**Connecting Voices, Developing a Space for Creative Communication**

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**Introduction**

This paper summarises the methodologies and evaluated outcomes of a research project involving COVO, an educational charity in Peckham, south London, and a group of volunteer student participants from London College of Communication (LCC), one of the six colleges within University of the Arts London (UAL). The project was developed and supported by UAL’s Retain, Achieve and Succeed (RAS) research fund, made available for researchers within the university to investigate and improve aspects of the attainment of home Black and Minority Ethic (BME) students. Figures released in 2012 by the Equality Challenge Unit show that 69.5 per cent of UK-domiciled white students achieved a first or a 2:1 in 2010-11, compared with 51.1 per cent of BME students. The gap was more pronounced for black students, with only 40.3 per cent scoring a first or a 2:1.[[1]](#footnote-0)

I am writing from the position of an artist who has 16 years experience of designing, delivering and assessing academic programmes in higher education. My teaching experience reflects my research interests in art practice and the development of students’ visual literacy, and has spanned both studio support and dissertation supervision. My research experience is not in pedagogical or race theory, but moreover in the role of art practice, and in particular drawing, as a way of exploring materials, space and language. *Connecting Voices, Developing a Space for Creative Communication*

was a collaboration between COVO, Eddie Otchere, LCC alumni and film maker, and myself, to develop and evaluate a series of workshops that focus on using drawing and movement as primary methods of communication as an alternative to the formal academic structure and language used in the traditional art school crit or group discussion. Based on the experiences of running the workshops at LCC, COVO have provided a series of observations and recommendations with view to implementing more inclusive methods of communication amongst groups of diverse students.

COVO Connecting Voices[[2]](#footnote-1) is an educational charity specialised in providing interventions into schools and devising personalised training programmes for staff, disadvantaged parents, children and young people including those NEET[[3]](#footnote-2). COVO trainers use participatory and creative training methods to engage and mentor people to develop confidence and skills, improve practice, promote youth leadership opportunities and develop the involvement of those underrepresented, in decision-making. COVO workers are trained in therapeutic movement and systemic/reflective thinking methods and integrate these practices in the delivery of programs. Connecting Voices, Developing a Space for Creative Communication facilitated the trial and evaluation of an intervention between COVO’s participatory training methods and LCC’s Higher Education programme with the aim of encouraging increased understanding of issues surrounding diversity and inclusion within creative academic disciplines.

**The Language of Higher Education and the Space of the Crit.**

The research afforded an investigation through action research and reflection on the workability of COVO’s methodologies of systemic movement and drawing as alternative strategies of communication in Higher Education. Group encounters in arts education at HE level often take the form of the ‘crit’. The critique or crit is a group seminar or formative assessment where groups of student-artists present their work to gain critical responses from peers and tutors. The crit is still considered an integral part of art and design teaching and learning, its strengths lying in a number of areas including a promotion of group work, a development of reflective practices, offering students the experience of presenting to an audience and articulating ideas about creative practical work, and contributing to peer learning.[[4]](#footnote-3) Considering the significance placed on the crit in art and design education there has been comparatively little research into its weaknesses or to developing alternative strategies, although Blair (2006) and Percy (2003) have suggested some limitations of the studio crit. In *Critiquing the Crit* (2007), a research project undertaken over two years at LCC, Blair, Blythman and Orr identify two main weaknesses of the crit. Firstly, under what they term ‘widening participation’ they located a sense that cultural capital could play a role in students’ ability to ‘perform well’ in crits. Through their research they reported of students alluding to some group members being able to present articulately but for many it was considered to be a ‘difficult emotional task’ and some students lacked the confidence to carry this out. They also highlight, under the heading ‘student diversity’, referring to international students or to students for whom English is a second language, that the traditional crit essentially becomes a form of assessment of their oral skills. In *Why Art cannot be Taught* (2001) Elkins describes crits as, 'like seductions, full of emotional outbursts'. He analyses observed critique dialogue looking at confrontation in crits and proposes that there can be a problem in the translation of the dialogue between a tutor and student, stating that 'critiques are perilously close to total nonsense'. [[5]](#footnote-4)

