

Student Voices transcripts: Nicky

Nicky – Interview 2020

Nicky 0:00

My name is Nicky O'Donnell, I'm a BA, ceramics design student at Central Saint Martin's. I am going back into my third year, having completed the first two years, and this year I've actually been on a diploma of Professional Studies year, which is a year out of college, completing different work experiences. And there's been a wide variety of those in my case, UAL is now the only place where you can do a ceramics degree in London. The fact that UAL has such a broad range of subjects from you know, product design and fashion through to film and all the video work that goes on at LCC was of interest to me, I thought it meant that the college would have a broader outlook also.

Nicky 0:49

I mean, I am a Londoner, and I live in London. I'm a mature student and I have a family so I'm forgetting that I actually it wasn't an option for me to move out of London, anyway. But also the reputation of CSM is you know quite a draw because so many wonderful artists have passed through and by CSM, you feel that you're going somewhere serious, I suppose. And visiting lecturers and artists are actively pleased to come to CSM and UAL to lecture so you're getting the very best that's available, I think.

I do already have a degree in performing arts and I specialised in arts administration. And I've been working in mainly music promotion for the last 20 odd years. And I was doing ceramics and pottery as a kind of hobby, really, I didn't take it very seriously. But I then started to get a little bit frustrated because I thought I can just sit and make bowls and cups forever. But how do you develop ideas? How do you come up with ideas for new things to make, and I've never had an art based education. I haven't even done art O'level or A'level or anything at school, and I ended up doing an Art Foundation a few years ago now, which I absolutely loved.

Nicky 2:08

But I was, you know, also still working and still had a family to look after. So it was quite a struggle. And then I just left everything for another few years, life carried on. I was thinking about going back and doing a part time ceramics course at one of the adult education colleges in London. And a friend said, Oh, for goodness sake, that you've done that, you know, you've not moving forwards. Why don't you look at Saint Martins and I didn't think I had a hope in hell of getting into St. Martin's. But I got my little portfolio together and looked at the work I'd done during my foundation and thought, Well, okay, I'll give it a go. And I went and had my interview. And I was offered a place there and then I could have, you know, knocked me over. And I felt really, really positive and excited. The breadth of imagination and practice is enormous. You know, everything from, you know, designer, tableware through to quite avant-garde film work and dance performance, sexual politics, you know everything is covered.

So I was quite excited to be in that environment. I mean, I was a little bit scared, you know, there was trepidation there. But I'm actually not the oldest person on the course. And there's a really broad mix of ages and backgrounds and nationalities.

(3:29) And because it's a small course, you, you've really become friends and you all mix in and you share ideas. So it's, it's been really good to focus on which direction you want your artistic practice to take your creative practice and your design practice and people go off in lots of different directions, share ideas, some of my fellow students were very heavily design influenced and wanted to work in industry.

And although I don't envisage myself becoming a designer at Wedgwood, or anything I'm really interested in that practice and the history of it. So that feeds back into my expressive practice which is fascinating. Really, there are some things that maybe as a mature student, I've sought out but not just because I'm a mature student... I'm just a bit nosy. And I like to know what's going on. And we do have access to the... I don't know if it's the St. Martin's or the UAL there's a museum and that museum, we're allowed handling rights and we have classes. So the students have access to the history of the college, which in turn obviously has a history that directly relates.

Nicky 4:40 As we know so many artists and designers have come through the school and the sort of situation of the different schools within UAL is important because you can pop over to Chelsea and do a class. You can go down to LCC and do a class or you if you're new to London, within UAL you can travel around London, which is also a wonderful new experience for people that may be are new to the city.

You know, obviously I'm born and bred here, and I know it very well. But still, it's interesting for me to even to go down to Wimbledon or you know, anywhere places I wouldn't normally go. From that point of view, it's great that it's all over London and you can make friends, all the different colleges, I suppose. So I think through that you get the broadest range. It's funny when I did tell some friends, I'm going to go back, I'm going to do an arts degree, they're saying, "Well, why do you want to do another degree? Nicky, you know, that means writing and dissertations and reading and, you know, are you really ready for that?" And I was like, actually, "I really love reading" but I just find life takes over and I end up not reading as much as I would like. I was a little bit concerned, or how am I going to fit everything in but actually, the reading has been one of the biggest joys. I never imagined that I would be, you know, desperate to go to the library. And the library at CSM does get very busy, but I've signed up for the British Library and there's a readers room there, which you can use as a student, and I recommend it to everyone, and I've just been taking myself off or before lockdown, and really loving finding some time to read.

And I've written a few essays that I absolutely love doing, or you know, because it just takes you off in a... you find what you just learn, you just learn loads, and you find out more. And by finding out more about other people's work, you then do, reflect and find out more about your own work. So it's a really great way of developing and there is so much support UAL, I mean, luckily, you know, I'm not dyslexic, but my son is and I'm very aware of my peers who are dyslexic and have problems with writing and reading and then I know that they've found the most amazing amount of support. But I think the essays and things we write, they're...

they're not the same as a history degree essay. You know, we're not expected to write a very heavy academic tome. I think it's all about reflection and finding out about artists, which I think it's, it can only benefit your own creative development. So I've really taken to that actually.

