

DDCA

- [NiTRO Home](#)
- [Current Edition](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Add Your Voice](#)
- [Get NiTRO Emails](#)
- [About NiTRO](#)
- [About The DDCA](#)

"It Was Twenty [Five] Years Ago Today..."

[September 26, 2016](#)

By Professor Clive Barstow and Dr Jenny Wilson

On the eve of his 25th anniversary of his emigration to Australia, Jenny Wilson talks to artist and academic Clive Barstow about his reflections on arts education.

Clive Barstow came to Australia from the UK in 1990s after career teaching and studying in the UK art school 'scene'. He is now Dean of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan University in Perth. After a sustained period of coming to grips with the changing Australian tertiary education environment, he reflects upon how his own history and experiences have shaped his perceptions and approach to educational leadership.

Jenny: Tell me a little about your own experiences in the university sector in the UK.

Clive: I originally trained as a sculptor in England and undertook postgraduate study at the Chelsea School of Art, now part of the University of the Arts London. I suppose the environment of London and particularly the Kings Road in the late 1970's formed me in many ways. I come from a northern working class background so moving to London to study felt like moving to another planet. Having Eduardo Paolozzi, Vivien Westwood, Allen Jones and Bill Wyman all in the studios on the same day was a day never to forget. When I was there, it felt like the end of a golden but turbulent era when the

street punks were starting to look rather tired, a nostalgic reminder of an intense reaction to the politics of the day and one from which Britain never really recovered. Society had become very divided and art responded by popularising and satirising this hopelessness in a way that has always defined British culture. My work as a result has always been about the darkness of the politics of division, a focus that has become more acute here in Australia where ongoing issues such as race and immigration seem even more polarised and virulent.

I taught at a number of art schools in Britain with some truly wonderful and eccentric colleagues, many of who would not be allowed to work in the University environment these days. Times have changed. I regard myself as being lucky to have been part of a very special art school experience in which eccentricity was not only accepted but also celebrated. While learning the craft of teaching, I regularly taught alongside fashion designers, musicians, filmmakers, actors who all were connected by a common collective thread but also by the fact they had all attained success in the professional world. Although these were difficult times, British culture had a wonderful way of dealing with adversity, which is why it produced such innovative writers, musicians, comedians and artists. Its reactionary nature comes out of extreme social division, and its culture is a way of surviving it.

Teaching subsequently at Middlesex University and at the Maidstone College of the Art I became more involved in the discussion about how we should teach or train future artists. My students included Tracy Emin and Billy Childish, some of the forerunners of the Britpack so it was both a transitional and an exciting time both in and outside the art school. In retrospect, these turbulent and unpredictable moments in art schools have often been the most productive in terms of giving birth to a generation of movers and shakers.

The British cultural model I mention above was about a particular time and a place, so it was strange for me when I came to Australia to see doc martins being worn in Fremantle on a 40 degree summers day by a sunburned punk with a wilting Mohican. Dislocation and cultural collision has fed my arts practice ever since.

The British cultural model . . . was about a particular time and a place, so it was strange for me when I came to Australia to see doc martins being worn in Fremantle on a 40 degree summers day by a sunburned punk with a wilting Mohican. Dislocation and cultural collision has fed my arts practice ever since.

JW: It is interesting that you value art as a discipline that should be taught by artists, as arts is so often included in schools that are led by someone who is not an artist...

CB: I was thinking about this the other day. One of my colleagues said that if we hadn't had an artist running the school then art wouldn't have survived. In the late 1980's in the UK the experiment of running art schools with business executives gloriously backfired, as did the whole Thatcherism movement in its intentions to rationalise its art schools by replacing them with metropolitan based centres of excellence. A few prestigious art schools did not survive this cultural dismembering, but the political backlash was broad and wide which had the opposite effect of exposing how influential and embedded the art school system is in a rich cultural society such as Britain. From that low point, art schools have become more savvy and more focused as a way of positioning themselves to avoid the culture wars that had almost destroyed them. I learned a lot from this time, particularly how important it is to advocate for the arts in the community and how to connect the arts within your own institution.

JW: Tell me about what you have done in your position as a manager in terms of positioning the arts in your institution.

