Collaboration is Uncomfortable

Terri Newman

Abstract

Artist/Teacher/Researcher: I see this identity as one of collaborations. It is one that I share with my colleagues and students. Each day, with others we question, develop, think, create and rebound ideas, changing and moulding them, as we do materials and matter, backwards and forwards, in dialogue with one another. In the absence of these interactions, alone in my flat, I've been thinking of the comfort that comes from not having my ideas challenged, although we continue our learning digitally, it feels stunted. Without our community we must travel a road upon which our own ideas are absolute and this I believe limits the learning experience. It is being outside of one's comfort zone, having ones ideas challenged and being asked to see something differently that I believe is at the core to learning, but it comes at the cost of feeling uncomfortable.

Keywords

collaboration, practice research, post-sixteen, pedagogy, art and design, post-sixteen

In this article I will examine the 'uncomfortability' of collaboration and how it is in fact this discomfort that facilitates learning. I will discuss how learning happens at the borders of both body and understanding, how with each interaction, our understanding is broken apart and remade anew. I will cite Karan Barad (2007) and Jaques Lacan (2006) to discuss the entangled nature of learning and how it occurs at the limits of comfortability.

I will discuss how collaborative learning in my own practice is infrequently pleasant. Drawing on five years' research into collaborative pedagogies, this article will discuss how I encourage discomfort in both myself and learners and nurture a trust in uncomfortability. In my practice-based research I have been investigating the pedagogy of collaboration and facilitating a curriculum that encouraged co-authored working as a pedagogy of the 'visual' arts in post-sixteen education.

The Academy is an industry specialist school for young people aged 14–19 and I have had the honour of heading their visual arts department for the last two

years. At post-sixteen we deliver the common pre-university qualification: the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A Level) in art and photography, as well as the less common: the UAL Extended diploma in Art and Design [1]. The young artists that we teach are predominantly white working class and their aspirations for the future are commonly low. Approximately 15.3 per cent of our students are eligible for free school meals, a government funded scheme that provides lunches to children from low income families in the UK compared to 14.1 per cent (Department for Education 2019b) in schools across the UK. At the Academy 31 per cent of learners are registered as having special educational needs compared to 14.9 per cent of the national average (Department for Education 2019a). The art at the Academy is not what one would traditionally expect to see in the secondary classroom. Work often appears chaotic, is large, sometimes unfinished and is co-authored. Process and purpose is of much greater importance than outcome. This article seeks to untangle some of the ways in which collaboration can lead to and can cause us to feel a level of discomfort and that is in these moments of discomfort that learning occurs.

As I write this article (June 2020) we are currently experiencing a 'lockdown' due to the coronavirus outbreak. All schools, bars, gyms and places of worship have been closed for three months and although restrictions are beginning to ease in the city of London, schools are unlikely to reopen for the remainder of the academic year.

Like many people, the way that I have been doing my job over the past two months has changed dramatically. My usual habitat is a very large room, made up of two parts. The majority of the space is segmented into 30 small studios, strewn with detritus. It is unkempt, messy and the most wonderful creative chaos. The front third of the space holds one large table, big enough to seat 20 people. Between 8 am and 8.30 am, before the artists arrive, the space is quiet. I walk around looking at the work stations, marvelling at the creativity of the young people. I leave them notes, questions, books and sometimes move things around the room that I think might inspire or probe; but mostly I just take the time to think. The space is calm during this time and it makes me feel excitement for the possibility of the day. When they come, you know they are there. It's a sensory overload and I know it will not stop for the next five hours.

Some come with questions, what do I think about this or that? Some with complaints, ailments and ideas. Some burst through my doors bright eyed, moving at a million times a second and others limp in, surprised that they appear to find themselves out of their beds. They play music, dance, swear, push one another and create cacophony as they bound in but they know what they're here for and they bring themselves around that large table, leaning, laying and on top of one another and I welcome them to another exciting day in paradise. The sense that I get from these young artists is an ownership and confidence in the space, it is positioned as belonging to us: it is not 'my classroom' it is 'the studio'. It is here that they continue their work together and like doctors on rounds we walk around the studio discussing the work in progress. It is in these discussions that the artists find new meaning together. They say 'Have you thought of this?' or 'I've heard if you dry the resin this way or that, you will get a better result.' These moments are informal and they require restraint on my part. It's difficult to interject if the advice from a student contradicts my own methods or thought processes; I have to trust that succeed or fail, the suggestion from a peer requires my trust in the learning process.

