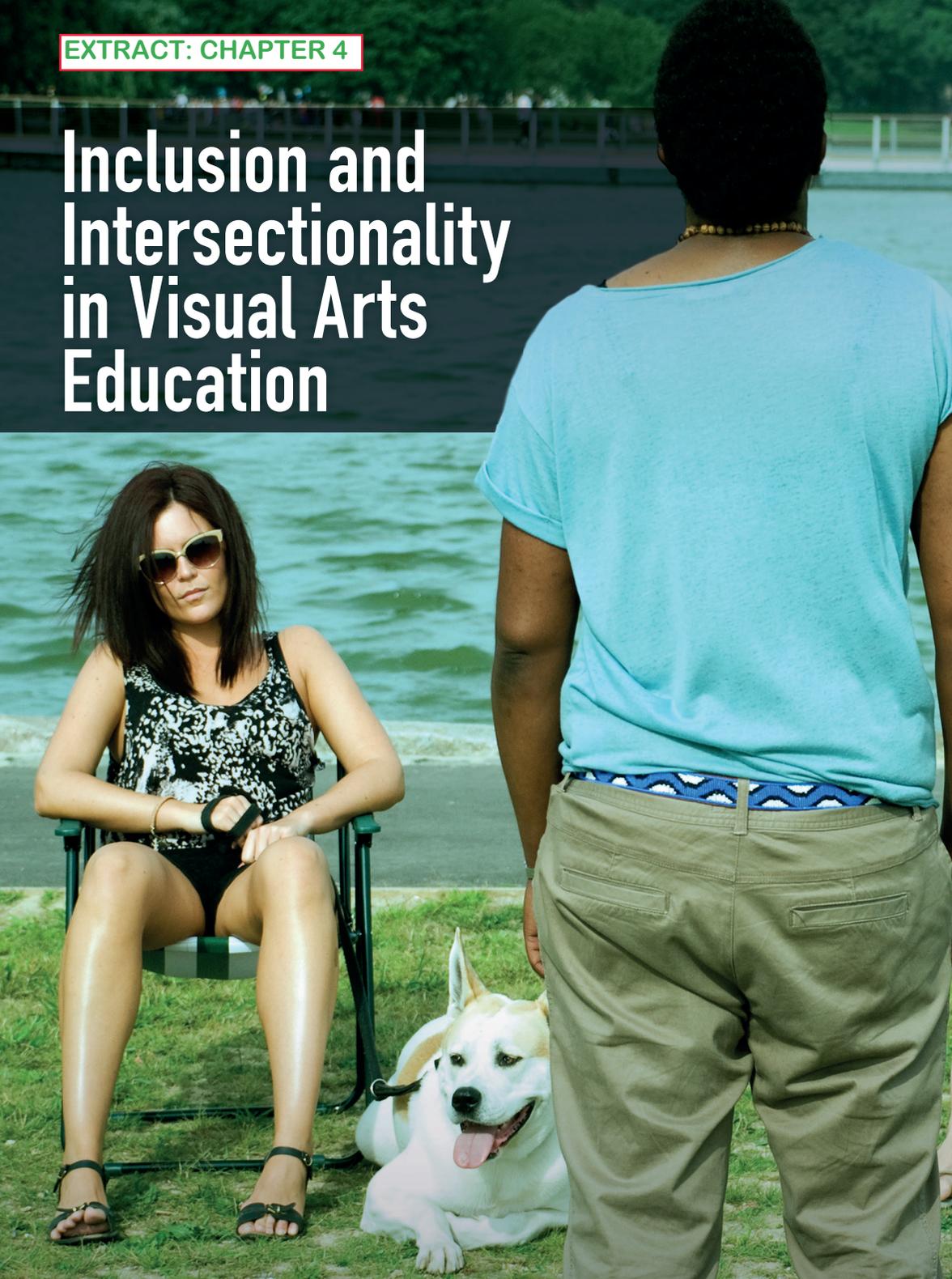


EXTRACT: CHAPTER 4

Inclusion and Intersectionality in Visual Arts Education



Edited by **Kate Hatton**

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Creative curricula: Developing inclusion projects informed by states of identity, alienation

Lorraine Douglas

The first thing to be learned is that people are, and are not,
what we think they are; they, we, are always so much more.
(Sagan, 2014: 5)

This chapter is inspired by a series of dialogues I initiated as a visiting lecturer and researcher within a fine art department of a London university between April 2016 and June 2017. Being a mentor and visiting artist inspired me to write an educational action research proposal around my knowledge as an artist and former art student. This research was funded by the arts institution's Widening Participation (WP) and Equality and Diversity department. The work examined attainment and the curriculum. As set out in the Cabinet Office's Race Disparity Audit published at the time of my writing this chapter: 'The UK has become more ethnically diverse. The proportion of people identifying as White British in England and Wales decreased from 87.4% in 2001 to 80.5% in 2011' (Cabinet Office, 2017). The audit claims to seek out the disparities 'that have the most impact on people's quality of life and their opportunities'. This chapter aims to identify some of the characteristics of alienation that culturally or ethnically diverse arts students may be vulnerable to (for example, being required to exhaustively explain one's identity or choices), and looks at how an inclusion project might help to increase students' quality of life on the course and their opportunities. This project and my statement here refer to students of colour, students of ethnically diverse backgrounds or culturally diverse backgrounds, including students perceived as white who did not identify as white British or as European.

