

NAFAE conference. The Hidden Curriculum.

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Territories of Practice and The Fall of the Studio.

Expanding space for risk, collaboration and agency.

Abstract

This paper outlines the development of a pass/fail unit entitled 'Territories of Practice' and explores its relationship to a new approach to studio organisation on the Fine Art programme at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London (UAL). The paper is a development from my presentation at PARADOX '15 in Poznan, which explored the role of assessment within the fine art curriculum. The paper asks what might replace assessment as arguably the most powerful aspect of a student's learning experience if attainment of a grade is removed as an outcome of a unit of study. The paper considers how *process*, both the process of making art and the educational experience, might be emphasised over *product*, which could be understood as either the finished artwork or the grade achieved. I then discuss the close relationship between generating space for risk and experimentation within the curriculum to new approaches to the organisation of physical studio space. I argue that accepted wisdom and conventions about the organisation of studios may no longer be fit for purpose. I outline an alternative approach to studio organisation that has led to the formation of a set of principles and guidelines for the use of space. These principles acknowledge that the main function of the studio is to support discourse where a strong, critical community of artists can be developed. As such, our approach to the studio symbolises the philosophy of the Fine Art Programme at Chelsea, identifying and declaring the art school's function. In particular, the paper focuses on the ambition that our approach to studio organisation provides a blueprint for how artists might operate after college providing a model for sustainable studios within London. I am choosing to discuss attitudes to the curriculum alongside the way physical space is considered because I think on a fine art course each works together. An attitude to the way space is used makes developments of curriculum possible and vice versa.

Pass/fail. Making space in the curriculum.

At the Slade in the 1980s and 90s Stuart Brisley would begin the course by telling his students that they had passed their MA in Fine Art. He would invite students to generate their own diploma certificates. I studied there in 1996. What Brisley was doing with the students on our very first day at the institution was to ask questions about what the value of our education was. Why had we enlisted in the programme and what did we intend to get out of it? And he was making his position clear, that the qualification cannot have been the most important thing.

A second key moment for me during the first week of my MA at the Slade was when my tutor, Bruce McLean said: “the trouble with this art school is that there are too many people trying to make art”. As an impressionable and ambitious student who had just arrived in London to study art this was quite a statement to take in. What I later discovered McLean was inferring was his belief that if students focussed on what was really important, for him this was asking questions through making work, there was more chance that they might end up making art than if they focussed on the end product. These two ways of thinking about an art education have stayed with me in my attempts to develop approaches to teaching and writing curricula. What both McLean’s and Brisley’s approach to the first week made clear was that there was a danger in focussing on the product. For McLean this was the imposing spectre of Art with a capital A. And Brisley was acknowledging the potential for assessment to have a negative impact on artistic development.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of these anecdotes is that they both show an attempt to identify and unpack the underlying values of a fine art education, those things that once might have been described as ‘hidden’. At a time when external forces mean there is growing pressure on higher education and with the threat that art and design might be removed from pre 16 compulsory education, identifying and articulating the values of a Fine Art education has never felt more urgent.

At Chelsea we have a broad based fine art course, we never set a themed project and we do not teach technical skills relative to any particular medium within the curriculum. So what we have is a situation where, in effect, anyone can do whatever they like, whenever they like. However, students arrive at Chelsea with very powerful pre-programmed, ideas about what is important in education. This is the result of being brought up in an educational system where assessment plays an increasingly central role. For example, my 8-year old daughter has been through three years of primary school and for the last two she has been assessed on her spelling and maths every week. Perhaps in response to the perceived growing need for an assessment and accountability regime, art schools, like the rest of the educational sector, have adopted a rigorous and regular structure of assessment. The primacy of assessment is widely acknowledged in pedagogical research around art education, for example: “*The opportunity presented by assessment is potentially the most powerful learning situation a student can encounter during their time in formal learning.*”¹ (Drew and Shreeve’s 2005).

