

Learning Ecologies: From Past Generations to Current Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper reports on the ongoing establishment of a basis for a re-consideration of the way the contributions to knowledge, culture and social fabric of aging Portuguese scholars may be recognized, communicated and activated in future contexts. The project stems from an analysis of the professional life and work of Portuguese scholars graduated at the School of Fine Arts of Porto (ESBAP), during the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by the country's political Revolution of April 25, 1974, with deep socio-cultural repercussions. The analysis was performed following semi-structured interviews carried out with informants who attended the School to later become professors. Their testimonies reveal a contrast in learning from being a student and being a lecturer; they provide valuable insights into their personal creative journeys in light of their commitment to education and how their efforts have helped maintain related formal and tacit streams of traditional knowledge, within rapidly changing cultural and socio-political environments.

Keywords: School of Fine Arts of Porto; Wisdom Transfer; Life stories, Art and Design pedagogies

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Introduction

This paper reports on a set of preliminary results of the project *Wisdom Transfer: towards the scientific inscription of individual legacies in contexts of retirement from art and design higher education and research* (POCI-01-0145-FEDER-029038), which arises from the evidence that there is insufficient inscription and use of individual knowledge and experience of ageing and retired art and design professors and researchers. The study is focused on the analysis of the professional life and work of Portuguese scholars, researchers and artists, graduated from the School of Fine Arts of Porto (ESBAP), during the 1960s and 1970s, a period surrounding the social, cultural and political Revolution of April 25, 1974. The pre-Revolution period was characterized by the dictatorship regime and the closure of the country, with scarce foreign influences, including in the artistic scene. Access to artistic materials was very limited and the few accessible resources were of poor quality.

This period was especially notable in ESBAP, not only for the pedagogical practices adopted that differentiated this school from other similar ones, attracting art students from all over the country, but also for the political and social scenario that was lived in the country that resulted in the Revolution of April 25, 1974, which led to Educational reforms and, in the case of ESBAP, the emergence of design as a course.

Since art and design research has only recently been validated as a scientific discipline, we can argue that the available scientific heritage precedes the formalization of these disciplines, residing in an older generation of scholars, researchers and artists. This study aims to establish a basis for a transformation in the way their contributions to knowledge, culture and social fabric are recognized, communicated and activated in future contexts.

In the first part, a sum up of the main characteristics of ESBAP in the pre-revolutionary period is made, pointing out teaching methodologies that proved to be more significant for students at the time. This is followed by an analysis of the first experiments carried out in the school in the field of graphic arts, which would later result in the creation of a design course. Finally, aiming the inscription of the contributions provided by the retired artists, professors and researchers interviewed and the transfer of transgenerational knowledge, a set of initiatives that have been carried out mainly with art and design students is presented.

Methodology

Due to the lack of documentation in this context, the contributions were mostly obtained through ethnographic interviews carried out with informants who attended the ESBAP during the 1960s and 1970s. From December 2018 to December 2019 we have done 32 interviews to former students divided mostly across the disciplines of sculpting and painting, alongside the current director of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (former ESBAP), who was considered a person of interest, not only because she is the current director of this school but mainly for her studies on artists graduated from ESBAP (Table 1). The lack of individuals with a formation in design is due to the fact that the design course commenced after April 25, 1974, and its graduating batch falls outside the scope of the project's intended timeframe.

Name	Course	Start	End	Date of the interview
Ana Campos	Communication Design / Graphic Arts	1976	1981	27th June 2019
Antero Pinto	Communication Design	1979	1987	10th January 2019
António Mendanha	Painting	1979	1986	10th January 2019
António Quadros Ferreira	Painting	1966	1971	12th April 2019
Armando Alves	Painting	1957	1962	5th December 2018
Carlos Barreira	Sculpture	1968	1973	8th January 2019
Carlos Carreiro	Painting	1967	1972	16th January 2019
Carlos Marques	Sculpture	1967	1975	11th December 2018
Elvira Leite	Painting	1957	1962	15th January 2019
Graça Morais	Painting	1966	1971	31st January 2019
Haydée De=Francesco	Sculpture	1956	1961	21st January 2019
Helena Abreu e Lima	Painting	1963	1968	23rd January 2019
Helena Almeida Santos	Painting	1961	1966	7th January 2019
Isabel Cabral	Painting	1967	1973	28th December 2018
João Machado	Sculpture	1963	1968	1st March 2019
João Nunes	Communication Design / Graphic Arts	1976	1981	26th February 2019
Jorge Pinheiro	Painting	1955	1963	16th April 2019
José Paiva	Painting	1968	1986	19th December 2018
Leonilde Santos	Painting	1981	1986	14th December 2018
Lima de Carvalho	Painting	1967	1972	31st January 2019
Lúcia Matos	–	–	–	24th January 2019
Manuela Bronze	Painting	1975	1981	4th January 2019
Maria José Aguiar	Painting	1967	1972	14th January 2019
Maria José Valente	Painting	1968	1977	22nd January 2019
Mário Américo	Painting	1962	1972	25th January 2019
Mário Moura	Architecture	1961	1967	5th November 2019
Paula Soares	Painting	1973	1978	8th April 2019
Pedro Rocha	Painting	1967	1972	30th January 2019
Purificação Fontes	Sculpture	1964	1972	22th January 2019
Rodrigo Cabral	Painting	1968	1973	28th December 2018
Sobral Centeno	Painting	1969	1978	20th December 2018
Zulmiro de Carvalho	Sculpture	1963	1968	7th January 2019

