

Communicating Hand Skills

Johnny Ragland

At the end of the 1970's, was indentured to a company to learn the trade of carpentry and joinery. In 1982 he became a freelance carpenter/furniture-maker, and from the early 1990's produced, within his own business, hand-made commissioned bespoke furniture. Seeking whenever possible to use his own hands he found that, while this was not always possible, the level of satisfaction attained from observing others completing orders was considerably impaired. In 2001 he enrolled on a full-time degree; studying 'furniture and product design' at Kingston University. In 2007 he took a masters degree for 'innovation and design for sustainability' at Cranfield University, where his interest was discovered for exploring a link between the decline/learning of hand skills and a dis/connection of 'self' within nature as a 'whole'.

In this essay he addresses the alienation or distancing of people caused by the processes of industrialisation from their 'home' within nature. Home in this sense is the awareness of self as part of something larger, which may manifest itself in terms of the physical engagement with nature, but also the role nature plays in supporting human life. He does not seek to prove or substantiate this process of alienation but attempts to contribute to the re-engagement with nature through the (re)development and sharing of the practical hand skills necessary to work with natural materials. He is not so much driven by the need to work with materials in a sustainable way, essential though this is, but to facilitate an empathy with and appreciation of nature, which may lead to an improved level of sustainability.

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE IN THIS BRIEF ESSAY to tackle any in-depth scientific discussion; to do so may cloud the simplicity of the objective, which is to draw attention to a basic human need sometimes overlooked. I do not seek to demonise mass production, which arguably has improved the lives of many, but to demonstrate that the (re)learning of hand skills can bring benefits other than completing projects for which those skills are designed.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution there have been distinguished people warning of elements which have put in jeopardy the necessity to learn and work skilfully with our hands. William Morris (1892) for example argued that this work is a need inherent in the makeup of humans.

The main thrust of my argument is to demonstrate a particular benefit connected to the use of these skills. Our connection with nature manifests itself in many ways; here we are concerned with how this bond might be made more apparent.

The word nature, depending on one's perspective, can suggest different meanings. It will be used here in the sense of encompassing all, all that exists at any one moment in time, without differentiation of human creation. Wendell Berry (1987) writes: "*What we call nature is, in a sense, the sum of the changes made by all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places*" ...and "*humans, like all other creatures, must make a difference; otherwise, they cannot live*" (p.7). He suggests that there is a danger of using nature as an escape, and proposes that nature should be considered as one with our daily life. Orr (1994) contends that humans are part of nature and in no way separate from it. While this meaning of nature is not to defend human destructivity, it does portray nature as present in every circumstance; in the air we breathe, in every building, it is the rain, the wind, the morning dew or an evening mist – it is us and we are it.

Woodworking is considered for this essay as one and the same with all skills involving the creation of decorative or practical artefacts by hand which will be referred to as crafts. Furniture making in England specifically will be used as a point of focus, in the hope that my experience within it may ease the explanation of the hypothesis put forward. While referring to the past history of furniture making 'he' rather than 'he/she' is used, because up until recent times, I have found no evidence of women in this industry trained as craftspeople, but invite feedback and wait to be corrected. Differentiation has never been clearly defined between the words: joiner, cabinet-/furniture-maker and carpenter (Joyce, 1970), so for simplicity the words 'woodworker' or 'craftsman' will be used.

Practical demonstration became an accepted method by which tacit knowledge was handed down through generations. Initially it took the form of physical engagement with nature for purposes of supporting human life. This required the use of hands for making and using weapons, for making and using tools, for creating shelter and for harvesting and cooking food. With this new knowledge came the need to share that knowledge over time, through learning and education – an emergent process that was grounded in the inter-relation between, and inseparability of, humans from their environment.

