

NO ROOM! OF COURSE THERE'S ROOM

Abstract

This paper is an adaptation of a workshop provocation given at [redacted], which I set up as an 'Alice in Wonderland' 'Mad Hatter's' table. I dressed the table on theme, and equipped it with props, as a set to share with fellow educators a focus group project I had undertaken with students on overcrowding in their college art studios.

I held up the lack of room in the studios as a social justice issue for exploration, firstly, as the inflation of numbers and knock-on impact of overcrowding of studios felt by students was acknowledged as result of over-recruitment to the course during and post pandemic; and secondly, exploring the question of whether minority students are most impacted; including those who are less confident to claim space due to factors such as accessibility, language barriers, financial issues, and lack of peer support within the course.

By putting workshop participants in the position of taking a seat at a fictional table space, loaded with caricature, I sought to provoke a creative dialogue around positionality and our relationship to shared space, whilst contemplating anonymised transcripts of the focus group dialogue that had taken place with students around a different table earlier in the academic year. The workshop gave reference to the ideas of Nirmal Puwar regarding positionality and the negotiation of space; and to Mikhail Bakhtin when considering student utterances in the focus group dialogue.

Keywords:

#Aliceinwonderland #lewiscarroll #radicaldemocracy #intersectionaldiscrimination
#intersectionalfeminism #nirmalpuwar #spaceinvaders #mikhailbhaktin #utterance
#criticalracetheory #whitefragility #overcrowding #artspaces #artstudios #collegeartstudios

Institutional context

The focus group had been an urgent intervention during a tense period for [the college department]. Academic year 2022/23 had kicked off with the simmering crisis of overcrowding in the studios that began the year before, boiling over into students protesting on social media and on the walls of their studios. I was completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice and put forward the focus group as my 'Action Research' project (McNiff, 2013). I was interested in the potential of the focus group for dynamic group interaction, (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 2013) and in how it might capture some of the conflict that had occurred between the students in their studios. I sought to find such understanding as Mary Louise Pratt in her description of an educational space as a "Contact Zone", where "Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom - the joys of the contact zone..." (Pratt, 1991, p.8).

A contentious studio booking system had been implemented in 2021/22 – an initiative akin to the Red Queen's game of croquet, which no one can ever win. Students had to book to 'hot desk' their studios each week and stack unfinished work in storage. Students relayed to me its failure both in terms of putting off many students coming in altogether and in more dominant students repeatedly block-booking the same space and effectively ignoring

the rules of usage. The system was got rid of within a month of the new Academic year, in favour of smaller, allocated spaces. However, tempers still ran high.

Entering the [department] for a 1-year sabbatical-cover role, a temporary invader, I was inspired that it appeared to be more actively committed to decolonisation and to have more non-white senior academic staff than other departments I had worked in within the same college. I had been engaged with critical race theory in my academic practice since writing my PhD on [redacted]. However, being in a department with the benefit of more staff of colour, whose lived experience and presence in the studios was more meaningful than how much theory I had read, challenged me as to what I could contribute to inclusivity as a white cisgender female. [Redacted name's] lecture to Fine Art staff on [redacted] highlighted Nirmal Puwar's *Space Invaders*, and quoted the first page of her book (2004, p.1) "The arrival of women and racialised minorities in spaces from which they have been historically or conceptually excluded is... intriguing because it is a moment of change. It disturbs the status quo, while at the same time bearing the weight of the sedimented past." Seeking to facilitate such a moment of change as a white person extended then outside of the staff offices and into disrupting the status quo of practices of entitlement in the students' studios. I started to pay attention "to recognise how whiteness is embedded in institutional cultures" as well as my own "ontological complicity" (Puwar, 2004, p.135). This extended to questioning the students' complicity with both maleness and whiteness in how shared spaces were navigated. If the dominant students claiming the biggest spaces in the studio also followed normative patterns of Whiteness and maleness, did the students who found it hard to come in at some level feel like 'space invaders' and stay away?

The focus group framework

In approaching how many students to invite, and the length of the session I referred to guidelines such as the *National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's How to...organise focus groups* (2017). The students I invited to the group consisted firstly of my own tutor groups; secondly, official student representatives; and thirdly, a wider call was made closer to the date to the whole year group, specifically inviting input from those who wanted to speak to this issue. The sources I read suggested 8-12 students would be optimum, and from the invitations I made, we had a group of 9 students. I advertised the session as being 45mins to 1 hour, and on the day the session was 49 mins. In putting together the questions I read papers such as Pew Research Center's Writing Survey Questions (2022) paying attention to how closed and open the line of questioning was. When presenting the questions to students I also made clear that the conversation would evolve responsively to their answers. (Which it did!)

