

Mind The Gap: Developing Contexts for Practice

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Case Study Research

Mind the Gap: Developing Contexts for Practice

An investigation into the development of patchwork texts as a model for enabling students to make progressive links between theory and practice on a BA (Hons) Fine Art course and how this model of delivery might support a more holistic assessment of contextual knowledge in which learning takes place and 'makes sense over time' and in relation to a range of experiences.

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Introduction and Context for research

The BA (hons) Fine Art course at Wolverhampton attracts a diverse student body, many of whom arrive with little cultural and contextual awareness of the subject and its contexts. Their prior learning experiences are usually highly structured and indelibly achievement linked i.e learning to pass exams rather than learning as personal growth or development and for many, study is combined with extensive work/family commitments. The course is also situated within a post '92 University and in keeping with the sector is highly modular and designed to provide students with a kind of freedom to follow different modes of study. Within this context we have found that students increasingly struggle to draw together the theoretical and historical ideas, personal/social 'life' experience and studio work into a meaningful art practice to an appropriate undergraduate level. They struggle to bridge the gap between modules that 'separate' out core ideas and experiences into discreet sets of learning outcomes and assessment tasks and transform this knowledge into 'practice'. This sense of dislocated learning is exacerbated by the imposition of a strict modular timetable of contact hours in which independent studio practice appears to be of secondary importance and almost not part of assessment (See Ayliffe & Mieves ...). The researchers on this project have a different generational experience of studying and teaching Fine Art but as a department we have acknowledged that the structural dimensions of teaching and learning increasingly imposed within the post'92 university system (academic mistrust and government quality data) on art and design courses during our careers appear to mitigate against student engagement, holistic learning and progression to the independent learner/ artists/designers prized by our art schools and creative industries in the past. As a result we started to research student attitudes to learning to locate the 'dislocation' and develop new approaches to delivery and assessment that aimed to provide students with platforms for drawing together and reflecting upon their different experiences that might generate a more acute connectivity between the different aspects or streams of knowledge that inform creative practice. The research has developed into a complete review of the modular structure within Wolverhampton School of Art and the models of

teaching practice explicated in this paper underpin new approaches to delivery and formative assessment that are core to this curriculum review.

Dirty Practice summary

In 2015-16 we undertook a research project looking at the BME attainment gap in the Faculty of Arts. We wanted to understand student 'engagement' better and to try and learn from the students what barriers to becoming our much wanted 'independent learners' they faced on a daily basis. We used a range of creative writing and drawing tasks to reveal the students attitudes and relationships to learning. The students identified a dislocation between (paid) work, home (free time) and study time (structured teaching hours) with little cross over or understanding of independent research/practice time. The tasks also revealed a very linear approach to research rather than a cyclical and ongoing model of practice in which making/reflection and revision creates a momentum and increasingly supports more in-depth and personally focussed projects. We found that students are not 'standing in the right place' to learn effectively on an independent and negotiated programme of study common to art and design practice. We found that rather than an attainment gap we were facing an expectation gap between staff and students around notions of engagement where learning is delivered within a schedule and not found through self-realisation.

In preparation for the academic year 2016-17 we looked at the work of Richard Winter on patchwork texts and specifically his paper: 'Contextualizing the Patchwork Text: Addressing Problems of Coursework Assessment in Higher Education'. We decided to explore whether a patchwork model might be adapted to our sector and usefully develop a more integrated understanding of social, theoretical and aesthetic interactions in the minds of our Fine Art students.

Winter describes the need to make assessment 'tasks coherent with their own experience' as opposed to 'tasks as external impositions'. This seems a vital aspiration for Fine Art students in a culture which relies on self-initiation of practice/projects and self-motivation to practice at a high level. We targeted a level 4 and a level 5 contextual module for this project and devised a range of patchwork tasks for each year group. The tasks aimed to support students to make links between theory and practice, to allow practitioner identities to emerge that referenced individual experience within a field of criticality and to support our students to become informed individual voices/decision makers.

