

What Art School Education might tell us about ambiguity and agency in Higher Education student learning (work in progress) (0320)

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Art School Education can be characterized as an environment in which multiple forms of reason, embodied aesthetics, and the interaction with materials/immaterials through the imagination, converge as a student engages within the pedagogical processes related to studio and critique (blinded, in press). In this, the certainties of ‘critical thinking’ as outlined in research designed to improve it as an outcome of undergraduate studies, are found wanting. Not all forms of reason are deductive and inductive (as Artists and Designers eloquently demonstrate), aesthetics is, at least in part, constituted in affective desires which can subvert social constraints, and working with materials (even virtual ones) can be viewed as notoriously unpredictable. Yet, the implications for how students learn within this mix is barely reflected upon in higher education research into student learning. This presentation will explore three key areas:

- The research-based discourse of unambiguity in ways to manage student learning;
- The need to understand how thinking, doing, making operate together through studio-based education (including virtual studios or spaces off-site) and simultaneously constitute the three dimensional locus of Art School learning (which is qualitatively different to broader comprehensive university disciplines);
- The need to explore evocative ambiguities within curriculum design to enhance creativity.

The presentation will argue that what we can observe is the emergence of the research-based discourse of unambiguity in recent UK HE literature:

1. Dominance of constructive alignment and the over simplification of learning outcomes as a production mechanism which was identified from large studies with university (not Creative Practices) undergraduates;
2. The integration of academic literacies in response to both the massification of higher education and research on how to assist students to learn better and the well-intentioned but problematic lurch into coaching (this emerges out of a lack of engagement with the following observation: – where students and academics fail to have epistemological empathy, students tend to adopt false proxies which they assume demonstrate the understanding required to be demonstrated, Gunn, 2013: 74-75);
3. The common ‘proxy’ for pedagogic effectiveness in the educational development literature is not really creativity or originality *per se*, especially disciplinary teaching methods as signature pedagogies. Rather it is centred on explaining and mechanizing teaching methods which support sufficiency of understanding in the disciplinary context to cultivate simultaneously:
  - immediate subject area predetermined outcomes
  - career-wide approaches to learning.
4. Growth in notions of alienation, exile, exclusion to address minority group learning, with a rhetoric predicated on the notion that minority groups aren’t accommodated within current Art School pedagogical frameworks (which is true) (Atkinson, 2011, p. 14), but an assumption that this means they have a limited existence within the pedagogical context (which needs to be more fully unpacked);

5. Dependence on closed circuitry of inductive, qualitative methods as well as deductive, disembodied ones to explore how learning emerges. This often ignores the inter-subjective and embodied aspects of making, thinking, and doing as the necessary triad of higher learning in the creative arts and humanities. These methods in conjunction with a propensity towards solutionism that fails to recognize that pedagogy operates ecologically rather than a mechanical process may partly explain the developments behind observations 1-4.

Our understanding of how students learn in Art School is, at the moment, dominated by normative rather than Art School-pedagogy based representations. Research needs to consider how apparent dissonances which emerge via intellectual and affective abrasions generated between reason, aesthetics, and physical interaction with materials/ immaterials. This phenomenon values both intellectual agency that seems to stand outside disciplinary borders as well as new ideas, interpretations, and paradigms *within* disciplinary borders. As such it needs to be understood more fully. Aaron Stoller (2014, pp. 55-75) has revisited Dewey's thinking on knowing and learning, drawing it together with what artistic communities have termed 'maker's knowledge': reshaping knowing and learning as creative action. In this he recognises that rationality, our capacity to think, is enlarged through making and doing – that types of reason, aesthetics, and certain *mores*, woven together to interact with ambiguity generate creative action. What this suggests is that disciplines (cultures, content, canons, and processes) have the potential to be loci of agency from a position of *evocative ambiguity*, a form of ambiguity that works akin to what has been referred to elsewhere as an *enabling constraint* (Manning & Massumi, 2014)– ie an apparent disciplinary structural constraint that *calls out* or *evokes student agency* because of how they relate through their difference to what they are learning.

The commentary here pivots on the notion of 'evocative ambiguity' which calls out agency on the part of students, particularly those currently being identified within the student equality and diversity literature. In centering on this, I accept the position of new materialists who amplify the idea that we become who we are through how we make, what we make, and what we do. In this making and doing is 'done' socially and in relation to physical matter. As such it functions as an 'ecology' which includes alienating gestures but which is seen as generative of agentic horizons and the associated perceptions of freedom embedded within such horizons. Thus, pedagogical 'evocative ambiguities' need to cultivate what Grosz calls: 'freedom as the capacity for action' (2010, p.140). From this perspective, the key question becomes: what supports students to use potentially alienating encounters with normative approaches to making, thinking, and doing as animators of the freedom to make, think, do creatively?

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Manning, E. & Massumi, B. (2014) *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

Stoller, A. (2014) *Knowing and Learning as Creative Action*. Palgrave Pivot