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### Feature

## Where to begin – pedagogy in studio practice

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## Title of Feature Where to begin – pedagogy in studio practice

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### Introduction

It is my intention in this short paper to reveal some of the internal and external characteristics of the art studio as a 'place and space' that encourages creative development in students' experience.

If I start to investigate a narrative concerning my encounters and interactions with students and the nature of aesthetic experience in the studio space what kind of reflective learning journey will I discover? My intention is to grasp the beginnings of this process with a curious attitude of mind and to 'go with the flow'. Flow is happening already as this engagement with process reveals associations of the most recent experiences spilling from the significant shaping forces of past. These are both negative and positive polarities in my teaching and practice as an artist.

Most significantly I appreciate the interconnectedness of my thinking concerning the parallel processes supporting students in their unfolding creative journey e.g. how shaping forces of past [stemming from primary and secondary school experiences] can have negative and positive influences on how students perceive not only the physicality of the art studio space but also their emotional engagement within workshops. Also this shared sense of how past experiences can help crystallise the present and have shaping influences on possible future routes, such as personal and professional pathways, gives cognisance to the healthy uncertainty in all forms of creative growth.

At this point in my thinking this captivates the divergent and fluid nature of the inter-changeability and intercommunication within passages, or fragments, of time [past, present and future implications] and creative engagement with self and others. Creative engagements are made up of the interdependency of emerging ideas and they are sustaining the in-between state as a receptive and creative mind space. The readiness for change and wonderment is personally and collectively transforming. Another possible incentive for beginning this exploration in documenting the possible directions of multilayered, multi-sensorial visual art experiences and influences is in relation to an intuitive sense of listening, listening to the inner emotional and rational self. That voice suggests that within the context of current educational transitions there is a significant need for greater exchanges of meaning within and across a range of artistic, scientific and linguistic modes in support of artists, students, children and teachers' potential learning. There are great educative possibilities in being part of a process that enables others to explore their artistic abilities, creative routes and aesthetic sensitivities. The nature of the art studio as a non-judgemental place and space where students can explore subject expertise and lack of expertise alongside emerging personal response and a sense of freedom in discovering creative art possibilities can be vital in supporting their ongoing potential learning. The dynamics of the art studio, as a place where the 'in between' state for students is celebrated, can act as a transitional passage towards their future creative growth as pedagogues.

The route I have selected for this paper is through attempting to define and understand the essence of what 'freedom' can be in the visual art studio for the artist- pedagogue[ myself and students]. Initially I will focus briefly upon student workshops and the value of experimenting with the characteristics of materials to enable freedom of expression to occur. The duality of the workshop structure encompasses student experiential learning in the context of developing a deeper understanding of art and design processes and children's creative potential. I proceed with this short scenario as an introduction because I feel that the physicality of experimenting and discovering visual characteristics of materials is a shared creative thread and a source of further deep creativity for all participants. Also the physical nature of the space requires an open flow to support this kind of activity.

I choose in my practice to interweave in the studio the diverse ways that media explorations and playful wanderings can be the beginning of organic approaches which give visibility to the various

characteristics of materials, and also to the emergence of ideas and traces of participants' ways of visually communicating.

In a student workshop context, with chalk and paper resources, individual and group discoveries of qualities of blending and softness might also be juxtaposed with the emerging interest in mind's eye drawings. These drawings can be continuous with line or broken and assembled in different ways to reveal the stylistic form of the individual. The paradoxical nature of this lies in the individual exhibiting enjoyment of both mark making characteristics and mind's eye drawing only to disparagingly state 'I can't draw' or 'I draw like a child'. This can either be dispiriting or not for the individual depending on freedom from bias. When the emphasis is on experimentation with materials cultural and personal bias can be counterbalanced with open exchanges and developments in practice. Real participation and real dialogue should capture the essence of these approaches and processes.

The student workshops I construct give emphasis to both playing with the characteristics of materials and the significance of the transference of learning processes to classroom practice e.g. how can sessions like these successfully take shape in schools with students and children getting to know both the materials and their individual subjective response. Through reference to my own experience, students and children verbalise both positive and negative interests in the qualities of materials and a sense of personal preference becomes visible. This can be the protagonist for a fuller sense of ownership of creative experience. When working knowledge of media characteristics is in the process of becoming established possibilities can be awakened for 'what to use' [choice of media from a knowledge base] in relation to future individual and group image-making. When participants interpret their experiments in the framework of visual and tactile aesthetic qualities there can be a subjective release from the hierarchy of abilities in art to pure enjoyment of likes and dislikes. This can be the opening for some participants to begin to discover and rediscover different ways of representing ideas in conjunction with their sense of aesthetic response.