At the Academy collaborative practice is built into the structure of our post-sixteen art and design provision, students work together on common goals and are encouraged to see themselves as a community of practice (Wenger-Traynor 1998) rather than artists who's practice exists as separate from one another. The visual arts curriculum at the Academy is designed to be an exercise in Paulo Freire's notion of 'critical consciousness' (Freire 2005 [1974]), and we do that through questioning ourselves, our position and or decisions. We acknowledge that no artist enters the department an empty vessel: 'we take with us our values, gender, politics ethnicity … we also take our values, assumptions, categories feelings and previous experiences' (Coe *et al.* 2017, 73). When creating artwork with others we begin by addressing the similarities and, most importantly, the differences between artist in the same group and often this brings about discussions highlighting differences. For example: two young artist may agree that they dislike wearing school uniform although one because it represents for them a system of control but the other because they do not have a washing machine at home and so it is often difficult to keep clean.

Asking learners to examine their existing prejudices and assumptions means that I must also turn to my own. Like them, I feel uncomfortable when my ideologies are challenged. I must remember that (within the realms of child protection) my ideas are not absolute and are open to the challenge of the students. As teachers, many of us have learned to say 'I don't know' but how many feel comfortable saying 'I got it wrong'? Power is inescapable in the secondary setting. Through the structure of the institution, power relations are reproduced (Kulz 2017) and it is only by discussing them that we may begin to shift them. I control the content space and pace of learning, my position as teacher positions me as 'knower' and them as 'unknower', this asymmetry of power awarded to me by the institution is performed within the secondary institution, so much so that to when I attempt to step backwards from it, this can instil panic in the students. In 2014 I was working on my first inter-institutional collaboration project and in the first weeks I decided to relinquish all restrictions, rules and parameters for the work of the learners. What I found that students became stifled and expressed a heightened fear of 'getting it wrong' as they attempted to navigate a project without rules that existed within an institutionalised context that has so many rules both seen and unseen.

We ask the young artists to think about their prejudices and differences but also about our lived experience in correlation with the lived experience of others, both the other (individual) and the Lacanian Big Other (Lacan 2006): the rules and language that underpin all interaction and how these form patterns of understanding that underpin our lived experience. Visual arts at the Academy are positioned as research methods by which we can investigate and interpret our world.

In the art world collective action and collaborative making has become common in contemporary practice. Artists across the world such as the Guerrilla Girls in New York; The Raqs Media Collective in Delhi and the 2015 Turner prize winners Assemble do not credit the work of individual artists, craftspeople and designers but rather the sum of their parts. In the pre-university UK education system, teachers must declare that 'the work produced is solely that of the candidate' (AQA 2020) and therefore the work created by students who undertake collaborative methods cannot be assessed. Teachers therefore are less likely to include these experiences in the curriculum.

Each programme of study is positioned as a community of learning, outlined by Etienne Wenger-Traynor (1998, 1) as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. The community of learning within each programme is enforced through both a weekly critical meeting that I discussed above in which artists discuss their work, but also in an underlying culture established by the teaching staff that positions teachers as learners and learners as teachers.

Collaborative production or art making is a formalised method of teaching and learning and is built into the curriculum. Collective production and collaboration is a process by which more than one young artist works together in a creative process to achieve the same objective. I do not consider this to be an exercise in distributing labour, but in working simultaneously on the same problem and moving into a new space of understanding together. Deleuze & Guittari's notion of becoming, positions the individual as a universe, expanding outwards. In practises that encounter the other, one universe expands into another and vice versa to create an entangled 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guittari 2013) where the knowledge of one student and the other become intertwined. Collaborative practice is a methodology that can be employed in an attention of the social, each student turning their attention to the invisible constructs that govern their lives and see themselves reflected back through the person with whom they are working. Students are asked to undertake projects in which they create a co-authored artwork over a number of weeks whilst 'mapping' their journey using a large mind map that outlines their thinking and ideas at each stage of the project. Learners are then asked to reflect upon what and how they learned from the other person, how their universe expanded or grew as they managed the needs of the other. I propose that art making with others is a cartography of the Deleuzian affect, mapping the strata and segmentations that bring the humans to point X, the moment of working together. For a collaborator this requires a level of examination that can feel intrusive. If together we create a cartography of affect, we must turn our attention to and accept that there is not existence of free choice, only one in which we are a product of our affected interactions.

