's your preferences? And so it doesn't necessarily mean we will always do what you want, because some of your interests might might be competing. But at least if everyone is aware, Chris is going to continue putting his hand up and going, Oh, I've got a point to make here.

B Benji Jeffrey 37:34
Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 37:35
And then also may think, well, maybe actually, if that's your instinct, great, we'll bring you in. But now be quiet and let other people come in and let them spend some time listening. As long as everyone understands what their preferences are, I think it's really useful. On the PG cert, for years ago, someone did a project around just emotional check ins, the start of a session, they were doing a workshop. How was everyone feeling? And it was really interesting that we've very rarely asked that. How is everyone feeling right now? And in a, hopefully, in a kind

of supportive environment, everyone is saying, well, actually, I didn't sleep at all last night. So I feel pretty wretched right now. Or I've got this going on that going on. And suddenly, you understood that, rather than everyone being boxed fresh, and coming into it as sort of eager students to learn that everyone had problems. Everyone had, you know, different levels of energy and enthusiasm for that particular day. And that you can adapt to that. You can sort of say, well, that's fine. Great. You're, you know, sorry that you didn't have a good night's sleep. But when, for example, you're being a little bit behind the curve, I'll understand and I won't push you on that. I think it's really useful to that have that level of dialogue. And it's something I'd certainly as an individual teacher, I want to do more of.

B Benji Jeffrey 38:48
Yeah, I guess it's about setting honesty as well. Right?

C Chris Mitchell 38:50
Yeah

B Benji Jeffrey 38:50
And pulling down this divide once again, between the master and the student, you know, we're all in this together. And your your teacher is just as likely to have had a bad night's sleep.

C Chris Mitchell 38:59
Haha Exactly.

B Benji Jeffrey 39:01
I've got one final question that might be a bit too big. But here we go.

C Chris Mitchell 39:04
Okay

B Benji Jeffrey 39:04
In a time when there is no time, how do we make sure that we embed all of these these productive ideas?

C Chris Mitchell 39:12

I mean, I feel the lack of time as much as anybody.

B Benji Jeffrey 39:16

Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 39:17

So, I'm not going to give anyone else advice, because I'm always kind of quite shy of, of giving anyone advice, which I haven't actively sought it. Right. All I can say from my own point of view is often it's, it's an investment of time. I think. If you're in a situation where you're not giving yourself enough time to prepare for something, whatever that might be, then, yes, less likely to have a positive experience from that. So I think it's for me, in terms of how I've done it is, is a greater sense of prioritisation. Because there was quite a lot of time in the day.

B Benji Jeffrey 39:51

Yeah.

C Chris Mitchell 39:52

And a lot of things I'm doing are thinking, well, who's going to benefit from that? Am I going to benefit from that? Is anyone else going to benefit from that? And in which case I invest my time in making sure that I've got, you know, I've given myself enough time to kind of plan. But also to think about, well, what happens if it doesn't work? I think from a teaching point of view, I think that's really important. Because you can design something which as you said, and in your example, early, you've tried something lots of times before, absolutely confident that it works. And it doesn't. And I think that happens all the time. It happens all the time in life. And it certainly happens in education, when you're thinking these people are not getting this. And I think it's, it's invest the time in sort of preparing it, but also recognise, it's not working. What else are we going to do? And I think, for me, it's, it's, it's a really tricky one, because I think all of us gonna do feel that kind of sense of we never have enough time to do all the things we do, or we don't recognise the competing demands that we might have. But I've never regretted investing a bit more time in something I've never kind of said, well, I'm not going to do that, and invest time in something that really matters to me and matters to other people. Yeah, I've never regretted doing that.

B Benji Jeffrey 41:04

Great. Well, brilliant. Thank you very much for being with us here today, Chris and being so generous with what you've you've given us. You've been listening to Rcast to the Royal College of Art Podcast, home to the next generation of artists, innovators and entrepreneurs and the world's number one art and design University. You can learn more about our programmes@rca.ac.uk as well as finding news and events relating to the college and our application portal. If you're a prospective student.

