

Knowing, not knowing and the unknown. Ambiguity and the locus of knowledge and power in student – tutor relations. (0323)

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In art and design education the relationship between student and tutor is close, developed through studio-based practice as described by Schön (1985) and others. Even when online learning is used in creative arts there is still an important dialogic element, a ‘kind of exchange’ (Shreeve et al 2010) which forms one of the signature pedagogies of art and design (Sims & Shreeve 2012). Studio learning is based on enquiry and transmission models of education are subverted to be replaced with ‘reverse transmission’ models where students tell the tutor about their learning (Orr et al 2014). This enquiry based approach to creative pedagogy configures the curriculum as active, generative, contingent and dynamic. This ‘sticky curriculum’ requires negotiation on the part of the student and the tutor (Orr and Shreeve forthcoming). The kinds of knowledges employed in creative practice are multiple and complex, and evidenced through doing, being and becoming.

There is great interest across the disciplines in enquiry based learning (EBL) and this approach – which is new in some disciplines (e.g. Duch et al 2001) - has underpinned studio pedagogy for decades (Schön 1985). Studio EBL is concerned with creating a learning activity usually based on a sticky and complex project, which has open ended solutions, deliberately setting out a scenario which requires engagement by the student who finds their own route through the task. Through engagement with materials, users and the environment (physically and socially) the student creates new and innovative products, artefacts, services or performances which have not been seen before. This new outcome places the student (even at undergraduate level) as the owner and originator of new knowledge changing the balance of expertise and power relations in the learning environment. This approach to pedagogy decentres the expertise of the tutor.

A creative project brief will be ambiguous. The centrality of ambiguity challenges the orthodoxy of transparency found in contemporary education discourse (Austerlitz et al 2008). The concept of ambiguity is key to understanding art and design education ontology. Ambiguity is central to creative learning because it enables the individual students to gain confidence and autonomy as artists and designers. If students and tutors are unable to manage ambiguity in the learning environment the students may never pass over this ‘threshold concept’ (Osmond et al 2009) and become creative practitioners.

The studio tutor has an ambiguous role which shifts and changes in response to individual learners, the demands of the university, the changing environment of cultural and professional practice beyond the university and the situations they themselves create as opportunities for learning. At times they will need to be an interpreter, a peer, a provocateur, a friend, a guide, a dictator, a parental figure, an ignorant schoolmaster (Rancière 1991, Orr & McDougall 2014). However, at the heart of the pedagogic encounter the tutor will determine or shape, through their responses and preferences, the kind of art or design most students make. There is a necessary space of not-knowing and not shaping which must be present for some students to take risks in pushing the acceptable boundaries of knowledge where creative artefacts are the

outcome of learning. Such boundaries of the acceptable are where power relations are played out and where not knowing in the assessment process creates uncertainty for tutors, or, if they are afraid to be different, failure for the student. There is a key paradox here. Whilst the art school promulgates the idea that ‘anything goes’ there is a set of student pedagogical identities, credentialised values and aesthetics which are shaped by the tutors and by the discourse of regulatory educational bodies (Atkinson 2012).

Deliberate disruption to the curriculum is an important pedagogic tool which tutors draw on to create more ambiguity and less formal and regimented learning activities. There are many approaches adopted to recast the curriculum as sticky rather than inert. A project brief may be co set with an employer (a live brief), it may be a group project, it may consist of one word that it asks students to respond to, or it may be highly scaffolded. Creative educators are making decisions about the space afforded for risk taking - the space for the unexpected and the unanticipated.

We argue that more ambiguous, less transparent determinism in curriculum planning should provide space to offer up the different and unusual. Teaching is a creative act in which power relations shift and change (Orr and McDougall 2014). As educators and researchers we celebrate not knowing and we welcome disruptive power relations that give students opportunities to lead on curriculum design and assessment. In a political context that seeks to frame the student as consumer the importance of our meta-learning discourses has never been more critical. In this paper we look to studio based teaching as an approach that celebrates the agency of students, welcoming opportunities to create, co-create and disrupt the curriculum for themselves and in collaboration with us.

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