

The view from here (and there) – mutually transformative practices in higher education and arts outreach work

Dr Michael Bowdidge

This presentation aims to provide a brief overview of the synergies that have occurred between my creative teaching activities in academic and community settings, while also acknowledging the common roots of these connections in my doctoral research. My aim in doing so is to start a discussion about the transformative potential of such crossovers, with a view to seeing if such occurrences might be tentatively formalized in some way at some future date.

I note that there is some emphasis in the current literature on the role and impact of the ‘Bohemian graduate’ (Comunian et al, 2010ⁱ), so today I intend to provide instead a snapshot of the activities of one ‘Bohemian post-graduate’ with the hope that, to quote Graham Sullivan, ‘what is seen to be real in one observed setting can have a parallel relevance in a similar situation’ⁱⁱ.

Having completed a practice-based PhD in 2012, I currently work as an artist and educator in two primary roles: as a faculty member at Transart Institute (an international low-residency post-graduate programme) and as a community arts educator for WHALE Arts Agency in Edinburgh.

My artistic practice is primarily sculptural, although I also work with digital photography and audio media. At the heart of these activities is an interest in bringing together materials, objects, images or sounds in a spirit of curiosity and experimentation. This is combined with a fascination with what Max Ernst termed the ‘cultivation of the effects of a systematic putting out of place’ (1948, p.21)ⁱⁱⁱ.

I undertook a practice-based PhD in part because I wanted to understand how and why I work this way and in order to better locate myself within a wider contemporary and historical context. Considered in relation to Katie Macleod's typology of practice-based research, my own project sprawled somewhat messily across all three categories:

Type A which is defined as positioning a practice; type B defined as theorising a practice and type C which has been given the in-progress definition of revealing a practice (2000, online)^{iv}.

I feel some resistance to the notion of theorizing a practice, preferring a process in which artistic activity is brought into fruitful dialogue with appropriate contextual materials. I also think that a certain 'liveliness' (analogous to Shelley Sacks' framing of the 'aesthetic' as opposing a notion of the 'anesthetic'^v) is a prerequisite for such encounters and may help to prevent practice and theory from falling into subordinate relationships with each other.

A key notion here is specificity. Responses and connections, either artistic or contextual, often seem to benefit from being considered and supplied in relation to a distinct set of circumstances. Such dialogues underpinned my PhD project – in this respect, Wittgenstein's admonition - 'don't apologise for anything, don't obscure anything, look and tell how it really is'^{vi} proved invaluable as a means of reminding myself to remain present, connected and responsive.

During the course of my research, having already seen an expansion of bricolage strategies into the written part of my thesis, I became aware that such methods were also extending themselves into the workshops that I was teaching, both in community settings and in higher education. Put simply, I had begun to approach the planning and delivery of these workshops using a similar process of 'knowledge in action'^{vii} (after Schön, 1983) to that which underpinned my artistic practice. This was a powerful revelation for me at the time, and one that continues to resonate today.

This development came about in part because I was asked to lead a sculpture workshop for young people as part of a large-scale temporary sculptural commission in 2007. The opportunity to extend my creative practice into my teaching practice could not really have been any more obvious – here both subject and method combined to produce a ‘light-bulb moment’ that was hard to ignore.

Once I had made this connection, it was simple to transform this ethos of working quickly with the objects that were to hand to focus instead on image gathering or audio capture using mobile phones in subsequent sessions. Such strategies remain a key part of my workshop repertoire – as can be seen in these images from a recent workshop in Gainsborough.

In the simplest terms, this can be expressed as ‘work with what’s there, either in terms of resources, materials, ideas or areas of interest’.

At around this time (2007) I also began to work with Transart Institute as a member of their summer faculty, designing and delivering week-long practical workshops for Masters students during an intensive summer residency in Berlin, an activity which I continue to this day.

These classes typically run for between one and five days and are non-medium specific. Students explore specified themes in a broadly constituted contemporary art milieu in relation to relevant critical theory and/or philosophy through short practical exercises, discussions and presentations and work either individually or collaboratively. Tools available include laptops, smartphones, cameras, pens, pencils, paper, furniture, clothing, bodies, light, movement and sound, but because Transart has no permanent facilities there is no access to the fabrication facilities that one might typically find in an art school. Accordingly, there is again an emphasis on working with whatever is ‘to hand’.

For me, these limitations are very much a positive, as they force both faculty and students to deal with the immediate phenomenological play of the works and concepts under investigation.

The work that I currently do at WHALE Arts is part of the ongoing Street Arts programme, which takes an individual creative practitioner drawn from a rotating team out onto the streets of Wester Hailes (a disadvantaged area of Edinburgh) every Thursday evening in order to engage young people aged between eight and eighteen years of age in creative activities.

