

Creativity in the Bronze Age: Bringing Archaeological Research into Contemporary Craft Teaching and Learning through a Live Project

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ABSTRACT

The CinBA Live Project sought to engage students of contemporary craft courses in the UK with Bronze Age creativity. We aimed to explore the ways in which the creativity inherent in prehistoric craft may be used as inspiration in contemporary making. It simultaneously offered institutions a unique opportunity to offer a practice-led, research-based live project which was distinct to those generally known to be available to art and design institutions. It offered a different experience within this established pedagogical model in art and design education by using the Bronze Age as a source of inspiration for creative practice through practice-based research in contemporary craft within the framework of an international academic research project, and suggesting new roles for the interpretation of the prehistoric past through creative work. This article reports on the CinBA Live Project. It outlines the context of the opportunity, details our methods of facilitation, describes the activities undertaken by the students and considers the outputs and post-project impact of the activity.

KEYWORDS

creativity, live project, Bronze Age, contemporary craft, practice-based research, impact

Introduction

Live projects are simulated real-life situations often used in art and design education to create a distinct set of experiences for students (Orr *et al.* 2014; Shreeve *et al.* 2008). In general terms, these experiences take students outside of the 'community of practice' of the 'art school' and place their skills in external art and design contexts. Researchers at the Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (CLTAD) have documented how the structure of undergraduate level courses in art, design and craft subjects provides students with a great variety of learning practices which engage them in 'situated learning' (Innes 2006). This pedagogical framework is employed in the arts to help articulate the unique nature of the studio-centred learning experience in which newcomers (new students) take part in a community of practice from the outset. They are considered as artists – 'artists' employed here as a generic term to encompass art, design and craft practitioners of all kinds – from the time of their arrival, giving them legitimacy as a

practitioner, although their inexperience is taken into consideration. Newcomers engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991) – meaning that they learn by doing and engaging with the activities of the community they are in. As they become more experienced their engagement becomes more central in the community of practice, in this case the art and design world. This pedagogical model has been useful for researchers examining the nature of art and design courses to differentiate the kinds of teaching and learning experiences they offer students, with inclusivity, peer interaction, active learning and learning by doing at their core (Orr *et al.* 2014).

The CinBA Live Project sought to engage students of contemporary craft courses in the UK with Bronze Age creativity and to explore the ways in which the creativity inherent in prehistoric craft may be used as inspiration in contemporary making. Linked to the major archaeological international academic research project 'Creativity and Craft Production in Middle and Late Bronze Age Europe' (CinBA), it offered institutions a unique opportunity to offer a practice-led, research-based live project that was distinct to those generally known to be available to art and design institutions. It used the Bronze Age as a source of inspiration for creative practice and, through practice-based research in contemporary craft, suggested new roles for the interpretation of the prehistoric past through creative work. The CinBA Live Project thus provides a case study in offering a different experience within this established pedagogical model in art and design education.

Context of the CinBA Live Project

CinBA was a HERA-funded international research project exploring the phenomenon of creativity in the production of objects between 2500 and 800 BCE. The project ran from 2010 to 2013. It examined prehistoric creative expression in three materials – textiles, bronze and clay – and the perceptions of prehistoric craft today. During the Bronze Age people began to explore the creative potential of recently 'invented' materials that we take for granted today: the new materials of bronze and textiles, and to work with clay in new ways. This focus on creativity extended established archaeological concerns with the instrumental qualities of Bronze Age craft production into new intellectual territory. The research aims of the project took the detailed analysis of the qualities and construction of prehistoric artefacts (including composition of the materials, the size, shape and decorative scheme of an object), a step further to examine thinking, innovation and creativity in the practical and aesthetic choices used to make them.

To meet the challenge of exploring the making processes and techniques used by past societies, archaeologists have previously employed experimental archaeology to gain insights into the ancient past. Recreating tools, objects or processes in order to understand making techniques have provided valuable insights into the manufacturing of finished products, but they do not necessarily reveal the nuances of the creative process. From the outset of CinBA, contemporary responses to, and interpretations of, Bronze Age material culture were embedded into the research through a variety of knowledge exchange activities including a student live project;

these contemporary perceptions were intended to complement the findings of archaeological analysis, to reveal alternative viewpoints on the inherent creativity in the material, and to inform on the potential role of prehistoric craft as source of inspiration for contemporary makers.