In 2011 the National Union of Students’ Black Students’ Campaign[[6]](#footnote-5) published a report on the experiences of Black students in Further and Higher Education, entitled *Race for Equality*. The document described how some students interviewed for the project expressed their difficulty in adjusting to the styles of teaching and assessment at their institution, many highlighting that they felt unprepared for study at FE and HE level, and that in particular that they felt lacking in the academic skills related to essay writing and sufficient knowledge of academic vocabulary. A significant minority of Black students surveyed described difficulties in understanding their lecturers – some because of unfamiliarity with academic jargon, others because of language barriers,

*First of all, some students from ethnic minorities are learning subjects in a completely different language from what they may be using at home, and coupling this with a very specific ’academic language‘ which is almost certainly alien to most means that it is harder for these students to start their courses at an equal level ... as their White counterparts. This in turn can leave students struggling throughout their studies and lead to lower qualification achievements.* Black African respondent, HE [[7]](#footnote-6)

Inexperience with academic language may result from a lack of exposure to such communication methods earlier on in their education, but many Black students surveyed in the NUS report still felt that communication barriers were compounded by their lecturers’ lack of understanding. Interview respondents maintained that their FE/HE lecturers did not always take into account the diverse range of academic and language skills in the classroom. Those who felt less familiar with academia believed that they were left to struggle on their own,

*[There is a] lack of adequate understanding of how to communicate with minorities, [a] notion that ‘one-size-fits-all' when communicating with minorities.*

Black African respondent, HE[[8]](#footnote-7)

In their work in educational institutions COVO employ alternatives to learned languages to allow group members to express themselves comfortably, for example, drawing and/or movement are used as a subconscious alternative to conscious, academic language. *Connecting Voices, Developing a Space for Creative Communication* aimed to test the use of alternative, non-academic languagesto increase access to intellectual debate and reflection, i.e. whether methods such as systemic movement and drawing encourage an environment of greater inclusion amongst groups of students with diverse cultural backgrounds than an emphasis on the more traditional learned academic language used in crits or other group learning situations based on verbal communication. Moreover, the research project sought to implement an alternative method of communication within student groups, placing less emphasis on the authoritative, intellectual position of the lecturer leading the crit and allowing more opportunities for students to speak in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Through their workshops it was hoped that COVO could develop a space in which students were also able to speak freely about their experiences of studying art and design in Higher Education.

**COVO’s Methodology: Alternative Spaces for Dialogue**

COVO’s approach to curriculum interventions is based on a model that draws from systemic thinking and movement psychotherapy. According to systemic thinking theory, any system (family, school, organisation etc) is a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements that form a complex whole. COVO’s approach is to consider the whole system in order to address any problems, which are explored through engaging everyone involved within the system in a process of self-reflection. In particular COVO focus on three specific concepts from systemic thinking: circular questioning, connected conversation and appreciative enquiries.[[9]](#footnote-8) The following points summarise the methodologies and key concepts in the theoretical contextualisation of COVO’s work with groups in education.

**Connected Conversations**refers toa framework that enables a group to reflect on a given issue by validating each other’s contribution and therefore facilitating dialogue and unity of purpose in dealing with issues, therefore opening more possibilities.

**Appreciative Inquiry** is the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Appreciative Inquiry involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Appreciative Inquiry seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul.

**Circular Questioning** provides the possibility of undermining belief systems that are based on ‘truth’ e.g. *my son is lazy – my daughter is stubborn.* Circular questions undermine belief systems by using the language of relationship, not of ‘what is’. This may be done by ‘if’ questions and by future oriented questions (for example: if your mother decided to stop worrying about you, what would your father do?). These questions imply patterns, not facts. The moment a question undermines the belief system, it creates opportunities for new stories. The use of feedback as opposite to linear thinking – not limited to cause and effect. Circularity is a technique used in the development of hypothesis and the sustaining of neutrality.