In this case study, we will explore how we adapted Winters' patchwork methodology for a practice based Fine Art course and the impact this approach has had on the cohort as a whole in terms of achievement and progression. We will also explore the specific development of studio projects and how the different patchwork tasks created multiple opportunities throughout the modules for students to start to individuate and manage their learning and devise increasingly independent goals and decision making strategies that support ambition, progression and engagement.

Case Study 1: level 4: Constructing Practice: modelling the relationship between identity, making & material

In 2008, Christopher Frayling posed a series of questions in his talk on Research in Art and Design;

‘How can I tell what I think till I see what *I say*?’

‘How can I tell what I think till I see what *I make and do*?’

‘How can I tell what *I am* till I see what I make and do?’

This set of questions are ones of autobiography, personal development and communicable knowledge, the coming together of theory and practice with the realisation of self. These are significant intentions for teaching and learning in art education, and what is considered as the emergence of ‘visual intelligence’ (Fortnum, 2005). Visual intelligence can be defined as the capacity to articulate an artist’s encounters with and in response to ideas in their work whilst making it. This is not always about knowing but of not-knowing.

Materially speaking, a patchwork is a craft of sewing different elements together, a collage or multi-layered juxtaposition of designs, colours and fragments. Applying this thinking to Fine Art is useful - writing becomes a material that is personal, varied and seen as part of a wider body of practice. At level 4, we generated patchwork tasks (or ‘patches’) in response to lectures, exhibitions or students developing practice. These tasks were introduced over twelve weeks, allowing opportunity for students to produce and submit drafts for feedback that could be improved before the final submission. These were as follows:

- 1 An analysis of the relationship between two artworks chosen by the student following an exhibition visit.
- 2 A visual essay that documents a workshop activity undertaken by the student.
- 3 An individual documentation of an exhibition proposal that was presented in groups in class.
- 4 An essay response to ‘Why are there no great women artists?’ by Lynda Nochlin.
- 5 Artist comparisons of the student’s choice.
- 6 Remaking of an object plus a short fictive narrative to accompany it.
- 7 A short literature review of an artist connected to the student’s studio practice.
- 8 A critical response to the question ‘What is the role of art school in society?’
- 9 A reflective statement which evaluates the patchwork tasks and considers any patterns that emerge that are individual to the student.

To consider the significance of this assessment intervention for fine art education, we focus here on the perceptions of students, as expressed through evaluative questionnaires and the patches themselves. In addition to this we aim to review a shift from the purely descriptive towards a reflective, critical and discursive form of writing and how this is utilised within practice as a form of visual intelligence.

Adjusting to Higher Education

Through asking; what is the best thing, the least successful thing and what can be improved about the module, we gained an insight into student perceptions. It was quickly recognized that the frequency and immediacy that patchwork texts demand challenged students, with some stating that; “*there was too much work,*” that “*less written tasks,*” and “*more time*” would improve the module. The ongoing, sustained engagement elicited through the patchwork conflates with prior learning experiences. A request for “*less frequent hand-ins with bigger word count*” demonstrates how traditional ‘essayist literacies’ provide a level of institutionalised comfort or certainty, as well as highlighting the disparity between what is

expected at A-level for example and the workloads expected at degree level. However, nearly all students who completed the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that they found the module 'intellectually stimulating' and that they 'learned a lot through the module' indicating that they benefitted from undertaking the work.

This module has challenged me to the fullest extent, stretching my academic capabilities.

It's changed how confident I am within myself. It's allowed me to progress with the themes in my project that I would have been scared to do before.

The cross-disciplinary approach to writing that the patchwork approach entails encourages students to communicate through different writerly means and discover things about their own skills.

When looking through all of my patchwork I notice that I have become quite an opinionated person...But I also notice that my vocabulary isn't keeping up with what I have to say. I now know to try and keep developing and working on this.

Students working from a descriptive to an analytical stance with regard to their own artistic practice. Early patches draw upon student experiences in galleries and workshops

We were asked to write a critical response to the question, what role does art school play in society? This question led me into thinking what role we as students play, and therefore as artists individually.