Reflecting on creativity through current, actual creative practice was a new possibility, and the Crafts Council was sought out as a non-academic partner to address this need, bringing the project within reach of craftspeople from amateurs and students to professional makers / artists. CinBA's engagements with contemporary makers were focused on their creative practice. The project worked with them as novel researcher-investigators, recording and analysing their responses and interpretations of Bronze Age craft objects. In this sense, CinBA's approach was aligned with practice-led research which places making at the core of both the methodology and outcome (Sullivan 2010, 71–5) and with concerns regarding how to stimulate creativity within education policy (Gustina & Sweet 2014).

The 'Live Project' was decided upon as a suitable model for engagement with student makers in consultation with the Crafts Council. The Crafts Council have an established role in maker development within the contemporary crafts sector in the UK, and deliver a range of programmes and interventions for craft practitioners to help enhance their professional development and creative practice. The organisation has a good understanding of craft-based courses in further and higher education and their constituent elements, and a keen eye for the kinds of experiences that add value to courses in terms of professional and creative development. In the CinBA Live Project a unique opportunity presented itself – to offer a practice-led, research-based live project which was distinct to those generally known to be available to art and design institutions, and which would offer a distinct experience using the Bronze Age as a source of inspiration for creative practice, and suggesting new roles for the interpretation of the past through creative work. The time depth offered by the project – engaging students with a period which holds the origins of several key materials used in contemporary crafts practice – was a further unique aspect. Education leaders in craft have pointed to a frequent lack of time-depth or historical understanding of the disciplines they are studying (Brewerton 2015, in Brockhurst & Sofaer 2015).

Live projects frequently tend towards the commercial, placing student teams alongside website design companies, for example, to deliver projects for real-life, often paying, clients. Most undergraduate courses in art and design subjects include live brief projects that engage students with business, retail and design problems from beyond the confines of their institution. These are simulated 'real-life' situations, with those offered by major retailers such as Sainsbury's supermarket or Adidas on occasion resulting in students' work reaching the market. As outlined by Shreeve *et al.* (2008), live projects form an essential part of the art and design curriculum in higher education (see also Matthews 2010). Teaching and learning is brought about through a varied programme balancing reflection and generation of a personal vision or voice with exposure to real-world situations and experiences that bring richness and variety to the student experience.

The Live Brief is intended as a 'situated learning' experience, albeit not a true one as the work often resides within the college environment (Innes 2006). Using an engagement with academia (archaeology) and the model of practice-led research, the CinBA Live Project offered the opportunity for students to engage with new research methodologies, and a semi-structured brief not dissimilar to self-directed projects in professional practice. Although this may not at first glance appear to provide the same 'real world' commercial application which other live briefs prioritise, the exposure to practice-led research at this early stage may have important implications for pedagogy in the crafts. Concerns exist regarding a lack of students progressing to academic research and higher degrees within the crafts. This may impinge on the development of the subject in the future and the health of craft as an academic subject in the long term. Therefore exposure to the 'under-developed career route' (Hunt *et al.* 2010, viii) of practice-led research at this early stage may be as valuable as those bringing students into the realm of 'industry' in all its forms.

The encounter also offers a different approach to established models using heritage and engaging artists with the past. Using museum collections and objects from the past to stimulate inspiration is a common practice in contemporary creative learning and teaching. Various case studies and projects have been documented where museum collections and professionals are engaged with students in higher education, notably by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Through Design at the University of Brighton through their 'Learning at the Interface Conference' (2010). In these case studies it is clear to see the perceived value of using object-based learning as a tool for material appreciation and exploration, for generating empathy with different periods and cultures, and for grounding learnt theoretical models in real things. Within crafts teaching, object-based learning is understandably central as a method for developing material knowledge and subject content. Similar points can be made about learning and teaching within archaeology (Doonan & Boyd 2008). However, unlike in archaeology, these objects are all too rarely contextualised within their precise historical settings when used in art and design, as if the objects 'speak for themselves'. Moreover, it is debatable whether they are understood both as artefacts of the past and as creatively conceived objects within current pedagogical practice in craft subjects. It is in this gap that the CinBA intervention with students sat, offering an opportunity to learn and absorb what is known about past objects through interaction with professional archaeologists and drawing on their expertise, yet focusing attention on the creative process that follows that encounter and what may be learnt in return from it.