My research idea was developed from a workshop called 'Reflections' that I created as a visiting artist in 2014, and focused on this while bringing a

discourse on belonging into the curriculum. My research project consisted of a focus group, interviews and workshops, and was connected to an internal educational research study aiming to enhance the student experience. The project addressed personal narratives, our cultures, influences, and how wellbeing impacts on our practice as fine artists. The research element of this work also meant I was working as an ‘insider’ researcher. This, and the overlapping aspects of the work, gave me a sense of my role as a ‘blended’ one, such as Whitchurch (2008: 7) discusses. I also felt my unique positionality was not only inspired by my role and background but also by my desire to see long-term change for students in giving them a voice. Further on in the chapter I relate memories and experiences of my own time as an undergraduate student to provide context to this chapter. This additional knowledge I feel is necessary for readers who may be unfamiliar with artists and their work. I hope it may suggest aspects of the approaches necessary to gaining knowledge and developing creative identities and ideas.

Positionality

In this research I was aware of and reflected upon my position as both artist and researcher aiming to support students in two ways: by both teaching and researching the learning situations they faced during that particular time on their course. I continually reflected throughout on my understandings as an artist, to help equalize my position with them but also to understand the intersectional nature of the issues that may arise around identity within the arts institution. One of my guiding principles was that ‘we’ and the institutional narratives are often ‘so much more’ (Sagan, 2014: 5) than we may first appreciate.

By having more than one role, I was able to access different insights and perspectives on arts learning and teaching and this affected my researcher positionality, a subject discussed by Sikes (2004: 5). In conversations with students and staff, we each reflected on our experiences of being fine art students and the influences and working environments that have characterized those experiences.

In these dual roles it was important to work ethically by adhering to the university’s code of conduct regarding confidentiality, participant consent and data protection, exploring my own positionality within both the research and teaching work which occurred at the same time. I took Sikes’s (2004: 13) approach of being inside the research: ‘whatever they decide inevitably applies to them as well as to their research population’.

Researcher honesty is important and ‘telling it as it was’ can only be in the interest of good research practice (ibid.: 15). The most revealing point

here is that through setting up a focus group and individual interviews – having made it clear that the students would shape what the project was to become – the project shifted from an emphasis on risk-taking and the role of confidence in fine art practice, to a project on self-identification and where individuals felt situated within the course and in relation to their peers. I put my original workshop title: ‘Reflections’ up for review, but the participating students seemed to like the openness of it and no alternative was proposed to replace it.

This chapter is written in the first person in keeping with the nature of the project, which was about opening up dialogues on the factors that influence our practice as fine artists. This helped to build a sense of connectedness within the group and discussions. Here, the ‘our’ represents the unifying experience of studying and practising fine art. Sikes (2004: 25) has this to say about self-identification and language styles in education research:

One issue that I feel strongly about, but which I am aware is controversial, is the use of ‘I’ when writing about the research process in papers or dissertations. In my view using such phrases as ‘the researcher’ or ‘the author’ is a distancing strategy. Researchers should be prepared to ‘own’ their work and the most immediate and obvious way of doing so is to say ‘I’.

Perhaps there is a parallel between my methodology as an artist practitioner – in which I go ‘out’ and into dialogue with others and how I am received as a visitor in isolated or transitional spaces. Certainly, I felt that my positionality might have contributed to how open others were to speaking with me, and their willingness to discuss rather personal issues regarding the realm of fine art.

Opening up dialogues

‘Reflections’ was a small, practice-led group for undergraduate fine art students, providing them with an opportunity to reflect on how they felt about their practice and their surroundings. My aim was to gain a better understanding of the difficulties BA Fine Art students face during their studies, hoping that the initiative could go some way towards tackling alienation, which was an issue that several students had brought to me. With reference to contemporary education research by Donszelmann (2015), I was interested to learn whether one-to-one and small-group discussions could help support fine artists facing issues relating to cultural background, anxiety or perfectionism. Donszelmann (*ibid.*: 97–8) asserts that students

have ‘an active role to play and a voice in the formation of a community, no matter how “micro” or “informal”’, thus contributing to a non-threatening space for research enquiry. I began working with the students through a focus group to seek their advice on how to publicize the group and what the focus and title might be. The structure was very similar to the workshops it inspired: discussion-based and practice-orientated. As Kitzinger (1995: 299) highlights in introducing focus groups:

Focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method ... people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other’s experiences and points of view.