**Movement Psychotherapy** is the psychotherapeutic use of movement through which a person can engage creatively in a process to further their emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration.

Movement is the medium through which human beings learn in direct participation with the languages of the body sensation, feeling, movement, image, and instinct. It is a means of exploration and learning common to all humans and provides a way to focus on the lived body as a source of information. As we move, we are always making connections, creating relationships, both within ourselves and between the world and ourselves.

Attending to sensory motor experience provides the opportunity to listen to the body in order to uncover the experience of self - internally, in relationship to others and the natural world. In this way of learning, the sense of being that precedes doing is important.[[10]](#footnote-9) Movement both reflects and affects inner self. The way we organise our movement reflects the way we organise our selves. Movement can be used to gain information and insight, to find coping strategies and to bring about change.

**Mirroring.** Human beings become increasingly open to learning when they feel, at a deep level, that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood.

The structure and organisation of the self appears to become more rigid when under threat and to relax its boundaries when completely free from threat, or safe. [Carl Rogers](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rogers.htm), best known as the founder of ‘client-centred’ or ‘non-directive’ therapy, believed that people increasingly trust others when they feel that their experiences are respected and understood. Based on this he argued that there are three ‘core conditions’ for facilitative practice – realness, acceptance and empathy. He maintained that our success as educators, helpers and animators of learning and change is heavily dependent on both the people we are, and the way in which we are experienced by others. COVO refer to the importance of realness, acceptance, and empathy being required by the group facilitator/educator to create an environment in which boundaries can expand and learning can take place. Empathy, in kinesthetic terms, is the capacity to know another person's inner feelings based on sensory experience. Empathy utilises attunement in tension flow, which is based on kinesthetic identification with the tension changes of another person. This requires openness to kinesthetic awareness.[[11]](#footnote-10) Physical relationship is a key component of physical, and other, learning. Being seen without judgment, interpretation or projection, is a key part of the sensory motor learning process. [[12]](#footnote-11)

**The Workshops**

COVO have developed a combination of systemic thinking and movement psychotherapy, which enables participants to engage in an experiential reflective process. During the research project COVO designed a series of five workshop sessions: three with students, one with teaching staff and one with students and teaching staff working together. The workshops were designed to use an experiential method, using therapeutic movement, reflection and group work in order for the participants to work together using non-academic learned language to share their experiences of Higher Education. Each session started with a series of exercises involving movement to music, before participants took part in directed discussions, the basis of some of these involved talking through drawings and notes made by the students on a given topic relating to their life experience. The discussions touched on aspects of the students’ heritage, experiences of school, their transition to Higher Education and their expectations and experiences of studying at LCC.

The workshops were advertised on posters around LCC and through emails to the college Deans, Programme Managers and undergraduate Course Leaders to circulate to their students, alumni and teaching staff. The poster carried the slogan, ‘I do not want art for a few any more than I want education for a few or freedom for a few’[[13]](#footnote-12) and invited volunteers to participate in sessions to discuss their experiences of learning and teaching in LCC.

Unfortunately, despite several rounds of marketing the workshops, the numbers of participants in each workshop was extremely low. Despite repeated invitations to engage with the project no tutors attended any of the sessions, so the planned workshops involving LCC staff could not take place. The student participants each signed a disclosure form and model release form. Some filming and audio recording of the sessions took place, which participants could opt out of if preferred. Unfortunately, the low numbers of participants for the workshops meant that the amount of quantitative data generated was very limited and did not provide sufficient material from which to generate substantial conclusions. To counteract the lack of data provided by the project, COVO prepared a report of their experiences and observations of the sessions, key points from which are highlighted below.