Facilitation of the Live Project

In meeting CinBA's research aims of understanding the potential role of Bronze Age objects in stimulating creativity and in tracing creative processes, the live project model was ideal. It had the potential to engage a wide range of student makers in terms of both experience and geography and could provide craft students with an interesting alternative to current approaches to live brief projects. A project

brief was developed with the assistance of critical friends and experts in professional development for contemporary craft makers who had previously worked with higher and further education institutions. The brief outlined the timescales involved, the objectives of the project (to use Bronze Age objects as a source of inspiration within practice-led research), and the offer of input from CinBA archaeologists in the form of an introductory seminar at the start of the project and online resource pack available to participating institutions.

It was decided from the outset that the CinBA Live Project would benefit from a tangible outcome for the students, a feature which highlighted the emphasis on creativity rather than a final product, and which would lend authenticity to the project. Such an outcome would echo the kinds of unique opportunities offered by existing live projects – realising an object / design / solution which is assessed, praised and made available to external audiences and the public. An online exhibition was decided upon, enabling the display of both finished works and preliminary research recordings (sketchbooks, notes) that illustrated the creative process. To bring a further layer of reality, and a sense of value and selection to the process, a highly respected visual arts academic and curator was asked to curate the exhibition. The brief clearly stated what the online exhibition would consist of, how students should submit their work for selection, and how the exhibition and their images would be presented, used and promoted.

The opportunity was disseminated to subject and course leaders teaching contemporary craft subjects in further and higher education institutions across the UK at the start of the academic year 2010–11. Fifty tutors at twenty-nine institutions were contacted directly by email and issued the brief. Further circulation amongst the sector was also anticipated, and the opportunity for involvement was posted on the CinBA and Crafts Council websites. Five institutions took up the opportunity to offer the brief to their student cohorts, reaching approximately 150 students from first year undergraduate to MA levels.

Process of the Live Project

All the institutions that expressed an interest in the project hosted an initial seminar and object handling session with a CinBA Project archaeologist. This introduced the students and tutors to CinBA and its international partners, the materials being researched, and Bronze Age material culture in general. It was identified early on that an online, password-protected resource pack of images from Bronze Age collections and reference list would be invaluable for students' self-directed research. Although there are significant individual objects and collections of Bronze Age material in the UK, many well-preserved objects and a wide variety of materials are found in CinBA partners' collections in Europe, which were also being studied by the archaeologists in the project. Access to this resource pack was limited to educational institutions participating in the CinBA Live Project and so enabled us to use a far wider variety of material than would be admissible on a public platform. Once this initial session and resource pack were delivered, tutors at the institutions were left to direct students as to the next steps they

might wish to follow, although CinBA offered support through facilitating and brokering further access to collections and professional archaeological expertise. There were few stipulations for how the project should be delivered, although it was required to run in the 2010–11 academic year.

Those that pursued the project after the initial seminar undertook a number of activities. For example, a number of institutions offered organised field trips to students, which included visiting Bronze Age and prehistoric sites in the UK, such as Stonehenge and Avebury, and making use of museum collections such as the Wiltshire Museum and Manchester Museum. Individual students pursued self-directed research visits to diverse institutions including the British Museum, Blythe House Archive (British Museum), Cardiff National Museum, Heaton Park and Chester Zoo in the UK, and museums in Stockholm and Copenhagen in Scandinavia. Students also reported reading around the topic, including specific volumes on prehistoric textiles and Bronze Age jewellery, watching popular media, such as the BBC series 'Ancient Britain' which was televised in 2011, performing internet-based research, talking to professional archaeologists, and making records of materials using photography and drawing. One participating university directed student reflection via a blog, and some students chose to follow those experiences on through their own personal blogs and websites. Another institution used the project to set a critical studies writing assignment on the use of the past and its relevance to contemporary craft making.

