

Developing an Experimental Retreat-Based Model for Fine Art Theory-Practice Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This is a report on the *Words in Many Voices Theory-Practice Retreat* for AUB students, held at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire, 29 -30th June 2017. It was supported by the teaching and development fund at Arts University Bournemouth.

When I was coming of age as an artist, writer and educator, I was incredibly fortunate to have been guided by teachers who acted out of deep respect for my art practice and my intellectual life. They were rigorous and exacting – but they also allowed my thinking and material experiments to take their own form, rather than imposing a set of readymade coordinates. They helped me cultivate a lifelong sense of joy in learning, making, experimenting, and sharing my work with others. As an educator, I continually think about how I can do my students the same service. This of course is complicated by the fact that the contexts in which teaching takes place are continually changing. To do the same service means constantly reinventing the practice of teaching – and taking an experimental approach to the task of understanding how teaching is situated within larger institutional structures and strictures.

Like many educators working in British HE, I often find myself in a double bind. On the one hand, I must respect the bureaucratic procedures through which British universities are obliged to work. On the other hand, I am deeply concerned with the negative effects this has on students and their intellectual lives. I fear the increasingly metrified conditions within which students and educators must work (with ever-more emphasis placed on scoring, surveys and assessments), combined with increased financial pressures for both institutions and students, create an atmosphere of anxiety in HE institutions. Such an atmosphere makes it newly important to rethink how educators might guide students in one of their most important tasks: to develop their own, internal compass as to what constitutes a robust, lively, critical and deeply engaged creative and intellectual practice.

In 2017, I applied to develop a theory-practice retreat at the Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire. I wanted to devise a learning activity that would extend the non-assessed offerings on the AUB BA Fine Art programme, and to give students an opportunity to develop a sense of their expanding professional practice. I also wanted to encourage students to develop their own internal compass about their research practice, and to help cultivate independence from the external validation of marks as indicators of their success as artists and thinkers. I wanted to round out the CPD offerings already on Fine Art, to include a combined theory and practice event, giving students a chance to experience theory in an experiment-driven and hands-on environment. And I wanted to work with the ‘retreat’ format to give students a chance to learn about residencies and retreats that they might seek out after their degrees – and to model the importance of collaborating with other practitioners as they continued to develop as artists beyond university.

I chose to set up a theory-practice retreat at the Wysing Arts Centre for a variety of reasons: primarily because of the very high quality of their experimental programming, their ongoing

engagement with experimental pedagogy and their collaboration with a wide range of researchers and communities. As an institution that mostly works with high level emerging to established artists, but which also offers some student retreats, Wysing was an excellent institution to bring to students' attention for future opportunities. I proposed a two-day theory-practice retreat consisting of learning about Wysing from curator Lotte Juul Petersen; "slow viewing" exercises in response to Wysing's summer exhibition, curated by Jesse Darling; one-to-one tutorials with Juul Petersen; and student-led activities and experiments relating to the theme "words in many voices" (chosen to complement the theme of Wysing's summer exhibition). I was awarded AUB's Teaching Development funding for the project.

A call for applications invited students to propose an activity they could lead during the retreat, related to the theme. Students could discuss a reading or cultural artefact they had selected; or, lead a practical experiment relating to the theme and/or Wysing's programming. As always when offering extra-curricular opportunities by application, I stressed that gaining experience in applying for residencies and retreats was valuable; I offered feedback to those not selected. Applications were assessed by the Fine Art team, based on quality and suitability of the proposal. The stated aims of the retreat were: (1) to produce a research file of experiments, notes, sketches and ideas for artworks, which students could use to enrich their ongoing research and studio practice; and (2) to reflect on how theory and practice interrelate. Students were encouraged to lead their own, self-directed collaborative exhibition or presentation of work after the retreat. Six students were selected.

The Retreat

On arrival, the students received an introduction to Wysing, its grounds and its programming; they stayed in the onsite farmhouse. I led a series of "slow viewing" experiments in response to the summer exhibition, during which students were asked to do creative writing experiments in response to artworks of their choice. Afterwards, the group engaged in an in-depth discussion of the exhibition.

The students led a variety of workshops. After each, I held a group discussion to help students think through the theoretical implications of their experiments and promote critical reflection. This meant that the theoretical discussions were contingent on what happened in the student-led experiments; and students allowed the discussions to feed back into their research files.

Student-led workshops included: a sound-diagramming experiment, in which students recorded sounds on a long scroll of ticker tape; discussions on theoretical texts chosen by students; dinner and discussion in the farmhouse; minimalist music listening, collaging in response to the retreat theme; and an experimental automated poetry session, using smartphones and predictive text technologies. Each activity related to the voice and sound, allowing the reflective discussions to build from one to the next.

After the retreat, participants filled out a questionnaire, in which they reflected on how the learning experience at Wysing differed from classroom learning, and how this might affect their practices and ways of thinking.

Participant Responses

Responses to the questionnaire were generally very positive. Below, I'll excerpt from the questionnaires anonymously, with a focus on those responses that give a sense of how the structure of the retreat affected the development of self-directed learning strategies.

Describe your experience of the Wysing retreat. What was it like for you to participate in the student-led experiments and activities? What was it like to learn about Wysing's programming? What was it like to have a studio visit with a Wysing curator?

"Preparing a talk for the good of sharing ideas without the strain of marks really gave me room to breathe and a small group creates a very relaxed and talkative environment. Overall I left feeling very enriched, inspired and much more confident in my practice."

