Academic Practice Commentary of the Design of my Learning Materials '[Authors and Agents](#)'

This is my commentary on the learning material I've designed (a Y1 Critical Studies lecture).

Introduction

This commentary reflects on a learning activity I have designed to correspond with an existing element of the BA (Hons) Fine Art and BA Digital Arts Computing (DAC) programmes at Goldsmiths, called Critical Studies. Critical Studies acts as a theoretical component to the predominantly practice-based study of Art at BA level, and is designed to support art students to contextualise and develop their own artwork and artistic methodologies within a wider awareness of art theory, history and contemporary art criticism and culture. My learning materials are specifically pitched at level 4 according to the SEEC Credit Level Descriptors (2016), which at Goldsmiths equates to Critical Studies 1.

Throughout the first year of my PhD, I have had the opportunity to audit the Critical Studies lecture series with the students and lead one of the seminar groups, forming a set of early teaching experiences which I have reflected and drawn upon in the design of my own learning activity. With this in mind, I have opted to create a one-hour lecture aligned with the existing learning outcomes and framework for Critical Studies. At the same time, in planning the learning materials I have attempted to identify a thematic gap in the lecture series that could be addressed by my research. While I have designed the lecture as an in-person activity addressing a large group, it could also be readily adapted to an online platform such as Panopto or as part of a MOOC (see attached PDF). My TLA timetable, embedded within the existing format for Critical Studies, is as follows:

1.Pre-work: Readings

With level 1 students in mind, the readings I have prescribed are not too demanding in terms of workload: a short essay by Roland Barthes and a performance video by artist Hedwig Houben. In terms of content, the essay will likely challenge the students, but my lecture consolidates their efforts by consistently referring back to the reading and unpacking three key concepts from it, using artworks to illustrate each idea.

2. Lecture: 'Authors and Agents'

The Critical Studies lectures last one hour. Please find my lecture slides, script and a video rehearsal of the lecture in the attached PDF of learning materials.

3. Group Seminar

After the lecture, the students attend a one-hour group seminar discussion. In the design of my lecture, I have tried to anticipate this by planting open questions as seeds for discussion throughout the lecture, actively encouraging the students take up the issues as their own.

4. Assessment

The Critical Studies assessment consists of a 2000-word essay corresponding to the subject of one of the lectures in the series. Please find my prompt for assessment (an essay question) in the attached PDF. The assessment is summative in the weak sense that it counts for a minimal percentage of the final grade, but is more intended as a formative exercise towards the final year dissertation (Year 3); preceded with academic support and followed up with feedback tutorials.

Since the wider adoption of outcomes-based approaches to learning, the lecture has often been criticised as a teaching and learning activity, for the good reason that it threatens to become more teacher-centred by placing the learner in a passive position relative to the lecturer; thus inhibiting the student from practising key, actionable skills nominated by the intended learning outcomes (Biggs, 2014). Nonetheless, I recall from my own studies that the lecture jogged lesser exercised skills in the context of studying Art, where the student is placed in almost exclusively active scenarios: creating

works in open-plan, shared studios and frequently being asked to present work and submit themselves to group critique. Furthermore, in her essay In Defence of the Lecture, Miya Tokumitsu raises the problematic compulsion to "always seem harried, even if our flailing about isn't directed toward anything concrete," as a result of the action-based criteria for student assessment and employability, questioning whether this requirement for observable results necessarily means that students are doing nothing when listening to a lecture. In the arts especially and arguably for any practice-based learner, the lecture might actually be a unique scenario in their studies in which they are not in public view or required to justify their thinking to others - the only space for quiet reflection. With this in mind, I've endeavoured to create opportunities for reflecting within the lecture itself, as well as chosen a theme that might inspire reflective thinking: authorship.

Background and Approach

Before art entered the academy, the education of aspiring artists took place in master artists' ateliers or workshops, often segregated by craft, and very much modelled upon the style and methods of the master. Today, an art student might find themselves in a university full of aspiring psychologists and computer scientists as well as artists, sharing a studio with artists that paint, code, perform or make complex installations. Materially and thematically, the artwork produced in a single class of BA students may vary wildly, and this is not accidental. Diversity is encouraged. Far from the top-down, Renaissance model of the master imparting methods and concerns to students, today art tutors are wary of imposing their own artistic interests on the student, lest it limit their creativity. This change of heart in the realm of arts pedagogy is reflected in the history of art itself, which is replete with treatises and manifestos written and rewritten throughout the ages, detailing the necessary ingredients for producing great art; following every manifesto was a counter-manifesto - and following every painstaking taxonomy of art, from high to low, there has come along an artist or an entire movement to refute it. The history of art teaches us (as pedagogues) that the requisites of a good artist are hard to pin down in terms of universal laws; that what makes art 'good' is relentlessly dynamic and contingent upon the times. This quality makes it challenging to decide upon how to teach it. How do you qualify an art student, when society as a

whole is still undecided as to how to qualify the art of the past hundred years? What values do you prescribe to the emerging artist, when the most brilliant artists of the past have left their mark by rendering obsolete the artistic taxonomies of predecessors? The key 'problem' in teaching art lies in the fact that the student comes to learn about something that necessarily does not yet exist - that is, the art that they themselves will make and which they have not yet even imagined - the art that will typically come to undermine, rebel against or reinvent its past. What's more, Art Practice is a young academic discipline; we lack the terminology to articulate the creative processes that take place in the studio (Rankovic, M. 2007).