At the University of the Arts London (UAL) this has meant the development of a set of eight Marking criteria. Designed for greater clarity about the process of assessment the criteria attempt to cover every possible base from research, to subject knowledge, to personal and professional development. Eight separate bits of assessment. Crucially, ‘**Experimentation** (*Problem solving, risk taking, experimentation and testing of ideas and materials in the realisation of concepts*) is one of the criteria.’²

Furthermore, assessment criteria have been instigated in addition to the existing system of learning outcomes. I would argue that it is fair to say that we may be giving students strange signals about their learning experience. We attempt to describe what the outcomes of their learning might be before they have started the learning. Surely this is a contradiction and flies in the face of what leaning as an exploratory process might be. And we say that risk taking is

¹ Drew, L. and Shreeve, A. 2006. *Assessment as Participation in Practice*. In: *Improving Student Learning: Improving Student Learning through Assessment*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development., Oxford. Available at: <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/1992/> [accessed 31 March, 2016]

² <http://www.arts.ac.uk/assessment/markingcriteria/> [accessed 31 March, 2016]

encouraged. Again, is there not a contradiction here? If a risk is sanctioned, positively encouraged even, where is the risk? Are we not suggesting to students that they might prejudge the amount of appropriate risk they are to perform in order to gain maximum credit?

At Chelsea we have dual forces. On the one hand we have the pressure to adhere to UAL assessment regimes, and on the other we have and a curriculum, which proposes total freedom where experimentation and risk taking are encouraged. Together, I would argue that there is a danger that assessment becomes the most powerful force. Assessment becomes the most noticeable part of the curriculum. In my opinion this leads to more strategic approaches to assessment and a growing sense of mark dependency.

Our second year BA unit, Territories of Practice, was written as a response. It is a unit that attempts to unravel and explore ideas about the learning experience. An important aspect of this unit, which takes up the first 10 week term of the second year is that it is a pass/fail unit and as such it is a pilot for the University. Students must engage with the unit in order to pass but there is no mark assigned. Stripping the unit of any assessed grades leaves no doubt that, for this unit at least, it is not the grade that will mark the success or failure of this chunk of learning. What I think we are asking through this unit is what might replace assessment as being the most powerful learning situation if the attainment of a grade is taken away. For us and for our students the prospect of not being graded is intended to have the same impact as Stuart Brisley assigning diplomas on the first day: to shift the focus away from the product and onto the process.

As well as opening up dialogue between staff and students about the role and status of assessment within the curriculum the pass/fail unit also allowed for an emphasis on collaboration and collectivisation. Research by Professor Susan Orr, in *Collaborating or fighting for the marks? Students' experiences of group work assessment in the creative arts* (2010) explores the complex relationship between assigning individual marks for assessment and encouragement of collaborative work. The research acknowledges that assigning individual grades can present an obstacle to students' collaboration. However, as acknowledged in unit evaluation by the students, the pass/fail regime negates these complications. The following quote comes from anonymous student comment in the Unit Evaluation:

"I guess the aspect that the unit was pass/fail - I think allowed for a greater level of feeling safe in experimenting. I also feel this made it more fair - as some peoples groups didn't work out (just because of chance or they thought they could work together and then didn't) - so for me I feel the pass/fail element was essential. But I think what you could learn from not being able to work together could be a lot - and make you have a greater definition of how you define yourself as an artist."³

The fact that students were not getting individual grades meant there was none of the potential conflict between collaboration and competing for grades.

Along with experimentation and collaboration the pass/fail nature of the unit allowed for an emphasis on research. It also allowed for an experimental approach towards the mode of the exhibition event that formed the unit's culmination. The students were encouraged to think about how they could find modes for externalising their research rather than presenting finished artworks.

³ This is a comment from a second year BA Fine Art student that appeared in the Territories of Practice Unit Evaluation feedback survey, which is an anonymous UAL wide process for feedback on each unit of study.

The Studio. Animating and emphasising space in the fine art studio.

Closely relating to the development of the curriculum is our approach to organisation of studio space across the fine art programme.

The Fall of the Studio, Artists at Work, *'questions the many assumptions underlying popular and international discussions of the so-called post-studio era'* (Davidts and Paice, 2009). The texts in this book acknowledge that the role of the studio within art practice has changed, fundamentally changed in relation to many art practices. Various practices provide evidence of the need for the studio as a special space, one that persists to be a highly relevant part of contemporary practice.