Learners are asked to look to one another, recognising that 'the role of the human being in the world is not a passive one', that each individual has the capacity to 'make critical choices and transform reality' (Freire 2005 [1974], 3). The way that artists receive feedback is much more in line with what one would expect from a university than a school. During weekly group critiques (a practice more commonly seen in tertiary education in which one artist presents their work before the floor is opened to discussion about the work), the role of the teacher is more like that of a conductor of voices than a giver of knowledge. Over the course of the programme, learners gain much greater confidence in both their ability to provide constructive critique and to ask questions of their community. I find my requirement to call forth the voices of others diminishes over time.

The Lacanian human reality is a co-construct of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real (Lacan 2006). Being in the world is not simply a case of having action upon it; we are in fact excluded from relation to the world unless we adhere to the underlying currents of relations that underpin all interaction within it. Lacan uses the term 'Other' characterised with a capital O to refer to the subconscious underlying linguistic and performative structures that govern the construct of acting in the world. He uses the term 'other' (small o) to refer to the idealised image of the self as subject *in* the world as desired by the ego. The subjective self as fully

Terri Newman

formed, permanently falls away as we strive to construct ourselves as the ego desires. We are misunderstood and in turn misunderstand, permanently alienated.

I would like to ask the reader to consider the classroom as a room of *others*, each in a private hell in which their discontent ego tortures them for their inability to live up to expectations. The *Other*, I position here as perceived success, be that social, economic or academic. Each *other* must involuntarily engage with the over-lapping and at times contradictory rules that govern success in these categories or risk yet further failure.

Existing in isolation, in part offers a solution to this crisis. 'How can I fail if there is no one to compare myself to?' But the ego remains unsatisfied. In collabo-rative pedagogies we unravel the *Other*. Working with other artists allows us the opportunity to question why it is that we do what we do. But it comes at the price of confronting our failure: we must accept that we are nothing more than actors playing a part.

In *Meeting the Universe Half Way*, Karan Barad uses the word 'intra-action' to replace 'interaction'. Intra-action removes agency from the individual and attributes it to the dynamic reconfigurings and entanglements of the universe en/folding in the world (Barad 2007, 141). The term 'intra-actions' allow us to see relationships with matter and its ability to affect and be affected in equal measure. The Baradian universe is a series of unlimiting interactions between all matter at all times in which each thing exists in its own relationship to everything else and cannot be removed from it. Matter and meaning Barad tells us cannot be separated, not by 'chemical processing, or centrifuge, or nuclear blast' (Barad 2007, 3) and so in the art classroom where matter is manipulated with intention, one must turn their attention to 'meaning'. The artist may never create something new, they may only manipulate relata and must understand themselves as malleable as the clay between their hands.

Let me return to my classroom of *others*. I now ask us to consider each human in the room as an ongoing product of intra-actions, refolding and reconfiguring. Until joining us at the Academy, the rhetoric of the art student is that their objec-tive is to apply, with increasing proficiency, techniques to manipulate matter. The paint should be applied in the correct way to show light, the clay to show form without cracking. The young artist sees themselves as the employer of the materi-als, that they may direct to serve their cause for self-expression. Barad, amongst other new materialist philosophies, teach us that both matter and manipulators are already affecting one another and that we are not able to escape the act of being affected. 'Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the "Other." The intra-actively emergent "parts" of phenomena are co-constituted' (Barad 2007, 140). This is a difficult shift to undertake and means that each piece of work must be positioned not as one of self-expression but one of practice research into the unknown.

The boundary between what is known and the potential of what may be known is in a constant state of reconfiguring in relationship with the external. Knowing, or a journey towards it is perhaps the bread and butter of a teacher.

The etymology of 'education' is from the Latin with connotations of 'drawing out', 'bringing up' and 'leading forth' (Coe *et al*. 2017, 98). The leading forth of the student to a place of further understanding is quite literally the etymology of the term 'learning'. In the view of Barad (2007, 379), to the 'extent that humans partic-ipate in scientific or other practices of knowing, they do so as part of the larger material configuration of the world and its ongoing open-ended articulation'.

