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Education through Creativity: A Case for Experience Initiated Learning

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Abstract

This paper is a case study reflection on the experience of initiating and launching a full work based learning programme in creative education and, specifically, the aspect of student focused, creativity led learning. In the process of developing this Masters programme the team encountered obstacles and barriers that may be construed as institutional constraints but they could be caused by a culture of teaching that has influenced Arts and Creative Education to the extent where compliance with systems is potentially fostering conservatism. The case study describes a programme development that seeks to open up the curriculum to embrace the ideal of experience initiated learning as it is described in Europe and liberate the student from obsessive and, therefore, oppressive assessment regimes. It aims to revisit a constructivist form of education that has been traditionally associated with teaching in creative disciplines. This has been a conscious attempt to redress the excesses of formal education; the prescription of overbearing curriculum structures and, as a consequence, the tendency to undermine the role of emotional intelligences in learning. The emphasis of the programme has been; reflective education, independent learning, peer networking, open source knowledge exchange, blended and convergent interaction, context driven practice, evidence based enquiry and heuristic discovery; or education as a creative set of practices in its own right (something similar to Contemporary Fine art). Development work on new programme fields has already commenced with the intention of generating impetus and critical space for a whole approach to creativity centred, experience initiated learning, some of which will engage with European and International collaborations.

1. Background

The motive for developing and re-examining the means by which creative education may be delivered has arisen from a number of differing sources, which include Edward de Bono's seminal works on 'Lateral Thinking' and 'Thinking Outside of the Box' (De Bono, 1992). This paper will briefly describe the chronological history of a postgraduate programme development and this will evidence demand, a rational and a staged shift towards working with contextually sited experience-initiated learning. However, in the first instance, it is worth noting that the desire to move, at least Masters level, teaching to a place beyond the University's institutional boundaries has grown within the development team as a consequence of frustration. Simply put, there has always been a significant constituency of

learners operating in creative disciplines such as Painting, Sculpture, Dance, Music and a multitude of other specialisms, who do not fit the needs of the teaching environment. This is emphasised in Sir Ken Robinson's significant contributions (Robinson, 2001). It can be argued that some of these individuals excel in learning whilst they are failing at assessment. The idea that these cases appear more and more frequently means that those engaging learners in creative fields are constantly having to invent fresh approaches to student support and frequently having to source ever more robust arguments to defend both their students and their subject field.

The invention of a new curriculum for Creative Education has been inspired by significant examples where students have fallen foul of systems that do not correspond to creativity in the students skill set. Referencing one of the best performing and most challenging students in the history of the undergraduate Visual Arts programme at Salford University provides a case where the regulated response to multiple 'special needs' affecting learning and assessment had set the potential for disability discrimination. In this example 'Student A' was treated as deficient. However, without a thorough interrogation of the students various conditions and a qualified analysis of their impact on cognitive and intellectual development it has to be considered that this individual was simply not providing their knowledge in a form appropriate for assessment. Or, that by virtue of their creativity and a limiting Quality Assurance process, Student A was excluded from a process of correspondence with teachers that would normally consolidate learning and progress teaching. Through his experiences with Student A, A's personal tutor came to the conclusion that A faced a disadvantage in working with linear forms of narrative in either descriptive or analytical writing. This is not to say A was incapable but that their specific learning styles and mental preferences were for lateral systems of communicant platforms and presentational lay-outs. This is not unusual for students of Fine Art, especially those who display specific learning styles normally characterised by the term 'Dyslexia', but even more common in students exhibiting multiple conditions. As there is no means of judging common traits or forming any conclusion as to typical patterns for students with learning support needs, every student has to be dealt with as an individual case, to some extent. Student A's case repeatedly evidenced a crisis in her handling of information, and specifically text, when it was standardised in linear narrative form and progressive logic. A thinks (or thought) in pattern (mostly geometric), colour and tone. A's data handling normally started in diagrammatic form on a lateral plane or a topographical map. A could work and did work in sentence and paragraph structures, very successfully. However, if this was to be the sole structure offered to her, the effect could be fairly severe, causing extreme anxiety and presenting a real risk of impact on her medically and emotionally. Essentially, the standard dissertation format left her in a state of confusion where A could not contain the impulses to expand and diversify her knowledge (A could not limit her inquisitive and creative instincts) and could not control her perception; this then led to panic and even trauma. There was a simple need to adopt a more flexible form of 'essay' and report writing where A could blend diagrammatic and pictorial devices with structured text and where A would be allowed to design equivalent communications (pictures, signs and word patterns) to articulate some of A's knowledge and critical/analytical dialogue. The key to success in handling patchwork writing of this type would normally be the cross-referencing tools. These would normally be presented as a list of descriptors and sub-categories and a set of matrix and or web maps to describe cross-referencing and capture extended sources of knowledge and enquiry. In the end, it was argued that Student A should have the option to reinforce and embolden their evidence through appended Logbook, Journal or Sketchbook content; therefore, nothing at all radical when considering the normal traditions of Fine Art education.