Table 1: List of interviewees.

Many of these informants later became artists and professors in ESBAP and though currently retired, they still maintain their artistic activity. Hence, whenever possible, interviews were carried out in their art studios providing means to obtain a set of exclusive observations within the interviewees' testimonies (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), and the opportunity to witness first-hand, some of the practices that characterized their creative process and were integral to the methodologies they presented to their students (figure 1).



Figure 1: Studies for paintings by Lima de Carvalho. Photography @Cláudia Lima.

For the interviews, it was used a script with open-ended questions (Quivy & Campnhoudt 2008) focusing on the artists' experiences as students and professors, curricular and extracurricular relations, foreign associations and influences and impacts of the political landscape on their work.

The interviews were all filmed and photographed, allowing the creation of memory supporting documents for further scrutiny of the collected observations (Tinkler, 2013). At the beginning of each interview, informants were asked for permission to collect images and sound, through a document signed by them (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), and explained the purpose of these materials.

ESBAP learning practices in a pre-revolutionary period

In the period preceding the Revolution of April 25, 1974, the ESBAP was known for its pedagogical practices and school environment, attracting art students from all over the country. While the School of Fine Arts of Lisbon (the only alternative to ESBAP in art higher education, in Portugal) was considered a more academic and theoretical school and repressive in relation to contemporary art forms, ESBAP was known for being more liberal, with studio classes that enabled a more experimental approach.

This appreciated pedagogical environments and practices were partly due to its Director Carlos Ramos who was considered a modernist in his generation opened to the evolution and transformation of art. He encouraged the proximity of all school communities (students-faculty-staff), believing this would foster the sharing of knowledge and the understanding of different manifestations of art.

Before 1974, ESBAP offered courses in Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and had a faculty of distinguished figures from the Portuguese artistic scene, among them Dordio Gomes, Augusto Gomes, Barata Feyer, Júlio Resende, Lagoa Henriques, Gustavo Bastos or Ângelo de Sousa.

In the open-door classrooms of ESBAP, the sense of class was absent, with professors employing a more relaxed approach to enable open and unrestricted flow of knowledge and communication. Nonetheless, it was common for professors to talk about artworks in conceptual terms, without further explanations on techniques and practices. Professors would walk around the classroom while students work and if a student was not correctly performing a technique, they would mention that was not correct, yet failing to explain how to do it properly. Although the ESBAP professors, then designated by *Masters* as a kind of character's glorification, remained little in the classroom space (they arrived late and were absent before class ended) and were vague in their comments, several students of the time reported that the experience of the school was in itself a learning experience. As the classes were very small, there was great proximity between them, and between them, professors and all school staff.

The very structure and functioning of the school fostered this proximity. At the beginning of the school year, moments of conviviality were organized such as the acclaimed Magustos with bonfires jumps, singing and dancing in order to encourage further interaction and bonding between professors and students (figure 2).



Figure 2: Magusto, 1961: Bonfire Jump. Photography ©Elvira Leite.

The Magna Exhibitions were also an outstanding moment in the school and conducive to socializing and sharing of experiences. Held at the beginning of the school year, the Magnas were a showcase of artistic works made by students in the previous school year and selected by professors, opened to the public, attracting not only other artists but also several citizens interested in art. Another exhibition held at ESBAP at this time, and promoted by Carlos Ramos, was the Extra-Escolar with student artwork carried out in the studios and, therefore, with a less rigorous character in relation to the parameters and guidelines of the course.

The difficult access to information, especially from foreign countries, and the limited resources of the library also fostered greater proximity among the school community. Given the scarcity of contemporary art books in the school library (as well as in the country's libraries and bookstores), it was common for faculty to bring their own materials, books and postcards to show to students and to promote discussions often “in the convivial ground outside class”, as one student said.

In fact, the conviviality and interpersonal relations went beyond the limits of the ESBAP and extended to iconic places in the city of Porto, such as the Teatro Experimental do Porto, Café Piolho or Café de São Lázaro. In these places debates were held covering various socio-political subjects and artistic themes that often focused on aspects of contemporary art not addressed in classrooms.

