

Collaboration and conflict in the making of a group-based Creative Process Journal for a 'real world' student art exhibition

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Abstract

This paper reports on a specific case study considering the use of a group creative process journal (CPJ) in the subject area of art and design. It places the case study in the broader field of a research project considering a range of approaches to creative processes and their documentation. Both the case study and the broader research project are particularly concerned with the tension between the development of creativity and the requirements of assessment within art and design higher education. We discuss our approach to research methods in terms of our broader field of enquiry, and raise the importance of student participation as active research agents, and in relation to their evaluation of their experience in the case study presented.

Introduction

Our conference workshop session 'Collaboration and conflict in the making of a group-based Creative Process Journal for a 'real world' student art exhibition', presented as a case study the experiences of a group of undergraduate media arts students working collaboratively towards the production of an external public art exhibition. This case study formed part of a much wider CLT funded research project exploring how embedded models and procedures of documenting the creative process aid learning in an art education context.

Importantly a number of the students involved in the making of the group-based CPJ participated in the workshop, offering their personal perspectives and providing valuable reflective critique. The physical object of the CPJ provided the focus of the session. With this focus, students and staff discussed their collaborative experience in relation to the broader research questions of our CLT research project entitled 'Working in the dark – encouraging, enabling and rewarding students' risk-taking and experimentation in a processes orientated model of creative practice'.

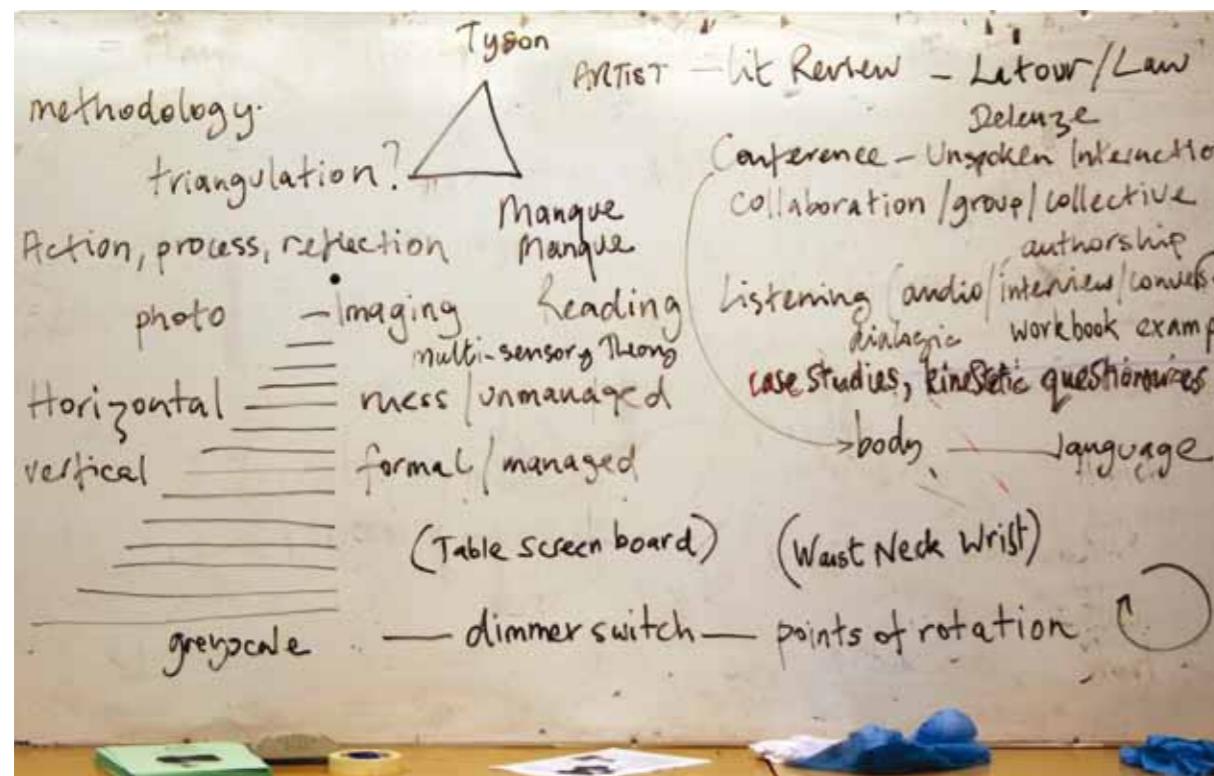
'We work in the dark - we do what we can - we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art' Henry James, *The Middle Years*, 1893.

