

The Artist as Educator: Examining Relationships between Art Practice and Pedagogy in the Gallery Context

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Fig.1
Participants working with an artist during a community education session at Tate Modern
Photograph: © Dave Lewis

This paper addresses the relationship between art practice and artist-led pedagogy, drawing on my study of artists working on the Arts Council's 'Artists in Sites for Learning' (AISFL) scheme and, more extensively, my interviews with artist educators working on the community education strand of Tate Modern's Learning programme.¹ Bold claims are increasingly made for the efficacy of artists working in education contexts by policy makers,² and artist-led pedagogy has been seen by some gallery educators as a 'powerful focus for all kinds of applied skills and learning'.³ Yet hitherto there has been relatively little research into artists' perceptions of how and why they operate as they do.⁴

Both these studies aimed to explore how selected visual art practitioners defined themselves as artists, looking at what they do and the expertise they thought they possessed. They were designed as case studies and in each case a relatively small number of artists (nine in the AISFL research and five in the Tate Modern study) were interviewed in depth and observed. The focus on fewer practitioners was deliberate as this was a relatively unexplored area. Although I was aware of the potential conflict between a focus on particular cases and the pressure to generalise to assist the development of theory across a discipline, I wanted to contribute to a wider

understanding of the phenomena of artist-led pedagogic practice by concentrating on detail and by examining specific artists' perceptions of their practice. My findings are based on these perceptions and are intended to illuminate practice, rather than provide an 'explanation' for how all artists work in education scenarios.

What emerged very clearly from my work was that the artists I interviewed saw their practice as a process of conceptual enquiry and of making meaning. Liz Ellis, for example, said:

I mainly use photography and print, although I am starting to plan video and sound for the future. But I would say that I see my practice much less as being about what media I use, than the approaches that I take ... [it's] about methods of investigation, I suppose, the kinds of questions I find myself asking and I want to find, not so much answers to, but to show that process of investigation.⁵

Her use of the term 'investigation' is significant, indicating that she sees herself as interrogating the concerns that preoccupy her rather than as simply a maker of images. Liz and the other artist educators interviewed tended not to identify themselves exclusively with a particular medium or technique but saw themselves as engaged in creative investigation and problem solving, a process that culminated in the artwork. While they might be proficient at welding or digital photography, they utilised their skills in order to articulate their ideas.

Artistic knowledge

Building on this construction of practice, the knowledge and skills the interviewees considered essential to the artist were those that enabled them to negotiate the process of conceptual enquiry. Beyond knowing how to mix paint, for example, a more fundamental element of these artists' knowledge was that which enabled them to realise their ideas. This artistic knowledge resembles what has been defined by the educationalist Michael Eraut as 'practical' knowledge or 'know how'.⁶ Such practical knowledge can be differentiated from more theoretical knowledge, or 'know what', that is capable of written codification and generalisation.⁷ Theoretical knowledge informs practical knowledge, although only when it is 'sufficiently integrated into or connected with personal practice'.⁸ An example of how these artists draw on theoretical knowledge when integrated with practice was given by Michaela Ross, when she contrasted the approach she took as an art historian with how she worked as an artist:

I did art history quite traditionally ... It's a very particular discipline ... it was about the canon and ... [there] is that sense of there being a fixed way of doing things or working within a particular discipline and with certain kinds of protocols and methodologies that you take on as an art historian ... In many ways, I think it's antithetical to what you do as an artist which ... is more I need this idea or I need this formal solution ...

I suppose [as an artist] I use theory.⁹

Artistic ‘know how’ is experiential, complex and context-specific. Artists talk about the importance of learning through doing and how their knowledge is gained through practice. In some cases, their knowledge is embodied and resists systematic and explicit organisation. Typically, artists reveal their knowledge through the art-making process (what the expert in learning Donald Schon refers to as ‘knowing in action’)¹⁰ and by making their ideas explicit, generally in visual form. Artist and educator Roy Prentice, for example, identifies the artwork as an ‘imaginative outcome’ which embodies ‘the knowledge required for its production’.¹¹ Accessing this embodied knowledge present within a work is an element of the interpretive process as led by artists in the gallery.

Artistic skills

The skills these artists considered intrinsic to their expertise included active questioning and enquiry. Indeed, aspects of how the artists described their practice were akin to a research process. Playfulness and risk taking were central. The interviewed artists perceived themselves as skilled in accommodating the unexpected. They valued curiosity, imaginative response, open-mindedness and the freedom to explore concurrent strands of interest. They saw that productive failure occupied an important place in their practice and felt comfortable with not knowing.

Spontaneity and intuition were important, but looking, reflecting and critical thinking were equally significant. In this respect these artists echoed the ideas of older practitioners, such as the painter [Ben Shahn](#), who argued in 1957 for ‘art which is the product of willing and intending’ and positioned the artist not as ‘a non-thinking ‘medium’ through which ideas flow’ but as an analytical and reflective creator who constantly makes decisions regarding his or her work.¹²

Art practice was thus constructed by these artists as an experiential process of conceptual enquiry that embraced inspiration, critical thinking and the building of meanings. Each of the characteristics is significant, not least because evidence indicates that these artists see art practice as providing a model for a creative learning process.