The fact that this real case had to be argued on behalf of a student of Fine Art is indicative of a crisis that can be felt right throughout education relating to creativity and the development of creative capacity. Our reaction has been to grapple with the education process itself and address the activity of teaching as a creative endeavor. This is one of the motivating ideals that led to the development of the MA Creative Education programme.

2. Context

The City of Salford in the North West Region of England has a University that has grown into and with the City region, sharing the industrial and engineering heritage of the conurbation and the post-industrial and post-modern flux that has moved the once prosperous economic foundation of Salford towards a highly reactive, politically nuanced and relatively deprived society. Over the past 15 years Salford has seen an unprecedented expansion in the Creative and Cultural Industries that has refreshed and accelerated any sense of renaissance that may have been affected by publicly funded and planned tactical regeneration. It feels like the stimulus has come about via a collective consciousness and common purpose that is concomitant with the identity of Salford as a place. As a possible coincidence, the School of Art and Design started degree courses 19 years ago and one of the first subject areas was Visual Art. It could be viewed as contributing to the rich diversity of current practice in the professional realm and should be seen as contributing to the growth of participation in the sector, specifically because the School was originally conceived and defined by its own goals for widening access to Higher Education. The Visual Arts curriculum at Salford was originally intended as an outward looking and engaging programme that would seek to capture the experience of learning in contextualized environments and ‘live’ situations. The suggestion is that transformative education, given the Salford example, is a shared and interactive dynamic that spans metronomic fluctuations between rationale curriculum design and chance creative encounters or social accidents/collisions. In practice, students recruited from communities and Schools in the region were regularly exercising and exploring their learning back in those settings. An early outcome was a very healthy relationship between education providers and cultural organizations in the region and a very high rate of recruitment from low participation neighbourhoods. Another product of this thinking has matured into the design and launch of the MA Creative Education programme.

The reality for a University, rigidly rooted in the urban, post-industrial context is that ‘Widening Participation’ should, in the first instance, be amended to read ‘Widening Partnerships’. The ecology of Salford’s knowledge economy has evolved from multiple networks of individuals and social groupings that have been drawn together by a shared intent and empathetic vision; simply, there is enough passion amongst individuals within the local communities both inside and outside of the academy for their mutual interdependence to become embedded in social memory. However, the professional educational response to Quality Assurance regulatory frameworks has become progressively constraining; it has affected an attitudinal shift from the radical practices that were at the core of the Fine Art offer to a refined and detached teaching mission. This is an area that Derek Horton discusses in his article on Art School Alternatives during a symposium on the future of art education (Horton, 2010). The MA Creative Education development has sought to re-appropriate some of that radicalism and the mutualism that has so successfully supported learning communities previously. As Norman Jackson states, one of his four reasons why creativity is important in higher education is because

“beyond higher education people need to be creative in order to survive and prosper

in a complex, ever-changing, unpredictable world' (Jackson, 2005).

There is a compelling sense of social responsibility written into public education and this university, like so many located within low participation neighbourhoods, has adopted principles relating to comprehensive education goals. As a consequence, there is an opportunity to address inequalities in education that lead to inequities in society. This goes beyond strategic targets in that planned initiatives and interventions do not cover the entire range of activities. Current practices are fragmented and disparate because they are frequently led by passionate and committed individuals and are motivated by individual contexts and narratives. A strategy should either cover all bases or accommodate for surprise, originality and permissiveness. This is one of the problems with formal education; consistency and universal systems do not reliably support responsive partnerships in transformative change dynamics within evolutionary social systems, one of these being the teaching and learning environment itself. A research project undertaken by Canterbury Christ Church University and Future Creative (2004-2005) is reported in Cremin et al (2010). The book explores the characteristics of creative teachers, identifying the behaviours and environments that support the development of these attributes.