I emailed students three ways of participating in the project: focus groups, workshops and one-to-one interviews. The options were intended to offer a way in for people who might be put off by the formality of an interview (Kitzinger, 1995). The workshop activities were therefore for both research and arts learning purposes, and were chosen as an ideal place for understanding better how the students might feel at a particular stage of their course.

In order to work ethically, I ensured I made clear to students the research setting prior to beginning the entire research. I invited their participation, gave full explanations of the research and used formal participation consent sheets from the research project. In the course of the research I anonymized the data and attempted to routinely reflect on my position within the study.

Group settings

Sagan (2014) discusses the importance of ‘safe “practice” grounds’. Here she relays the role of trust within group settings and how past experiences can impact on one’s enthusiasm to share, speak, or display artwork (ibid.: 135–6). In consultation with students (and during the focus group) the activities were advertised as being for a maximum of six people per group. With respect to issues around trust within group settings, the number of groups that I led could multiply if the demand was there, but the size of each group would not.

I devised the workshop spaces mindful of Sikes’s (2004: 20) questions to researchers: ‘Are you asking people things you wouldn’t want to be asked? Are you asking people to do things that you wouldn’t want to be asked to do?’. The workshops were carried out with the kind of open dialogue that I experienced as a fine art undergraduate in the 1990s, in which there was

an expectation that artwork could be discussed in formal, personal and socio-political terms. More importantly, our conversations could be fluid and expansive. During the focus group and interviews, students expressed a need for more one-to-one contact time with their tutors and a space to bring all aspects of their identities into the forum. Discourses around mental health, and varying degrees of belonging featured strongly. Sagan (2008: 180) argues that:

The model followed in much of today's educational practice, for the containment of anxiety and any 'emotional disturbance', is to relegate the emotion elsewhere, literally, to another space, often student support systems and/or counselling. While these are both important aspects of an effective learning framework (Coren, 1997) a reliance on these enables us to 'clean' the immediate teacher/student space and maintain an illusion that it is emotion free, intellectual, cognitive.

The idea that the discussion of art should be 'emotion free' and 'clean' may sound absurd, but some students spoke of difficulties they had experienced due to accidentally overstepping boundaries and difficulties in knowing where the discourse on their work should be situated. In her text focusing on artists whose practice deals with difficulty, the personal and the political, Doyle asserts that contemporary art spaces can have an inhibiting effect and seem to champion the 'cool and aloof' (Doyle, 2013: 5). As one student expressed in a one-to-one interview I conducted:

In my culture and in Latin cultures generally it's okay to talk about things that people wouldn't talk about here. And the way that that line is drawn sometimes makes me feel very inappropriate.

This comment was pivotal in my recognizing that the discourse students wanted to have was about the need to 'bring oneself' to the fine art course. It was evident throughout the project that the department was well regarded in its encouragement of independent thinking and openness to what art practice might mean (or look like). I was keen to learn what this openness could help us to further understand about connectedness and alienation. How can we foster a space that acknowledges difference and prevents students from 'feeling very inappropriate', while navigating that space? Surely, this is a key factor in respecting identities and avoiding alienation?

Hatton (2016: 197) suggests that, in speaking about their own identity and role within the institution, educators provide a useful way to reassure students experiencing feelings of difference or not fitting in:

‘knowing about how such concerns impact on creativity’, can increase ‘affinity with their students’ positions and expectations’. This ‘affinity’ is key to the subject of alienation that I examine in this chapter. Doyle (2013: xviii–xix) addresses the need to respond to what students are telling us, in light of the institutional convention to formalize discourse:

That contrast between the interest and openness of some of our students and the jaded disaffection of much art criticism led me to put terms like emotion and sincerity at the heart of this book. To insist on them. They may operate in critical parlance as synonyms for the naïve and the simple, but they are the very things that make these works difficult, complicated, hard to talk about, and worth the effort.

Sagan (2014), Hatton (2015, 2016) and Doyle (2013) point to art educators as having a key role in the spaces that we develop and facilitate. Sagan addresses the need for tolerance and the power of empathy, Hatton asks us to use our own positionality as a reflective tool with which to empower students, and Doyle speaks of the vulnerability of physical and emotional selves within the sphere of the observer (or critic). These issues correlate and can help us consider our behaviour in relation to what students are bringing to us within the institution and the potential of the smaller spaces that we curate or co/construct.

Michael McMillan (2015: 78–80) describes arts practitioners as carrying out an ‘expert-intuitive’ practice, which proposes a sensitivity to the students: ‘since I am asking you to jump in the deep end of a swimming pool, I will jump in first’. McMillan’s essay is an important reminder of the somewhat concrete, yet invisible weight of institutional settings in terms of restrictions that artists might encounter, largely due to the ‘fear of models of knowledge that cannot be policed and regulated by the critical orthodoxy’ (ibid.: 78). In this chapter I focus on the act of leaning in, not only with the intention to jump into the pool but also in terms of keen observation and participation.

