

Sharing practice: the specialist creative arts college environment as critical and creative pedagogical space.

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Summary-Crynodeb

College-based higher education (CBHE) exists in an academic space between the Higher Education Institution (HEI) and Further Education (FE). Likewise, a crafts-based creative education could be said to occupy a conceptual space between higher vocational skills-based learning and the more vertical knowledge structures and concept-based practice of Fine Art. This article argues the case for considering creative crafts and arts higher education existing in a liminal, and, therefore, a potential boundary-space which supports transformative learning. Crafts studio practices can also be considered as a critical counter-argument to 'students as consumers' and the increased marketisation of HE. In the crafts studio, knowledge is embodied in the object as part of an activity system which includes tools, tutors and peers and is part of a wider learning ecosystem. As such, it introduces particular pedagogical practices and learning environments (such as the crafts studio) which could support students in recontextualising knowledge to reconcile divides between theory and practice. Such spaces may help students learn valuable transferable skills necessary to thrive in a fluid 21st century context whilst learning specialist vocational skills. A debate around such practices and environments might hold use value to the wider sector.

Mae addysg uwch mewn coleg yn llenwi'r bwlch academaidd rhwng Sefydliad Addysg Uwch ac Addysg Bellach. Yn yr un modd, gellid dweud bod addysg greadigol sy'n seiliedig ar grefftau yn llenwi bwlch cysyniadol rhwng dysgu galwedigaethol uwch sy'n seiliedig ar sgiliau a'r strwythurau gwybodaeth mwy fertigol a'r arfer seiliedig ar gysyniadau sy'n gysylltiedig â Chelf Gain. Mae'r erthygl hon yn dadlau'r achos dros ystyried bod addysg uwch ym maes y celfyddydau a'r crefftau creadigol yn llenwi bwlch trothwy, ac felly, o bosibl, fwlch rhwng terfynau sy'n cefnogi dysgu trawsnewidiol. Yn ogystal gellir ystyried bod arferion stiwdios crefftau yn wrth-ddadl allweddol i 'fyfyrwyr fel cwsmeriaid' a marchnadeiddio AU yn gynyddol. Yn y stiwdio grefftau, mae gwybodaeth wedi'i hymgorffori yn yr amcan fel rhan o system gweithgarwch sy'n cynnwys offer, tiwtoriaid a chymheiriaid ac sy'n rhan o ecosystem dysgu ehangach. Fel y cyfryw, mae'n cyflwyno arferion addysgegol ac amgylcheddau dysgu penodol (megis y stiwdio grefftau) a allai gynorthwyo myfyrwyr i ail gyd-destunoli gwybodaeth i gysoni rhaniadau rhwng theori ac arfer. Gall y fath fylchau helpu myfyrwyr i ddysgu sgiliau trosglwyddadwy gwerthfawr sy'n angenrheidiol er mwyn ffynnu mewn cyd-destun 21ain ganrif cyfnewidiol wrth ddysgu sgiliau galwedigaethol arbenigol. Gallai dadl ynghylch arferion ac amgylcheddau o'r fath fod o werth o ran eu defnydd yn y sector ehangach.

Keywords: theory and practice, studio, recontextualisation of knowledge, creative arts teaching and learning

Introduction

This article aims to consider aspects of a specialist art college education within the context of its unique position as both College-based Higher Education (CBHE) and as a provider of a creative vocational education. Arguably, this position places the art college as deliverer of HE in a liminal educational space, inhabiting, as it does, a position that sits between mainstream HEI and FE.

This 'challenger' perspective may be particularly relevant given the current context; the continuing 'marketisation' of the HEI and the accompanying discourse of 'students as consumers' (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2011). This understanding of the academy presents epistemological concerns around students as passive consumers of knowledge (Martinez-Saenz & Schoonover, 2015) and the university as an 'experience' linked to social capital rather than skills or discipline. If such a framing leads to educational experiences that 'close' rather than 'open' out experience (Scott, 2016), or, at the very least, assumes frameworks which do not adequately reflect the complexity surrounding ideas of 'value' from a Higher Education experience (Woodall et al, 2014) then how can it foster dynamic, transferable skills which students need to thrive in an increasingly complex context (Blaschke, 2012).

The framing of students as 'consumers' has implications beyond the financial connotations and legal implications of Competitions and Market Authority (CMA) legislation. Students may also, in this model, identify as consumers of knowledge - passive recipients of existing knowledge rather than critical or creative thinkers. Such concerns hold educational and wider social implications if considered through Freire's banking principle (Freire, 2000), within which education is a social change agent, empowering individuals and supporting communities to thrive in an increasingly complex environment.