It is widely accepted that the artist's sketch book or journal plays a significant role in the creative process of its maker and is often coveted by art historians and archivists for the 'behind the scenes' insight such documents afford into the musings, observations, thought and production processes of the artist's mind and practice. Art education traditionally encourages the use of workbooks, sketchbooks or journals as good documentary practice in the development of students' creative processes. This is often reinforced by the demand that these documents function as evidence in the formal process of assessment.

The wider research project began with an observation that the format and aesthetics of some student CPJs appeared to 'fall into' unreflective, institutionalised modes of production (mind-maps/spider diagrams, silver pen on black paper, reams of internet 'research'), often pre-established and readily conforming to models of practice uncritically learned in prior education. We noticed that these accepted approaches had a tendency to 'get stuck' rather than develop in tandem with the critical and creative development of the practice itself. This observation led us to identify a number of questions about the role

and function of the CPJ which we sought to critically and creatively investigate by engaging the students collaboratively in the research process.

It was also clear to us that our methodology needed to be reflexively aware, and to encompass our own creativity and work within the conditions circumscribed by our institutional context. This involves 'delivering' HE within a predominantly FE establishment, with all the attendant cultural and economic implications. To this end we began to observe our own practice through photographic documentation of our working space. In the process of this observation we recognised that our 'analysis' was becoming spatialised; the vertical axis (the white board) enabled us to 'think ideas through' in a more deliberate or managed way; the horizontal axis (the office table), was a kind of unmanaged flux which nevertheless gave an insight into the 'thick of things' in which we were engaged. Furthermore, the office environment is shared by other staff in the department and their activities. Their engagement in our inquiry through informal conversation highlighted the fluid, unpredictable and often unacknowledged social aspects of the research process and its embeddedness in the day to day aspects of our teaching practices.



Vertical axis: the whiteboard

The idea of reflexivity, and the importance of 'situatedness' in creativity and in qualitative research processes, was brought more sharply into focus later on in the course of the literature review. In particular we were informed by Derek Pigrum's writing in which he draws on a range of perspectives to consider the importance of place in creativity. Specifically we were interested in his focus on the workbook as a locus which travels with the artist in the manner of a peripatetic studio. Pigrum and Stables (2005,7-8) state that:

'... the physical place where analysis is conducted can alternatively be seen to correspond to Heidegger's notion of 'place-as-pragmatic-as the realm of worked-on-things [and in which] artistic concerns, labour, problems, and solutions present themselves not as a fixed configuration of objects but in ever-changing relationships of near and far, juxtaposition, overlap, and dispersion'.

We were also particularly interested in notions of messiness in research methodology as elaborated by John Law (2004). Law argues against the convention that 'messy' findings are a consequence of poor

research. He claims that in attempts to present tidy findings we often filter out many of the valuable realities which are by their nature vague and ephemeral. We were keen to hold on to these aspects of our work and wished to include this 'messiness' as evidence of our understanding that to be 'involved' (subjectively) in our own research was a necessity not a choice.

