

**PG Certificate in
Learning and Teaching in Higher Education**

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Education as Experiment: Fostering Experimentation in the Arts in Higher Education

Introduction

Jointly written by Researcher A and B

A core learning objective in contemporary arts education in the UK is for students to develop experimentation as a central part of their art practices (Varvarigou, 2017) since 'taking risks to explore the unknown' forms an essential step in the innovation required of art students (Choi, 2019). In the history of HE arts education in the UK, this has often also implied experimental teaching practices (Danvers, 2003). For instance, between 1969-73, tutors at Saint Martins School of Art in London initiated a (controversial) strategy in which students were locked in a room for several hours without specified instruction, evaluation or feedback, in order to necessitate resourcefulness and experimentation (Lee, 2021; Suchin, 2020). Likewise, today students come to Goldsmiths College 'because they know that experimenting is possible' (Russell, 2016) under the guidance of tutors like artist Michelle Williams Gamaker, who often creates work together with her students.¹

With this climate of experimentation particular to art in mind, and as colleagues working in the Art Department at Goldsmiths College, we have decided to embark on a joint research question before diverging our pedagogic focus. We generated a mutual research question, methodology and collected data together before independently applying our findings to an analysis of our two specific teaching practices. We are both Graduate Trainee Tutors within the BA Fine Art course, in which we teach on two different modules. Researcher A works in Fine Art Studio Practice, and Researcher B works on the Critical Studies module. The two areas are designed to complement each other in providing opportunities for students to develop relationships between practice and theory in their artistic methodologies.

As part of the PG-Cert course, we provided teaching observations of each other's teaching, after which we conducted a feedback session. In this conversation, we realised that both of us had implemented teaching experiments in our respective modules with an

¹ These include re-enactments of participatory performance pieces by the modernist Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. Re-enactments include pieces such as *Cannibalistic Slobber*, which involves the use of string, saliva and bodies to create an intimate performative situation and human sculpture. (It should be noted that performance re-enactments of this particular piece were only taking place before the Covid-19 pandemic).

aim to prompt experimentation within our students' practices. This led us to generate the following joint research question, which we then applied as a lens through which to reflect on the development of our independent HE teaching practices:

How can we nurture experimentation in our students' practices? Does placing 'experiment' at the heart of arts education require art teachers to engage in experimental teaching practice?

Methodology

Jointly written by Researcher A and B

To approach our research question, we conducted a 80-minute interactive interview with each other, constituting an autoethnographic, dialogic method in which both parties of the interview occupy an equal status and in which our respective subjectivities are included and described in the narrative of the research process (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010).

The interview was conducted in two steps. In the first step, each researcher generated five interview questions for the other based on encouraging student experimentation within our respective modules (see Appendix 1). In the second step, we used the questions as prompts to interview each other in an unstructured form to allow flexibility in the generation of themes throughout our discussion. The interview was recorded using the video conferencing tool Zoom and speech-to-text software Otter was used to auto-generate a transcript of the conversation (see Appendix 2).²

We applied a thematic analysis to extract the most recurrent and pertinent themes that arose in the interview transcript, following Braun and Clarke's six step approach (2006). Our analysis was inductive, allowing the data to determine our themes, and semantic, paying attention to explicit statements (Caulfield, 2019). In our coding process, we highlighted individual concepts that recurred or responded to the research question. These codes were grouped and organised into broader themes that suggested themselves in the analysis (see Appendix 3). We used the resulting codes and themes as the primary data through which to reflect on our individual teaching practices.

² These tools can be viewed and downloaded at <http://www.zoom.us/> and <http://www.otter.ai/> (Last accessed 15 August 2021).

Results

Jointly written by Researcher A and B

We found that the codes generated through a thematic analysis of the interview transcript could be organised into six broader themes (see Appendix 3 for a full breakdown):

1. The conditions of experimental practice

Here our discussion revolved predominantly around the notion of lowering the stakes for failure (McLaughlan et al, 2021) and encouraging a culture of ‘taking a benign attitude to error’ (Clarke & Cripps, 2012).³ We identified spaces for reflection and the ongoing and revisionary nature of a developing oeuvre as key elements of an experimental teaching and learning culture (c.f. Belluigi, 2018).