Constructing and reconstructing workshop approaches as participants reveal their needs can impact considerably in epistemological terms and redefining the scope of knowledge and understanding in this aesthetic field. Also the process of letting go of previous bias [I can't do scenario] through experiential learning, as a means to becoming a facilitator of children's creative growth, is possibly the component that authenticates this approach most.

In particular, participants experiencing an inner state of dysphoria can find alleviation through these processes. This also highlights the need for the tutor to be an 'open door' to enable the diverse interest [or lack of interest] of the participants to integrate and co-construct meaning at this personal level. This type of emotional exchange is integral to ways of working together with children, therefore within visual art student workshops trusting relationships would hopefully evolve through experiential learning. This refers back to the value of selected approaches meeting the creative needs of individuals. These approaches can only evolve through the frequency of experiential encounters, not as a stand alone experience. The challenge within this is connected to educators becoming more fully aware of participants experiencing happiness or unhappiness and how this is understood as part of the adaptive process. A minority group of students in any workshop can be experiencing:

The visibility of a person's physical and psychological discomfort, through previous external sources, requires sensitive interaction from others to help foster positive connections with subjectivity and co-construction of meaning-making and expression in art experiences. This can be more problematic to resolve in playful encounters with materials [e.g. enjoying emerging likes and dislikes] through an individual's struggle to contain feelings of inadequacy.

The richness of opportunity to freely explore and experiment can increase the vitality and creative connectedness of these participants and enable such spontaneous practices to unfold with children in schools. Within an artistic narrative I hope to highlight the interpretation of significant presences and memories that intrinsically continue to reinforce my identity as an artist alongside the pedagogical activities which students experience in the studio space.

As an artist I draw on a considerable range of visual data for interpretation of self and environment. The evidence of my work in the studio is in various stages of development as visible traces of the importance of process. Within some of the artworks the use of tissue paper as a material is visibly significant. An example of how this relates to a particular workshop with students follows.

Through the multi-sensorial use of tissue paper in collage processes I intend to share a thread of personal narrative to begin a workshop entitled 'collage in the early years' and then underpin this with related theory and film from encounters with children. I also attempt to share insights into the nature of the physicality of the space and how the dynamics of this hopefully create a sense of curiosity in the participating students.

Starting, firstly with my childhood and self as 'child artist', I hope to give an insight into the nature of the tutor sharing glimpses of personal narrative to enrich the meaning making within the context. I realise as I write this that there is only minimal visual material retained to define my artistic activity and the freedom to play as a child! [I seem to have arising preoccupations with why there is a huge absence of interesting material for analysis.]

Somewhere within this time frame tissue paper figures emerge. I visually sense the subtle and bright colours; tissue paper in small squares and circles ready for my manipulations into female figurines in flowing dresses; forms created by a quick twist of the paper to create a waist; symbols for female; ladies lined up on the floor revealing my interest in colour relationships [soft lilac next to bright pink and blue]. Figures ready for action! What kind of action? The figures are placed gently into open sports cars which are evidently manipulated by me to negotiate countryside and town roads [ along and around the various patterns on the carpets]; driving in and out of a small white, peeling, stucco wooden garage either for repairs, petrol or a rest on the first level.

There is a stream of talking developing in this 'in-between place' between myself and the figures. In this trace of the past there is a sense of darkness all around me as I crawl around the floor. What does this past trace in a domestic space make visible today? A child's home lacking evidence of their painting and drawing; in my mind's eye these transitional tissue paper forms coexisted with tension in relation to all the other surrounding adult and sibling artefacts. The figures could be easily snatched up, crumpled and hidden inside a tight fisted hand if there was the sound of anyone approaching. This was my form of control and ownership of actions. Why this secretiveness? Solitary play not to be disrupted by anyone! Perhaps we are entering a situation that requires further development through foci upon the intrusion of barriers to freedom in art and play in the domestic space. The child-artist-creator striving for the emancipation of his creative practices can become engaged [as I did as an adolescent] with very active processes which intervene and challenge suppressive events that restrict ownership of creative experience. What do I feel I am engaged with in this recall of experience? I am involved with a documentation process that begins to reveal parts of my past that have a bearing on my present self as an artist and educationalist.

The glimpse of childhood I offer in this context surprises me in relation to the continuity of my creativity with the use of tissue paper so apparent in the most recent mixed media work entitled 'Reciprocity'[ See images below ].



Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 - Reciprocity

An adult memory of rustling, folding and twisting the dry paper as a child is overtaken as an adult 'now' in this recent work tearing, cutting, layering wet upon wet paper, squashing, edging, concealing materials within and drawing upon. Are there shared psychological implications of what is hidden and revealed in these processes from childhood to adulthood? Expressions centred on this question will follow on after giving an insight into the nature of 'Reciprocity'

The piece visibly renders the nature of reciprocity through the assemblage of materials to convey symbolic presence of parent, baby and transitional object as one. The multiplicity of images are integral to the exploration of sensing vital others in our relationships – connectedness through a sense of intimacy and closeness. The images give a multilayered perspective to the work and form a

paper based enclosure around the piece to symbolise the nature of enclosure, envelopment and boundary issues – as a safe, trusting space to explore our sensory world. The anonymity of the human presence is a symbol for the human as both a state of being in struggle and in celebration of experiencing life. The assembled and attached book denotes the daily rhythm of our sensory connectedness with others.

The enclosing boundary contains significant small sticks as a holding device.

The underlying blue material, from the work to the floor, symbolises fluidity and our life rivers of sensory experience. If this is spread across the floor space to encompass related images and sticks, stones can be placed within this to reveal the emerging traditional saying 'sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me.' This is both symbolically rendered through visual aspects and a fragment of text. Forming relationships with the ideas of hidden labels as barriers to truly celebrating the fullness of human sensory experience helps to make sense of this work..

If the attached material, spread out in full flow, is problematic for the physical space encountered it can be gathered in under the work or the work can stand alone without it.

The transformative process of using tissue paper, dry to wet to dry, in this work is significant not only as a form of encasement but also in expressing fragility and other submerged ideas. Also the work is significantly a painting with collaged arrangements within and around the piece

What I would call in my work a fusion of paint and other materials! Paint is predominantly the primary source which begins the whole process and thereafter allows inclusion of paper, card, crayon etc. The enjoyment and angst of layering can give the shaping force to paint again and again, with edges of colour, with a whole field of colour to yield to the texture of what is underneath my work, in many ways interconnects with the interplay of painting and assemblage of found materials and the present surprise recall of memories of past aesthetic interests as a student. This work embodied found materials such as box card, plastics and rope to create structures, for paint and collage application, which featured low reliefs, bulges and protrusions.

The temporary nature of my artworks and their disintegration through weathering was a particular interest at the time. Also the discarded resource combined with purchased paint was significant in the psychological tension of the affordability of my creative outpouring and the values attached to process and product and aesthetics.

The above narrative is to be considered in the context of exploring ways to hopefully engage students in the processes of collage making and creating an environment where feeling safe with the freedom to explore is a priority. The following points can give a sense of the fluidity of this kind of shared experience and 'bouncing the ball' backwards and forwards between tutor and students and students to students:

- Tutor narrative focusing on childhood memory followed by student narratives in pairs or small group structure ' from their childhood and school placement'
- Sharing personal responses / visual exploration of tutor artworks and other selected artist works
- Sharing a range of collage works from recent tutor experience of working with children. Also sharing film of children engaged in collage processes.
- Sharing selected theory specific to the value of collage as a form of expression in a co-constructivist setting
- Exploration of the characteristics of collage in a variety of ways, including with other materials such as paint. Also collage as a recycling process.

The sequence of images within this article document student explorations with tissue paper and initiating their own creative image making. This exploratory experience encompasses a range of ways in using the hands as sensory tools of engagement especially whilst manipulating wet tissue paper on a transparent plastic surface. The tissue paper can be layered and smoothed, folded over into other colour areas, torn and reshaped, lifted, dropped, squashed and transformed into a range of shapes or

colour areas. During this discovery process students are using the full spread of their hands, the heel and side of their hands and their fingertips. A frequent comment is how therapeutic the process is, especially synchronising both hands whilst spreading out paste, layering papers and further spreading actions with both hands. When the experiments are dry they separate from the plastic surface and can be held up for light to illuminate the colours used. Alternatively opaque and hard if the tissue paper has been manipulated in a sculptural way.

*Images of student explorations*



Figure 4 and Figure 5

1: This image represents a mother and child as a response to the artwork, Reciprocity, discussed earlier in this paper. The student initiated the creation of this transitory image after investigating a range of possibilities with dry tissue paper e.g. squashing, opening out, floating, folding and twisting.

Also the student set her own spatial boundaries in relation to whether to create on a small or large scale, whether on the table or on the floor.