Exposition

For some of us, the possibility of displaying one’s artwork is both enchanting and perplexing. A prerequisite for a career in fine art, it magnifies our place in the world, our perspective at that moment in time, and how we wish to be perceived by an audience.

I am reminded of an experience I once had as an audience member at a visiting artist’s talk. I was a BA student and, drawn to the artist’s work,

I had previously visited London especially to see their show (which I had found to be magnificent and heartfelt). We were a small department, and the occasion was informal, with most of us sitting on the floor. From my spot at the front I could see beads of perspiration on the artist's face and a painful yet quiet struggle with the act of public speaking. To my mind there was a disparity between the boldness and scale of the artist's work, and their difficulty in speaking to our informal group. However, what I was witnessing was anxiety. I doubt very much that the young artist would have thought that their talk would be remembered in such detail years later, let alone that I would have noticed the extent of their discomfort. But, to my mind, it developed into one of the most socially insightful artist's talks that I have ever attended. The artist has since received immense critical acclaim.

The reason I am sharing this incident with you is that difficulty is complex. A person may struggle with some tasks yet excel at others. As you are reading this, you may think that incredibly simple and obvious, but the point is, fine artists and fine art students are expected to excel at a myriad of tasks. Either role requires many nuanced skills, including practical, intellectual and communicative ones. Fine artists and fine art students have to develop a reflexive and critical practice and the verbal skills with which to discuss work (for example in tutorials, group critiques or 'crits', peer reviews). As Ferguson (2011: 175) argues, 'There is a set of necessary professional skills, many of them social, that is more of a priority than ever before'. As well as making their work, a fine art student or practitioner will develop the knowledge to contextualize it in relation to that of other people, both historical and contemporary, with an understanding of the existing cultural milieu. A level of skill and self-confidence is required to work collaboratively with fellow practitioners, members of the public and arts professionals (who may be curators, gallerists, publicists), and to manage digital platforms and social media, budgets for expenses, materials, space-hire and events. An artist, regardless of the form their art takes, manoeuvres in the sphere of business as much as in art.

The nature of art is expressive and self-exposing to varying degrees: exposing in relation to one's technical abilities and to one's perception of the world. As fine art educators and students it is important to acknowledge that our dexterity in different tasks might not always be aligned. We give without knowing; in the workshop space or arts learning environment, our own admissions of difficulty might enable others to also do things that they find difficult.

Exceptionalism

My mentoring work at an arts university from 2014 to 2017 showed me that a student might not fully utilize a resource, but (sometimes) just knowing that somebody was there who they can identify with and that the person knew them by name, could contribute towards them feeling a little less isolated. Students would approach me and tell me that it meant a lot to them to see someone they felt looks like them, or people they grew up with. During an interview in 2016 this student spoke of their experiences, and what they described as the classist structure of the institution:

Student: It's difficult to engage with people from a very different cultural background and when you attempt to there's hardly any common ground at times. So, we end up retreating – coming in and being like a hermit. That's how I've been doing it for a while. There is a sort of air in the art school of exceptionalism; 'I'm special' and a lack of willingness from other students to collaborate. That's something I definitely sense.

There are several issues to unpack within that statement. Initially, the problem seems to lie not in the concept of exceptionalism, but in the disparity between those who seem to find it easy to feel a robust sense of self-confidence and those who do not. The statement describes those less willing to associate or to collaborate with peers, alluding to exclusivity and at times alienation due to class. But we could look at exceptionalism in another way. Less controversially, its essence could also be about 'knowing' that one's contribution is worthy of attention – not 'thinking' but 'knowing'.

If we are to consider exceptionalism in this capacity alone, isn't self-assurance something that we would wish for everyone? In which case, rather than seeing it as an oppositional force, shouldn't we assess what conditions are necessary for every student to feel that they have something exceptional to bring to their course? Newton and Donkin (2011: 292) examine incidental learning and elements that appear to generate successful studentship:

Student: I think you have a confidence in your ability if you approach subjects, go against what is normative, so an ability to think that you're able to say something from another standpoint, it's quite important to be able to separate yourself from other things, be decisive, different, or confident in a sense.

In this case, the emphasis is not on what the content is as such but in the knowledge that one's opinion is valuable, even necessary for the group. That it is to some extent 'exceptional'. The data reveals that class and economic issues do have some part to play, as does connectedness with those succeeding within the field. Here is an extract from a workshop discussion between fine art students in 2016:

To do this course you either need to have a job or you need to have rich parents.

I think that people who are able to just buy things or just order things from the internet, they do have a much bigger advantage.

It's like 'pay to win'.