If our aim is to foster flexible learners with the capacity to create and implement solutions to complex real-life social, economic, political problems, particularly in a time of great social change, we need to consider a need for meaning-making to be jointly created within the academy with, rather than 'to' students. Such a need speaks to the complexities of 'student engagement' movements, and the importance of placing emphasis on collaborative action (Matthews, 2016).

From an employability perspective, supporting students' capacity to think critically and thrive in a 'fluid' 21st century context (Barnett and Coate, 2010) is undeniably important. Such skills support the individual, regardless of discipline, to thrive in a context of rapid technological change (Soffell, 2016). Such skills are not 'fixed' knowledge structures but rely on an individual's capacity to recontextualise knowledge, moving and applying information between theory and practice.

The particular learning environments offered as part of a higher vocational curriculum are also considered, with a focus on the studio environment as a liminal space which is neither site of production of object (workshop) or lecture theatre. The studio is considered as a space where knowledge can be recontextualised, and which supports transformative learning (Illeris, 2012) by creating a space where meanings can be created and articulated in different modes using a range of tools, both conceptual and physical.

The crafts studio is also considered as a dialogic learning space that dismantles 'traditional' power structures within the tutor/student relationship.

Context - CBHE

College-based Higher Education is normally used to describe higher education (including foundation courses) delivered within the context of a Further Education College (FEC). Such provision accounts for 10% of HE teaching in the UK, and is delivered in a diverse range of spaces and institutions, from smaller, specialist institutions with a focus on creative arts or teacher training through to consortiums of FECs. The CHELIS report (2016) outlined broad commonalities for such provision, which define it, largely, as education delivered within a community, often with part-time learners from non-traditional backgrounds.

The current context and historical and conceptual underpinnings of CBHE is explored by Lea (2015), whose literature review considers wider ideas of vocation, vocational knowledge and scholarship within the sector, defining CBHE as a discrete entity which is neither FE nor HEI and holds its own cultural practices and policies. However, he also outlines particular tensions related to a sector which inhabits a negotiation space between the top-down managerialism traditionally associated with the FEC and the

broader discipline-allegiance and emphasis on individual practices traditionally associated with the HEI (Creasy, 2013).

Such a space can prove problematic in terms of their 'HE-ness' (or lack of HE-ness) (Lea, 2014). However, Land (2014) considers boundary-spaces and liminal spaces as learning environments which support transformational learning. CBHE presents a counter-discourse to the large class sizes and lecture-based environments found in some HEI's. It is possible that they also hold, because rather than despite of, their very precarious positioning in the wider context of HE, opportunities for transformational learning experiences. In particular, for those colleges who offer embedded provision, using traditionally close relationships with employers, there holds potential for learning partnership communities to exist (Eaton et al., 2016), in this particular academic space, where the traditional power-boundaries between tutor and student, institution and employer work on a local level, constantly under negotiation.

Current research into the particular nature of scholarship in CBHE is being carried out through the HEFCE-funded 'AoC Enhancing Scholarship in College Higher Education Project' (Association of Colleges, 2015). The project is conceptually underpinned by Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship, and this article has been informed by the projects findings.

Case Study

Hereford College of Arts (HCA) is a long-established specialist provider of creative arts education. As a further education college (FEC) it currently has a cohort of around 400 students enrolled on BA courses and a similar enrollment on FE courses. FE and HE provision are taught on different campuses with, in the majority, different lecturers, and each centre has a very different approach to teaching and learning which reflects the distinctive difference between FE and HE contexts. HCA also offers a Foundation (Level 3-4) course, again delivered as a discrete unit in a separate learning environment. The college has a conceptual underpinning in delivering high quality crafts-based higher level vocational education in a rural environment for many years. It has a history of high NSS scores and positive Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reports, and a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) silver award.

HCA currently delivers 11 undergraduate programmes and two masters level programmes, all validated by the University of Wales Trinity St David (UWTSD).

The current climate of HE is in flux. External drivers such as the TEF demand a more articulate response to the particular practices within the crafts college. This is not simply a local issue, but mirrored in the wider Art and Design sector, as evidenced by Orr's (2017) keynote at the GLAD Conference, which called for the creative arts sector to identify and articulate the particular pedagogies and practices of art and design education beyond an articulation based on critical/conceptual studies, which is closer to the humanities model.

