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The bookbinding workshop: Making as collaborative pedagogic practice

ABSTRACT

This article will consider student engagement through collaborative teaching and learning practices I have developed within a series of bookbinding workshops in which I acquire new skills alongside my students. The bookbinding workshop developed from my desire to seek ways to engage with *and* alongside *students in my practice and research to ground my own making within my pedagogic practice. In this way students are not being 'instructed' by a skilled specialist but rather collaborating with a committed enthusiast and researcher learning from their practice and experience. This article will discuss the impact these workshops have had on participating students, their practice and their sense of 'creative self' through the analysis of anonymous surveys carried over the span of two years.*

INTRODUCTION

This article will consider student engagement through collaborative teaching and learning practices, which I have developed within a series of bookbinding workshops conducted away from the formal studio environment in which I develop new skills alongside my students (Figure 1). These workshops developed from my desire to seek ways to engage *with* and *alongside* students in my practice and research, in order to ground my own making within my teaching.

Figure 1: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).

In this way students are not being 'instructed' by a skilled specialist but rather collaborating with a committed enthusiast and researcher learning from their practice and experience.

This article will discuss the impact these workshops have had on my teaching, my own practice, the practice of participating students and their sense of 'creative self', through the analysis of anonymous surveys carried out over the span of two years.

THE WORKSHOPS: SOCIAL THEORY OF LEARNING IN PRACTICE

I was interested in developing a physical and metaphoric learning space for art and design students who chose hand bookbinding as a visual method to display their creative work. My aim was to encourage the forming of a community of learning through shared practice and experience (Wenger 1998; Reid and Solomonides 2007). The workshops began as a hunch, a tacit and uncanny notion, that making supports understanding and develops one's creative identity and confidence. This had certainly been my own experience having come to study design through working with, and leading, teams of pre-press operators in a small print shop. I was as dependent on the knowledge of my peers as they with me; learning the skill set to perform the tasks adequately was dependent on collaboration from within our team and outside it. As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, I became a more 'complex' person as I developed these skills through collaborative experiences:

> Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness. [...] [i]ntegration refers to its opposite: a union with

other people with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.

<div align="right">(Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 41)</div>

Csikszentmihalyi notes 'a skill and habit is not developed through knowing *how* to do it; it must be done, performed or practiced consistently and regularly as a dancer, painter, or athlete might' (1990, original emphasis) and Wenger (1998), argues identity is informed through engaging in social practice. I realized I was creative and began a degree in graphic design. Later I became interested in combining my industrial bookmaking skills with the personal satisfaction of hand bookbinding. It was against this backdrop of experiences and curiosities that I began to organize annual bookbinding workshops in 2013 at the University of Chester, where I now lecture.

The workshop as the site and pedagogic method of developing craft and design skills has a long and rich history from the medieval period through the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in cottage industries (Barnwell et al. 2004) to the Arts and Crafts movement (Meggs and Purvis 2006; Pevsner 2005) and the craft-based structure of the Bauhaus school (Woodham 1997; Wilk 2006). The workshop setting was correct historically and culturally for the practical skills I would be introducing to students. Pedagogically I was interested in exploring how the workshop setting, situated away from the studios where assessed work is produced, might influence students' creative confidence through what Merleau-Ponty suggests is the body 'understanding' a new habit, ritual, skill: '[t]o understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world' (2002: 167). Within these workshops I asked students to use their bodies and minds in new ways (Figures 2, 3 and 4), explicitly to use new tools (and familiar tools innovatively) to construct meaning that the body

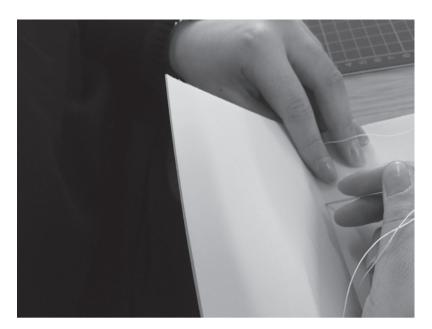*Figure 2: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).*

Figure 3: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).

cannot perform itself (Merleau-Ponty 2002): ruler, paper, bone folder, folded signatures, sewing guide, awl, thread, beeswax block, needle, set square, glue, glue brush, book cloth and cover board. Following from Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'the development of self' (1990: 171), I was interested in creating an activity that allowed and encouraged students to develop new skills for the growth of their creative selves, for the sake of experiencing 'the joys' (1990: 99) of the senses and movement, rather than for formal assessment. As the students had chosen to join the extracurricular workshop series, they would be in a position to set their own goals through intrinsic motivation and experience self-led knowledge development. As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, '[p]ower returns to the person when rewards are no longer relegated to outside forces' (1990: 19).

