

The Current Education System: Too Much Beta, Not Enough Alpha

Is our current education system helping to break, not build?

As part of my role at AccessArt, I've been attending roundtable discussions with various organisations about the future of art education, in particular with regard to a probable change of government in the UK. Although these discussions centre around art education, it's clear from all conversations that it is education in its entirety that needs a rethink. The impact education has on all areas of our lives, both in the short term, and the long term; on our wellbeing, relationships, health, as well as the way it nurtures our sense of place in the world, is of course clear. The education system we have now is just a variation of one devised in the 20th century – and we find ourselves in a very different kind of century now, so we cannot assume what once worked (ish) would work at all now.

I must admit to a huge feeling of overwhelm at the roundtable meetings – problems seem intractable, and a government would need to be very brave to tackle and rewrite our entire system, so we will probably just see more tinkering at the edges. But

what interests me is how, one day (and I'm under no illusion this will be with the next government, or the next or the next), perhaps science can help describe what we, as artists, know instinctively, and lead us forward into a new, more holistic approach.

- That there is rarely enough time, understanding or support in the current education system for open-ended, exploratory learning, which is unhindered by an assessment process which, relative to the setting, has the potential to discourage risk-taking.
- That it is hard for learners to feel able to "switch" from types of learning; if the majority of the pupils' learning experience is based upon taught knowledge, they struggle to understand how to act in a space designed to empower them to discover their own knowledge.

The impact of our current system...

The current system shows its weaknesses in the things that don't happen and the things that do happen:

- Pupils aren't afforded the opportunity to explore their creativity, build and express their sense of self, and explore their empathy and connection with others. *"Unused creativity is not benign" Brene Brown.*

- Pupils struggle with mental health and wellbeing. *“That anxiety often starts with sensitivity, and that can often be channelled into creativity” Sheryl Paul*

What a shift might look like...

In a [short presentation](#) I made for AccessArt, I talked to Primary Teachers about the importance of remembering that because art is such a unique subject to teach, it provides us with a unique opportunity for pupils to experience a different *shape* of learning. As teachers, you will all be aware (I hope!) of the valuable shifts in being which are experienced during an art lesson?

Let's take a diagonal step forwards and look at brain states during our day.

Beta

Most of our waking time our brains are in beta state. When we are engaged in any kind of activity with the world (thinking, writing, talking), we are in beta state. We can be in a low beta state, for example when we are occupied with one or two tasks, or a high beta state when we are taking in more info – for example switching between tasks, checking phones, in a busy environment.

Being in beta is useful – vital – it is goal orientated. *The reality is, formal education puts us firmly in beta, and measures our ability to handle it, when in fact we were never meant to*

handle being in beta all day.

Being in beta for extended periods of time means prolonged stress, and all that goes along with sustained stress (e.g. anxiety, tension, insomnia, addiction etc etc). That wired, exhausted feeling? Too much time in beta.

Alpha

As brain waves begin to slow we enter alpha state. Alpha state is associated with more balanced emotions, less physical tension, less mental anxiety.

Alpha state is also associated with being in a state of flow. In alpha, you are in the present, and able to think clearly and calmly. Serotonin (the feel good hormone) is released. We're also in alpha when we meditate and briefly before we sleep; some people get to recognise and enjoy that [liminal space](#). Depending on your level of alpha state, you may dip into theta and briefly access the subconscious mind – that feeling of being a bit spacey and ideas or disconnected thoughts popping into your head uninvited.

(And yes, making art can help you slow to alpha).

Theta

As brainwaves slow even more and grow in amplitude, we enter theta. Theta is experienced in deeper states of meditation and when dreaming in

sleep, but we can also access theta when we are awake, if we are able to relax enough.

When in theta we are open to our subconscious, and more closed off to external sensory inputs. With the rational brain shut off, in theta state we make different kinds of connections, influenced by our subconscious and we are able to listen to our intuition. Theta state is healing and restful.

(Gamma and delta states book end the states above, but for purposes of thinking about education, I wanted to highlight the importance of balancing and enabling beta and alpha states).

We are all aware of the advice to slow down, go for a walk, practice mindfulness, but it seems there is a massive discrepancy at the moment between the advice given, and a formal education system which quite literally drives our learners to only be in beta state. Of course, it goes without saying that a drive to be in “switched-on, ever achieving beta”, is going to come at the cost of decreased opportunity to explore creativity and to develop wellbeing. It isn't rocket science.

Would it be too big a leap, to hope that one day, we are brave enough to devise an education system around brain states, balancing time spent in beta and alpha during the education day, nurturing understanding, through practice, of why and when being in a specific state aids not only our capacity to learn, but also our wellbeing?

What do you think?

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