Nicky 7:06

I have always worked in teams, that's one of the things I really like. And sometimes I have to think, stop worrying about everyone else, you know, focus on your own work be a little bit more selfish. But, you know, for me being part of the team, within the ceramic group is really useful because it helps chivvy me on. And again, sharing ideas, for me normally means developing more of your own ideas. So, it can only ever be a positive. I can understand that for the college as a whole.

There are some areas where they, they do really try and develop collaboration, and maybe sometimes they try and force it a bit where actually it's happening quite naturally. And I suppose that's a challenge for a big organisation. because sometimes enforced collaboration is a little bit tricky, if you're more mature. But I personally absolutely love, I almost would rather work with someone that's not the same as me and doesn't necessarily have my language because it's just so much more interesting.

And you just find out so much more. I did one big collaborative project that I sort of thought "well, if we have to" and I met a girl from Shanghai, a girl from Beijing, and girl from Singapore, and one girl actually had family from Hong Kong. So it was that was it a whole range of attitudes, opinions, and stories, actually. And a breaking down of many stereotypes. You know, I think that's what's wonderful about being somewhere so International. I have a lot of friends from all around the world, but I don't know very many people from China. And I've met quite a few now on the course and because ceramics has such a big Chinese history. It's really interesting for me

(8:53) and I really like that and, you know, my closest friends on our course one's from Australia, one's from Israel, one's of Sri Lankan descent, and one is of Chinese descent. And there's a German guy that I'm really friendly with. So, for me that's the most exciting. We had a questionnaire and they said, you know, 'what do you need to do next year?' sort of thing. And so "I need to be more confident" and everyone laughed and said "Nicky, you're confident what you're talking about?'. So no, being confident in your work and that you can present your work is something that never goes away. I don't think. We have to interview artists for specific projects, or designers, and a rather well known ceramic artists that we interviewed, said the imposter syndrome is still very, very high on her list of problems if you like. I think you just have to accept that you're in an educational institution and they want you to learn and they want you to develop. So it's best to have those doubts when you are at college, so that you build up the resilience so that when you leave college you think 'no, you know, I've actually I know that I'm good at that, this is the area that I need to work on. And I think it can only stand you in good stead but I think any creative industry any creative endeavour has.. has those moments.

(10:16)

With ceramics specifically, everything takes such a long time. And sometimes you just want to weep because you've spent four weeks developing something and then it comes out the kiln cracked or the colours wrong or something. So I think ceramicists are well versed in that sort of anxiety, but you know, everyone is learning. And it's not just the tutors actually, I should mention technicians and I think this is the same across the whole of the college, the technicians in all the departments that I've come across have been really wonderful at showing you how to do things and helping you improve the way you do them. So whether it's in the photography studio or in the metal room, you can go with a problem, and someone will help you resolve it.

So you can have the creative support from your tutors. But then the practical, actually Can I do this? Is it going to work comes from technicians. I can't tell you how valuable the technicians are. And I think going back after lockdown, they're going to be even more valuable because time is going to be of the essence.

Academic Support 11:22

Can we talk about lockdown? Can you tell us what happened the very first few days and then since then?

Nicky 11:29

Yeah, I was on the Diploma of Professional Studies year out. And I was due to go down to Cornwall from May to July to work on a outreach project in St Austell in a brick works there. And I was really looking forward to it. And of course it was all cancelled. I was at home and I have got two older kids, one of whom has finished uni and one who's still at uni and there was a lot of readjusting.

(11:53)

I started lockdown thinking I'm going to sort out all my project photos. I had just bought a kiln I'm going to make loads of stuff and it's going to be wonderful. Well, it's all taken a lot longer than I imagined and my photos are still in a mess. But I have, through UAL, I've got a mentor. And it's been really useful at keeping me on track. So I speak with her once a month. And I'm so grateful that I've got that during lockdown because it helped me focus about where I'm going next. And it also helped soften the upset, at something, you know, not happening that you've been hoping for.

(12.38)

But I also ended up going back and volunteering with the community project that I'd been working on, because they're doing an online outreach programme.

So for 10 weeks, I've been doing that three days a week that's kept me busy. It's kept me in touch with creativity and talking to people. But then I started noticing some of the academic support emails and they carried on running wonderful workshops, and I did four drawing workshops, which it was amazing that the online workshop really did inspire me. I found it much less scary almost than going to a real workshop at college. I felt much more confident, I was just sitting at my desk, there was no one I couldn't compare myself to anyone. And when I spoke to the tutor, I got really good advice and commentary. So I thought, humm so I did some more. I've done a moving image one, I've done a sensory mediation workshop. And I did another workshop, which was really full of people from all around the world about making materials from banana skins and orange peel. And that obviously had a lot of product design students in there because there were people from all over the world, the drawing one was much smaller group of people.