3. History of the Programme Development

The MA Creative Education programme evolved out of a university partnership going back to 2005 between Academic Enterprise in The School of Art and Design and a Community Interest Company, Artists and Education C.I.C. Artists and Education (A&E) was formed in 2002 by two Visual Arts Graduates from University of Salford. The company's objectives were to carry out activities of benefit to the community and, in particular, to encourage and foster the study, performance, knowledge and understanding, appreciation and development of the arts through artists' residencies and educational workshop programmes. This emerged from the Artists and Education Directors' own experience of engaged practice within school residencies and site-specific public art commissions and the lack of professionalized networked support for artists operating in those fields at that time. This was before nationwide initiatives such as Creative Partnerships and both artists and teachers were lacking a shared understanding of each other's disciplines and working methods. Artists and Education regularly encountered Primary School teaching staff terrified at the prospect of having to accommodate an artist in their classrooms for fear of revealing to their pupils the teachers own perceived lack of creativity. This did not apply to all teachers and all schools. Some great artist / teacher partnerships were observed, however opportunities for joint learning and delivery were being missed. Equally, many artists new to working in schools were intimidated by school staff rooms and had many preconceived ideas of school curricula based on their own, sometimes negative, experiences of school life.

Whilst Artists and Education (A&E) continued to deliver project management for arts residencies and festivals it became evident that in order to reach the companies aims they needed to provide professional development and training for artists and educators in order to advance their delivery of the arts. The initial focus was to work with recent arts graduates to support the transition from an individual studio based culture to a professionalized engaged practice within a number of environments: schools, hospitals, prisons and galleries. A&E worked in partnership with staff from within the School of Art and Design to develop a number of 10 week programmes supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). Whilst reflecting on practices within these differing educational environments the connection between them all was the artists creative approaches to the workplace environment.

A sister course was developed aimed at primary teachers, rather than artists, to look at ways of developing creativity through a mixture of hands on workshops that transferred new skills and techniques but also instituted a wider learning debate about how creativity can be fostered. This non credit-bearing course identified a number of points that were incorporated in future planning for the MA Creative Education development. Most importantly, whilst teachers took away new ideas to transfer into the classroom from the practical workshops such as printmaking, the real energy came from the sessions that explored the teachers' abilities to take risks and try new approaches. An example of this was setting the task of presenting personal artwork with restrictions on materials and a ban on established school methods of display. This made the teachers challenge conventional approaches and explore how the display of work can be used as an ongoing teaching resource rather than just a celebration of work done. Online sources such as The Creative Toolbox managed by CreatingMinds are also available, which can also act as a catalyst for this process.

An opportunity arose to bid for further funds through the Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) strand of Teachers Development Agency (TDA) funding. The PPD presented an opportunity to link new continuing professional development (CPD) delivery for qualified teachers into a qualification. Working in partnership with A&E, Local Authority Education Advisors and an Educational Charity (REAL Trust) the funding provided Stand Alone Modules at Level 7 (postgraduate). The MA Creative Education (MACE) whilst having its origins in the previous courses and modules delivered prior to September 2010 has since been developed to encompass a much wider range of learners from the original focus of arts coordinators within primary schools.

MACE utilizes the University of Salford's Work Based Learning Framework (WBL), designed in response to employers' demands for flexible programmes of learning that focus on the accreditation of experience in the workplace. The framework at postgraduate level comprises four 30 credit modules and a 60 credit self directed element and is led through Work Based reflection alongside research and experiential activity. In essence, it is a compact between creative studio based discipline and real world learning in professional environments. The ethos of the course is to enable the students to take risks and experiment with notions of creativity within an educational context. Differences are noted with the Imaginative Curriculum Network site founded by Norman Jackson and the University of Surrey. The MACE course encourages creative thinking and has, as its wider remit, an ambition to develop the participant's creativity within an educational dialogue. Through a focused study of arts practices and praxis participants are introduced to new concepts for teaching and learning, whilst being encouraged to examine and to further develop, existing skills, knowledge and understanding.

The structure of the programme means that classes are delivered in small groups, arranged either geographically off campus or in groups related to a shared work background (artist educators/teachers). The aim is to provide a flexible programme of study that takes into account the needs of the students, most of whom are working full time whilst undertaking the programme. In reality this means tutors invest time in travelling out to support learners in satellite locations such as a High School or local authority development centre. Teaching is supported through seminars and tutorials during twilight sessions, one-to-one tutorials at their place of employment/ work placements as well peer group discussions and a number of intensive day long workshops at the University. The students work in a variety of specialised areas of teaching, far wider than first envisaged. Learners studying on MA Creative