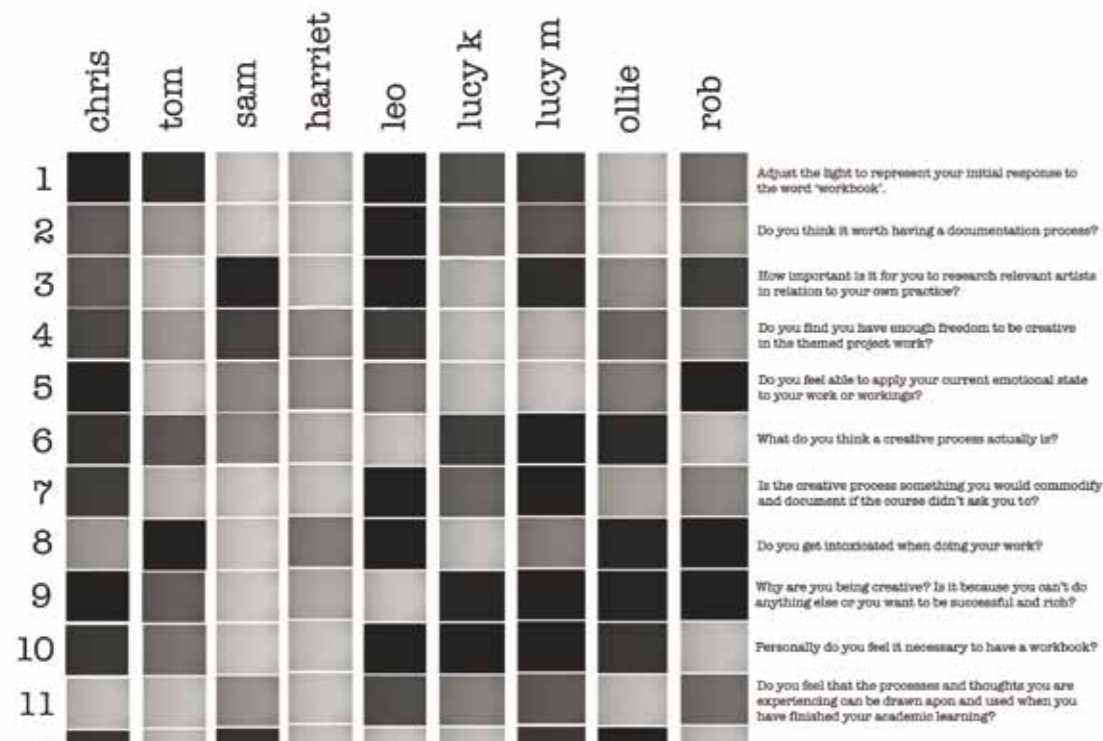


Horizontal axis, the office table

With Law in mind, we aimed to move beyond conventional text orientated and quantitative research methods towards predominantly visual and audio forms. In parallel with our use of photography to document spaces and activity we developed unorthodox questionnaires with visual interfaces. We also prioritised (recorded) dialogue and conversation between ourselves and the students, over more conventional reading and writing.

Importantly, we have resisted the transcription of sound/dialogue, seeking to maintain the specificity of the medium rather than transforming it into the standard text based form required by academic publication. This range of multi-sensory approaches was supported by a broad literature review which included pedagogic and social theory, literature, poetry and philosophy. In essence we were developing a spatialised 3-d model of a CPJ embracing all of the uncertainties and productive mess of creativity.

The CPJ is a complex document that in theory reflects the creative and learning processes of the student through its multi-modal form. These aspects range from highly personal and often confessional drawing, doodling and writing to contextual research. They serve as a memory supplement in the form of notes from technical workshops, seminars and lectures and post-rational project self-evaluations. The various formats of a CPJ include loose leaf folders, mixed media boxes, objects and fold-outs, but conventionally they conform to the sketch book, and as such encourage linear production. The tension between the freedom to use the CPJ as a place of creative risk taking (personal reflection, desultory observations, lateral thinking) and the need to evidence the learning process for assessment, gives rise to one of the central questions of this research: if authentic creative practice needs privacy, space, time, dialogue and critical reflection, then how does the necessity to relinquish this document for shared public consumption



Dimmer switch questionnaire responses

and assessment affect the student's sense of creative freedom and ownership of their work? Alternatively, it may be that this public requirement encourages the student to be more ambitious and productive and enables them to evidence learning that would otherwise remain unseen or unrealised. In other words, is it true that nothing grows as a result of being measured?

These questions emerged as a particular issue in the production of the group workbook in the Year 2 BA media and photo arts collaborative exhibition project, which was the focus of the Learning and Teaching Conference workshop.

The format of the workbook (100 metre roll of lining paper) was creatively pre-determined with the intention that its scale and linear form would accommodate shared production and reflect the progress of the project over time. It was introduced to the group with the invitation, (pending their ethical consent), to participate as student researchers in the CPJ project.

At the start some students were concerned about how they would be assessed on the group CPJ, and whether it would replace the need to produce an individual workbook. We suggested that the group CPJ would be a means to share the research process and subject knowledge around the general issues of mounting an exhibition - including artists and curatorial practice, exhibition management and development, and production issues. However it was emphasised that this approach would not replace or reduce the need for them to pursue their individual creative investigation into the process of producing work for the exhibition.

We were particularly keen to pursue the idea of collaboration with the students to encourage their abilities to work as a team in rehearsal for their year 3 degree show. Thus the development of professional practice in the mounting of an exhibition was key, and in this collaborative context we also sought to develop student understanding of, and critical engagement with, ideas of audience inter-activity through an introduction to the theory of Relational Aesthetics drawn from Nicholas Bourriard's writing.