The small, specialist college presents a very different model of HE learning and teaching to that of the large HEI. Project-based learning with a range of local and institutional participants forms a large part of teaching and learning. Assessment practices involve creative arts methods such as the 'group crit'. The need to articulate the particular impact of crafts-based higher vocational arts curriculum within an HE context is particularly important given the current political context, and an increasingly neo-liberal, market-driven model of Higher Education. Within such a model rural communities and crafts-based creative arts occupations can be marginalised through, amongst other things, not being urban-centric, working with relatively small data sets, and not conforming to the particular classifications of 'arts and media' which typify the larger art and design HEI as well as existing as College-based Higher Education.

An increasing emphasis on finance-based outputs linked to graduate salary affect the whole of the creative sector (McGettigan, 2017). There are also challenges faced by arts education in general, already a complex sector with frameworks of 'value' existing in multiple areas beyond the purely economic (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). Again, this is particularly pressing in rural areas (Herefordshire has the fifth lowest median earnings in England) but where arguably, many young people remain to work following graduation through less tangible benefits the rural environment offers, particularly to the craftsperson, or follow complex employment pathways following graduation. For example, blacksmithing graduates often follow a traditional form of apprenticeship where they travel to study

with a master for little pay, speaking to ideas of 'vocation' or the German concepts of 'bildung' and 'beruf' rather than contemporary measures of value-added education measured through Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) data.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore and articulate the potential benefits of a creative arts education. However, the ideas of 'value' provided by the AHRC funded 'Cultural Value' project (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016), argue a case for small, local-level initiatives having impact on social wellbeing within communities, leading to positive individual and wider social transformations, and creates a discourse of arts value beyond that of increasing individual or social 'cultural capital' or economics.

Furthermore, in a world subject to rapid technological change, the embodied nature of the learning experiences offered by a crafts or creative arts education could be linked not only to ideas of cultural value, but a different kind of meaning-making and student engagement; engagement with, through and of both place and object.

Such ideas might be considered from the perspective of phenomenology (Quinn, 2009) as engagement with place to make meaning, or through activity theory; crafts practice as an activity mediated through tools and context (Hasan and Kazaluskas, 2014). It may also be worthwhile considering learning in the creative arts as rhizomatic; a social process involving the sharing of artefacts (Cormier, 2010).

Looked at in terms of widening participation, the 'student engagement' agenda, subject-level threats to the arts at school level (Rintoul, 2017) and different ways in which creative arts might support 'employability' skills, the value of an arts education at college level is undoubtedly complex. For the case study presented here, inhabiting a negotiation space between the HEI and the FEC and offering a crafts-practice based culture rooted in the rural creates a unique centre, with emphasis on personalised learning, embodied meaning and meaning-making. A higher vocational education within the crafts-based art college may inhabit a different academic space to that of the HEI; and inhabits an academic space which does not make the majority of its meanings in the lecture theatre and seminar room.

With regard to teaching and learning practices, this suggestion can be considered further in terms of the particular learning environments and studio spaces found in the art college.

Arts college pedagogies and learning environments

Sawyer (2017) examines studio pedagogies of art and design studio classes in a comprehensive literature review which finds various themes including; the classroom as community of practice, students as active and independent learners, the presence of flexible, open-ended pedagogies and a tension between technical skills and creativity. The review notes that lecturers consider process as well as purpose and that different articulations of practice form part of studio assessments, plus a focus on formative group critique. The review concludes by finding that 'studio pedagogy can serve as a model for teaching and learning...when educators wish for students to learn the material in ways that prepare them to build on that knowledge and create new knowledge' (Sawyer, 2017, p.111).

The review does not distinguish between fine arts and design practice, and there is no focus on crafts or rural crafts pedagogies. Neither is there much analysis of the particular learning environment, more on the teaching and learning practices within it.

However, the particular nature of creative crafts practice might be worthy of further investigation as these vary from the fine art studio in several ways. A visual discourse analysis of two art college centres with a historical background in crafts practices identified some common elements in the learning environments which might be usefully explored in future research.

The most noticeable of these was the lack of a 'fixed' focus for power. In more traditional learning spaces the projector screen, lecture or whiteboard assume a dominant position at one side of the room, despite how the rest of the room furniture is arranged (in tables or rows of seating). However, in the workshop and studio environments no such focus existed. The visual significance of this is straightforward; in the workshop and studio students and staff work in an environment with a different power-balance to that of the traditional classroom. It might be inferred that in the lecture theatre and workshop the educator holds power, due to either traditional signifiers such as the podium or (in the

workshop) their mastery of practice and particular skills. However, in the studio, where ideas are generated and discussed, tutor and student approach concepts as peers.