Education range from; Teaching Assistants to Deputy Heads, subject specialist Secondary School teachers, special needs teaching staff specialising in severe autism, Higher Education Dyslexic Support Staff, Freelance Artists and Creative Practitioners employed in a number of different workplaces. Although it was initially recognised that there was a risk attached to recruiting from such wide ranging backgrounds, the core theme of engaging with and applying creative practices to situations enables the course to retain a strong identity. The diversity of the cohorts has benefited participants by providing a broader base for discussion. There is a real sense that participants are learning from each other about differing delivery methods across subject specialisms and contexts as well as discussions about pupil / student progression and the value of bringing outside influences into the teaching space. Group meetings provide a non-judgemental space where students can discuss work related issues alongside professionals with similar experiences without being involved in the internal politics of the workplace. Students are expected to actively explore their own creative processes before testing out and transferring some of those activities to their students/ collaborators. This initial reflection is key to subsequent engagements within the course. Roughly 75% of students have an undergraduate qualification within a recognized creative field (Visual Arts, Textiles, Music).

Chris Dorsett, Reader in Art School Practices at Northumbria University and External Examiner for MACE writes; “The need to provide Masters level provision for teachers who specialize in creative disciplines has been extensively promoted by the NSEAD Artist-Teacher Scheme and the development of MA Creative Education at Salford is a welcome extension of this idea, particularly with its aspiration to embrace both the visual and the performing arts. I have been impressed with the level of student achievement and note that the best work submitted seems to transcend the values embedded in different modes of creative practice, to establish a critical and practical engagement with the broader role of the arts in current education policy. ” The course is evolving to include students engaging with the programme from other fields of undergraduate knowledge – Sociology, Creative Writing, Engineering, Psychology and most recently, Chinese Medicine. These students are encouraged to develop their own studio practice in whatever artform they feel most comfortable with. This engagement / re-engagement with making, alongside research and reflection provides the students with a base upon which progress has added personal value.

The MACE students tend to be hesitant learners at first as they are generally returning to university after a long gap and need a lot of support and mentoring in the first modules in order to build their confidence. Once established they tend to push themselves and generate a tremendous amount of work; their expectations run high and they tend to apply very significant personal goals. The course relies heavily on the reflective process and this has forced participants to examine their current practice and work on self-identified areas for development. This process has not always been comfortable for participants but has resulted in their overcoming obstacles, working through problems and increasing their confidence to try new methods and approaches to their own pedagogy. The overall feedback from students has been an increase in subject knowledge, not just in art and design, but in the wider arts and an increase in confidence in the subsequent application of this learning to the workplace. Other aspects commented on have been the structure of the course; in particular the group seminar format that has provided a sense of shared support and has effectively functioned as forum for ideas and auto-ethnographic research. In addition the online open source learning forum has initiated an increase in IT engagement generally.

Norman Jackson writing in relation to teaching creativity in Higher Education states

"A more process-oriented academic curriculum that promotes productive enquiry and problem-based learning, moves away from a knowledge transmission model towards a facilitated discovery model of learning that is much more in tune with the idea of learning to be creative." (Jackson, 2008).

As students progress through the modules they are assessed on their ability to contextualise their studies in relation to the wider work-based environment. This is achieved through shared learning with work colleagues, developing teaching materials for dissemination, developing resources for use within the wider workplace, promoting best practice through evidence or addressing specific and focused issues. Final Self Directed projects are currently being completed include the following examples; using the visual arts as a platform for teaching literacy, developing programmes of study that encourage boys' participation in dance and the building of a Timemachine (game) to introduce new methods of delivering the history curriculum.

The majority of assessment takes place via a physical portfolio, student presentations and reflective statements. Creative approaches and reports rather than essays are encouraged and meet the needs of the students. Some students have created electronic portfolios and blog-sites and the programme has a discrete Virtual Learning Environment managed collectively by postgraduate staff and students. Students need to disseminate their activities and findings within their own workplace and are encourage to lead Staff Development sessions when possible. As the students are themselves educators within their work based context it is useful to capture and reflect on wider impact from the MA. Outcomes differ but there is clear improvement in the confidence of participating students and in their understanding of the arts as both a discrete taught subject and as a cross-curricular tool. There has been a specific increase in the desire of MACE students to pass learning on to other staff and colleagues. Participants have expressed a greater awareness of the possibilities for whole school changes – such as the widespread use of sketchbooks as a tool for learning or the use of the expressive arts to lead whole school development of emotional literacy.

Moving forward, there is an ambition to grow this approach to creativity centred learning. In the first instance, to grow MA Creative Education and extend its reach so that it has identifiable connections to any and all subject fields that might be represented by potential students. Therefore it needs adjustment to emphasise the creativity inherent in the education process and move the association of the offer away from specific learning in the arts and towards a style of learning that will empower creativity within learning.