2. Learning objectives for an experimental arts practice

Here, the conditions from Theme 1 are translated into a set of requisite skills for the development of experimentation in artistic practice, identifying collaboration and ‘articulating the process’ as key (Houghton, 2014).

3. The relation between the tutor’s artistic practice and the student’s learning

The ethos of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) adopted by methodologies such as ethnography to take into account the subjectivities of participants in the field of research, emerged as a lens through which to reflect on student/tutor relations in the arts – in particular, how a tutor’s own artistic practice can promote experimentation in students. A surprising revelation was that a tutor’s conscious self-disclosure as an artist (as opposed to

³ This is, however, not easy to achieve, since ‘taking a benign attitude to error in a culture where error is considered failure is a psychological challenge that requires a great deal of energy, patience and good will on behalf of both lecturers and students’ (Clarke & Cripps, 2012). Furthermore, Wilkinson (2020), along with Gawthorp (2016) and Lesnik-Oberstein (2015) argue that the marketisation of university education seems to have a particularly adverse effect on art pedagogy in a number of ways, including a reduction in experimentation due to risk aversion brought on by quantifiable quality assurance processes. Choi et al (2019) also echo this problem when they write, ‘assessment structures and traditional learning methods within higher education often prevent students from taking creative risks’. Dina Zoe Belluigi has already begun to systematically research the relation between assessment practices and experimentation. See for example Belluigi (2016) where she reflects: ‘despite attempting to establish enabling conditions for creativity, because of the backwash of the power of summative assessments, most often students practiced a balance between calculated risk and risk-avoidance, thinking strategically for better grades or social validation from the staff.’ The subject of assessment on both individual and systemic levels should therefore play a key role in future studies on art student experimentation.

a distancing of their practice from the teaching/learning situation) could possibly *enhance* rather than inhibit student independence from the tutor. By disclosing specialisms, perspectives and personal interests, a tutor enacts the partiality of their views on art, thereby liberating the student from a dependence on the tutor's authority as sole proprietor of knowledge (Freire, 2017).⁴ This relativity also encourages students to '[take] responsibility for the way in which a 'text's meaning and significance may shift through reading in context', a key skill for practitioners operating within an 'uncertain discipline' like art (Belluigi, 2018).

4. The relation between practice and theory in the arts

This theme is concerned with the instinctive 'split between the hand-made and the conceptual' (Fortnum & Pybus, 2014), and how challenging preconceptions about the distinction between practice and theory might encourage student experimentation.

5. Concrete examples

This theme includes a series of concrete exercises designed to promote student experimentation.

6. Prompts

This theme includes prompts or general principles for the design of future teaching experiments in the arts.

The paper will now diverge into independent reflections.

Towards Personal Relevance

Independently written by Researcher B

Over the past two years, I led a seminar group of 15-18 students in Critical Studies Year 1 (Level 4 according to SEEC, 2016). Critical Studies acts as a theoretical component to the predominantly practice-based study of BA Fine Art at Goldsmiths, 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. My role was to facilitate student discussion and reflection in seminars following a weekly lecture series and readings. I also acted as the students' primary support for their two essay assessments.

⁴ C.f. Clark & Cripps on 'tak[ing] into account multiple intelligences' (2012).

While these are technically summative assessments, they contribute so minimally to the students' overall grades that they are considered formative in practice, and experimentation and personal expression is encouraged. In this section, I focus on how I handled the theme of reading and writing alongside art practice in seminars.

The practice-theory split

I have observed, both during my own education and my early experience as an art tutor, a recurring theme in which students 'often position themselves in relation to a split between the hand-made and the conceptual' (Fortnum & Pybus, 2014). This split, with 'theory', 'writing' and 'research' on one side and 'practice', 'making' and 'intuition' on the other, could often engender anything between confusion and debilitating distress for students, making them feel torn in their efforts and confused about their identity ('am I trying to be an artist or an academic?'). It is a theme that especially arises in the module I teach, expressed as anxiety before the submission of an essay, or frustration with difficult seminar readings.

It could be argued that the positioning of a module such as 'Critical Studies' in parallel to the 'practice-focused' aspects of the course might partly engender this split in the first place. However, it is likely that this split, like the mind-body dualism that still persists in other areas of academic and quotidian experience, is inherited in a multitude of ways over an entire life, beyond the walls of the academy. Artist-students often come to the course already believing they are 'just not that academic', 'bad at writing', sometimes even that they are not clever.