I asked such questions as:

- What has your experience of the art studios been like, since we got rid of the booking system at the beginning of term, and allocated you with your own, small space? What has improved and what has been difficult?
- What factors motivate you to come to work in the studio, rather than working at home?
- What factors put you off coming to work in the studio? Have you ever avoided coming into the studio to do your work, if so, why?

I took a recording on my phone, which I listened back to at different points. In the immediate term, I gave a headline report to the course students and staff on the concerns raised. These included:

- Instances were reported of names and work being moved. Suggestions were made of a need for a further year group session on collectively agreeing studio etiquette. Students requested that more should be done to enforce the allocations in studios by tutors.
- Focus group participants said that the studio spaces were so small that although it was better to have an allocated space, it had reverted to mostly the same people coming in as during the booking system the previous year.
- Students had identified bookable project spaces in other courses that were not fully utilised. They asked if the message "[our department] is in crisis" could be put out to other courses, and ask if the bookable rooms could be opened up to them.
- They said too many different calendars and modes of communication were being given to them by the University. Some students were more motivated to come in around taught sessions and tutor contact time, and confusion about when to come in made it harder for them to plan this.

On a second listening, I applied thematic analysis, and on a third listening, I produced a transcript and then interfered with the text as a social and architectural contested space.

Thematic Analysis and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

I had been researching the history of tea and the slave trade and dwelling on my nostalgia for the prettiness of my White, middle-classed Grandmother's diligently put together tea parties. My attachment to these memories told me something about how (engendered) sentimentality and protectiveness of our British traditions covers up the patriarchal violence of historical and continuing resource extraction. African American painter Gary Simmons has spoken about his own continuing fondness and nostalgia for cartoon characters from his childhood that he has since realised to be racist (Simmons to Eshun, 2023), highlighting how hard it is to disturb our attachment to these learnt characters from childhood. For myself I alighted on the Alice character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2010) – an educated White girl in a colonised 'wonder' land - as a way of confronting my own complicity with White Supremacy as a grown-up white woman in an institution where the majority of staff are still white women, and how this influenced my own relationship to shared spaces. Puwar describes (2004, pp. 9-10) how "the relative degree to which white women are the somatic norm, on the grounds of whiteness, gets overlooked. The extent to which their whiteness grants them a certain level of 'ontological complicity' with normative institutional cultures, even while they are, on the grounds of gender and possibly class, 'space invaders', remains hidden."

I was studying my PgCert at a time when [redacted] was still delivering the Inclusivity unit within the course. Their [redacted] along with texts such as *White Fragility* (2018) helped me to think about what I could do from my own positionality in confronting practices of White Supremacy at play within our spaces, as well as giving space to minority voices within the student cohort to speak up.

Thematic analysis and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

As I came to analyse the recording of the session I employed thematic analysis, drawn to its use by "Critical race feminist researchers [who] centralize storytelling to increase the understanding of multiple positions of persons or groups of persons, particularly the socially and politically marginalized individuals living at the juncture of identities" (Lahman et al, 2015). Analysing the students' comments, I pulled out five themes: Vulnerability; Chaos; Confusing Communication; Aggression; Upheaval: Effort v lack of impact. As I listened further and produced a transcript I focused in particular on moments when students swore or burst out with a phrase "'clusterfuck", "environment of a free-for-all", "moved their names around or like chucked them on the ground", "'some people go over their allocated space almost like invading someone else's space'". According to Bakhtin "life enters language through concrete utterances... The utterance is an exceptionally important node of problems." (Bakhtin, 1986). I reflected on this further at the Mad Hatter's tea party where the dormouse would speak in his sleep and the Hatter would interject in conversations.

Ahead of Alice reaching the scene in her Adventures in Wonderland, she encounters the Cheshire Cat who says that everyone here is mad, Alice included. When she says "How do you know?" he explains "You must be, or you wouldn't have come here." (Carroll, 2010, p.37) Which sounds equally a quip one might hear about going to Art school. The references to madness in Alice in Wonderland can be read in different ways. Ellerby (2018) critiques Lewis Carroll and suggests making light of madness is damaging in how it characterises someone who is suffering. However, Molly S (2022) points out that Carroll

engaged with the asylum environment through his uncle [ref], and was arguably seeking to improve understanding: “The individual mental illnesses that characters in the story display help to critique social norms and the monarchical system... It is possible that Carroll’s interest in mental illness simply pervaded throughout his work, but it seems as though he is making a point that those who struggle with mental illnesses are not possessed by the Devil (as many people thought in this era) but rather just misunderstood.”.