4. Emerging Opportunities and Themes: Capitalising on Creative Education for the Creative Academy

Current developments in the School of Art and Design at Salford are seeking to exploit the lessons from our first work initiated learning Masters programme. One development will focus on Contemporary Fine Art, targeting independent creative in the context of both the making environment and the arena for public engagement. The School is currently bidding with 4 European partners for a collaborative development. A further version is underway that relates to Design Innovation and Design Management targeted those working in the area of design practice, design solutions and design for manufacturing. This initiative will have the potential for international reach, engaging partners in both Europe and beyond. Both of these cases will aim to exploit diversity in the learner community and the context for learning. The goal of all of these initiatives is to move the experience and framework for education as close

as possible to the impact environment and relevant communities of interest beyond the academy. Eventually, a collection of creativity centred specialist educational programmes will provide a single structure platform for tiered engagements with ‘sliding scale’ benchmarks assessed through self criticism and delivered through peer/inter-relational experienced initiated learning. The principled approach seeks to harness enterprise-structured frameworks (contextual priorities, collaboration and team working, creative independence, and process management responsibility); open access resourcing and open knowledge exchange. The impact goal is to realise a supportive education focused network in the interests of inclusion and social capacity growth for the region. The objective is to extend the concept of a University beyond its own physical boundaries and enable access to personal and professional advancement through Higher Education via outreach.

‘Universities and colleges are shaped by, and themselves shape, our economy and society. Through world-class teaching, research, and increasingly close interaction with businesses and communities, they are helping to create the conditions which will lead the country out of recession and to full recovery. Higher education is an engine of economic, social and cultural development, in local communities and across the country as a whole.’
(Langlands, 2009)

Too often the ‘inclusion’ agenda is interpreted as a political principle and yet the essence of creativity centred learning is that it takes place away from subject hierarchies and related discipline focused priorities and actively opens up engagement opportunities by virtue of cross-disciplinary interactions and by the quality of the enterprise relationship that promotes reflective learning in the student. This suggests an element of chaos and a very potent element of radical mutualism in the learning contract that will influence and steer the future syllabus and the range of evidence based outcomes from learning; as such the curriculum may be described as dynamic in that it operates as a process of correspondence between all participating parties. Communications and cultural outputs that emerge from ‘study’ should directly contribute to the range of knowledge and, therefore, educational resources that feed learning. Fresh commentary, invention and innovation, provided by the student, will feed speculative and experimental enquiry as complementary to, rather than disruptive of, the planned and targeted curriculum.

“It is my contention that civil disobediences are nothing but the latest form of voluntary association, and that they are thus quite in tune with the oldest traditions of the country.”
(Arendt, n.d.)

Creating, acquiring and sharing knowledge is an essential part of our society. It is now over 10 years since Lord Dearing set out his vision for higher education (HE) in the learning society¹, but the four main purposes he identified for HE still hold true:

- to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfillment
- to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society
- to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels
- to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.

In observing the outcome and practices that have emerged through the MA Creative Education programme, there is every reason to assume that more and similar developments will closely and accurately adhere to those goals and provide the Higher Education establishment with the flexibility, creativity and currency so essential to the modernization of the curriculum and syllabus. The experience of Salford has been a positive one and many in the ‘academic’ community recognise and bear evidence to a role that extends far beyond academia and, as Sir Alan Langlands suggests, is shaped by the context and environment of the Civil Society we seek to serve. In this sense, the word ‘academic’ ceases to adequately describe the educational process or, indeed, its contractual and moral relationship with both the individuals participating as beneficiaries and the society that both supplies and consumes the knowledge capital with which it seeks engagement.

Creativity is widely accepted as both a skill and attribute valued by contemporary society, and yet its presence within the sensory processes commonly associated with creative themes still require academic iteration before they can be assumed to be properly measured and counted. The core problem in Creative Education is that we still think to teach the experience rather than learn from it. What is implied in the running of creativity led education is that the engagement with knowledge through creativity and practice provides all the evidence of skill and intellectual critical resource needed to qualify achievement. A part of this debate has to imply that education need not be borne from an institution but is more a social and political habit of society (or subject communities within society) that can be promoted and facilitated and can fluctuate between reason and the anarchy of creativity.

“...anyhow, I think with my knees”

Wolfgang Dreschler quoting from Joseph Beuys (1960) [2007]. 9

The direct transcription of these thoughts can be summarised as; how can we enliven our appreciation and awareness of how people learn and develop in parallel to our institution, and then, how can we respond pro-actively by making entry, outreach and delivery more flexible and more accessible?

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