Students could choose whether to submit their work for consideration for the online exhibition, via an electronic portal on the CinBA website. Students were asked to submit sketchbook and preparatory work, any finished pieces, and an artist's statement. This combination was chosen in consultation with maker development experts at the Crafts Council, where it is used frequently for professional competitions (e.g. trade shows, exhibitions, funding), lending the project a 'real-world' dimension. This also formed a data set through which CinBA was able to trace students' creative processes. Submissions had to be received by 1 July 2011.

Outcomes of the Live Project

Of the 150 students who attended the initial seminar and object handling session, 80 students submitted work to the online exhibition having pursued the project as one of their elective live briefs. Crucially, we asked students wishing to submit to the exhibition to include not only finished pieces, but also sketches and reflective writing in the form of an artist's statement. These reveal the workings of the student artists, enabling the CinBA researchers' insights into the creative processes of those involved.

Fourteen students whose portfolios were felt to be complementary to the brief, well-realised and executed, and demonstrating a depth of consideration of the conceptual framework of CinBA through creative and intellectual engagement, were selected for inclusion in the exhibition. As promised in the initial brief, the online exhibition was highly professional and well designed, drawing on the expertise of CinBA partner institutions. The exhibition was published to the CinBA

website on 1 March 2012 (www.cinba.net/exhibition/) and subsequently promoted by project partners in the UK and across Europe. The students' work is accompanied by essays from the exhibition curator and the Executive Director of the Crafts Council (Jefferies 2012; Greenlees 2012). Additional to the expectations laid out in the brief, the exhibition was formatted on a separate open-access platform, enabling the full-colour PDF to be downloaded, and for the 'show' to remain online for an indefinite period of time.

For many students the CinBA Live Project was a first encounter with prehistory. Their submissions reveal that it provided scope for self-directed research that was, in some cases, impressively wide ranging. The subject matter provoked imaginative responses, with storytelling emerging as a mode of connecting with the material for a number of students. Many reflected on social aspects of the Bronze Age, such as burial and death rites, obtaining food or the role of status, suggesting that their research reflected a desire to comprehend the people, not just the objects.

The students also responded conceptually to the material encountered. The motifs, cosmology and beliefs were of fascination to many, and led them to consider the role of meaning within object-making, both by themselves and the people of the Bronze Age. A number of responses draw comparisons with our own time, highlighting the relative intellectual frameworks used in prehistory and today, for example in comprehending the motion of the sun and planetary movements through the Nebra Sky Disc dating to ca. 1600 BCE and the International Space Station and Phoenix Mars Lander (Inglis 2012). Another student was inspired by Bronze Age cosmology, in particular the myth of the sun, and began exploring devices for modelling the solar system, eventually creating a modern iteration of an eighteenth-century mechanical device known as an Orrery which modelled the solar system according to Bronze Age conceptions (Wernham 2012). These raise philosophical questions including the relationship between time and decay, museum and object, deconstruction and reconstruction.

The project led students to question, change and reconsider their creative process. For some of the students the experience was a catalyst for change, or opened the door to other possibilities for making types of work that they had abandoned or had not considered before. For example, one participant who mainly worked in ceramics was inspired by developments in the techniques found in textiles in the Bronze Age and thus began to explore 'different kinds of weaving and textures' and applied those to their ceramic work. Through experimenting and discovering the different qualities of fabrics the student identified a 'wide range of possibilities'; this shift in material awareness led the student to consider that 'if I really try I can achieve any shape I want, any dish I think of' (Anonymous survey respondent). Bronze Age artefacts suggested not only new materials and techniques, but also new combinations of these. The technical complexity of the Bronze Age artefacts was very attractive to the students, possibly more so than they (or their tutors) were expecting. The students describe testing out new materials and working with new techniques, but also being inspired by the combinations found in the collections and objects they encountered, such as wood with

clay or textiles with metal. Students attached importance to authenticity, identifying certain techniques or material finishes as 'correct' as they were used in the Bronze Age, although this sense of replication was limited to the process and not the end result. The final pieces submitted by the students can be understood as a form of *bricolage*, both of concepts and materials, as the students seek to find relevance in the 'old' craft objects and adapt modern materials and techniques to achieving an object in conversation with them.