Relationship between writing and studio practice

The studio holds within it a plethora of stuff with unknown possibility. Collections of objects, materials, experiments and images that the artist may not use, but holds potential for the future. The studio is a tool that students learn to use this as much as they learn to use writing. Each has the probability of making mistakes, 'even failing to learn what is expected in a given situation usually involves learning something else instead' (Wenger, 1998: p.8). In material/visual practices, these moments of productive failure indicate the differences between 'intention' and 'outcome.' Material processes of making unfold in unexpected ways and it is here that critical self-reflection on the physical acts of making are important in realising what could be learnt from the 'something else.'

The tasks made me think a lot about my own practice, I feel that I don't think enough during the physical creative process. The tasks made me do just that, it made me think, how did I reach that outcome?

Throughout the patches we sought to provide opportunity for students to explore their interests, whether that be through the artists researched, exhibitions proposed or objects they chose to remake, 'the artists own sense of discovery – or revelation if you will – is a dominant driver for making art work' (Fortnum, 2009, p.2). Positioning students at the centre of this assessment framework allows for the beginnings of a fusion between personal, visual and bodily intelligence (personal experience, academic knowledge). Regarding the assessment structure not as an external imposition, but to identify with it, claim ownership of it, make it their own.

Without realising it the themes were consistent through my patchworks and if I'd have purposefully created that patchwork based on a certain theme, then the outcome of my essays and my responses would have been fake or invalid.

At first, I found this difficult due to not being as creative through the use of words as I am with other forms of practice, however the more I got in to the task the easier it became, and I found myself portraying the overall issues I was trying to refer to in my studio practice.

Winter outlines the importance of the Patchwork text in enabling students to 'redefine' the content of the course material. To review, edit and interpret what the material means to them. It is clear that students' capacity for reflective practice increased as the module progressed. Connections between what was taking place in the patchwork tasks and what was taking place in the studio were coming into contact with one another, sometimes unintentionally.

A piece of work I created was inspired by one of the patchwork tasks which asked for a creative writing piece in which we wrote from the perspective of an object that we remade. I wrote from the perspective of a mobile phone. I found that by doing this it was easier to articulate my thoughts and opinions...it helped my studio practice and I decided to share this piece of writing through a photography piece by sending the relating extract through a message on a phone.

Here we can begin to envisage a dynamic where the student perceives writing as a productive entity in the development of her practice. Relieved from a prescription to form the student could write from a different place, one without rules which brought about unanticipated results, confidence and assurance in her own mind.

Idea that knowledge is not total but ongoing – this is a step in developing independence and independent practice.

Overall, students who fully engaged in all aspects of patchwork tasks (handing them in for review) keeping up with workloads, made deeper connections between their writing, materials and practice. Using this as a space to think through their ideas, situating their work in response to questions and research.

Challenging Expectations in all directions

We can no longer make the assumption that students will enter higher education with a sense of preparedness. Our expectations as educators needs to shift to support this gap, and it would appear that the Patchwork Text approach encourages students to reflect increasingly upon what they think, say make and do – and as a result the development of themselves and their learning at level 4.

As a teacher, lectures and seminars take on a different emphasis when constructing patchwork tasks. The relationship between the two should oscillate, contemplating how the knowledge developed through the lecture can be used and applied to re-inform and deepen student experience. In this sense, the patchwork model becomes a method for creating space for each other in the contexts of education and academic writing; we are placed in the position of the student to consider how the patches re-define what is expected of ourselves and students in writing.