Nicky 13:52

And I thought, well, this is just fantastic that I had access to this broad range of workshops, and there are many others. And it kept me in touch with being a student, it kept me creatively inspired, and has actually given me some skills for when I go back. So I'm really grateful for that. So for me, it's been a really positive experience. I don't know what it would have been like if I had been a third year student and not getting to do my degree show. I think a lot of them were quite upset, obviously, because that's a big milestone and as a CSM degree show is a big deal. So I think, you know, very disappointed but because the tutors and the workshop leaders at UAL are such high quality, I suppose, it does mean you are getting the best you could possibly get online.

(14:43)

I think sometimes students don't really believe there'll be someone at the end of the phone that can help them and it does always amaze me that there is actually you know, you can go to a library and get some help. And I think that's one thing I think the university needs to communicate better, there are humans there that can help. But everyone says, oh, I've just found this wonderful tutor that deals with dyslexia... and she's brilliant, or you've just been down to student services. And he's helped me sort out this. And it's the same with technical support online, actually. So it hasn't been a negative experience for me, I have to say.

Academic Support 15:19

And if you were thinking of coming to UAL in October, it's likely that's going to be partially online and partially face to face what would you recommend somebody thinking about doing that?

Nicky 15:35

Well, I myself thought, why am I going to pay nine grand to go back for my final year, if I'm not going to be able to be in the studio? You know, it went through my mind. And then I started to think, well, if I don't go now, and I have another year out, you know, who knows what's round. you never know what's around the corner, and my positive experience of the online workshops that I've done and I have since been in tutorials with, like the DPS tutors and with my head of course and we actually had a really focused around the table conversation with about six of us. Because you know, there was a few technical hitches at the beginning of the meeting, but everyone is there and they're focused, you're kind of listening to the person that's speaking. And then everyone's listening to you when you speak. And I feel that in an hour, you probably get a little bit more focused attention. Now, that's not to say that I wouldn't miss the nuanced, passing someone in the corridor or seeing a tutor or an artist that I haven't seen you for ages.

(16:38)

And, you know, that is really an important part, especially as a creative process because so many ideas come out of those little conversations. But the focused lectures and things where you are just sitting at a desk, I mean, going into college for 20 minutes tutorial, which sometimes would have to happen, actually, I'm happier to do that online and feel it's a better use of my time and I can start see that some of that stuff might continue. Once I thought about it like that, I thought, well, you know I think it's going to be okay. And as I understand it, we should be getting two full days in college and they're looking at extending hours. And I do believe they're looking at making it the best experience for the students, but also the staff and the technicians. It's a combination of all those things. If the students aren't happy, the tutors aren't happy. If the tutors aren't happy, then the technicians aren't happy. If the technicians aren't happy then the students aren't happy. So, it makes sense for it to work for everybody. And I do believe they're working really hard at that. For me, personally, I'm going to go back and it's going to be an experience, whatever it is, is never going to be perfect. I think that's the other thing. I think there's just nothing in life that's perfect. So, you make the best of the situation you're in.

Academic Support 17:51

Thank you so much, Nicky, so clearly communicated. If you if you were that person thinking of applying any recommendations or suggestions or thoughts based upon your own experience?

Nicky 18:07

I think it depends on which college or you're going to geographically, whichever college you're going to go to, I think try and live as near as you possibly can. I did have a niece who lived out in Woolwich and was going into SOAS and the... I mean, because it was cheaper... but the journey time, you know, was a nightmare.

It took a long while to get there, she spent quite a lot of money on transport. And in the end, if she'd lived a bit nearer, she could have cycled or bought and she probably wouldn't have spent any more money. So I ...and especially now... I think your local community is very important in post lockdown London. You know, you want to live somewhere where you can easily get around and I would say getting to college on foot or on a bike is a really important thing. It might sound like a sort of daft thing, but I know I can cycle into college and I'm really grateful for that from where I am.

I think that then you find a local area where you can entertain yourself ...because obviously you're still going to want to go out, you want to sit in park, you want to hang out with friends, you want to have a drink, and post lockdown London, that's what you want to feel comfortable with. I don't know whether the college bars are going to open. I'd like to think they will be working at making sure there's some sort of social space. In fact, I'm sure they will. And I think when you get to UAL, really look around and see what you can take advantage of because there's so much on offer. And if your social life is going to be curtailed a little bit post lockdown, really try and make the most of the things that are on offer. Because there are so many workshops and there's screenings, and there's film shows and there's performance and there's galleries. I mean, I've just heard that a lot of the galleries are opening at the end of July and you're coming to London. So there's lots of stuff to do here and a lot of it is free.

But you just have to broaden your outlook a little bit and find out what's going on. Because I think some of the big club nights probably aren't going to be happening. So you just need to find other ways of entertaining yourself. And take advantage of being able to throw yourself into your course because the time goes so, so quickly. You really want to make the most of it in this post lockdown. There will be things being offered by the Student Union by ...there's different groups, you know, you could join the... I don't know, I'm sure there's a skateboarding society or whatever it whatever it is, you're into. You know, make the most of it. I think that's my, my top tip.

Academic Support 20:01

Thank you so much. I felt like I learnt a lot from listening to you. It's been really interesting and really clear.

Nicky 20:48 Oh, good.

Academic Support 20:48

So thank you.