The apprenticeships of recent centuries involved a methodical process of training young people in a craft. Throughout his training, a boy was expected to absorb by osmosis. The onus was on the apprentice to accumulate hand skills sufficient to facilitate the level of ingenuity required to become a master craftsman. His only way to reach this goal was by imitation. Being 'indentured' to one person for the period of the contract had additional educational significance. A boy in the furniture industry would commence working at about fourteen, he was usually coupled with a single craftsman for a period of normally seven years* a period which would witness a transformation, not only in the boy becoming a skilled craftsman, but the child becoming an adult.

The master's objective was to encourage the apprentice to learn the lessons of the trade for *himself* rather than merely becoming 'knowledgeable' about the subject. An apprentice was expected to practice the project being displayed in order to discover the 'secret'. Over time and through his *own* efforts the 'tricks of the trade' (with hints and pointers from his master) would become apparent. The aim was to coach the apprentice to become adept at developing solutions with his own strength of character. This led his work to become an expression of his individuality and therefore with the artefact he created came a strong personal connection.

Attaining solace from our connection with nature as a whole is at the core of this essay, which of course, is only attained with and by the will of the individual. A friend however, advised me that the using of hand skills carries no guarantee that doing so will nurture any empathy toward nature or develop a desire to see it protected. This I will not dispute, but nonetheless argue that should an individual be open to the concept, regular skilful use of his or her hands can inspire an increased appreciation of a larger self that is part of nature. To assist with this line of reasoning, some further wisdom from Morris (1882) is cited, in which he delves into different perspectives of labour.

... higher men were making things wholly to satisfy men's spiritual wants; the lower, things whose first intention was to satisfy their bodily wants... Men whose hands were skilled in fashioning things could not help thinking the while, and soon found out that their deft fingers could express some part of the tangle of their thoughts... and thus, though they laboured, they laboured somewhat for their pleasure and uncompelled, and had conquered the curse of toil, and were men (p.174).

Sennett (2008) suggests that the true meaning of skilled labour has a deeper sense; one that carries insight into the human position within nature which can provide a greater understanding of self. He states this can be achieved with: "...the desire to do something well for its own sake" (p.9) It therefore can be claimed that outcomes of such engagement wholly depend upon how the participant approaches the activity, the student's relationship with the teacher and the motives with which the exercise is undertaken.

* Apprenticeships were reduced in phases to three years in the 20th century before being disbanded in the early 1980's

This is no new theory; Tönnies (cited in Dickens 1992, p.31) in 1955 argues that in order to know oneself it is necessary to interact with people *and* nature, and reflects that modernity is altering relationships, suggesting that humans are becoming impervious to their surroundings. Schumacher wrote in 1973 of mass production causing a reduction of rural occupations arguing that this was resulting in a disconnection with traditional values and the demise of appreciation of the surrounding environment.

Nonetheless, as previously stated, the intention is not to pass judgment on the methods of production that contemporary manufacturers employ. Competition has left most producers with little option, other than a continual investment in machinery, which by doing the work of many, decreases overheads and enables a more attractive retail price. Attractive to the consumer perhaps, but with a heavy cost to the crafts. Joyce in 1970 wrote that mechanisation allows the machine, hungry for fast production, to dictate to the craftsman how to perform his duty, thus removing the need for creativity, which previously was carefully propagated. Arguably the reduction in hand skills is having a profound effect on creativity and with it man's ingenious instinct is being undermined. Hand carving for example, since the Middle Ages has in Europe, influenced interior decoration and the ornamentation of furniture (Johnson 1976); in England, this skill is now seldom commercially found. Mass produced furniture has for many, altered expectations; the production time entailed for hand carving necessitates a selling price no longer normally acceptably comparable to the value of a product produced en masse, making this practice professionally no longer generally viable. Though poignant to the human instinct to create that this situation may be, a way forward cannot be found by turning the clock backwards – the future of hand skills relies on their use in the present.