In collaborative pedagogies we must see being in the world as a function of rearranging and reconfiguring *with* it. What is difficult for learners is that they are unable to know. They must be asked to reject an objectivist ontology whist accepting that knowing is not a process that will ever reach a completion.

It is true that students have struggled to reject the notion that knowing 'is not a play of ideas within the mind' (Barad 2007, 342) but is an entanglement in which in which our world becomes differently intelligible to us and to itself. Knowing is packaged by educational institutions as a task that be completed. Once students have absorbed all material they are then to sit the exams. The examination process positions knowledge as something fixed and quantifiable. To discuss with young artist that what can be understood about matter, meaning or process may not be known by the teacher is an uncomfortable process for them as much as for me.

I ask them to trust me, to feel reassured that I have an understanding of my subject area. But when I tell them that they may understand it better than me, or interpret it in a way that is beyond me, this makes them feel uneasy. They do not trust that I have the 'excellent subject knowledge' (Department for Education 2016) required of me to hold this professional qualified teacher status. I certainly do not have the answer to these issues. When I propose that the learner may not know the material but must employ it as a research methodology, they usually believe that I am employing a teaching strategy in which they are tricked into figuring it out for themselves. I guess in a way they are, but it certainly is not a trick.

When I think about life at the Academy I have a deep sense of loss. The experience of studying visual arts there is very much one of being with – *with* the space, the art objects and *with* others – and there is a grief for the absence that comes from working within such a rich environment. There is another feeling though, one of reprieve. I position collaborative pedagogies not as the utopia for teacher relaxation in which one sits back, and admires as the learners teach themselves. It is an uncomfortable experience in which one occupies the lip of the unknown. In order to cultivate a culture of collaboration within the classroom one must not exercise 'false generosity' (Freire 2005 [1974], 44–5) but in fact honestly step into the unknown with the other learners. It's a leap of faith and it does not always pay off.

I began this article with a description of my classroom and the chaos that exists within. I have discussed through examples of my experience, how both the young artists at the Academy and myself experience uncomfortability whilst participating in collaborative practices and how we can use Lacan's theories of otherness and Barad's theories of entanglement allow us to see how we come to see the interconnectivity of our lives can perhaps shed some light on how we feel this way.

As restrictions begin to ease and I think about the construction of the programmes of study for next academic year I wonder how we will all manage the transition from isolation to one where we must confront our boundaries and accept a position of not knowing. Will we all have become so comfortable with our isolated status or will we return eager to confront our boundaries? My expectation is that, like myself, the young artists at the Academy are in equal parts excited and anxious of the prospect of being in the world with others again: it is the calm before the storm.

Terri Newman is the head of Visual Arts in an Academy in North London. Her practice-based PhD is in Arts and Learning at Goldsmiths University where she investigates collaborative pedagogies in post-sixteen education. Terri is preoccupied with untangling what can

be learned from collaborative pedagogues in art and design and advocates a space for them within the curriculum. Contact address: 107 Heron Road, Northstowe, Cambridgeshire, CB24 1AS, UK. Email: terri.newman.terri@gmail.com

Note

1. The UAL Extended Diploma in Art and design is a course underwritten by the University of Arts London (UAL 2020) and is a substantial qualification that is designed to provide students with the skills needed to progress to a career in the creative arts or degree level study in an arts subject.

References

AQA. (2020) AS and A-level Art and Design. Available at: https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/art-and-design/as-and-a-level/art-and-design (accessed 20 June 2020).

Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Coe, R., Waring, M., Hedges, L. & Arthur, J. (2017) *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education*. London: Sage.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2013) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitaliism and Schizophrenia*, Vol. 2. London : Bloomsbury.

Department for Education. (2016) Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537031/160712_-_PD_Expert_Group_Guidance.pdf (accessed 2 July 2020).

Department for Education. (2019a) Special Educational Needs in England: January 2019 (online). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2019 (accessed 13 June 2020).

Department for Education. (2019) Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics: January 2019 (online). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019 (accessed 13 June 2020).

Freire, P. (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Kulz, C. (2017) *Factories for Learning*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lacan, J. (2006) *Écrits*. New York: Norton.

UAL. (2020) UAL Level 3 Diploma and Extended Diploma in Art and Design (online). Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/partnerships/ual-awarding-body/qualifications/art-and-design/level-3-diploma-and-extended-diploma-in-art-and-design (accessed 12 June 2020).

Wenger-Traynor, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.