The current introductory lecture of the Critical Studies lecture series addresses these issues by openly sharing them with students. Students are taught about the history of arts pedagogy and invited into the task of shaping its future; they are taught about the past hundred years' fluctuations in trends and varying emphases on theory, intuition, or craft; and about the raging debates that have gone on in academies about art pedagogy. Students' agency can be activated via their participation in the development of Art as an academic discipline, and this strategy is one I've adopted within my own lecture. There is also a consensus that art is best taught by practising artists (Baxter, 2014), and that it's a good idea to expose the art student to as much of their bewildering context (historical, contemporary, theoretical) as possible, to inform their idiosyncratic treatments of these sources. As a result, in tutorials, art tutors spend far more time referring their students to artistic and theoretical material, rather than instructing them on what to do with it or how to process it.

In this the Critical Studies lecture series already provides very rich stimulus. However, most of the lectures I audited approached art from the perspective of the spectator - the wider cultural and historical context - rather than the artist themselves. Whilst this is an enlightening perspective for the artist, whose context must always be her very material, the lectures often import their language from kindred, established academic subjects (art history and art criticism), and thus leave us at a loss of how to speak about wider cultural contexts on the level of practice, an approach which seemed to have a mildly alienating effect on the students, at least according to my seminar group. The challenge boils down to the question of whether

it's even possible to speak generally (addressing a wide set of practices and contexts that the students bring to the college) about something so divergent at the individual level.

Searching for such a language has been a key task in my own research, as well as others pursuing practice-based PhDs in Art (cf. Price, 2000), and my lecture attempts to use this work to directly address the space primarily occupied by the practicing art student throughout their studies. My research project is a study in fictional characters and their relation to real persons (manifest in the 'author' or the 'reader'), as a means of reflecting on the imminent question of machine personhood, of which I argue fictional characters are a prototype. My art practice involves staging encounters between fictional beings and persons (including myself) in such a way that their relative statuses as agents is brought into relief and challenged. In practice, the results of these attempts have to bear upon how we conceive of the relation between creator and creation, and thus, questions about authorship. By combining my experience in innovating a practice-specific terminology with my research into the philosophy of authorship and creativity, I was able to develop a lecture that targeted introspective reflection into the nature of the student's own authorial roles and capacities. Not only could this feed into the practice itself and enrich its inquiry; but being able to articulate facets of one's own practice in this way is a form of professional development (e.g. in preparation for giving artist talks, writing artist statements, etc).

Having selected a theme, I followed a 'backward design' strategy (Fink, 2003) that started with intending learning outcomes, and then employed constructive alignment (Biggs, 2014) to map my learning activity and assessment onto these. The ILO's for my lecture are:

Upon attending the lecture and reading the core readings, you will be able to write a 2000-word essay in which you:

Demonstrate a fundamental awareness of theories and debates within studies of authorship and creativity.
Identify and discuss works of art and theoretical references relevant to theories of authorship and creativity.

Reflect on how you perceive your own authorial role within your practice in contrast with the references you discuss.

The phrasing of these outcomes was informed by Bloom's taxonomy (1956), predominantly catering to the lower three categories of 'Remembering', 'Understanding', and 'Applying', and derived its measurable, actionable 'verbs' from Stanny's 2016 analysis of verbs commonly adhering to each category. The SEEC level 4 descriptors also employ a similar subset of verbs to describe the achievements expected at this level: 'describe', 'demonstrate an awareness of', 'identify', 'collect', 'locate', but I also ensured to include the higher level cognition required of 'reflecting' and 'discussing', because art students are expected to innovate further upon the ideas discussed in lectures through their own practice; and innovation and creation are defining features of such work. These ILO's then guided the structure and content of my lecture, and were almost directly rephrased into an essay prompt for the formative assessment (see attached PDF).

My lecture highlights a set of questions and theories about authorship modelled on three ideas in Roland Barthes' The Death of the Author: 1) a critique of the author's omniscience, 2) a critique of the concept of 'originality' and 3) the reader as the dominant locus of a text's coming-to-be. Accompanying these are accounts of how different artists have conceived of their own authorial role against the backdrop of these evolving theories.