Schumacher in 1973 advocated a society where people are valued higher than economics and suggests an in-between world of machine use, which does not use machines of mass production, but by the same token will not abandon machine use altogether. He promoted an increase of the self-employed artisan working in the small workshop in a more rural environment as an alternative to the city dweller disconnected with much needed elements of nature. Though this was clearly a sensitive and practical solution when it was written, some twenty years later, however, witnessed a sharp decrease in the small furniture making business in England; there is therefore evidence to suggest that the desirable outcome envisaged cannot be certain. Small workshops and the cottage industry are thankfully still, on a reduced scale, in operation today, but are mainly kept afloat with commissioned bespoke orders from the rich, leaving the possibilities of earning a living from such practice only available to few. With the use of the adage, 'that it is not possible to correct a problem with elements from which it was produced', I propose that we investigate avenues other than those which must embrace full mechanisation, to satisfy the fundamental urge within humans to create.

Professional and amateur artists alike, from time immemorial, have *created* through a need reaching further than their consideration for remuneration. The word 'amateur' however, will often evoke the meaning of someone with a lower skill level, but it is the meaning from its Latin origin *amare* 'to love', which will now be considered. Craft and art are closely knitted together. This connection may be the key to a method of teaching that brings significant contribution to the survival of hand skills. Teaching of crafts have traditionally and logically been taught as a technology – skills needed for living. Modification of the method by which the physical skills are taught is not my message, but their categorisation and the reasons given for learning them.

Mechanisation has rendered obsolescent some hand skills, but these should be continued and cherished. When these are categorised as 'the arts' they communicate a wider and deeper meaning, more closely representing benefits, which learning and using them may inspire. How the creative seeds of hand skills grow will depend largely on the way in which schools teach 'the crafts'. Emphasis a *teacher* places on the deep satisfaction potentially derived from handwork, may provide significant encouragement to expose a latent talent that bears the fruit of fulfilment in their work as an *amateur* craftsperson.

Research into the benefits of skilfully using one's hands, may expose further advantages not previously considered: new avenues of exploitation, further advantages of the 'craft therapy workshop' discovered, and importantly, may assist the vital integration of sustainability issues into all subjects of the school curriculum, assisting the understanding of the environment and our place within it, which Orr (2002) argues is needed to ensure our survival.

Nevertheless irrefutably demonstrating that working skilfully with hands will provide a specific advantage will be difficult because the benefits attainable will always depend on the individual's perspective; handwork may provide no more than remuneration, or a useful artefact. Similarly, travelling through a forest may be experienced merely as a task or a rejuvenating, even therapeutic, encounter. I would nonetheless claim that the learning and practice of the crafts involving and evolving the creation of objects, provides an *opportunity* to attain a lasting satisfaction to a participant who has the potential to increase sensitivity to our connection with nature, which may have the effect of reducing the need for continual mental investment into objects themselves.

I would like to close with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh (cited in Van der Ryn and Cowan, 1996, p. 91), a Vietnamese Monk who refers to connectivity:

"When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun."

References:

- Berry, B. (1987) *Home Economics*. North Point Press, New York
- Dickens, P. (1992) *Society and Nature Towards a Green Social Theory*. Billing, Worcester, UK
- Johnson, H. (1976), *The International Book of Wood*. Mitchell Beazley, London
- Joyce, E. (1970) *The Technique of Furniture Making*. B. T. Batsford, London
- Morris, W. (1882) *The Lesser Arts of Life*. Macmillan and Co., London p. 174 - 232. Also available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1892/life1.htm> [accessed 30th December 2008]
- Orr, D. (1994) *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*. Island Press, Washington DC
- Orr, D. (2002) *The Nature of Design Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Schumacher, E. (1973) *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. Blond and Briggs, London
- Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*. Penguin Group, London
- Thich Nhat Hanh (1988): *The Sun My Heart*. Parallax Press, Berkeley, USA.
- Tönnies, F. (1955) *Community and Association*. Routledge, London
- Van der Ryn, S. and Cowan, S. (1996), *Ecological Design*. Island Press, Washington DC.