Over the past few years I have designed and delivered many such sessions, which have ranged from collaborative and remote drawing projects through to working with captured audio or images and building temporary sculptural structures. I always try to approach these workshops in exactly the same spirit as my post-graduate teaching, and I often use examples of works by relevant modern and contemporary artists as a means of demonstrating the principles and techniques that will be explored during the session, as I have found that doing so can grant 'permission' to experiment in powerful and innovative ways. Particular favourites of mine in this respect are Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1943), as they both engender a certain playfulness which renders them more accessible than some other artworks.

I also make use of modernist strategies for defamiliarization and reinvention, such as classic Surrealist parlour games like 'Exquisite Corpse' and its textual cousin 'Consequences', alongside exercises culled from workshops led by artists such as Joseph Beuys (amongst others). An example of this is an exercise that I call 'Beuys Sticks', which involves the considered placement of garden canes to build a temporary structure, with the proviso that each 'turn' must bring something new to the proceedings. These are exercises that I have used successfully during my summer post-graduate workshops and in Street Arts sessions.

In the former context they often act as 'warm-up' or 'icebreaker' activities, whereas in an outdoor community setting in which time (and attention) may be in short supply these games assume a more prominent role. Ensuring that their provenance is explained to participants is also important to me, as I feel that this can help to build creative confidence – in my opinion there's nothing worse than feeling that you are participating in an activity which has been designed with a very particular view of your own abilities and aptitudes in mind. This is risky in some ways, as failures and misunderstandings do occur, but I would argue that, handled properly, these can be just as valuable as the successes.

Asked to comment for this paper on her perceptions of this 'cross-fertilization' between academic and community education, my colleague and project manager at WHALE Arts, Kate Griffin, confirmed the value of this approach:

An understanding of the 'bigger picture' is a key benefit of this crossover - placing activities and outcomes in an art historical context and linking to broader themes of philosophy, history and politics rarely happens with other work we deliver and is possibly the only place/time when young people have access to these ideas and the support and encouragement to discuss them and learn more. It requires a lot of skill to negotiate these conversations - something I see that clearly relates to both your practice as an artist working with communities and as an academic.

Kate added that:

In this community a notion of wider horizons, aspirations and ideas beyond the familiar are often seen as frightening, unfamiliar or 'not for people like us'. By encouraging a straightforward and egalitarian approach to discussing 'big' ideas (i.e. ideas from academic working) inspiration and new ideas take root.

It is clear to me what the impact of using academic material in community settings is, but what is the flow in the opposite direction? I argue that the particular blend of rigour, discipline and sensitivity that arts-based youth outreach sessions of this kind require can similarly refresh teaching in higher education contexts, and suggest that the opportunity to work in diverse educational settings is one which can prove to be unexpectedly and mutually enriching for the organisations and individuals involved, and thus might usefully be the subject of further research with a view to potential wider deployment.

In summary, what I have tried to lay out for you here today, albeit very briefly, is an overview of how a certain kind of approach to material thinking can overflow into academic and community based teaching practices, and the benefits which can accrue for those involved in those activities. During the question and answer session, I would be particularly interested in discussing if and how such overflows can be encouraged, developed and maintained. I am also curious to hear the extent to which the audience thinks that there may be common factors which underpin such crossovers, or whether such processes must remain wholly rooted in the specificities of individual practices.

Thank you for listening.

ⁱ COMUNIAN R., FAGGIAN A. and LI Q. C. (2010) Unrewarded careers in the creative class: The strange case of Bohemian graduates, *Papers in Regional Science* **89**, pp.389 – 410

ⁱⁱ SULLIVAN, G. (2005) *Art Practice as Research*. London, SAGE. p.59

ⁱⁱⁱ ERNST, M. (1948) *Beyond Painting, And Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*. New York, Wittenborn & Schultz, p.21

^{iv} MACLEOD, K. (2000) The functions of the written text in practice-based PhD submissions. *Working Papers in Art and Design* **1**.

Available from < https://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf.../WPIAAD_voll_macleod.pdf >
[Accessed 19th June 2014].

^v SACKS, S. Foreword in HARLIN, V. (ed.), (2004) *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. Forest Row, Clairview, p.ix

^{vi} WITGENSTEIN, L. (1998) *Culture and Value*. Oxford, Blackwell, p.45

^{vii} I use Schön's term 'knowledge in action' deliberately here, as it strikes me that it is this phase of his tripartite description of the processes of a professional practice (e.g. knowledge in action, as opposed to reflection in action, or reflection on action) that best characterizes how this expansion took place, though inevitably there are overlaps with the other two terms. See SCHÖN, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. London, Ashgate. See also FURLONG, J. (2003) 'Intuition and the crisis in teacher professionalism'. In: CLAXTON, G. and ATKINSON, T. (eds.) (2003) *The Intuitive Practitioner – On the value of not always knowing what one is doing*. Maidenhead, Open University Press, pp.15-31, here p.22 for a useful definition of Schön's terms.