My goal in my teaching was to help students see how 'theory' was there to act in service of them rather than the other way around, in order to catalyse a productive relationship between Critical Studies and their studio practice. My approach gave primacy to stimulating a sense of personal relevance and student agency in relation to the learning materials. It is experimental because it consists of elements which I incorporated into the course material with the aim of 'seeing what would happen'. Note: any 'experimental teaching approach' was stated as such to students. Its aspects were as follows:

1. Co-inquiry

The first seminar centred on collectively establishing 'ground rules' for future seminars. The students and I introduced our practices and discussed how the seminar could be structured

in order to serve our art practices. By addressing students as practitioners with existing expertise about their needs, the purpose of this exercise was to ‘minimise the power differential between teachers and students’, a necessary component of ‘co-inquiry practices’ (McLaughlan et al, 2021).⁵ It also aimed to encourage student responsibility over their own learning, given that ‘autonomy is a primary determinant in developing innovation in students’ (Martin et al. 2017).

2. Implicit theory

In keeping with Orr et al.’s proposal that ‘the answer is brought about within you’ (2014), I asked students to think about the theory that was ‘already there’, implicit in their practices, before they even arrived at college. The aim was to challenge preconceptions about the theory/practice split as well as common feelings of inadequacy in relation to ‘theory’.

3. Centering practice

I structured seminar discussions around our own art practices and emphasised the use of studio anecdotes to demonstrate a way of accessing wider discourses and concepts through our individual practices as a lens. The aim was to encourage a return to ‘personal relevance’ following forays into discourses that can often feel alienating to students. Using one’s own practice as a lens could then present opportunities for experimental engagements with discursive materials.

4. Essay as experiment

My seminar on the essay began with its etymology (from the French *essayer*, ‘to try’ – an attempt). Students were encouraged to treat the essay as a laboratory, a space to test something or figure something out of personal relevance to them. We explored the diversity of styles and creative approaches to text now available in the humanities, and reimaged the essay as an artistic space of discovery, thus challenging preconceptions about the rigidity of academic texts that students often arrive with.

⁵ In a paper comparing two modernist American art schools that pioneered many of the principles still in use in UK art school today, Nicholas Houghton cites such minimising of power differentials between tutor and student as one of the (then new) approaches to teaching art: ‘In accord with its vocational ethos, students were never referred to as such, but instead as fellow artists or mentees’ (2014). See also Wilkinson (2020) on non-hierarchical pedagogy.

Reflection

Independently written by Researcher B

Where 'overcoming challenges of voicing ideas in a collaborative group context' has been identified by Choi et al (2019) as a key area in which to develop risk-taking, my approach succeeded in promoting an environment of 'low stakes for failure', as students increasingly allowed themselves to share half-formed thoughts and think through uncertainty together in the seminars.

Furthermore, my own self-disclosure as an artist with partial knowledge encouraged students to add their own perspectives and discover their autonomy in theoretical discourse. Several students wrote essays with extensive reflections on their own practices, situating their own work within contemporary art discourses. These students were able to develop personalised approaches to the practice/theory split, or suggestively transcend it.⁶

However, following the results of the thematic analysis of the interview between myself and Researcher A, I have realised that my approach was largely discursive and theoretical. It could potentially be enhanced if supplemented by practical exercises in order to 'demonstrate' as well as 'theorise' the conditions of experimental practice.

Suggestions that appeared in the interview and which I would add to my teaching repertoire in future include 1) structuring periods of silent reflection into the seminars themselves, 2) introducing performative approaches to reading texts collectively, 3) using free association to kickstart discussion, and 4) asking students to create practice-based responses to readings and lectures through the prism of their own artistic practices.

Our analysis seems also to yield several new research questions in relation to student experimentation which I would like to develop in future research.

⁶ The essay assessor (a senior lecturer) recognised the inclusion of discussion on students' own artworks to be uncommon practice in Critical Studies essays, saying it was 'something [they] usually discouraged,' but positively remarked on the outcome, praising students on their independence, creativity and depth of research.

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