The presentation of this particular history of ideas is designed to invite the students to practice introspection into the possible nature of their own authorship. Instead of speaking about works in the gallery or museum, the lecture speaks about the studio, examining the processes and motivations of a series of artists who actively investigate the 'mechanics' of their own practice. Boud & Walker (1998) raise privacy concerns with certain 'public' reflective TLA's, so I took advantage of the relative anonymity afforded by the lecture format to begin with a private reflection activity, in which students are asked to brainstorm responses to six questions in relation to their own work, using their notebooks. These questions speak directly to matters of ideation and authorial roles, and are designed to generate a list of concerns in each student's notebook that might inform future reflective

work (e.g. the final year dissertation). It is my hope that the atmosphere, though not conversational, will still feel charged with the motivational energy of communal activity (as in a library). Then, the reflections generated will form an internal basis for comparison with the ideas to come in the lecture, establishing a thread of 'continuity' in the student's learning throughout the lecture (Rodgers, 2002).

A key point I make in the lecture is that, while Barthes suggests what the author is not (i.e. not the divine source of original ideas), he does not tell us what the author is. Although the lecture does not cater to immediately observable learner participation, it emphasises that many of the issues discussed are open questions and that the students are, by nature of being artists, inherently part of its unfolding history; that history is being made in their seminars. By transferring both responsibility and agency onto the learner's exploration of authorship, and by highlighting the direct relevance of these theories to their practice, I hope that the lecture can motivate and inspire students' own creative treatments on the topic - subversions, retaliations, innovations - which are after all, the kinds of skills they come to the college to practice.

Evaluation

As an early career researcher who taught in HE for the first time over the past year, I am best described as an 'Associate Fellow', according to the UK Professional Standards Framework (2011). In this assignment I focused on A1 and A5 from the UKPSF's Areas of Activity, although I also used the practical experience I've gained in that short time in the three other areas (teaching, assessing and developing learning environments), to inform the design of my learning materials. Reflecting on my conversations with students in seminars and tutorials motivated me to search for less alienating terminology in my lecture, as well as to adopt Critical Studies' strategy of 'inviting' the student into the shaping of their curriculum. This reflective process, along with accessing pedagogic literature for the first time, has helped me put into practice A5 of the Areas of Activity, and further understand the importance of committing to a career-long investment in quality enhancement (as opposed to 'quality assurance', in Biggs' terms; a

cyclical improvement of technique and approach informed by reflective practices).

I think I have also successfully delivered A1, in terms of pitching the learning content correctly to Level 1 and exploiting the lecture format to craft an hour of reflective and deep engagement in the three selected ideas in Barthes' text, consistently linking them to practice-based inquiry and their relevance to an artist (Carbone, 1998). Despite the philosophically advanced topic of my lecture, I think I have managed to strike a good balance between assuming no prior knowledge on behalf of the student, even if they missed the readings, and not sacrificing finesse on the topic itself. I also think the lecture succeeds, in the material it covers as well as its structure and language, to impart a sense of agency on the part of the student by inviting them into shaping the debates, rather than patronisingly reducing them to recipients of information.

Upon recording the lecture and running it past a few listeners, however, I could have included more visual illustrations of what I was saying to maintain attention and engaged listening. In any case, the pedagogic literature has taught me not to take for granted my own assessment of the learning materials, and after my submission I intend to run the lecture video by my own students for their feedback. In a real teaching environment, I would be gathering feedback on the lecture from seminar group leaders on the levels of engagement in the seminars that directly follow; King (2004) cites discussions between colleagues as a key site of professional development in addition to designated training.

The greatest revelation throughout working on this assignment came from my art pedagogy reading. Only through my research did I learn that questions of authorship are not only relevant to artists as a reflective inquiry into their own role and practice, but also have much to bear upon arts pedagogy itself. Through a case study of two art schools in England and South Africa, Dina Belluigi (2020) highlights a telling discrepancy in how students were assessed formatively and summatively based on conflicting interpretations of authorship and intentionality that inform how teachers advise and assess art students. This conflict meant that students ran the risk of being penalised in the summative assessment for adopting the value

of 'nominal authenticity' - a value that was emphasised in their formative feedback. Needless to say, this conflicting emphasis on values pertaining to authorship impacted the students' confidence (not least because of the sticky ways in which some interpretations of 'authorship' place it in parallel with the 'person' as a whole) - and yet, these conflicts mirror wider debates and uncertainties about value judgments on the significance and quality of artists' authorship in the professional context of the art world and culture as a whole.

I therefore hope that highlighting the theme of authorship as a site of controversy within my own teaching might help my students gain some agency and resilience in how they navigate their own reception as artists, by encouraging them to bear in mind that the ways in which they are assessed by both teachers and art critics is, to date, a matter of constant debate and reevaluation - not only within the art school, but within culture at large. An awareness of how belief systems attributed to authorship might be guiding my own teaching and interpretation of students' work motivates me to reflect on the relation between authorship theory and arts pedagogy throughout my own professional development as an art educator.

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