

MAYBE BE A LIZARD FIRST:

A CONVERSATION
WITH JOEL KARAMATH

Joel Karamath is the Course Leader for BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts at London College of Communication. His background in film and cultural studies, and he has an inherent interest in the relationship between theory and practice and how this manifests in the studio environment.

GEORGINA VOSS: How did the BA in Interaction Design Arts (IDA) develop, and how did technology fit into that evolution? To set the scene: we're sitting in the IDA studio where I can see both the computers and the workshop space. I'm curious about how you've brought technology into teaching over the years.

JOEL KARAMATH: As with all things, there's an element of serendipity involved. If we go back ten to twelve years to the inception of IDA, there were a number of pathways in the design school at that time—predominantly typography, illustration, design for advertising, book publishing. Then there were “bolt-ons”: if you were doing illustration you could bolt on letterpress because it was relevant.

It soon became obvious that other areas were coming out, like “moving image” and “interaction”, as it was known then. These two areas were growing but didn't really belong to any of the courses. Illustrators were doing things with moving images and animation, so they became popular media as people wanted to do pop promos and editing and filming. The wisdom at the time was to make two new pathways, one for moving image and one for interaction. But there wasn't enough money, so they said, “We'll make one pathway and call it Interaction and Moving Image” (IMI). It was a very fortuitous

accident in its own way. It was odd, of course: what does “Interaction and Moving Image” mean? But it had time to develop without the constraints of a given tradition, which in hindsight was a huge luxury.

That was interesting in terms of the way we view the term “interaction”. Most degree courses use “interaction” interchangeably with “digital”. That’s not true here—we have a much broader remit. IMI quickly evolved and became known for the type of work it produced. After revalidation it was renamed “Interaction Design Art”, and that terminology gave us an even broader remit. The philosophy of the course is grounded within design thinking: it’s a design-led course first and foremost. We do moving image—my background is in film studies—but we work through a design-led approach, film through design, et cetera. I think that’s a unique way of looking at it. When you bring moving image into the arts, it allows us to say, “Actually, it’s interaction for a number of really different areas”.

Very early on, Biggles [course tutor] started to say that the course could be high-tech, low-tech, or no-tech. This is a course about ideas, not technology. Technology is always secondary. It’s not because we’re completely media-agnostic; it’s that it is essential to ask “What’s your idea? How do you want it to come to fruition?”

Rather than saying, “I’m going to do something with an Arduino”—what’s the idea and what’s the best technology to use? Is it an Arduino or a cardboard box?

GV: Can you say more on how “interaction” gets used elsewhere, and how other places might conceive of “interaction” meaning “digital”?

JK: Every now and then, you get these zeitgeist phrases—“new media”, “multimedia”, and so on. “Interaction” works in that way at the moment: people attach it to a lot of things. But it’s still very much seen as the next new thing, even though it’s been the next new thing for quite a long time now. The term itself has never really bothered us. It’s how we use the terminology and how we think. If we were to start this course from scratch today, we would never call it IMI—but I’m certain that if it hadn’t called IMI then it wouldn’t have become “Interaction Design Arts”.

One of the problems that I see with a lot of new courses in interaction design is that they want to get to the future straight away, and they miss out on the naturally slower pace of evolution. We were crawling out of the swamp from day one. A lot of people say “I’m on dry land now, I’m going to be a bird, I want to fly”, and we’re saying, “Well, you might need to be a lizard or a dinosaur first.”

There's a lot of looking back and looking forward on the course. People talk about future-facing courses and they are literally facing in one direction. Ours is 360 degrees. If you look around the studio you'll find 16mm projectors, 35mm cassettes and cassette display units. They all get used in projects at some point. I try to get our students to use as much film as possible. We look at analogue photography not because it's quaint, but as a way to understand the difference—and make a choice—between the analogue and digital. Seven or eight years ago, the first cohort of first-years had no idea of analogue photography because they'd grown up with digital cameras. What's interesting about that is watching their reactions to working with film, making pinhole cameras or wet plates, and then using that to inform what they do with digital material.

I would argue one of our more successful recent interaction projects was the garden. It's almost the complete antithesis of the digital realm but it gives us a platform to explore things digitally: for example, we want to install a digital weather station. It's the most basic, rudimentary form of technology, going out there and literally getting dirt under your fingernails, but at the same time it informs very future-facing work around data collection, pollution, water, and climate. And it helps us with the very practical technical elements and processes of physically building stuff, away from screens, which is an inherent part of the course.