**Results and Recommendations from COVO[[14]](#footnote-13)**

In the first session there were two students: a white 21-year-old male from the Home Counties and a mixed race female (Indian and white English) from London. After the movement activities at the start of the session the main activity was for the students to plot their journey from a young age to the time they entered university, drawing on a piece of paper the significant milestones along the way. After this activity the two participants spoke together to share their journeys and discuss the similarities and differences in the two experiences.

A lively discussion ensued, which we noticed was mostly dominated by the white male in the group. Instead of the discussion being equally about the two journeys, it seemed that the white male recalled more and felt more comfortable talking about his family and the events in his life. The sheet of paper the male was working on reflected his confidence as it was beautifully drawn and written.

This was in stark contrast to the female in the group who revealed that she found it difficult to draw and was dyslexic. She was less inclined to show her work and spoke less about her past.

Facilitator’s Reflection on Workshop 1

Reflecting on the outcome of this first session, we noticed how much we could recall about the male participant, however it was much more difficult to remember the detail of the female in the group. The male member of the group gave a much more comprehensive account of his background and interests, which seemed interesting and consequently, easier for us to engage with.

It seemed that even from before the session began we were making links with the white male in the group as he had arrived early. He seemed to have many things in common with the facilitator: he had a father who was a chef in Italy, his family had travelled widely, he also had a sister who wanted to study to be a music therapist. With all this extra information the group facilitators had a good sense of the male group member even before the programme began.

The female in the group had difficulties getting to the university citing money difficulties. She also had to suffer the slight humiliation of not having a pass card to get in to the building. This highlighted the fact that she had not officially left the university.[[15]](#footnote-14) At the end of her first year she was finding it difficult and had taken a break. No one from the university had inquired into where she was and she felt, in effect, that she had been forgotten about.

We also noticed that we could fill a sheet of paper with everything we knew about the male, but in contrast we did not have many things to record initially about the female. However, what we did recall was very revealing.

*Below is the information about the two participants that we recalled after this first workshop*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Male | Lived in a village - smallest cathedral town - sister studied music want to study music therapy - lived in Angel north London and moved to Italy - father is a chef- taught skiing in the winter and surfing in the summer - mum was disabled - overcame her disability - went to one of the best schools in the country - could have studied a more academic subject but wanted a challenge and studied art |
| Female | Dual heritage - mother Indian and father English - went to Disneyland - grandmother died - Dyslexic - went to drama school - left school  |

Reflecting on our experiences in the session and from observations round the college, it may be that in relation to the teaching staff, there would be much more to relate to with the male member in the group than the female. Supposing that the majority of the staff in the university were white male, they would potentially relate more strongly to the white male student in the group. Based on the evidence from the workshop session, we would suggest that the staff may not relate as easily to the female group member’s experience.

Concerning the female group member’s experience, there seemed to be more difficulties revealed. She was at an art college but finds drawing difficult, this is not necessarily an insurmountable problem, as she was studying photography, however the additional difficulties of being dyslexic meant she may have found it difficult to communicate her ideas on paper. Another potential difficulty based on the workshop outcomes and discussions was that her identity, being from a mixed cultural parentage, meant that the tutors may not fully understand her identity, her needs and, possibly, her unique situation.

Reflection on Workshop 2

This session focused on how students saw themselves and how others saw them. We asked the students directly why they thought white students do better then their black counterparts. This felt like a difficult area for the students to engage in. The participants were puzzled and just did not understand the question at first. There was a feeling that the university was there to give them an experience of how to become an artist and so it was important for each student to find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning and becoming more self-sufficient. Both students commented that they found studying at LCC a more difficult experience than they expected, and that in particular, meetings with staff such as tutorials and crits could be ‘highly emotional and stressful’ situations.

Reflection on Workshop 3

This session was cancelled due to poor attendance. Instead, footage of the college and an interview with one of the participants was captured by the project’s filmmaker.