For many (but not all) students of this time the moments of conviviality, debate and practice of art also extend to the houses and studios of the professors. It was common for the Masters to organize parties in their homes to which they invited some students and various figures from the Portuguese artistic scene. It was also common for them to invite some students to work in their studios. These environments were equally conducive to the discussion of contemporary art forms that still had no framework at ESBAP.

These interpersonal relationships established inside and outside school result in paradoxical situations. On the one hand, several students remember these experiences as true moments of learning. On the other hand, there are a number of students who, not belonging to these circles of friendship, did not benefit from this learning ecologies. In this sense, it is observed that the learning process often progressed according to the richness of the relationships established between professors and students.

The results showed that the students who later became professors at ESBAP, relied on learnings from their experiences as students and either reproduced the good practices observed or counteracted the methods they considered dysfunctional. In fact, we verified the teaching models they developed later were derived from research processes that were based on empirical evidence, resulting from observation, interpretation and transfer of active/passive experiences. These models were tested in live scenarios before being adjusted and implemented as practice-based methodologies.

The emergence of design as a course

Although the practice of design was already well implemented in the period before the Revolution of April 25, 1974, the creation of higher education courses in this field only takes place in a post revolution period (Fragoso, 2012; Manaças, 2005; Nunes, 2016). In Porto, the first experiments in this field at ESBAP date back to 1962, when Professor Armando Alves proposed to introduce the Graphic Arts subject in the course of Painting, to replace the discipline of Decorative Painting, a subject he considered unsuited to contemporary artistic reality. Graduated in Painting from ESBAP, Alves already had a considerable portfolio in the area of Graphic Arts, which included the catalogues and posters produced for Magnas and Extra-Escolares Exhibitions commissioned by ESBAP director Carlos Ramos.

Due to the absence of background in this area, the approach to the discipline was thought and structured by Armando Alves based on his own experience and based on the observation of works done by other graphic artists. Since access and exchange of information across borders was very limited, his references were limited to the national environment. It was a very experimental approach, based on handcrafting, using existing reference materials such as the magazines *Marie Claire* or *Paris Match* which he considered publications “of great importance and great graphic quality” (personal communication, December 5, 2018). These publications were analyzed in the classroom and were also working materials: their graphic contents were collected, archived and reused in new graphic compositions in a “cut and paste” process. With these materials, which included clippings of letters, titles, texts or photographs, several projects were created as record covers or fictional book covers.

At the end of the school year, the results of this discipline were gathered and later exhibited at the Magna Exhibition. They were highly appreciated by the academic community. The Graphic Arts subject, initiated on an experimental basis within the Decorative Painting discipline, was thus stabilized in the course of Painting at ESBAP, with a similar approach over the following years: analysis of existing graphic work and renowned publications - occasionally from abroad and oriented to design, such as *Graphis* - and a practice characterized by experimentation and handcrafting.

At the turn of the decade, the discipline of Graphic Arts unfolds in two years, being taught in the 3rd and 4th year of the Painting course by Armando Alves and Amândio Silva, the latter also graduated in Painting. In 1973, Alves left his teaching activity to dedicate himself to painting and design. Thus, Domingos Pinho assumes the discipline of Graphic Arts as professor. In the years leading up to the Revolution of April 25, 1974, various essays were made in the field of Graphic Arts and the feasibility of creating a specific course in this area was studied. Illustration, poster design, comics and animation experiments were carried out, programs were designed and disciplines were structured, but the creation of the course only takes place in a post revolution period, when the ESBAP courses were reformulated.

According to students of that time, teachers migrated from the plastic arts' courses to the design course, the latter being based much on the idea of applying art to everyday life. Subjects such as Graphic Design, Specialized Graphics, Visual Communication, Editorial Graphics or Advertising Graphics were created, and the handicraft approach was maintained, with drawing, collage and gouache painting the common used

techniques. The students had as their most frequent instruments graphite, ruling pen, compass, ruler and square, and only the professor João Machado and the student João Nunes were familiar with Airbrush painting, due to their professional experiences outside the school.

In the years following the Revolution of April 25, 1974, the so called Design (Graphic Arts) course operates in ESBAP in an unofficial way. In the school year of 1980/1981, the course name changes to Communication Design (Graphic Art), privileging the concept of design and communication. But only January 22, 1983, were these courses - Design (Graphic Art) and Communication Design (Graphic Art) - recognized by the Portuguese Government in *Diário da República*¹, consisting of a primary three-year period, followed by a special two-year period.

Having this course emerged as a descendant of the Painting course, the understanding of design in this school has always been very associated with the image issue. According to one professor of this course, only later, when a first generation of design faculty with higher education in this area began to lecture at ESBAP, did design begin to be thought of in a different way, tending to become dissociated from the Plastic Arts. Even so, the derivations that emerged in design, were always very connected with the problem of image, and the concept of design as Industrial Design or Equipment Design, never really succeeded in Porto.