Polanyi (1967) has argued that the educator and the student need both explicit and tacit knowledge to understand a new experience and set of skills. Explicit knowledge can be critically analysed through writing, whereas tacit knowledge is unarticulated and unformulated, and thus, more basic and embodied – what we know but cannot say. Maykut and Morehouse note, '[…] as we articulate our observations, reflect on what we know explicitly, we will begin to uncover our tacit knowledge' (1994: 31). As this tacit knowledge is articulated and made explicit it then can be reflected on.

Tacit knowledge is gained by indwelling. To indwell is to live between and within, to 'walk a mile in another's shoes', to understand someone through empathy rather than sympathy (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 25). Polanyi (1969) suggests that much of learning is tacit and implicit. He notes that rather than there being a sharp division between tacit and explicit knowledge, explicit knowledge relies on tacit knowledge to interpret what has been articulated. 'Hence, all knowledge is either tacit or

rooted in tacit knowledge. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable' (Polanyi 1969: 144). Percy (2004), following Polanyi, suggests that we also learn through the application of fact, based on rational thought processes, but the principal method of learning is fundamentally constructive rather than deductive.

Barrett (2007) notes that Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge adds to our understandings of experiential knowledge. It refers to embodied knowledge or 'skill' developed and applied through practice and experience and is understood instinctively. According to Kolb (1984), learning and understanding begins with one's own lived experiences, which we bring with us to formal learning environments. Kolb suggests that learning takes place through action and reflection on that action. Kolb's experiential learning model recognizes that knowledge learned from events cannot be separated from the experiences in which it is applied.

THE ARTIST BOOK: GOING WITH THE GRAIN AND OTHER USEFUL TIPS

Johanna Drucker (2004) in her text *The Century of Artists' Books* notes that the development of the artist's book as an idea and form did not exist before the twentieth century, and in its current form only since 1945. She defines the artist's book as:

> [A] book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a pre-existing work and […] a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues.
>
> (2004: 2)

Figure 4: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).

Drucker argues that there is a concept of 'bookness' – a shared conventional form (two covers and a spine) and 'the idea that through thematic unity a book may establish its identity' (2004: 327). Susan Stewart writes about the attraction to the Victorian miniature book by both makers and consumers and notes that,

> The social space of the miniature book might be seen as the social space, in miniature, of all books: the book as talisman to the body and emblem of the self; the book as microcosm and macrocosm; the book as commodity and knowledge, fact and fiction.

<div align="right">(1993: 41)</div>

'THE BOOKBINDING CLUB'

The purpose of the workshop was to offer experiences to students to gain a new skill and consider new materials and methods of displaying their end of year artefacts and portfolios. Six students attended regularly last year and currently 'The Bookbinding Club', as they have called themselves, has seven attendees, with more joining every week. Students take great satisfaction in binding their work into designed cases, structures and covers. Interest in hand finishing has spread beyond the workshop participants, evidenced in queries about binding from students in the department whom I have not taught.

Students are adept at combining analogue and digital aesthetics. Many of the workshop attendees are proficient with the entire Adobe CS suite of creative computer programes. The work they hand bind is sleek, sharp, uses

Figure 5: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).

typography that signifies professionalism, and layouts that connote full adherence to the rules of corporate design. From their survey responses it is clear that a motivation for attending the workshops was that they wanted to put their own stamp, own voice, on the cover and structure of the display of their work. They felt it important to show prospective employers that they had analogue as well as digital skills, that they were not 'one trick ponies' (Figure 5). One student noted, 'I now will consider hand crafting things myself, instead of relying on computer graphics and the work of others' (Respondent 7, 2013). Another student has begun to look at designed artefacts differently coming out of the workshops: 'Bookbinding has made me think about the encasement of items in a detailed way as individual pieces of design' (Respondent 4, 2014).

A central goal of the workshops was to support students in gaining confidence in their abilities to construct objects from paper, a medium of great importance to designers as, while much design is now screen-based, the promotion of commodities, services and events continue to have printed elements. Students report that their confidence in design and making skills has developed from attending the workshops. One student noted, 'It has made me happier because I know about something that not many others do. It's a very useful skill to have' (Respondent 1, 2014). Another student was interested in how making books has helped her understand the user's experience, 'It has enabled me to think outside the box a bit more in terms of design pieces that the audience are able to handle and manipulate' (Respondent 2, 2014). A photography student felt more confident in finding new ways to display photographic work, 'Confidence levels in my practical design abilities have increased and will enable me to present my photographic work in more creative ways without compromising on professionalism' (Respondent 3, 2013).