It's just easier with money.

When I [first] came to art school I could see people live and breathe art. I like art, but those people breathed it, you can tell! I kind of felt setback. I felt so normal compared to some people.

Before I moved to [London] I never thought I want to be an artist. I thought I want to do a fine art degree and then hopefully get a job when I have my degree. But when people ask me now I say I want to be an artist obviously – I'm doing a fine art degree. And that made me think 'you can actually do that if you want to'. It's a social change even though it's the same country. I find [here] a lot of people went to private school and have more money and don't have to worry about having a part-time job.

The conversation above reveals the class difference that some students come up against when entering an arts university. The expression 'it's like pay to win' reveals how unfair the economic disparity can feel, whereas 'now I say I want to be an artist obviously' shows a shift in self-confidence and a consciousness of the student's value on the course. Also, on the issue of self-identification, the student describing their situation as feeling 'so normal compared to some people' seems to bring back our earlier subject of exceptionalism. These statements say a lot about privilege in relation to an assumed happiness that comes with wealth or at least with not having to 'worry about having a part-time job'. However, as the wider data from the Reflections project suggests, alienation is something that all art students could feel.

In establishing a safe research territory, Sikes (2004: 13) reminds us that ‘the more social power you have, the more you can choose what to do. The scenario is further complicated by the way in which people may have power in certain settings but not in others’. This statement can apply to all of us who research, students and academics alike. Rollock (2012: 83) defines intersectionality as ‘particularly useful as a means of framing and creating new ways of studying power and inequality and challenging traditional modes of thinking about marginalized groups’.

As intersectionality is one of the themes of this book, I shall explore this concept further by paying attention to the complexity of the shifting nature of power. It may seem that some factors are constant (for example, relative wealth), but this does not mean that they block out all other elements. In her key text and through the use of ‘part autobiography, data analysis and part counter-narrative’, Rollock (2012: 69) details a moment in which alienation was felt. In writing of her early experiences as a black child moving to a private girls’ school, she relays the moment in which her teacher sets her apart from her white peers for laughing in class by using the terms ‘you’ and ‘we’: “‘Well, I don’t know where *you* come from but we certainly don’t do that sort of thing here!’” she barked and clonked in her high heels to her desk’ (ibid.).

It is clear that the context and minute details of a situation play a part in a recipient’s experience of alienation, and that character and tone are as crucial as what is being said:

And golden Labradors wagged excited tails in the back of Land
Rovers and cars whose identities I could not place.

I begin to hate my dad’s car.

This was the ‘we’ of which I was not part. (Ibid: 69–70)

In one ‘Reflections’ interview a student shared how their exploration of self-identity was challenged during a group critique (crit) due to their assumed privilege. Through listening to the student, it became evident that a great deal of care had gone into their crit presentation and that the response from a peer had been difficult for them to deal with. The student later revealed that they had a hidden disability. In this instance the student’s social class and their (invisible) disability were ways in which they experienced alienation:

Student: Someone said to me ‘I’m really uncomfortable hearing you talk about your privilege’ and I said, ‘if I was working class

would I be allowed to talk about it?’ In the end they came up to me and said, ‘actually it’s quite nice that you talk about it’. My teacher came to my rescue a bit and said, ‘maybe you can find a way to talk about it that doesn’t make you so vulnerable.

The student went on to say that ‘It’s quite difficult [in crits because] it’s very easy to hate someone who is privileged in this culture.’

At this point we can consider Sagan’s (2014: 127) observation that in becoming more conversant in peer groups ‘how one used newly gained or recovered confidence and life skills was an experience often marred with difficulty’. This seems to suggest a kind of one step forward two steps back analogy. However, peer debate can also have an alchemical presence within fine art courses. During my undergraduate studies I considered my peers, alongside my family and tutors, as being my first audience; in that respect they were gatekeepers to the next more public world in which I would be sharing my perspective. If I could share (or even spar) with them, then this was a major step. When addressing exceptionalism, it is wise to consider Hatton’s (2016: 198–9) theory of ‘overlapping and hidden selves’. This acknowledges that each of us has characteristics and life experiences that intersect – some visibly, some less visibly nonetheless – that make up who we are.

Anthias (2013: 8) argues that an intersectional approach allows us to ‘revise the idea that culture has less saliency in the production of inequality than economic factors’. Although economic factors play a part, other factors are no less important. For example, growing up in a stable environment and having a sense of belonging in one’s community can also contribute to a robust level of self-confidence. As one London university’s socio-economic class data figures show (Panesar: 2017), race does appear to outweigh class in terms of disparity within student attainment levels. However, a high achieving student from a subgroup can affect the (average) result considerably for that year.