How do artists engage?

In terms of direct pedagogic engagement, the research undertaken at Tate Modern found that artists drew on their own experience as creative practitioners to instigate a learning process that resembled their art practice. This has implications both for what artists’ perceive they are teaching – they seek to pass on the skills and knowledge intrinsic to their artistic ‘know how’ – and how they engage with learners and artworks.

What are artists seeking to teach?

The artist educators interviewed believed that were enabling learners to gain ‘tools for looking’ or, in one case, ‘strategies for interpretation’. Their use of the term ‘tools for looking’ reveals the influence of Tate’s specific methodological approach which seeks to enable learners to engage with works of art in part through developing the necessary ‘looking’ skills.¹³

These skills were described by the artist educators as looking, questioning, reviewing and making meaning. Liz Ellis said: ‘I am teaching people how to slow down. Perhaps pushing them not just to consume and move on, but notice and reflect on what they see and feel and begin to process it.’ The term ‘teaching’ is employed here, but not in relation to transmitting knowledge. Instead, the artist educator is steering learners to adopt an approach to artworks, which allows them to move from recognition to analysis and encourages visual and intellectual interpretive processes to happen.

In the gallery context practitioners seek to provide learners with the skills, confidence and knowledge to interpret art for themselves. In particular, artists are clear that they are not there to convey specific interpretations. Instead, they aim to enable learners to draw on their personal experience to gain understanding, develop new knowledge and articulate their ideas.

How do artists engage with learners?

In line with ‘constructive’ learning models,¹⁴ artists see themselves as facilitators, engaging students in the processes of learning. As such, they locate learners as active makers of meaning, rather than passive recipients of ‘objective’ knowledge. They encourage learners to actively question and embark on a process of enquiry. The artists also promote experiential learning, with an emphasis on giving participants the opportunity to engage directly with the art, experiment, take risks and play, within a supportive environment.

When describing their pedagogic practice, these artists tended to define themselves in opposition to teachers. Although respecting the teaching profession, they resisted describing their practice as ‘teaching’, associating it exclusively with transmissive pedagogy. Instead, artists sought to engage participants primarily through discussion and exchanging ideas and experiences. There is evidence of ‘co-constructive’ learning taking place, whereby shared knowledge is generated between all participants including the teacher.¹⁵ These artists’ tended to identify themselves as co-learners, who question and re-organise their knowledge, rather than as infallible experts. They also tended to differentiate themselves from art historians. For example, referring to students she had been working with, Esther Sayers said:

There was a marked difference between someone who was doing an art history degree and somebody who was doing a fine art degree. The art historian wanted to collect meaning and take it to the work whereas the fine art student wanted to go to the work and unlock what was there standing in front of them.¹⁶

The implication here was that an artist deconstructs a work and builds up an interpretation by

interrogating the processes of production. The art historian, by contrast, brings his or her accumulated knowledge to bear on the work in order to contextualise and explain it. Although her views may not be shared by all artists (or art historians), Esther's sentiments were echoed by the other interviewees.

There is some evidence that these artists exhibit the attributes of effective learners. These include being active and strategic, skilled in developing goals and reflecting on and understanding their own learning, which perhaps suggests why artists resist describing themselves as teachers.¹⁷ It appears that particular artists approach their pedagogic work more from the perspective of the learner who is keen to make meaning.

Yet although the interviewees resisted acknowledging that they function as other than co-learners, the research identified that periodically artist educators did adopt a more didactic and authoritarian position when, for example, a group dialogue did not develop or participants were difficult and confrontational. Describing how a group of students were having difficulty engaging with work and resisting discussing issues beyond their personal responses, Liz Ellis recalled:

I found myself forcing them to try and take on this vision of how the room had been set up, even though it seemed to me that they weren't really wanting to admit that they had experienced it themselves ... they seemed to be finding it really difficult to value stuff that they didn't understand and I found myself being very authoritarian about it. Because what I got them to do prior to that point was note a lot of experience-based responses and I thought it was starting to slip too much into that ... So I felt I wanted them to know who had made these pieces. You know they are at Tate Modern. These aren't general pieces. They are by specific artists who have specific and different intents.¹⁸

It is perhaps relevant to note that this session took place as part of the schools' programme at Tate Modern and Liz had been encouraged by the students' teacher to challenge the group. Yet the comment reveals how an artist educator saw it as essential that individuals' personal (what Liz referred to as 'experience-based') responses were confronted and extended, if necessary through adopting a didactic, authoritarian position. In this scenario the artist educator was operating not as facilitator but, instead, attempted to determine participants' learning.