Case Study2: Level Five

The intent of this case study is to discuss the impact of contextual research patchwork document, which was introduced to level five students as part of a summative assessment. The intention was to provide a framework in which the students could contextually discuss and explore their practice and indeed develop a theoretical framework, which could be developed in the studio. In essence, relationships between practice and theory that oscillates rather than sit in opposition. A further component of the patchwork document was to enable a vocabulary that shifted from a subjective description to a judgement that aligned with a critically reflective model. The core theoretical concepts employed in the patchwork and subsequent delivery relate to experiential learning, constructive alignment, radical constructivism and the zone of proximal development. The concept of the rhizome has been initially introduced as a method of alignment between the four stages of learning discussed by Kolb: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These stages have been applied through the patchwork and discussed through the case study. Through this case study a framework has been devised to illustrate how contextual narrative can form the basis of a student's studio practice. Central to the case study has been the demonstration that as a lecturer who facilitates the students to identify and take ownership of their research it not only enriches their academic journey but also prepares them for professional development. The case study has generated surprising results – not least of which is the importance the patchwork places as an early warning for student feeling overwhelmed with the tasks and generates a strategy for early tailored intervention.

This case study addresses two key issues: Firstly, the continued alignment between research undertaken through the contextual lectures and the students practice within the studio setting; secondly, how through the introduction of the contextual research patchwork document a wider notion of inclusivity and engagement with the University of Wolverhampton could be addressed whilst fostering learning in the studio. The initial theoretical model would employ constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) in order to foster learning within the studio and inclusivity within the wider network of the University.

It is exactly the legacy of 'post '92' Universities, which can be addressed with the anecdotal evidence presented by a student in 2017 who stated 'why can't we just make work, why does there always have to be a contextual narrative attached' and why as a lecturer it is so important to provide a model that enables the student to frame their practice as the contextual narrative (Ramsden, 2003).

Findings:

The alignment of practice and theory in a studio environment: An examination into the impact of introducing a contextual patchwork as a summative assessment:

The assessed component of the module was a written essay and now included the completion of the patchwork document. The patchwork would be delivered incrementally initially. This was presented as assignment task one in week two and assignment task two in week four and the remainder of the five tasks being made available in week six through CANVAS the new virtual learning environment (VLE) being adopted by the University. The patchwork would provide the focus for the research needed for the essay. The aim was to enable a theoretical framework that could contextually support the student's studio practice, which also formed the basis of the essay question the students had to respond to:

What is the theoretical framework that contextually supports your studio practice?

The module was designed so that the lecture would take place in the morning and a seminar in the afternoon in effect a contextual studies day. The lecture would discuss established theoretical models within fine art academia and the seminars would comprise of pre-selected essays being read prior and discussed through Socratic questioning within the seminar. The students were tasked with identifying something they agreed with; something they disagreed with and something they didn't understand.

In addition to this initial model of critical analysis the student were introduced to Barrett's (1994) Principles of Interpretation in the formation of critical judgements:

Critical judgments are much more than mere opinions. Judgments are informed critical arguments about the value of a work of art. Judgments should never be given without reasons, and they ought to be based on definable criteria. Judgments without reasons are both uninformative and non-responsive. (Barrett, 1994. p.108).

The notion of critical judgment was discussed as a method that could be employed in the studio and as an extension of the framework to be developed. The relevance this impacted on the seminars greatly and resulted in a change in the delivery. Following the initial seminars in which critical essays were analysed a shift or new rupture was explored. The students were encouraged to bring an example of their studio work to the seminar and rather than describe *what* their practice were *about* to the group. The group was encouraged to apply critical judgement and significantly remember: "An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about." (Barrett, 1994.

p.75). As a form of risk taking it was agreed by all students undertaking the exercise that the student who presented their work did not explain it or respond to the judgements applied until the end.

The core concept was experiential learning that the practical element of making was forefront (rather than adopting a concept as a discursive justification) and the practice could be applied to the contextual research being discussed. In order to maintain a conducive environment, no student had an obligation to offer a judgement or bring an artwork to be critiqued as an assessed component – the core belief of student enablement was maintained at all times. However, the students were keen to participate. As the students developed, a deeper level of Socratic questioning became evident and they were able to take ownership of their contextual research and apply it in an observable transaction (A2).