Perhaps most interestingly, the book describes the set up of Olaf Eliasson's Berlin studio, which he describes as a laboratory and operates more the way an architectural practice might than a traditional art studio. It is a place that emphasises ongoing research and experimentation along with a sense of community. Developing thinking about the studio at Chelsea has similarities. What has been evolved is a way of describing and animating the studio space so that it is retained as the central and most valuable aspect of a fine art learning experience. Discussion that led to the shift in approach to studios acknowledged that the art school studio space required a re-think. I argue that accepted wisdom and conventions about the organisation of studios at art schools is no longer fit for purpose.

The traditional studio set up in an art school promotes is the idea of individual practice. The internal architecture creates an atmosphere that encourages students to look inwards. To have an intimate relationship with one's own work, but almost no relation to peers. Although many art schools have taken small steps to change this, most studios in institutions and in professional practice are, by and large, set up in a way that privileges the individual over the community.

Anyone involved in teaching in art schools, particularly in London, is aware that increased numbers studying Fine Art at University brings about pressure on space and pressure on providing individual studio space. Many see this shift as entirely negative. But whilst I would strongly argue that Fine Art courses need as much space as possible, the erosion of the emphasis on the individual within the physical space of the studio, far from being negative, is appropriate to the way the studio is being re-thought by contemporary artists.

Over the past three years we have looked at the way studio space is managed at Chelsea. Discussion between staff and students has led to the generation of a set of principles and guidelines about how studio space might be used. The anecdotes with which I started this paper described attempts to identify where the values of the fine art experience lie. Similarly, this was also the place where the principles and guidelines started: identifying that the space of the studio was the key learning environment for a fine art student. The motivation behind generating these principles was to reanimate the studio space, raise its importance in the minds of a student and provide a sense of ownership and agency over the way space is managed and used.

The following guidelines form the basis of a discussion with students during the first week of the course. Staff and students get together to talk about the way the studio might be organised. And students are invited to amend, add to or edit the principles and guidelines as they see fit.

Principles

1. The studio space is the most important learning environment for a fine art student.

2. The studio's main function is to support discourse and the exchange of ideas.

This principle is one that has evolved. Initially the principle stated that the studio should be 'as much as space for discussion as it is one for making work' but student and staff input has actually developed to assert that discourse is the space's primary function.

3. The studio should be a space where you can take risks with practice and experiment - a space where mistakes can be made in public.

4. Students should feel a sense of shared ownership of the studio space; when students refer to 'my studio' this should mean the whole of a space/room rather than an individual portion.

5. The studio space needs to be as flexible as possible to allow space to be maximised and to reflect the needs (often changing) of each student's practice; ambitions should not be limited by the nature of the space.

Given the large number of students we have at Chelsea and the fact that there is inevitable pressure on space because of our central London location if space is split up individually this puts a limit on the size of work a student can make.

6. The studio should foster communities that might become a blueprint for setting up sustainable, affordable studio collectives after college.

7. The studio should not be a space to hoard material in individual areas for long periods of time; work should be made, photographed, discussed or assessed (by tutors or students) and then removed.

This is the one principle that we struggle with most. Hoarding by some students is something that presents a constant challenge.

8. Furniture should be used as sparingly as possible. If everyone has their own table and chair the spaces become full. This reduces the amount of space for making work and discussing ideas.

9. The studio space should be a safe working environment.

These principles are then reinforced by a set of guidelines, which often overlap

Guidelines

1. Wall space should remain as free as possible – if tables are in the middle of spaces students will work while facing each other, opening up the potential for discourse to take place. If tables are against the wall students are likely to work facing the wall, cutting off the potential for group discourse.

2. Each room should have areas that reflect the needs of students' practices, e.g. a large wall to make paintings or a desk area for laptop work.

This guideline relates to the principle about not limiting space for any kind of practice or level of ambition.

3. Each studio should have an area designated for discussion – a table or a collection of chairs, perhaps including sofas.

4. Decisions about the best use of a studio should be based around the discussion of work and decided by the student groups.

5. Storage should be addressed collectively across the year group. The storage spaces are primarily for lockers and furniture to allow the studios to be cleared as needed.