Intersections between the ESBAP generation and current generations in art education

With the materials collected and after its analysis, the results were (and still are being) disseminated through various channels, namely conferences and scientific journals. These channels, which effectively contribute to the inscription of the knowledge and experiences of the generations under study, are generally not consulted by the younger generations, becoming ineffective as regards the transgenerational transfer of knowledge. In this sense, a number of initiatives have been carried out aimed at greater intergenerational involvement and interaction and aimed at effective knowledge transfer.

One of these initiatives consisted of workshops in 3 universities in the north of the country: the first, an Illustration workshop, held between April and July 2019, at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (FBAUP), formerly ESBAP; the second, a Multimedia workshop, held between October and November 2019, at the Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e Ave (IPCA); the third, a Typography workshop held between November 2019 and February 2020, at the Faculty of Communication, Architecture, Arts and Information Technology of the Universidade Lusófona do Porto (ULP).

Although the practical approach and the projects carried out in each workshop were different, it was decided to create an environment and working space with a set of common characteristics: all sessions were free with no basic requirements except for the commitment of the students; proximity between faculty and students was encouraged, dissipating notions of hierarchy in favor of a collaborative work; a

¹ *Diário da República* (DR) is the official government gazette of Portugal. It is published by Imprensa Nacional and includes the publication of Laws, Decree-laws and decisions by the Constitutional Court.

studio-like environment was created to foster greater sharing of ideas. Students were gathered in groups of 10 to 16 elements of different profiles and backgrounds. All projects were based on interviews with artists and study of their artwork, and participants were encouraged to research materials about these artists in addition to those already collected.

In October 2019, the results of the first workshop (of illustration) were exhibited at FBAUP (figure 3) in an event called *You look Familiar* that gathered several interviewees and former students of ESBAP (the silver generation), and current students, namely the workshop participants. More than an exhibition of works, this event provided moments of meeting, interaction and knowledge transfer between the silver generation and current generations.



Figure 3: Exhibition *You Look Familiar*. Photography @Cláudia Lima.

In parallel, during the months of November and December 2019, a set of 5 seminars were held open to the public, where, in each session, between 2 to 3 interviewees were gathered in an informal discussion about learning ecologies before and shortly after the Revolution of April 25, 1974, moderated by “an unlikely maestro”, i.e. a moderator from another generation or from the same generation but without any association with ESBAP (figure 4). These seminars held in iconic places of the city of Porto, such as the Ateneu Comercial do Porto, Reitoria of the University of Porto or Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e do Porto, attracted an audience of several generations, including former ESBAP students not yet interviewed (who actively participated in the discussions) and students participants of the workshops who, on their own initiative, used these moments to expand the research on this silver generation of artists for their projects and also to meet and interact with them.



Figure 4: Seminar nr 5, with the interviewees Paula Soares, João Nunes and Ana Campos, moderated by Susana Barreto (pictured on the left) and Eliana Penedos. Photography @Cláudia Lima.

In fact, we gathered that the workshops were a milestone in the transfer of transgenerational knowledge: a large part of the participating students revealed that they were unaware of the artists interviewed, contributing the workshops to the knowledge of artists and heritage that are part of local art history; many of the participants showed great motivation with this project, having expanded the research of information about these artists on their own initiative during the workshops – they visited the exhibition *You Look Familiar*, used the seminars for a greater knowledge of the artists in study and, in certain cases, established direct contact with the interviewees on whom their projects focused.

Given the success of the first exhibition and the workshops developed, other initiatives in this context are being planned, including an exhibition at the Reitoria of the University of Porto with the results of the Multimedia and Typography workshops (from IPCA and ULP respectively), and a second edition of the illustration workshop, at FBAUP.

Conclusion

In the period preceding the Revolution of April 25, 1974, ESBAP is described as a school with few resources, but with a group of distinguished professors from the Portuguese artistic scene and a pedagogical practice that gave the school greater recognition attracting art students from all over the country. Despite the scarcity of means in the early days, most of the interviewees remembered their time as students with affection and sense of belonging. The knowledge transfer from lecturers was insufficient, however the creative environment and cross-fertilization was a long-standing asset.

The absence of structured programs for the disciplines of the existing courses and the autonomy given to the faculty lead to several pedagogical experiments. It is in this context that the first pedagogical practices in the field of graphic arts are experimented and tested. The course in design appeared in a post revolution period, still unofficially, and was only recognized in 1983, by a law Decree.

These artistic and academic experiences that marked ESBAP and which are still reflected today in the school's sense of identity, tend to fade with the succession of generations, with many of the current art and design students unaware of local artists and their legacy. The workshops, seminars and exhibition held proved to be very positive for the dissemination of local art history and for the transfer of transgenerational knowledge.

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