Conversely, a diagram was developed as a visual reference for a theoretical framework being explored through the patchwork and illustrates a potential framework (K4, A5) – see fig 1:

Key for fig 1

HA - historical artist

CA – contemporary artist

Q – questioning and in the patchwork demonstrated by a fully referenced quote

E – exhibition

AW - artwork



- Student's studio practice

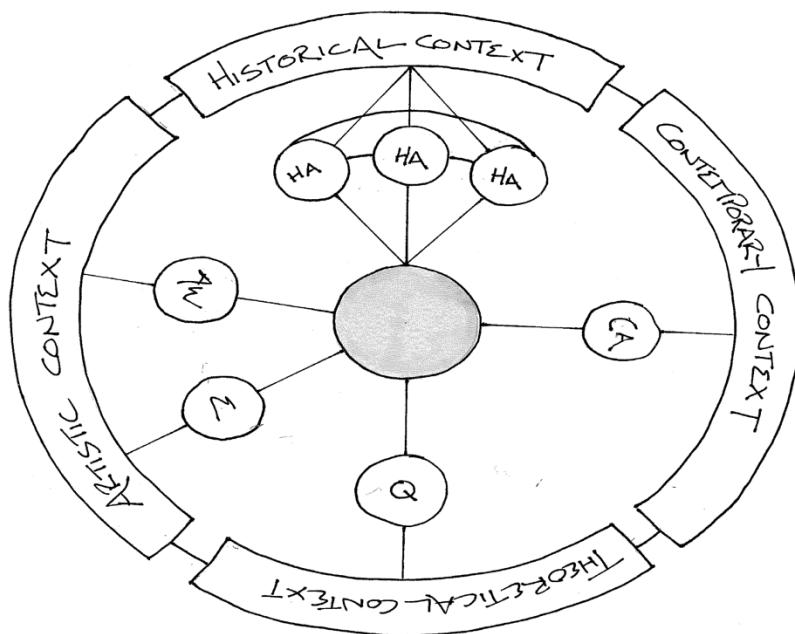


fig 1: Theoretical framework to contextually support a studio practice.

Through the development of this diagram it is important to note that the grey circle, which represents the students work, is not labelled. The students practice isn't labelled in order to re-enforce that the framework isn't employed as a descriptive narrative (K2). This isn't a narrative for the conceptual underpinning of students practice, but rather as network, in which the practice can be discussed in a wider theoretical context. The intentions behind this development were to enable the students with a critical framework that can be employed within their own practice and also in the discussions of other artists practice. This was introduced enable a confidence when entering the art world in their future careers (V4). It was core to ensuring that the philosophy of student-centred learning remained paramount. This was intended to facilitate an

intellectual and conceptual *rupture* for the students approach to the art world. It is recognised that a student-centred model acknowledges the qualitative differences need in assisting students learning academic content (Ramsden, 2003).

It has been the aim to enable the students to recognise - their practice can be the contextual narrative and are enabled to apply critical judgement in the analysis of their own and other artist's practices. The lecture and seminar series has been difficult in it's planning, often I have had to re-devise material to better align to a student-cantered methodology. The development of the patchwork has related directly to the theoretical underpinning discussed in the notions of experiential learning, constructive alignment, radical constructivism and the zone of proximal development. The theoretical underpinning has greatly improved the student academic journey.

To reflect on fig 1, through maintaining a directly relevant content within the lecture series (the contextual ring observed on the outside of the diagram) and thus relating it to established studio practices. Maintaining this through the theoretical under-pinning explored through this case study I believe, has been central to the success of the patchwork. The student's studio practice has become the stable force, an interstices or rupture, for the contextual framework explored. Ensuring the structure of the lecture and seminar series has directly influenced this. At its core this demonstrates the potential of andragogy. Whilst a large portion of the content was delivered in either a lecture theatre or seminar room, the emphasis of this case study was to foster learning in the studio environment. It has been through the alignment explored through the patchwork that has striven to help students evaluate the practice they undertake and re-examine the notion of a contextual narrative they explore through the studio. As students have advanced and take ownership they have the potential to progress through this differently and it is this difference that has to be recognised as enhancing the cultural melting pot of the studio.