So, as Anthias (2013: 12) points out, ‘people can have dialogical and contradictory positions’. The work of Rollock and of Anthias can be useful to all areas of education, since they foreground the complexity of intersectionality. In trying to understand data and quantify what is happening in our institutions, there is a risk that students are placed into categories that cannot represent the fluidity of their experiences. There is much to learn from listening to a person for longer, to hear what they are really saying. Therefore, intersectional debates can (at present) offer a more

qualitative approach, as the need grows for more specificity in how we express ourselves.

The fundamental nature of alienation is feeling somehow different and unsure of where to turn to for connection and understanding from others. In terms of the arts education environment it can mean avoiding situations that may be (anticipated as) further damaging or disparaging, for example shared studio spaces, workshops or showing up for crits. It can mean seeing or even knowing one's commonalities with others and at times enjoying these, but also experiencing them as all too fleeting. It is feeling unsure of acceptance. If one is experiencing alienation, the risk of taking part in activities with people one feels one shares little 'common ground' with can feel like a gamble. What as arts educators can we do to lessen this?

Risk-taking

As a spatial thinker (whose main artistic medium is installation) my first response to lessening alienation is to consider the territory in which it occurs: to observe diligently its dynamics, and to better understand the triggers that cause fine art students to experience it. When working within institutional settings with long associations with social hierarchies it is useful to start with an environment small enough that we can influence in a positive and inclusive way. Therefore, as previously noted, for this piece of research I chose to focus on the 'art workshop'. I am using the term workshop as McMillan (2015: 79) proposes: 'beyond a place where things are made or repaired', and as 'a group of people engaged in some intensive discussion and activity'.

As Atkinson (2011: 103) states:

Encouraging learners to take risks in their practice, by implication, suggests that teachers themselves are also taking risks in that they have to be able to 'let things happen'; they have to be able to facilitate these learning pathways without a clear sense of outcome.

This space, a place in which to be fully present and responsive to the students and the work and ideas that they brought in to it, was also ethical. I aimed to protect students in this open space by treating every person participating in it or referenced within it respectfully. The order of activities was: focus

group, staff interviews and student interviews, all of which influenced the structure and content of the workshops.

The workshops, therefore, were a culmination of research and teaching. They opened with the opportunity to eat and drink together and became a platform for participants to introduce themselves and something that was of influence to their art practice. It was interesting to see how people interpreted the opportunity. I was willing to go first (if that felt appropriate), but it turned out not to be necessary as the students keenly took the opportunity to open up dialogues. As both a researcher and tutor I was constantly reflecting on what was being shared and guiding the students to maintain a safe space.

In the opening workshop a student brought in their own work that enabled them to raise topics including gender, age, sexuality, power and money. These can be controversial topics and as a member of staff I was mindful to say that if anyone didn't wish to participate in any part of the discussion then they would not be encouraged to. By the student sharing their artwork with the group a discussion was opened up that (on this occasion) all in the room wished to contribute to. Kitziinger (1995: 299) illustrates this dynamic: 'Group work can actively facilitate the discussion of taboo topics because the less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants.' Within the group dynamic I used Sikes's (2004: 20) advice for education researchers, in which she asks: 'Are you asking people things you wouldn't want to be asked? Are you asking people to do things you wouldn't want to be asked to do?'

Not everyone wishes to discuss their personal lives through art, and as educators we also need to make space for that. As Sagan (2014) puts it, for some, the relief offered by an art practice resides precisely in it being private. It is important that:

interventions acknowledge the different modalities of art engagement, and address the need of people to connect, but also respect their need to disconnect at times ... the private and the social both play a part, sometimes at different points in the artist's journey. (Ibid.: 128)

Another student brought in objects that they later revealed were made from their own body. They advised us in advance 'not to touch' the objects, and learning of the origins of the work brought attention to the relationship between the artist, artwork and the audience. The subject led the conversation to a wider discourse on the everyday, our commonalities

and the subject of value. In preparing for the workshop I reflected on experiences in my own fine art degree, in which I had gone out of my way to learn about artists who were not on the contextual studies reading list. This included individuals of many disciplines that I came across through hours in the library, or attending exhibitions, plays and films. I also became increasingly interested in artists and curators within the BLK Art Group, and the British Black Arts Movement (1980s to 1990s), some of whom I was personally introduced to by my tutor. Key texts included *The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain* (Araeen, 1989), *The Thin Black Line* (Himid, 1985), *Black People and The British Flag* (Chambers, 1993), *Mirage: Enigmas of race, difference and desire* (Mercer and Bailey, 1995) and *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Powell and Bailey, 1997). I had particularly identified with tutors and visitors to our course who seemed approachable and less institutional – although I must add that this can mean different things as conventions and eras change. This was the era of Young British Artists. They were not necessarily from assumed privileged backgrounds, and some were by now heavyweights in terms of media attention and earning power. See, for example, the exhibition catalogue for *Sensation: Young British artists from the Saatchi Collection* (Brooks *et al.*, 1997). Accessing art and artists who were making a success out of allowing their voices to be heard didn't reduce my own feelings of difference, but it gave me confidence in sharing my position with tutors and peers; I knew that it was valuable to the course. As mentioned earlier, the distinction between (thinking) that something is of value and knowing it is crucial to risk-taking in fine art. It is that realm in which we can speak of the kind of confidence apparent in that problematic word: *exceptionalism*.