Over the past few years the changes that have been driven, and evolved, through the principles and guidelines has meant a very different studio atmosphere and culture at Chelsea. And the physical space has a direct impact on the development of the curriculum. The emphasis on collaboration and collectivisation in the pass/fail Territories of Practice unit was only really made possible because of the attitude to the studio space. A redesign of the interior of the studio spaces has been directly informed by the way the guidelines and principles have evolved and the need to facilitate collectivisation and collaboration. The intention of moving interior walls maximised the flexibility of the spaces and enabled anyone to see as much of the space as possible from any position in the room. The spaces were opened up creating whole communities rather than fractured individual workspaces.

The effectiveness of the shift in attitude towards the studio has been proven in several ways. Over the three years, since their instigation, students have taken the principles and guidelines further than staff might have dared suggest. Significantly, for example, this year's third year have re-designed the walls in one studio to create a materials store, documenting area and open zone for making large objects. In addition, studio space used to be the most commonly discussed topic of dissatisfaction, in National Student Survey comments, through course committees and from external examiners. Since the change in approach the issue rarely surfaces in negative student feedback. Furthermore, on the MA course the shift has meant that without being given extra studio space the change in attitude has led the students to decide to use part of the studio space as a project/gallery space. This clearly illustrates that students are placing a value on developing a group discourse and dialogue that helps build a strong community over and above a sense of internal competition.

Finally, recent developments prove that our attitude to the studio, and to building communities of artists, sets up a blueprint for how graduates might operate when they leave.

Current rent values in London mean the inner city is in danger of becoming a space of consumption. One perhaps only need think about Paris to see how devastating that can be. I know this might seem like a spurious link to be making but it is worth considering the particularities of city space. Paris is a city with a central area whose function is mainly for consumption: tourism, viewing culture in museums and shopping. This centre is surrounded by the places where people live and produce the *banlieue*. This kind of separation is highly problematic. Vibrant culture is only possible because it is produced from a wide cross section of society. These issues have been

discussed widely recently including within the popular press. *'Rich people don't create culture'* as Grayson Perry recently remarked in an independent article (2015). The fact that the lack of affordable housing and lack of affordable space to rent studios means there is a danger that the model we see in Paris could be repeated in London where a central space for consumption surrounded by a living and production space. This would mean London loses the energy and vibrancy, which is the very thing that attracts people from around the world and gives the city its energy and heartbeat.

As Nicholas Serota has recently warned:

'the high cost of living in London is threatening its place as a world leader in creativity and the arts...the housing crisis and steep rents for studio spaces risk depriving the capital of its next generation of artists.' (Evening Standard 2016)

Students graduating from London art schools are often faced with the problem of enormously high rents for individual studio spaces. And even in the recently published book *Studios for Artists Concepts and Concrete* (2016), which is a collaboration between ACME studios and Central Saint Martins, the approach to an artist studio that is generally privileged is that of individual practice. I would argue that this follows a model that is neither affordable or appropriate to current practice and certainly not sustainable.

The approach that has developed at Chelsea means that individuals may not rent self-contained studio space on graduating. Instead, the model we encourage within the art school is one that can be transcribed to professional practice where collectives, or groups, share space. This means that graduates have the possibility of a sustainable mode by which they can develop and retain networks formed at college. This presents a model through which creative, cultural and artistic production might remain viable in London. This is a key aim of the approach to studios and illustrates how an approach to a curriculum and an attitude to a course can have social and political ramifications beyond the academy. An example of how this is currently happening is where ACAVA, a London based studio provider, is managing subsidised space for groups of our graduates to set up together in a flexible situation that also provides showing space but is not segmented into separate rented blocks.

Through the development of our curriculum and in our approach to space, we are aiming to reveal and discuss the attributes that we might value most highly about an art education. Collaboration, experimentation, risk, participation and agency. In addition, we aim to foster approaches and communities that have a tangible value to society and culture more broadly. We are aiming to describe what should be most valued about studying and practicing art and what is most valued about the course. Perhaps the best way to describe what we provide is the space to be part of a community, and what makes this community special is that it is a critical community of makers, one which might be able to focus less on the products and more on the processes of exploration, collaboration and artistic and intellectual development. The ambition of the development of our pass/fail Territories of Practice unit and our approach to the way space is managed and used is that those features, which some might have once described as being the 'Hidden Curriculum', are made visible and explicit.

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