

“The learning I prize is immeasurable re-creation”

Ivan Illich (1971) *Deschooling Society*. (0339)

Helen Potkin, Kingston School of Art, Kingston University, London

In the quotation which forms the title of this paper, Ivan Illich infers a contrast between valuable learning and the standardised and quantified nature of institutional education. The tension highlighted in Illich’s radical critique of society appears to me prescient and also resonates with the discussion of the neo-liberal instrumentalisation of higher education in the work of contemporary writers such as Henry Giroux (2011) and Dennis Atkinson (2018).

Atkinson has drawn attention to the way current education operates on transcendent principles tending to encourage homogeneity, linearity and fixed routes. Referring to the didactic and regulatory nature of education, he notes the:

prescribed conduct of conduct constructed through the signifiers of performance, assessment, progress and achievement, which anticipate known pedagogic subjects (teacher and learners). (2018, p15)

He suggests that what he calls “real learning” is opposed to set pathways, but is alive to the unexpected, and is created through forms of encounters and events which permit a reconfigured world for the learner and expand definitions of what it is to learn.

In this paper, I assess the potential of co-creation to engender students’ investment in their own learning and to encourage reflective and self-conscious understandings of themselves as learners. I present a case study of a project in which the student group designed and planned the curriculum content, classroom activities and assessment briefs in collaboration with the tutor. The project took place in the context of an undergraduate art history module, *Researching the Contemporary*, at Kingston School of Art, London.

I introduced the module with an image depicting a poster from 1972 advertising the *Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research* founded by German artist, Joseph Beuys, and addressed the students directly about what and how they wanted to learn. The FIU presents a model of alternative educational practice which was inclusive, interactive, self-organised and transdisciplinary, in relation to which we could collectively begin to imagine the kinds of learning we wanted to do.

The idea underpinning the initiative was to test out co-creation as a creative process, exploring the potential of shifting the balance of the traditional dynamic between teacher and student in an active, participatory learning environment. In other words, the project asked about what kind of learning could be possible if we were all in it together? Erica McWilliam employs the phrase “meddler-in-the-middle” to characterise a practice of the teacher distinct from the authority figure imparting knowledge, or one facilitating from the side-lines. She further comments that,

Meddling is a re-positioning of teacher and student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world. As a learning partnership, meddling has powerful implications for what

“content” is considered worthy of engagement, how the value of the learning product is to be assessed, and who the rightful assessor is to be. (McWilliam, 2009, p.288)

As an attempt to create a less hierarchical learning environment, co-creation disclosed the complexities and ambiguities the in teacher/student relationship, to which student feedback on the module testifies. However, if students are conceived as producers (rather than consumers) of knowledge, this allows for new forms of agency to transpire. As makers, doers, participants, we can create and make visible our research, knowledge and ideas. The curriculum design emerged through negotiation, small group work and brainstorming. I employed a series of texts, film clips, art works as prompts and provocations, as ways of determining on content and approaches to learning. What materialised permitted students to explore areas of research and practice relevant to them as emerging artists, writers and curators. Our sessions each week were structured in relation to a series of themes, and were led and resourced by a group of students. The most successful seminars witnessed students drawing on their own interests, heritage and experience to effectively introduce us all to new material, ideas and ways of thinking. Here, the idea of curriculum itself is conceived not as predetermined, but active, fluid and responsive.

The assessment task came into being in relation to the developing curriculum themes, which in 2017-18 consisted of a focus on the role of cultural institutions and practices of curating in galleries and public space. We designed a brief with a collaborative and practical outcome, accompanied by individual critical and reflective writing. Each group was engaged in producing a curatorial concept which was manifested in a variety of ways: from project proposal, publication, virtual exhibition, display materials and event. The assessment process proposed a conception of research as practice that involved students creatively employing ways of thinking, doing and researching that were hybrid and permeable, allowing for new ecologies of practice to emerge.

The co-creation project witnessed high level of student engagement, investment in the assessment, and the production of ambitious, high quality work. Student feedback commented positively on collaboration and the opportunity to take risks in a safe environment. Students also expressed their concerns about open-ended ways of working, feelings of uncertainty and lack of structure. However, as one student commented, this prompted a different sense of what learning might be:

I believe that the combining of my artistic and art historical fields led to my initial feelings of uncertainty, as I had never done it before. It became clear that our tutor was aiming to foster our creative sides through this assessment, and that there were no prescribed outcomes that she expected. Once the lack of prescription and definition was made clear, our methodologies and ways of working became more experimental and free.

Co-creation is fraught with tensions such as uncertainty, but they can also be productive ones prompting us to envisage what learning can become. Evoking Illich, Irit Rogoff calls for abandoning a focus on outcomes, and embracing a pedagogy of potentiality, “not preoccupied with succeeding but with trying” (2011, p132). As experiment and experience, the project encouraged not just a questioning of how and why certain kinds of knowledge are privileged, but to make our own. In doing so we found ourselves enmeshed in a process

of reassembling a series of relationships: to each other, to learning, to the institution, to research and to our emotions.

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