The premise for our Reflections group was that we were all art practitioners. The workshops were about looking at art and discussing influences on our practice. Some time into the workshops the students asked about my artwork and influences. I began my slot by speaking about Stanley Green and his daily presence in Oxford Street (1968–93), where he was known as 'the human billboard' and 'the protein man'.

We looked at his attitude to being considered an outsider, which appeared to be confident and steadfast. One student asked if he was an 'artist'. This was an astute question. I explained that through my own framing I have brought him into the project and therefore they can also do that – be responsible for the frame and who or what they place in it. I spoke about how social research had been a catalyst to my BA practice

and how I took it out of the studio and into various landscapes. These included streets where I could be seen installing the work and where I could receive responses from the public, as well as much further afield into the countryside to obscure effect.



Figure 4.1: Alan Bradshaw, *Stanley Green, Oxford Street*, photograph

Source: public domain, 1983



Figure 4.2: Lorraine Douglas, *The Cakewalk* (detail), photograph

© Lorraine Douglas, 1997

Sharing images from that time and explaining how I navigated binaries of class, gender and race helped to ‘increase affinity’ with the group (Hatton, 2016: 197). I spoke about a range of artists, including Jo Spence and Ingrid Pollard, who asserted their positions and sense of self through the environments they situated their work in. Much of the work had a performative element, which tied in with Hatton’s ‘idea of an “inclusive” self’ and how the artists ‘operate within the boundaries of institutional practices’ (ibid.). This was effective, supporting the theory that richer group dialogues are achieved by not only introducing ourselves as tutors or visiting artists, but by also revealing something of our artwork or positionality in a wider social context.

The range of artworks we examined came from different genres and eras from the 1960s to the present day, including: Jo Spence and Terry Denner’s photograph ‘Remodelling Photohistory (Industrialization)’ (1982); Tony Richardson’s film *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962); Steve McQueen’s film installation *Deadpan* (1997) and Marlene Dumas’s painting *The Widow* (2013). I focused the workshops on influences rather than artwork. This slight distancing strategy aimed to take the attention away from the critiquing of physical objects and instead provide a platform for subject matter that was influential to each person

and their practice. In response, each person who attended brought not only their artistic influences but also their own artworks. This was more than the workshop advert had requested and indicated a confidence and willingness to take risks outside their own year groups and peer groups. It could be that the students were especially keen to talk about their work in a small group setting or it could be that they were open to approach art in terms of a more personal and cultural dialogue, as Doyle (2013: 19–20) has suggested.

One of our discussions focused on the site-specificity of the artworks and the impact that different environments can have on our self-expression. This included our relationship with differing audiences. In response to the discussion one student said:

It's so open in Britain. Where I come from artists are restricted by institutions. We never think about the possibility that we can find our own space to show our ideas and our expression. It's very nice when I've been here to see we can look for a chance ourselves. It's completely new for me, it's very exciting.

As I mentioned earlier, on a fine art course our peers are often our first audience. In that respect the shared studio space, although somewhat contained, is also a form of public space. Talking about the specificity of a site can enable students to reflect on their cultural awareness and discuss issues around risk-taking. Fine art students can have very differing levels of studio engagement. Some people have jobs that limit their ability to spend much time in the studio, and some may have an anxiety about going into the studios. Therefore, in any form of arts education, making time to look at artists whose practice operates outside the studio walls can have a liberating effect, as these students revealed:

I kind of prefer making things by myself and not using workshops, it kind of scares me as well.

I can't use the workshops, I can't use the studios, and I don't think I've ever made any work in the school. I do find it impossible to work or think in the studio.

My first year was my hardest transition ... not feeling that I needed to be in the studio, but creating an environment that I could work in.

While the first student states that they have an anxiety around using workshop spaces, the two that follow suggested that finding alternatives that better suited their needs was the issue. The third student demonstrates

how crucial that discovery can be. Where a transition is particularly hard, it can easily lead to feelings of frustration and alienation.

Tackling alienation

To engage in reflexivity is to partake in a range of discourses and relationships while constructing further discourses about them.
(Barker, 2012: 204)

Reflexivity is vital in trying to better understand alienation in an arts university setting. The sheer scale of some departments and the importance of staying connected to reap the benefits of a course and its resources can be a challenge for all fine art students and fine art educators. As fine art educators, how can we ensure that a teaching style that values independent thinking also supports students as they develop in that environment? During a one-to-one interview one student shared:

I remember thinking when I was not in a very happy time, I can't even come in because they're going to see I'm not happy and I have to seem like my perfect self, even my practice has to be perfect and then I have to seem perfect and seem healthy. In my second year I really suffered from that.