THE WORKSHOPS – A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Leading the workshops has been revelatory for me as a researcher, maker and educator. I simply had no idea how rewarding three hours a week making alongside students would be. There was a sense of industry in the air, and a common purpose, with participants supporting one another in learning new skills and sharing humour at those awkward 'first attempts' rather than feeling frustrated and isolated on their own. 'The Bookbinding Club' became a community of practice based on active engagement with specific experiences that supported learning through social participation (Wenger 1998).

The workshops developed what Reid and Solomonides term 'group creativity' – as a group we determined that what we were engaged in was creative, that it was 'perceived as unique and of value to a certain community of people' (2007: 28). Reid and Solomonides suggest that this phenomenon evidences that creativity is socially constructed (Figure 6).

As noted previously, the workshops were developmental and their outcomes were not assessed. Students included the bound structures in their design portfolios for summative assessment to evidence skills of exploration, experimentation and development of new practice skills, whilst I used the workshops to push my own skills. While I was initially anxious at my lack of experience and knowledge, I embraced the concept that they were supporting me as much as I was supporting them. A level of trust developed through supporting one another in what the next steps were in the making of the book structures. I wondered if I had disappointed them by not being a 'specialist', however, in the anonymous online survey I asked participants to answer, they

Figure 6: Photo and copyright Elizabeth Kealy-Morris (2015).

responded that they enjoyed that aspect of the workshops the most. One student noted,

> I felt, as we were all learning, that there wasn't any pressure to do things in a certain way, or any pressure if things were done a little wrong. Everyone was learning new skills in a calm environment.
>
> (Respondent 1, 2014)

Student survey responses suggest through these workshops they have been involved in a deeper level of learning contextualized by learning a new skill valued by their profession in a community of creativity. Reid and Solomonides' research indicates that for creative students to engage successfully in their studies they must have the opportunity to 'develop a robust Sense of Being [*sic*]' (2007: 37). They suggest that the most valuable pedagogic conditions will be those that create learning opportunities that encourage this embodment of the creative self. As Amabile proposes, all extrinsic factors that recognize the development of skill and ability or enable greater participation with the task itself, without impeding a sense of autonomy, '[…] should positively add to intrinsic motivation and should enhance creativy' (1996: 118). She reports that in a study with professional artists where some projects were commissioned where others were self-initiated, the extrinsic motivation was respect gained and the recognition of their skills and abilities. What then motivated the artists intrinsically was the challenge to develop themselves as respected practitioners. Lawrie (2008) ponders whether design educators could encourage in our students a deeper understanding of their subject beyond skills leading to employability and entrepreneurship. She suggests, '[…] an answer may lie in the intersection of embodiment, meaning and signification' (2008: 205). This 'intersection', I propose, requires teaching and projects that foreground and

privilege the experience and process of the learning that produces the final outcome rather than concentrating critiques on the outcome itself.

Trowler and Trowler (2010), in their report for the HEA's Student Engagement Project, note that studies have consistently shown associations between student engagement and improvements in identified desired outcomes, including cognitive development, critical thinking skills, practical competence and skills transferability. They found that interacting with staff has been shown to have a powerful impact on learning, especially when it takes place outside the classroom and responds to individual student needs.

The National Union of Student (NUS) *Student Experience Research 2012 Part 1: Teaching and Learning* supports Trowler and Trowler's (2010) findings. The purpose of the study was to understand student expectations of a university experience. Teaching quality was cited as the most important factor in what makes a good learning experience. The report indicated that students want more engaging teaching styles that are interactive, use technology and props to make the subject more accessible and interesting. Trowler and Trowler (2010) suggest that certain features of teaching and learning can improve outcomes including student–staff contact, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, academic challenge, respect for diverse learning styles and cooperation amongst students. It is striking that these bookbinding workshops supported all those features.

I would argue that if more such workshops were incorporated into creative programmes students would be more likely to feel part of Wenger's (1998) community of learners: that their experiences, their trials and errors, and their opinions mattered; that the work they are engaged within the studio has meaning and worth to their lecturers own practice and research and teaching; that mistakes and imperfections are necessary stages in any creative development process, including that of their lecturers. Students' tenacity and resiliency would grow along with new creative habits, confidence and independent enquiry. Finally, as noted previously, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model recognizes that knowledge learned from events cannot be separated from the experiences in which it is applied: how we teach what we teach matters to our students' development of knowledge, skill and sense of creative self and that of our own.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Originally from the United States, she settled in the northwest of England in 1996, initially in Manchester until 2010, now in Chester. She came to design through working as a pre-press operator in the States and went on to study Graphic Design at degree level and Visual Culture at Masters level.

She is currently engaged in an interdisciplinary practice-based doctorate engaging with art/design/making and education/pedagogy entitled *The Artist Book: Making as Embodied Knowledge of Practice and the Self*.

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