GV: One thing that's always struck me about the politics of technology is that there's always a point where the historians chip in and say, "Great, but how about we look back to the use of punch cards in WWII or the Cornish pumping engine?" You get a sense of how these systems operated in previous centuries and how their politics have carried through. Does a course that looks forward and back allow students to think more critically about technology?

JK: You can't isolate it like that, or consider history in the Western notion of linear time, when it might cycle or corkscrew forward instead. Technology sometimes misses a visceral element, which is so important. I saw an article the other day about a daycare nursery that gives kids power tools, and I said, "Yes!" Those visceral aspects are being diminished in tertiary education, as everything is forced into white coats and goggles and mitts. There's an element of evolving with your things, but also getting your things to evolve to you as well.

Many design degree courses operate in traditional, interchangeable white cubes where the walls go up and down, aiming to be everything but ending up being nothing. We've designed our active studios to aid our way of thinking, for quick rapid prototyping.

More than anything else, the whole relationship between past, present and future is really encapsulated by the fact that virtually anything that gets thrown out in the college will end up, sooner or later, in our studio. If I had to name a trait that students need to enter IDA, it's skip-diving. It's an essential part of the course. You find things; you ask, what is this? What does it do? How does it work?

GV: And how has it ended up in the skip?

JK: Exactly! All of the things that we've re-appropriated are still working. Students often stand by the shelves looking at a gadget, asking, "What does this do?" and we say, "Take it down and find out!" It harbours curiosity. A lot of education at the moment restricts curiosity—you can be curious, but only within these boundaries. Real creativity goes across boundaries; it comes at the nexus between disciplines. Because we don't have a single discipline on the course, there is more than one nexus.

GV: When I give talks about Supra Systems Studio, I often describe the spaces that permit discursive work—and then skip to a slide of Tommaso [IDA graduate 2017] wielding an engine part; he's beaming, so happy.

JK: It's not too dissimilar from those daycare kids and their power tools; it's the exact same look.

GV: I get nervous about ideas of "critical making"—there's something that feels antiseptic about it. You're allowed to "critically make" something, but never with an element of risk or danger, never with something old to dismantle. It often seems to take place in clean spaces with new materials.

JK: Speaking of space, sometimes we just have to convince people that they can do what they want to do. Some students say, "I only do photography, I can't do any of these other things." I say, "Look at your portfolio: yes, the photograph is good, but look how you're displaying it, look what you've built to display it. It's not just a photograph, it's your understanding of space." Our studio permits cross-pollination. The first-years often help the third-years on their projects. While the second-years are doing the Expanded Cinema unit, the first-years are looking through the window, saying, "Wow, what is that? Can we do that next year?" A first-year will pick up some tools and a second-year will say, "No, you need a different sort of hammer." I tell new students, "Hopefully over the next few years you'll learn a lot from us, but I guarantee you'll learn more from each other." Students feel a certain amount of ownership over the studio space, which helps to build a community of practice. I constantly have to chase students out of here before I can go home. We have our office in the middle of our studio,

which is really important. It's vital for students to know that that staff aren't above the course, but part of it.

GV: You said that this is a design-led course. What did you mean by that?

JK: It's how we approach problem solving: how does it work? why does it work? is there actually a problem at all? Our job as tutors is to create problems for students to explore through a brief. The media-agnosticism of the course comes through here, as students work out whether they want to approach the brief through film, installation, performance, dance, et cetera.

GV: Has it been a challenge to steer students away from simply thinking, "I want to do something with an Arduino" or "I want to do something with VR"?

JK: It becomes less of a challenge over time. In the first year we get into "de-schooling"—pick your idea first, not your medium. Ask yourself, what are the possible ways to do this? A lot of people make the mistake of thinking, "I really like that great project that uses an Arduino, so I'm going to use an Arduino." Fine, but that's not the reason that project is great. It's so important to get students away from the idea that random bits of technology are the solution. We encourage them to think that it's all about them—the ideas in their head and how they get them out into the world. We tell the first-years, "The next three years might seem like a race, but it's more of a ramble. The only thing that matters is your own progression and pace and development. You're not in a race with anyone else." Students need to find themselves and where they want to go with their ideas, because then they can explore why they want to do what they do.

GV: How has the course surprised you over the years? And not just in health and safety terms.

JK: The level of camaraderie amongst graduates, the amount that they give to each other, but also across the college and in community-based projects. There are surprises every year—not just the really high-end projects or the high flyers that you spot in the first year. Other students need gentle, continual coaxing; even into the third year, you wonder, "What are they doing with this...?" And then the students take their ideas and run with them. For me, that's what education is—seeing the people who've made the biggest journey. I'm always most proud of that.

(Interview conducted on July 5, 2018, and edited and condensed for clarity).