“Wysing was a worthwhile experience. It was interesting and creatively stimulating to experience learning with student-led experiments, it was relaxed and that made the practice part of this retreat extremely fun and laid back, which produced interesting results in different tasks.”

“...Learning about Wysing’s programming helped me to understand what field the organisation is interested in, like “thinking beyond your own body but on your own context” as the curator told us. It seemed to me that it is a place that tries to keep alive the dialogue between artists and community in relation to today’s political and technological landscapes.”

Which aspect of the retreat was most exciting, interesting, or impactful for you? What do you feel you learned from this aspect of the retreat?

“I think the writing exercises we did for the slow viewing of the gallery has impacted me the most. I found it really insightful and have never done this before. Now when I go to shows and galleries I will spend more time on one element and focus on the depth of the piece”.

“The exhibition was both exciting and impactful. The works themselves were so beautiful. I learnt a lot from the exhibition space in terms of curation and logistics. It was interesting to see multiple moving image/ sound pieces work so well together in a relatively small gallery.”

What impact do you feel the retreat might have on your work? Has the experience of working in a group affected your approach to your practice?

“I have worked collaboratively a lot previously, but working with a new group was really refreshing. The retreat has helped me to resolve my work more in terms of conceptualising bits, but working with the group and making audio and visual recordings has inspired new video works that I am making now, and I hope to get feedback from the same group prior to the exhibition/publication.”

“The retreat helped me get used to just making art without hesitation; it was a hands-on experience, during various workshops. I wish to bring this aspect into my studio practice, learn to start making with short exercises which will help with creative thinking.”

Did the Wysing retreat change the way you think of the relationships between theory and practice in your work?

“Definitely, in the way that I understand theory to have such a causal relationship with practice. Instead letting myself absorb theory and discussion and not pressurising the work to ‘portray’ this in any way. I gained a respect for ideas and artworks to have their own autonomy away from theory. However I feel as if being conscious of theory plays a role in producing the kind of person you are and the ideas that you generate.”

“In a way, yes! I used to focus more on theory and give little time to practice; this retreat re-informed me that they actually go hand in hand. As I’m heading into third year, this new way of relating to theory and practice will be useful to start the ball rolling as soon as I head back.”

“The retreat strengthened even more my opinion about the importance of the relationship between theory and practice”.

At Wysing, we explored experimental pedagogy and combined theory and practice in new ways. What was different about the way teaching and learning happened during the retreat, compared to the way it happens in a classroom environment at university? What was helpful in exploring these alternative ways of teaching and learning?

“I felt as if the intimacy of small group teaching teased out much more discussion and there is much less pressure in regards to talking in front of a small group. I also felt that we could go into more depth and really get used to using a certain dialect when we had more time and less people and no curriculum to guide us except our collective decision making”.

“It was different to university because it felt less stunted. It was a full-on experience... however I didn’t feel drained like I do at university. I’m not sure how to describe it but this way of learning left me feeling positively energised and ready to create.”

“I found it quite interesting that there was not a top-down learning as usually happens. Instead, the workshop model was kind of a just-in-time system where the entire group worked adapting moment by moment to the demands of each activity. Therefore there was a fluid communication and ideas exchange between all the participants on a horizontal plane rather than a centralized vertical structure. I did not learn new things only from our tutor and the Wysing curator but from the other participants as well.”

Conclusion

The student responses demonstrate a high degree of reflection about how the Wysing retreat affected the way they understand teaching and learning. From the interview results, students seemed to particularly appreciate the following:

Learning about a host institution’s programming through first-hand experience;

Engaging in open-ended (not learning outcome-bound) learning in small groups and alternate environments;

Being able to lead teaching sessions themselves, and to diversify the ways in which they participate in teaching and learning sessions;

Being able to be part of non-hierarchical research environments, in which they teach, learn and direct discussions in equal measure;

Being able to discuss theoretical content in tandem with hands-on experimentation and activities;

Being able to “relax” in an intensive teaching and learning environment outside of assessment criteria, and with much more focus on enjoying the process of learning as a group

The students’ deep appreciation of the retreat model underscores the importance of providing open-ended, collaborative and non-assessed learning opportunities within (and beyond) ever more metrified Higher Education environments. Such opportunities could be offered within a programme; or, they might usefully bring students from different departments together for experimental sessions, focused on a particular theme. As a facilitator to this retreat, it was an absolute pleasure to work with students outside of the strictures of coursework and assessment.

As Irit Rogoff and others have noted, there has been an “educational turn” in art and curating, according to which many curators and art institutions, concerned with the increasing limitations placed on university teaching by financial pressures and metrics, have adopted experimental pedagogical models within their own walls.¹ They have tried to keep alive more open-ended, and less results-driven, forms of pedagogy that might be less able to survive in universities, the more driven by survey and test results the latter become. The retreat at Wysing points to the value of taking some of the lessons of the educational turn into the university, to help students expand their awareness of pedagogical techniques, cultivate a sense of separateness from educational metrics, and open up new ways of understanding of how they might continue teaching and learning beyond university.

¹ Irit Rogoff, “Turning,” e-flux journal #0, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/> (Accessed: 4 September, 2017).

Author

Emily Rosamond is an artist and writer. Her research stems from an interest in how historically situated performances of self are intertwined with developments in financial and informatic infrastructures. Her recent publications have appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, *Paragrana*, *Finance and Society*, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, *Moneylab Reader* (Institute of Network Cultures) and *Are We All Addicts Now?* (Liverpool University Press). She is Lecturer in Visual Cultures and Joint Programme Leader, BA Fine Art & History of Art at Goldsmiths, University of London.