In addition to student portfolios submitted to the CinBA Live Project exhibition, we have analysed the results of institutional student evaluations carried out directly after the end of the Live Project, kindly shared with us by participating tutors. These form part of the students' critical self-reflection, used within the institutional context to guide the presentations of their work to peers and to develop the reflexive skills needed for professional art and design practice. As the evaluations are directed towards their own learning they complement the public statements provided in the exhibition submissions. We also surveyed tutors involved in supervising the students. From these two sources we can draw out some themes about how students engaged with, and what value they saw in, the CinBA Live Project.

The evaluations and survey responses reveal that participation encouraged exploration of, and experimentation with, materials and processes to realise designs / ideas. It stimulated new approaches to creative processes, for example using new or different methods and techniques or combinations to test and explore possibilities. It provided unusual subject matter in terms of motifs and cosmology, offering different kinds of stimuli and allowing for diverse responses that picked up on nuances of anthropological and philosophical questions. One tutor commented that, 'Students had to engage with people, place, and time far removed from their current environment, ways of thinking and experiences.' It thus presented opportunities to explore a different kind of knowledge.

The research element of the project was embraced by many of the students. The initial lecture by a CinBA archaeologist and associated handling session were particularly influential for some participants in sparking research:

This was the first time that I had handled ancient pieces and it made me question what the forms would have been like when they were whole ... This led me to look at broken surfaces found on archaeological pieces from the Bronze Age and I chose a collection of small elements from the lecture to research. (Layden 2012)

However, not all participants embedded research throughout the making process. Students who embraced the research aspect of the project had multi-modal approaches to their information gathering, spanning visit to sites, handling objects, testing materials, reading and watching relevant media, with some talking of fairly expansive approaches that, in some cases, hindered their progress.

A sense of ownership over the research is indicated amongst those students who were especially positive about the experience. As the brief had a less-explicit desired outcome than other live briefs this presented the students with a different

kind of challenge, and a higher level of risk, as the projects had to be self-devised and self-directed from a wide base of stimuli. Students reported employing a range of organisational techniques to help direct their work and thinking, including 'daily to-do lists and using sketchbooks in the workshop to solve problems' (Anonymous survey respondent), and experimenting with different media to explore ideas in 2D to a more significant extent than previous projects. One student who found the lack of explicit outcome challenging as they did 'not know what I wanted to produce', 'realised that I can indeed step back and simplify my ideas, and in that sense, I feel I've progressed as a designer' (Anonymous survey respondent). Reflecting on the project and what stood out within the experience, one participant commented on how carrying out self-directed research as part of the CinBA Live Project had developed 'a much broader sense of curiosity about material culture' (Anonymous survey respondent). Thus there were research skills in evidence, including organising one's own work and utilising alternative approaches to understanding the problem, which other projects may not have stimulated in the same way due to the subject matter; the open-ended, process-focused nature of the project presented a different kind of learning opportunity including the challenge of intellectual and creative risk-taking, particularly in terms of managing time and balancing concepts.

The chance to exhibit or present their work to others was less frequently mentioned within student evaluations than we might have expected. In the immediate post-Live Project evaluation only one person referenced the international character of CinBA as of particular importance or advantage, although this was seen as a clear benefit by tutors.

The CinBA Live Project provided a wide range of learning opportunities for the students involved, and developed their skills and knowledge in specific directions. Pedagogical theories for project work in design-based subjects highlight gradations of student learning, from 'surface' approaches – learning opportunities that intend to demonstrate technical competence where the emphasis is on remembering processes and technique – to 'deep' approaches – where learning is guided by concepts and has the intention of developing the student's own response and ideas in relation to the project (Drew *et al.* 2002; Shreeve *et al.* 2008, 349). The outcomes we have seen from the CinBA project map well on to these categories, and by including an emphasis on self-directed, practice-based research, for some students we have identified the deep-learning and 'search for intrinsic personal meaning' (Anonymous survey respondent) which enables students in creative subjects to assert themselves in the community of practice, a crucial element of success in teaching and learning in this field.