If the Cheshire Cat’s statement that everyone here is mad removes stigma and brings us to a levelling point of a collectively identity conditioned by the environment, perhaps this may be a useful starting point in navigating the strange rules of the institutional space too. Indeed, the Social Model of Disability (McCourt, 2015) that we follow at [redacted], states that oppression, exclusion and discrimination people with impairments face is *not* an inevitable consequence of having an impairment, but is caused instead by the way society is run and organised. The systems we have to navigate at the institution may not require us to shrink or enlarge ourselves like Alice, but certainly in the case of [redacted], the studio spaces had shrunk relative to the bloating numbers recruited to the course.

In the Mad Hatter’s tea party scene of Alice in Wonderland, the table is set for a large number, but only three figures - the hatter, the hare and the dormouse, occupy the table before Alice arrives. Nonetheless, as she tries to sit down they say “No Room, No Room!” (Carroll, 2010, p.39)

Puwar says that “The presence of women and racialised minorities continues to locate what are now insiders as outsiders. Being both insiders and outsiders, they occupy a tenuous location” (2004, p.9). Alice when told “No Room, No Room” by three males.

Herself, a white, upper middle-classed female, replies, “There’s plenty of room!” and sits down regardless, carried by the sense of entitlement she was brought up with, despite being a female and an outsider. Amanda Bryan (2013) writes about the Imperialist messaging played out in children’s literature at the time Alice was written, and whether or not the Alice character is complicit with Imperialist politics - colonising the world that she enters - or subverting it. Indeed, as the dormouse is used as a cushion, is constantly pinched awake, and even has tea poured on his head, Alice is not the most abused subject at this table.

Alice in Wonderland workshop

I printed out anonymised copies of the transcript and invited workshop attendees to highlight words in the text that caught their attention. This included thinking about the utterances in the text, and looking for underlying messages beyond what was said more formally in response to the focus group questions. Workshop participants were invited to select to put on one of the Alice in Wonderland character masks or head pieces— Alice, the Hatter, the Hare, the Dormouse and intruders at the table like the Cheshire Cat and Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. Some of the stationery order for the event had not arrived so attendees had paper plates on which to also write down their character’s relation to the table, their feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Responses were thoughtful as we dwelt on how to respond to the students’ voices transcribed before us. Some drew doodles, or wrote lines of poetry.

A group of predominately white educators sitting around the table, I shared with the group my reflections and concerns on who did not come or stayed quiet in the session. There

had been an absence of students from my tutor group who had flagged financial issues with accessing college. Some absent students had Individual Study Agreements in place in relation to disability, and I reflected whether the focus group format might have been too confronting for some of them. There were absentees who had flagged to myself/other staff their mental health issues. The anonymity of the transcript could also not account for the fact that more female, international students who attend the session either stayed quiet or needed prompting to voice their concerns in the session.

The focus group, like the mad hatter's table, consisting of a small group around a table, reflecting on the surrounding chaos, mediated with tea, coffee and light refreshments. It was a small offering to give insiders and outsiders, space invaders and space dominators, a chance to think about how their space could be more inclusive.

Conclusion

Both the focus group and the Alice in Wonderland workshop played out the dynamics of the institution and gave creative pause for reflection on what was happening in the studio spaces. Yet I remained conscious in both instances of who might not have come to the table, and the degree to which subjective factors influenced this. Twenty years on from publication Puwar's *Space Invaders* (2004) remains pertinent here, in particular in thinking of students who are intersectionally marginalised. My focus group's students suggested that female International students navigating both our physical and administrative systems were more likely to stay away from the studios, and suggested a buddying system of allyship to help them feel less like 'invaders' the space. Indeed, allyship, from tutor to students, and between students, seems an important tool in disrupting the status quo of

how these institutional spaces are managed. As bell hooks said “maintaining white supremacy has always been as great if not a greater priority than maintaining strict sex role divisions. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege... bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them... Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle” (1986).

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The focus group was given ethical approval by the Course Leader for my PgCert Academic Practice (2022-23), and the participants each gave written, signed consent for the focus group.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Data availability statement

An anonymised version of the transcript is available on request

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