The anxiety attached to feeling unsettled or not living up to expectations can be paralysing, preventing students from attending their course or accessing help. Government data released in 2016 exposed that '77% of all students report that they have a fear of failure, with one in five of these saying that this fear is very prevalent in their day to day life' (Aronin and Smith, 2017). In a one-to-one interview I asked a course tutor: 'If someone is struggling with confidence, what might be in place to address this?' Their response was:

Well, first of all I think it comes out of the tutorials and we've got to make sure we don't erode the one-to-one tutorials. The almost ad-hoc group tutorials are good too when the member of staff is experienced and can make sure trust is still there. Students can help each other, and they can hear each other express lack of confidence, those two things are really good. But one-to-one is where they can really ask for help if they need it and then we can act on that.

'Not enough one-to-one contact' was the most repeated comment students made throughout the Reflections research. If staff no longer have the

opportunity to offer students regular one-to-one tutorials, then can the sense of connectedness of small group meetings such as Reflections go some way towards filling that gap? One thing is clear: the more we reflect on our own experiences of being a newcomer to an activity, group or arts course, the more likely we are to find affiliation with the needs of fine art students.

It is a privilege to be part of a person's education, as the Sagan (2014: 5) quote I began this chapter with implies: 'people are, and are not, what we think they are; they, we, are always so much more'. There can also be a restorative value in 'finding oneself alone' as Anni Albers (2011: 39), a key figure in the history of visual arts education, reflected:

Most important to one's growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one's whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.

This text from Albers originates from her 'Work with Material' study (1938) at Black Mountain College. It points to something I have been attempting to reveal in this chapter, which is that the richest visual arts resource is being oneself. It is important for arts staff and the higher arts institution to guide students to a space that is expansive, always reminding them that they are the next generation of artists, and that they can bring new perspectives and forms of practice to their learning environment.

Practicalities

The points below are intended to provide some guidance for tackling alienation in the arts university setting:

- 1 Utilize existing specialist staff by keeping in touch with new resources and staff available. New initiatives and support services may get introduced and restructured on an annual basis; be aware of the current vocabulary so you can signpost students effectively. Have that knowledge so that you can drop it into conversations, normalizing the concept of asking for help, respecting confidentiality. Many students experience anxiety in revealing a difficulty or accessing a resource, making informal and face-to-face interaction all the more important. A person's demeanour may reveal something unapparent via digital communication. As Donszelmann (2015: 97) reminds us, the 'micro' or 'informal' can be 'key to a student's creative and critical capacities'.

- 2 Invite specialists to deliver arts-based inclusion projects. Specific experience is vital in managing sensitive discussions in order to ensure what Sagan (2014) describes as ‘safe “practice” grounds’. In my case I carried out this project with three years’ experience as a university tutor and mentor and over 15 years’ experience as a practising/visiting artist.
- 3 Be mindful of the unconscious bias that studios should be ‘emotion free, intellectual, cognitive’ (Sagan, 2008: 180). Or as Doyle (2014: 5) advises, be aware that contemporary art spaces can give off an air of the ‘cool and aloof’. Students contributing to the Reflections project who had experienced alienation were wary of this. So be practical. If a student brings a subject up in a group discussion that you feel could make them or their peers vulnerable, guide them to safety without causing embarrassment. As Ahmed (in Rollock 2012: 76) explains, ‘the argument is too much to bear when your body is so exposed’. As arts educators witnessing students express their identities and perspectives through their artwork we have a special responsibility. The territory in which the person is sharing their work may feel risky for them. If they decide to share it, they have probably taken a great deal of time thinking about it first. We can foster a space that acknowledges difference and prevents students from ‘feeling very inappropriate’ by remembering Sikes’s (2004: 20) questions: ‘are you asking people things you wouldn’t want to be asked? Are you asking people to do things that you wouldn’t want to be asked to do?’ Some subjects can be freely spoken about in one culture, yet are taboo in another. As arts educators we should be respectful and mindful of those positions. UK government data shows that one in four students are currently experiencing a mental health issue: ‘Of those who suffer, 77% have depression-related problems, and 74% have anxiety related problems’ (Aronin and Smith, 2017), and so in the arts learning environment the onus is on us to be confident about how we acknowledge that.
- 4 Finally, the ‘affinity’ that we are prepared to build during tutorials, studio visits and workshop settings must follow us out into corridor and canteen (Hatton, 2016). We may not see all students in the studio, but letting them know that we take their practice seriously wherever it is situated increases ‘trust’ and brings the opportunity to get to know each other better (Sagan, 2014: 5). This means pausing to give time to the incidental, bearing in mind the importance – to all of us – of connectedness.

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