In both centres a significance given to the 'tool' as both a visual object and a purposed object, with tools arranged as if on display and often providing a focal point to the room. This suggests a value beyond simple 'use' value is given to the tool, and that they hold value beyond the practical; becoming powerful cultural artefacts in the studio context. In one centre, books were 'used' as tools in the studio, a repurposing of an 'academic' artefact to a different purpose.

Unsurprisingly, learning environments at both centres presented themselves as highly visual, open spaces. It is worth noting that the site of production of the object, artefact or performative action (for Fine Arts) is not always situated within the studio, but can take place in a range of spaces such as the wider community or workshop space.

Likewise, research practices are not confined to the studio space but are carried out as practice in the workshop, through reading and theory in the lecture theatre, and through dialogue (often involving peers, tutors and objects) in the studio.

Such practices involve moving knowledge between the artefact as conceived and discussed in the studio, the artefact researched as practice-as-research in the workshop and the artefact performed/presented as part of a dialogue with peers and tutors as part of the 'group crit' in the studio or exhibition environment. The studio space can be understood as part of a complex activity system, mediated by a range of tools and through dialogue within a community of practice.

Such movement between learning spaces suggests that in the arts college knowledge is highly mobile. It is therefore difficult to fit it within frameworks, but it might be argued that within the higher level vocational curriculum tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1969) and procedural knowledge (Bernstein, 2000, as cited in Simmons, 2014) is often found in the workshop environment and explored through practice-as-research. Such knowledge is balanced by conceptual 'theory' (explicit, vertical knowledge) taught in lectures is delivered through Critical and contextual studies (Rintoul, 2017). As students move between such spaces they are supported by dialogue with peers and tutors in an environment which does not possess structures which suggest the studio tutor dictates knowledge, rather critically prompts and suggests knowledge that can be participated with on a deeply personalised level.

Hence, working in the studio space, with the studio tutor and peers, and without traditional educational, tutor/student hierarchies could support students in bridging the conceptual gap between theory and practice in the higher vocational curriculum and supporting students in recontextualising knowledge (Simmons, 2014). Certain pedagogical practices in the crafts studio embody a bridge between modes of articulation. Otik (2016) describes one such practice where students are encouraged to make conceptual links between visual and written narratives/ideas using kinaesthetic techniques that support synthesis of ideas within and through use of the physical space of the studio.

Likewise, Done (2017) uses visualisations as heuristics to support students in understanding the creative making process; encouraging personal responses that can be explored further in individual practice such techniques are not passive meaning-transfer but articulated practices within which individuals can make meaning within the various learning environments of the workshop/forge, studio and seminar space and which support individual articulations of how this process occurs.

Moving beyond the micro, if we consider the studio, in particular, as a boundary-space which supports students in having transformative learning experiences within the arts college then this, in some way, might be mirrored by the creative arts college learning experience itself as a boundary space between the HEI and FEC; a distinctive learning environment where students, working as part of a wider community of practice, learn to co-create and articulate knowledge in visual, discursive, embodied and written modes. The embedded and explicit practices of the creative crafts curriculum, in supporting students to move knowledge between domains and contexts, in turn supports the acquisition of critical, transferable skills.

Conclusion

This article is limited in scope, and confined to a single case study of a single learning environment. The ideas presented require further investigation. There are certainly wider areas which need consideration; in particular how use of physical space might link to the recontextualisation of knowledge,

contemporary ideas of 'cultural value', the idea of CHBE as boundary-space for students and of students, and rigorous investigation of the crafts based learning environment.

Further research would support an articulation of the particular characteristics of the crafts curriculum. Within an HE context increasingly dominated by a neo-liberal political agenda, perhaps college-based creative arts forms a critical counter discourse to this model. Sennett (2009) writes of 'dynamic repair' and here, perhaps, the kinds of vocational learning and abductive reasoning found within design crafts might prove useful to further disciplines. There is undoubtedly a need for 21st century higher education to create a range of learning spaces and experiences; spaces which exist at the intersection of different conversations and have the capacity to break and re-form boundaries, spaces which produce critical meanings and objects to support dialogue and purposes reflection outside the confines of the academy.

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