Post-Live Project Impact

Makers at an early stage in their career are exposed to a wide variety of opportunities and influences in order to develop their creativity. In 2014–15 we returned to the students who had been selected for the exhibition, all of whom have now graduated and most of which have developed careers in the creative sector, to

explore the impact of the experience (Brockhurst & Sofaer 2015). Our survey of students suggests that four years on, the novelty of the CinBA Live Project has had an ongoing creative and professional influence.

For most students, it was their first experience of being stimulated to carry out, and to own, practice-based research in the context of a wider academic project. Contact with archaeologists, follow-up visits to museums and sites, as well as the opportunity to exhibit online and to contribute to blogs documenting their creative practice, made it especially memorable. For some students, dealing with a period of time that spoke to the origins of craft was also particularly provocative, and they have gone on to use the material in their business products. Live Project participant responses indicate that exposure to CinBA led to participants thinking differently about creativity and craft, and encouraged a more general persistent interest in material culture and museums as sources of inspiration. For example, one Live Project participant said, 'The biggest part of my journey has been CinBA-related. Seeing and experiencing things that were "left behind" created a connection for me . . . going into museums now I see things very differently'.

Participation in the CinBA Live Project came at a pivotal point, early in the creative development of practitioners. The timing of interaction with CinBA appears to have been critical in generating creative impact. More than 1 in 4 reported that this early exposure to the Bronze Age had noticeably or significantly inspired their creative aesthetic, and half indicated that it had some impact. Of students who have started their own craft businesses since graduation (50 per cent of respondents), half of these acknowledged that some part of their business activities have their origins in the project; one student estimated this at 80 per cent, another at 50 per cent and a third at 20 per cent. More than half of the respondents indicated that the experience had led to experimentation with materials that continue to be relevant to their present practice, including techniques 'which are common in the Bronze Age but not in university teaching' (Anonymous survey respondent). CinBA thus set the tone for future interests and creative directions. Those students who did not choose to pursue the themes illuminated by the Bronze Age and CinBA nonetheless acknowledged in their responses the usefulness of being exposed to different forms of craft practice, particularly 'the ability to craft a beautiful piece with only hands and a few tools' (Anonymous survey respondent), and the provocations to their own creative practice that this provided.

More broadly, CinBA offered 'real life' professional experience in developing and presenting work outside a home institution. Students have leveraged the CinBA Live Project experience through promotional use of CinBA in digital media and CVs. Participation provided them with the opportunity to develop a strong track record and portfolio of innovative work subsequently used in successful scholarship applications for further study, as well as grant applications. The value of the international character of the Live Project and the opportunities it afforded for dissemination thus seem to have been recognised by participants after the project itself.

Conclusion

The CinBA Live Project benefitted from presenting a range of points of contact, engagement and departure, which extended it far beyond the initial expectation of the partners. The experience was especially successful in terms of the reach achieved, and the variety of responses by students. In the artists' statements and student evaluations we see clear stimulation of new experiments, new ways of seeing past objects, increased appreciation of their creative complexity and value, and departures from current creative processes or habits, to include new elements (research, materials, techniques) as a result of the encounter. Among students there was a strong imperative to create new work by 'taking on' Bronze Age materials and objects as inspiration beyond the notion of the replica. This sense of taking concepts from one body of objects to realise new objects that extend our appreciation of those concepts is not easily articulated. It is, nonetheless, stimulating in terms of an appreciation of the range of interpretations that may be relevant for material culture, and suggestive of the importance of a contextually embedded understanding of materials and objects within craft education.

As a novel model for live projects in contemporary craft, the degree of engagement expressed in the outputs, student reflections and medium- to long-term impact of the intervention speak to the potential for fruitful interaction between academic research projects and practice-led, research-based pedagogical experiences. For participating tutors it presented a new offer, something distinctive from other 'real-world' experiences provided for their students, answering, as one tutor put it, 'a latent need' for projects with more breadth of scope. The CinBA Live Project thus invites further exploration and analysis of the role humanities research could play as a stimulus for creative enquiry and the development of pedagogy within art and design education.

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