Although given their overlapping practice it is unproductive to polarise artists and teachers (or artists and art historians), it appears that a desire to work alongside learners and a resistance to didactic teaching are characteristic of artist-led pedagogy as perceived here. Michèle Fuirer described how she approached works in the gallery:

I am artist. This is a piece of art. I can get near this somehow. And I'm not quite sure what I am going to use but it will be something to do with why does it look like this. And what motivated [the artist] and

intentionality and stuff like that.¹⁹

She starts by engaging with the work and then exploring what the artist's role was increasing it. Her instinct is to place herself in the position of the artist and seek to understand the work in terms of what the artist did. Typically, artists start an interpretive process with learners by interrogating the formal and conceptual elements. They ask questions such as 'why do you think the work has been made in this way?'

By adopting this approach the artist educators appear to suggest that the artist's intentions are knowable and intrinsically key to the interpretation of an artwork. Whilst being aware of the tensions around taking this position, Lucy Wilson commented:

Although we are wary of talking about artists' intentions you have to acknowledge and respect [artists] and their work and the decisions they have made. And I suppose what I most want people to understand is that an artist is exactly like you and they have to go through a series of decisions.²⁰

This position resembles that taken by the art historian Griselda Pollock who identified the work of art as 'somebody's particular project'.²¹ By adopting this position these educators identify the art object as an active contributor in terms of how meaning is arrived at, negotiating between this and the viewer's prior knowledge and experience.

'Right' readings

In artist-led sessions in the gallery interpretations are constructed through group dialogue. This allows for different views to be expressed and provides a means of 'testing' ideas among learners, with the artist educator and against the work. Plural interpretations are valid but each is only justifiable in terms of what it evidences. Arguably, this provides a democratic interpretive space: it is the form and content of works that are ultimate arbiters of meaning rather than the relative knowledge learners bring. Within education programmes that aim to enable visitors to engage with the collection and provide a pedagogic space where their voices can be heard and interpretations supported, this approach is particularly appropriate. Arguably, this focus on individual engagement with artworks may lead to learners gaining less information about the place of the work within art history than if, for example, they had attended a lecture. There is also a risk that the emphasis on fostering engagement may restrict a more critical or challenging approach to the artwork and the museum.

Conclusion

The artist educators interviewed in these studies identified connections between their 'artistic' knowledge and expertise, on the one hand, and forms of pedagogic engagement, on the other. In particular, it proved possible to identify connections between the emerging construction of art practice as a process of conceptual enquiry and making meaning, with the dialogic forms of teaching and learning these practitioners aspired to. Yet the studies also revealed that challenges

exist in terms of implementing co-constructive learning, particularly in the gallery, and unearthed contradictions between how these artist educators perceived other professionals (teachers and art historians specifically) and their experience of teaching in the art institution and beyond. In so doing, these findings draw attention to the complexity of artist-led pedagogy, while highlighting how this practice can bring positive benefits to learners.

Notes

1. See Emily Pringle, 'We did stir things up': The Role of Artists in Sites for Learning, Arts Council, London 2002, and Emily Pringle, *The Artist as Educator: An Examination of the Relationship between Artistic Practice and Pedagogy within Contemporary Gallery Education*, Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Education, University of London 2008.
2. Claims in relation to creative practitioners' efficacy in supporting learner creativity were made in the influential report *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, DfEE/DCMS, London 1999). This discourse is also evident in more recent policy documents. See, for example, P. Collard, 'Creative Partnerships: Approach and Impact', in *This Much We Know ...*, Arts Council England, London 2007.
3. Veronica Sekules, 'The Celebrity Performer and the Creative Facilitator: The Artist, the School and the Art Museum', in M. Xanthoudaki, L. Tickle and Veronica Sekules (eds.), *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries*, London 2003, p.146.
4. From my own experience as an artist educator I am conscious of how my art practice has shaped my education work and I have been keen to establish whether this was true for other visual arts practitioners working in galleries.
5. Pringle 2008, p.85.
6. Michael Eraut, *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, London 1994.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, p.17.
9. Pringle 2008, p.100.
10. Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, London 1982.
11. Roy Prentice, 'The Place of Practical Knowledge in Research in Art and Design Education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol.5, no.4, 2000, p.523.
12. Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, Cambridge, MA, 1957, p.21, p.19.
13. Tate's 'Ways In' interpretive framework is described in H. Charman, K. Rose and G. Wilson (eds.), *The Art Gallery Handbook. A Resource for Teachers*, London 2006.
14. C. Watkins, *Learning: A Sense-Maker's Guide*, Association of Teachers and Lecturers and The Institute of Education, London 2003.
15. C. Watkins, E. Carnell, C. Lodge and C. Whalley, *Effective Learning*, National School Improvement Network Research Matters no.5, Institute of Education, London 1996.

16. Pringle 2008, p.178.
17. C. Watkins, et al, 1996.
18. Ibid, p.205.
19. Ibid, p.180.
20. Ibid, p.179.
21. Griselda Pollock interviewed in K. Raney, *Art in Question*, Continuum and The Arts Council of England, London 2003.

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