CB: In a 'new generation' Edith Cowan University, my contribution has involved building an ethos around the arts during a long period of transition, including the establishment of an arts research culture within the University. What we have done is to survive our own institution in a way, through being smart and agile and by taking advantage of being a young University in its early years of development. In the early days the art school was a fairly small player and our approach was based on the atelier model with a few softening edges. I arrived to find a mid-Atlantic pedagogical model using a European studio based system modularised by what looked like a mini-American liberal arts structure but unrelated to anything outside its own defined boundaries. This model is highly vulnerable in any climate and it does not reflect in my mind how artists and designers actually operate in the outside world. Through my current leadership role I have encouraged a more holistic and multi-disciplinary approach to reflect the new environment in which our artists will operate. The new School of Arts and Humanities is now the largest school in the University. It is also the most diverse with 6000 students and 38 disciplines. Art is central to this school and indispensable through its wider influence and interconnectivity.

Cross-disciplinary research is a way to show how art and design can drive new thinking in other areas of the University, which it turn can serve to protect the purity of our disciplines in the teaching space. This only happens when you have earned respect, most of my career has involved advocating for the arts in this way.

As an example of thinking outside the box and beyond the studio, the art school runs the University art collection, a \$14 million dollar collection that now serves a teaching and learning and research function as well as its contribution to internationalising our curriculum through the purchase of international works and artist-research residencies. Part of this collection now rotates through the West Australian Parliament on a regular basis as a way of connecting art to politics in a subtle but subversive way. Lateral thinking is what artists do really well, which is why they often make good managers.

JW: One of the things that has emerged from the literature is the difference in the way that artists see research. Do you feel that because of your own background there is a different ethos coming out from the non-arts disciplines in the school?

CB: The philosophy of a multi-disciplinary education is something we share across the arts and one that all the staff and students contribute to in our own way. It is early days to say whether this will be embraced by the social sciences who only joined us eight months ago. What we have though is unity, the idea that the common ground for arts and humanities is to improve life for everyone, whether that is through great art, beautiful design or through caring and support for the health of our communities. While research can mean different things to different people, it is important for a school of this size and breadth to share a unified understanding on the impact of this research, whether this be creative or traditional, and to this end we celebrate difference while we might at times struggle to explain it. We benefit greatly from an Aspire system here that rewards researchers financially to build a sustainable research profile while contributing to the University. The tyranny of distance from the eastern states however does disadvantage us when it comes to making strategic decisions about how best to approach this in the ERA space for instance.

In my time at ECU we, from the arts, have achieved at least equal recognition for what we do in the University. This is quite an achievement gained by a number of key and dedicated staff, a position that has been hard earned. In our University promotion policy, research is actually named 'research *and* creativity' partly in acknowledgement of the fact that creative outputs are now legitimised alongside STEM research in the University. Perhaps on a broader front, now everyone in the University thinks about creativity in their own context whether these are mathematicians, engineers, nurses or business graduates. This I must admit brings a smile to my face, a step toward an understanding of the embodied whole rather than a reflection of the established discipline structures that serve to separate creativity from other forms of academic practice. The arts do not own creativity but we do offer a broader and more contextualised view of how future graduates need to be equipped to operate in an increasingly globalising world.

JW: You worked within one of the best art schools in the UK and are working now in an interdisciplinary university, making allowances for time, what differences do you see?

What we lack compared to the UK situation. . . is a collective history. Art schools are still adolescent in the University environment, tiptoeing politely as we drag the academy into its surrogate parent's arms while at the same time carrying the burden of fear of being biologically rejected. When we talk about how creative students are contributing in our society, we need to prove it as a sector.

CB: Yes it is a different model but we are in a different time and place. Being taught by world-renowned artists means that you didn't get regular instruction in a way that is demanded by our more accountable and sometimes over regulated institutions now. What we got was random moments of magic that would feed you and keep you sustained throughout your life. You didn't receive unit credits, you got a launch pad made of gold, but like the doc martins, it would be out of place to assume that this model is one that can be transported and assumed to work in a different context.

What we do here in Australia is teach and, overall we teach very well. I know some very generous and passionate teachers and managers in Australian universities who struggle constantly with the idea of balancing pedagogical ideals with the realities of the business of staying alive. What we lack compared to the UK situation I describe, is a collective *history*. Art schools are still adolescent in the University environment, tiptoeing politely as we drag the academy into its surrogate parent's arms while at the same time carrying the burden of fear of being biologically rejected. When we talk about how creative students are contributing in our society, we need to prove it as a sector. We don't have a documented history of successful alumni yet to show how the arts are central to the economy rather than a peripheral leisure activity. This is not a devaluing process, rather it is a way of protecting and positioning the core values of what we do and who we are.