In reality, our idealism in these motives was challenged by the problems posed by group dynamics that



The group workbook was conceived as a research experiment designed to reflect the collaborative nature of this project and to act as a focus for group meetings and seminars

overtook the project at half way. Personal disagreements and conflict within the group threatened to destabilise the entire venture and required staff intervention in order to keep the project on track and maintain momentum. We were surprised to find that the group CPJ surprisingly exacerbated the conflict, as it served as a locus for issues of control and ownership. At the outset of the project each student had agreed to participate and had taken ownership of the CPJ by signing their names and laying down some self-imposed rules of engagement. What happened in effect was that the natural competencies and abilities of some students became apparent in the designation of roles, including the maintenance and responsibility for the safe-keeping of the CPJ (which was in some respects a fairly unwieldy and weighty object and responsibility). Thus the question of access to and ownership of the CPJ. became a source of conflict within the group and was therefore to a certain extent self-defeating. This matter was raised by the students in their evaluations of the project and by the volunteers who participated in the discussion at the conference presentation, who were also, perhaps inevitably, the ones who took most responsibility for the production of the CPJ.

'Shortly after these developments, our group hit a snag revolving around some personal disputes between several members of the group. This situation got to the point where a tutor led meeting was called for, and the suggestion made of splitting into two groups. I felt that this was a bad move to make, as our project was set as a 'group' endeavour for all of us to participate in. It should therefore involve us all working together, regardless of personal politics. After much heated debate between those involved in the dispute, I made the suggestion that if any members felt incapable of functioning within the group, they should leave and accept the consequences rather than set up a 'rebel' group, which I felt would have been counter-productive to the task in hand. In the end, it was decided to keep the group together, and many of the tasks were divided in such a way as to avoid those with personal issues working together' (Student evaluation).

As the project developed, it became increasingly evident that those students who took most responsibility

by acting as coordinators for student led meetings, also took the lead in decision making and the general project management of the exhibition as a whole. This worked well for some, who discovered leadership abilities and gained confidence in the process, while others, whose ideas and contributions did not meet with consensus became disenfranchised and began to opt-out of group work to focus on their own interests. There were also a number of 'passenger' students who were happy to benefit from the work of others, or to be directed towards tasks that needed fulfilling.

We are aware that the research conducted around the CPJ to date had neglected to prepare us for the inevitable issue of group dynamics in this project. Though it is a concern of teaching practice in general, much was learned by us as a result of the additional attention brought to these matters in the work around the group CPJ.

Other matters raised by delegates at the conference workshop concerned student gender and maturity. The student participants at the workshop (all of whom were female and one of whom is a mature student) fielded these questions in terms of their own experience. This contradicted the idea that there had been a gender bias in the sharing of responsibility for the project as a whole, or the CPJ in particular. In retrospect, it is our view that these political matters would bear greater scrutiny and will certainly be of interest to us in our future research. Another broader, though equally pertinent issue that emerged was the tension between our perception of good pedagogic practice in taking an appropriately heuristic approach in this project, (with all the concomitant 'risk' of instructive failure) and managing the public relations concerns of the institution with regard to student work in the public domain.

On balance the group CPJ was a success. As an artefact/document it was admired for its formal qualities and ambitious scale by those conference delegates who attended our session. We feel it occupied the documentary vacuum between the individual student's experience and that of group work - a natural part of which is conflict, hence our title.



The group CPJ

Predictably this work has raised more questions than it has addressed. One key issue raised in student feedback concerned the balance between our guiding and determining direction in a relatively prescriptive manner, and our desire to enable students to take control and be self-determining in their learning. Some students clearly felt underconfident in this respect and wanted us to take more responsibility in directing their experience. Inevitably this balance is always finely struck, and varied between different learner groups and their abilities. Certainly it has become an issue in HE generally, as students increasingly anticipate a mode of learning based on their experience, and currently they tend not to be given an opportunity for this in the early stages of their studies.

Our intention now is to extend the remit of future research in this area to focus further on students' pre-conceived and already learned approaches to the use of the CPJ, looking more closely at how their understandings are shaped

by the experience of pre-degree education and assessment demands. Much more remains to be done.

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Biographies

Claire Scanlon and **Paul Grivell** work together as course leaders on the photography and media arts degrees at Northbrook College, Sussex. Northbrook is an affiliated college of the University of Brighton.

Claire is an exhibiting artist and academic. She has worked as a visiting lecturer and practitioner in a number of HE institutions in London and the South of England. She is interested in how the subjective and experiential nature of aesthetic practice interrogates knowledge.

Paul's background is in photographic education though his interests range widely in the field of arts practices. He has worked in formal and informal education, including primary and secondary schools, further education and in the community. He has particular interests in the role of creativity in education, and the role of education in creativity.