**Conclusion**

The lack of participation in the project resulted in a disappointing amount of data on which to base conclusions. Many of the project’s objectives could not be fully explored without the participation of both staff and students in the workshop sessions. Moreover, the reasons for a lack of engagement in the workshops from staff is unclear – other responsibilities, lack of knowledge about the project – but several of the emails marketing the workshops were not circulated by senior management despite repeated requests. It may be possible that a lack of support at senior levels affected staff members’ access to information about the project. Across all the UAL colleges, LCC is the one engaged with the least amount of research through the RAS initiative.

COVO concluded that looking at the outcome of the two full sessions it was,

*very clear that the students would have benefited from having more sessions to draw from their experiences of the university and better articulate the feelings. This would then allow them to express their needs and how better to address the subject at hand.[[16]](#footnote-15)*

The students that took part in the workshops reflected positively on the experience, one commenting,

*I wish we’d had something like this in the first few weeks of the course. It would have helped us get to know each other and understand our different life experiences. I wouldn’t have felt so exposed in crits if I’d felt like my fellow students knew me and understood why I was making the work I was making. Crits wouldn’t be so stressful and emotional for me if I felt more comfortable and accepted in a group.*

Workshop participant.

Although the project team were surprised by the lack of participation, the experiences of the workshops confirmed many of the expected outcomes, regarding the most confident and frequently heard voice in the student group belonging to the white male. COVO believe that had there been more time available to work with a larger group then more work could have been done to address this. The workshops also revealed other possible inequalities in situations of group learning related to gender, social class and dyslexia/learning disabilities. Increasingly, students are starting undergraduate courses straight from school, without having undertaken a foundation course first. The foundation course traditionally plays an important role in introducing students to the different learning culture of college after their years of teaching in school. As foundation courses become less essential as a prerequisite for studying art and design at HE level, then earlier exposure to the structure of the crit and the language used does not occur.

Certainly the traditional crit format privileges those students who can clearly articulate their ideas verbally in front of a sometimes-large group. This is something that would benefit from further research. When crits are successful, they can improve confidence and help develop students’ abilities to make critical judgements of their own and others’ creative practice. This is an important aspect of students learning to develop their critical thinking skills. Crits provide an opportunity for students to get instant feedback on their work and discuss aspects of projects going badly in order to move forward. However, for this to occur crits need to take place in a safe environment, where students feel comfortable exposing what they may see as their weaknesses as well as their strengths. As a result of this research and pending budgetary restrictions, the project team are now working on a proposal to trial workshop sessions by COVO in the early stages of an undergraduate course at LCC in 2013/14.

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2. More information: <http://www.covo.org.uk> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Not in Education, Employment or Training [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. taken from the strengths of crit-based learning outlined in Blythman, M., Orr, S. and Blair, B. (2007) *Critiquing the Critique, A 2 year ADM-HEA funded project.* http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/news/subject-centre-news/critiquing-the-crit [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Elkins, J. (2001) Chapter Critiques in *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois, p.111-167 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Representing college and university students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. National Union of Students (2011) *Race for Equality, A report on the experiences of Black students in Further and Higher Education,* p.22 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid, p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. These definitions were provided in the evaluation report provided by COVO at the end of the research project. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. COVO cite the theories and practices of Authentic Movement and in particular, the work of Mary Starks Whitehouse, Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow as particularly influential on their thinking, and in addition, the dance therapy practitioners Marion Chace, Trudi Schoop and Rudolph Laban. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. COVO cite the work of Judith Kestenberg as important in terms of developing an approach to kinesthetic awreness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Adler, J. 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. William Morris quoted by Jeremy Deller on a placard for student fee protests, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Taken from the report provided by COVO after the sessions had taken place. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. The female student had requested to take some time out from her course but felt she had received inadequate support and communication from the college about the correct procedure. She was left assuming that she had actually been excluded from the course instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Taken from the report submitted by COVO after the workshops. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)