Multi-disciplinarity and inter-connectivity are ways not just to broaden opportunities for student employment; it is also a strategy to embed our contribution to society at a time when Australia is outgrowing its over reliance on mineral wealth and searching for new economies. We know that a creative economy is our future but we will need to strategise as to how we lead this debate by learning from others and by being united as a sector.

Earlier this month I re-visited the beautiful city of Winchester in the UK. On my arrival at the train station I was struck by the sign, "Winchester, Home of Winchester School of Art", with no mention of the unique Winchester Cathedral, the burial place of Jane Austen, King Arthur's round table or the fact that Winchester was the first capital of England. When I left the UK in the early 90's Winchester School of Art was hardly considered as a cultural landmark, so it is really encouraging to see how the local community has since embraced the art school as an institution to be proud of. The day we recognise art schools to be of such mainstream social and cultural significance here in Australia will be the day we mature as a nation.

Earlier this month I re-visited the beautiful city of Winchester in the UK I was struck by the sign, "Winchester, Home of Winchester School of Art", with no mention of the unique Winchester Cathedral, the burial place of Jane Austen, King Arthur's round table or the fact that Winchester was the first capital of England. . . .The day we recognise art schools to be of such mainstream social and cultural significance here in Australia will be the day we mature as a nation.

JW: Is there anything we can take from the academy models from the past and use now in a way that might define us in the future?

CB: There are established ways of learning in the art school that go back well beyond the establishment of the first University, and these should be protected and celebrated because they are still relevant today. We do however face the fact that the survival of the artist beyond the art school now depends on additional skills and attributes that have come about through emergent technologies and digital connectivity. It is a matter of balance of course, but the future will need some bold and creative thinking as to how we operate for the survival of the discipline.

Funding artists to undertake medium to long-term residencies in the art school is still of great relevance to how we learn our craft and a great addition to our day-to-day teaching. Don't ask them to teach, just organise them to come in and make work and let the students observe their mistakes and failures. It is about learning to cope with being human as much as teaching knowledge, so striking the balance is how we connect past to present. The residency approach should also extend beyond artists of course, having dialogue with politicians, writers, scientists etc. help us position our work within multiple voices as a way of taking responsibility for what we do beyond the walls of the academy. This is something that Universities and art schools already do in many cases but could share to pool resources. Here in the west the three main art schools are currently discussing this in terms of cost sharing to bring in major artists and designers into WA co-funded by state and private funding. Maybe the time is right again for a collegiate approach to how the art schools work as a community, as a marker of our unity and our relevance to society.

The Chelsea School of Art did not maintain its reputation by standing still or by protecting its boundaries. The University of the Arts London is now ranked as one of the world's leading creative institutions, a product of the sum of the parts to some extent, but more importantly it is an interconnected modern institution that also maintains and respects the autonomy and ethos of its constituent schools. Maybe there is something in this for regional institutions in Australia in particular as we face a new focus on STEM subjects at the possible cost to the arts. The model for a modern institution might not therefore be a consistent one across Australia as we start to define ourselves by our differences rather than our similarities. And finally, can you imagine Grayson Perry as Chancellor of an Australian University? We still have some way to go.

Clive Barstow's profile includes forty years of international exhibitions, artist residencies and publications in Europe, America, Asia and Australia. His work is held in a number of international collections, including the Musée National d'Art Paris. Clive is Professor and Dean of Arts & Humanities at Edith Cowan University, Honorary Professor of Art at the University of Shanghai for Science & Technology China and global faculty member of Fairleigh Dickinson University USA. His recent exhibitions include "Giving Yesterday a Tomorrow" at the Hu Jiang Gallery in Shanghai and recent publications include "Encountering the Third Space" at the University of Oxford UK.

[Clive Barstow and Jenny Wilson](#)

[Edition 3](#)

[Visual Arts, art school, history, Contribution](#)

0 Likes

- [From Uncertainty Towards Fluency: ...](#)
- [“Poetry of the Real: Conversations ...](#)

[NiTRO](#)

[Receive NiTRO In Your Inbox](#)

[Add Your Voice To NiTRO](#)

[NiTRO Article Archives](#)

[About NiTRO](#)

[The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts](#)