2: This image shows an experiment combining two and three dimensional ways of working with the tissue paper. The student indicated that the structural form arose out of rolling the moist paper, discovering the potential in overlapping, bridging and creating spaces underneath to create a network rhythm of growth inspired by coral structures. Imaginatively another student suggested a mythological theme emerging whilst another tissue and muscle within the body. The freedom of association emerging from the group dynamics in the art practice within the studio space is indicative of the nature of exploratory processes encouraging individuals to give voice to their spontaneous ideas.



Figure 6

The tissue paper structure is shown after the drying out process, a free form in readiness for other creative considerations.

3: These images evidence a collective experiment with tissue paper, formed by a group of Primary six children.

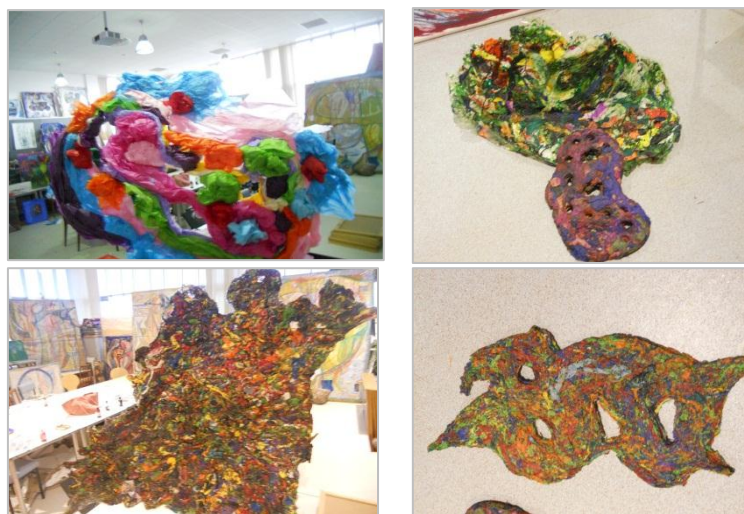


Figure 7; Figure 8; Figure 9 and Figure 10

In relation to the art studio as a space designated for specific creative purposes the question should be asked if the appropriate creative ambiance is there to encourage 'freedom' of engagement with ideas and practices. I ask myself how much does the following quotation from a teacher experiencing a joint exhibition of my work and her children's artwork in a local gallery space co-relate to how students experience the studio space:

*"A blank 'space' to write on! A'space' filled with colour, shape, noise – chatting, excitement, questions, busy children – no ones' bored – all engaged, engrossed, enjoying the experience!"*

*"Light filtered through rainbow colours Quiet corners chosen by quiet children. A child who never writes with something to say- at last!"*

*"Free choice – not directed – free to choose"*

The expression of ownership of experience is powerfully conveyed in this statement alongside the engagement of the children and their sense of curiosity within the gallery space. To juxtapose this with students' comments on experiencing the studio space I offer the following comments:

*"I really enjoy working in the art studio. All of the art on the walls, painting etc. are stimulating and inspiring. It is cluttered but the big tables and daylight leave plenty of space to work and be creative. It's also relaxed."*

*"It is a large open space appropriate for group discussion. The colour is motivating and the pictures are interesting to look at – more exciting than standard classrooms. It is cold but it is winter after-all!"*

*"There is so much going on, which creates for me an environment of excitement and adventure. It makes me want to explore, to look inside cupboards and corners of the room. It also reminds me of my art department at school and makes me want to start painting again."*

*"I think that it is a nice big airy room, although it is quite cluttered, in terms of trying to take everything in. It is nice and colourful, fun environment to learn in. Makes me feel creative when I am in it."*

*"I feel the room / space is homely and has such a relaxed atmosphere. Instead of coming in to a strict learning classroom atmosphere it feels warm and homely! Despite*

*the clutter the room is creative and friendly. Feels like you are able to be more open and share your views and opinions more freely. I love working in this room!"*

[BEd, Year 2]

These comments are from a group of students using the space for a workshop. The students were asked within the last fifteen minutes of the workshop to give an individual comment, without collaboration with peers, on how it feels to be in this studio space. The comments are essentially positive in relation to the open physical space and aspects relating to emotional response and motivation are to the extent that the different kind of environment is being celebrated.

The physical aspects of the studio space seem to offer an environment that is inviting creative engagement, rather than distraction, even though the learning is related to generic issues. Also the students do have expectations that the space will become an active arts space for them to creatively explore in the following year. As indicated earlier in this paper the wider society and cultural implications are embedded in how the shaping forces of the now experience impacts on the students as future creative pedagogues in schools and communities.