



### Using Tentacular Pedagogy to change the HE culture

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by Kai Syng Tan

From Leonardo da Vinci (whose trans-disciplinary inventiveness was attributed to his ADHD) to bell hooks (whose professorial role drew on her activism and poetry practice), history has no lack of examples of how creative and neurodivergent processes have produced insights to catalyse social and culture change. There are also growing calls for interdisciplinary and creative approaches prioritising equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to solve wicked global challenges (AHRC 2022, WEF 2016).

However, the 'dog-eat-dog' culture of Higher Education (HE), austerity measures and more are leading to harmful consequences, and stakeholders with protected characteristics are worst affected (Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016; UKRI 2021; Bhopal 2020; Blell, Liu and Verma 2022). Creative arts (CA-HE), often deemed less valuable than STEM subjects, are particularly threatened (Puffett 2022, Redmond 2020), evidenced in the closure of departments, and exacerbating the already tense relationship between the CA-HE and HE (Elkins 2009). Furthermore, research suggests CA-HE is elitist (Annetts 2018; Starkey 2013), racist (Orr 2021; Tan 2021a), and failing neurodivergent students and staff by not paying enough attention to their mental wellbeing (who are over-represented in CA-HE at around 30% in the student population, in Bacon and Bennett 2013; RCA 2015).

#### Octopuses and Tentacles

I have been cultivating 'Tentacular Pedagogy' (TP) for 24 years as a HE teacher and consultant. Prioritising creative thinking, leadership and EDI, this teaching and learning practice draws on the octopus's extraordinary composition of three hearts and nine minds. My keynote lecture for the European League of Institutes of the Arts Teachers Academy argued for a polycentric, transversal, (co-)creative teaching/learning approach which aims to make CA-HE more inclusive. In doing so, and following artist-academic James Elkin's (2009) call to use creative research to inform and transform HE, TP rallies CA-HE to play a more (pro-)active leadership role within HE and beyond in nurturing a more creative and compassionate future. UNESCO (2021) have called for HE to 'repair injustices while transforming the future' by 2050, with a new 'social contract' that prioritises 'human dignity and cultural diversity', plus 'care, reciprocity, and solidarity'.

#### Three Hearts and Nine Minds

TP features three EDI tenets and nine dimensions. TP's heart(s) lies in neurodiversity, decolonisation (and the related notions of anti-racism and internationalisation), and intersectionality. Neurodiversity has remained largely 'invisible' in HE (Tan 2018), even though it has been called a 'competitive advantage' or 'the next talent opportunity' for organisations (Harvard 2017, WEF 2018). This is a missed opportunity, given HE's 'omnicrisis' (Gill 2022). Activating research about how creativity, neurodiversity, and leadership interrelate (Tan 2021b; Tan 2019, Baron-Cohen 2017; Lesch 2018, Abraham et al 2006), TP cares about teaching/learning with/from/for/by marginalised ideas, methods and communities, who are often excluded from HE and syllabi. Surviving - even thriving - within hostile systems, TP purports that these communities are already creative and leader-ful by nature and design, and CA-HE should learn from them. TP also allies with other minoritised communities to address all social oppression (Obasi 2022, Walker 1983). Just as each tentacle of the octopus is an independent mind, TP's nine embodied 'minds' teach/learn through nine Cs.

#### Creativity, Community and Co-Creation

TP celebrates creativity, community and co-creation. This concerns creative thinking (Krathwhol 2002, Marton and Säljö 1976) encompassing everyday creativity and disruptive invention alike (Kaufman & Beghetto 2009). TP engages with external communities to form unique learning communities. Learners include peers, professors and professionals within and beyond CA-HE and HE, including psychological and social sciences and third sector organisations. TP also foregrounds multi-directional and anti-hierarchical learning. Often

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gathered in the same learning environment together, TP's diverse learners, including the 'teacher', learn via collaboration.

Creativity, Community and Co-Creation were exemplified in the 75th Anniversary Celebrations of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pan African Congress in Manchester(PAC75) for Black History Month 2020. Led by Manchester Metropolitan University in collaboration with the Universities of Manchester and Salford, and local arts bodies, PAC75 marked Manchester's impact on global history in nationhood and Black Lives Matter through a programme celebrating diverse leadership and intersectional engagement through culture. In 18 seminars, performances, and workshops black students chaired sessions with elders like Afua Hirsch and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Princeton), elevating their self-worth and leadership. Materials produced continue to be used, for example in Manchester's 'Remaking Modern British History' MA, and at the University of Ghana.

#### Collage, Can-Do, Curiosity

TP cultivates novel, meaningful synergies between diverse and/or disconnected body-minds, subjects, disciplines, classes and cultures, driven by 'productive antagonisms' (Latham and Tan 2017). TP itself collages pedagogies like undercommons (Moten and Harney, 2013), and STEM-to-STEAM movements (Pomeroy 2012, Eger 2011). Following the *shapeshifting octopus*, TP also nurtures a can-do attitude. Agility, resourcefulness and enterprise are cultivated through role-play, advocacy, volunteering and action-learning. As an artist-teacher-reflective practitioner (Thornton 2005) and a REF-submitted researcher, I conjoin teaching/learning with scholarship, research, knowledge exchange, community/industry/public engagement and widening participation. Furthermore, like the adventurous octopus, TP teachers/learners are exploratory and 'ill-disciplined' (Tan and Asherson 2018). Using play and interdisciplinarity, 'deficits' become positive *action*.

The ethos of collage, can-do and curiosity are played out in the *Neurodiversity In/& Creative Research Network*. The Network was set up to continue conversations and actions started by an art-psychiatry project #*MagicCarpet* (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement *Culture Change Award* 2018) that I led at King's College London. The co-chair was a #*MagicCarpet* participant. Today, this global alliance embodies bell hooks' 'beloved community' (1996) that *affirms* — not eradicates — difference. It comprises 360 neurodivergent people, including the inventor of neurodiversity, sociologist Judy Singer. Local and spinoff groups that members lead like the Kansas City League of Autistics and the Scottish Neurodiverse Performance Network empower HE staff and students to connect and advocate for themselves and others. Applying TP's 'cross-species' learning through intersectionality, the Network is an evolving hub, and models what an inclusive teaching/learning ecosystem looks like. Its masterclasses and seminars foster best practices in teaching/learning and research between and beyond CA-HE. HE teachers, students and researchers and professionals aside, members include activists, policy-makers, clinicians, CEOs and entrepreneurs who learn from/with one another as critical friends. Unusually, the Network welcomes self-proclaimed 'allies' too, which protects those unable/un-ready to disclose their difference. To counter exceptionalism and racism, which is not uncommon in other disability/neurodiversity-led communities (Barbarin, 2021; Russell, 2020; Mistry, 2019; Tan, 2019; Rashed, 2019), the Network welcomes racially-diverse people, and those with neuro-differences beyond the 'classical' remit of neurodiversity like stroke and PTSD.

Established in response to the pandemic, the Network attracted 150 members by April 2020, hinting at how CA-HE has hitherto failed neurodivergent teachers/learners. The Network has ignited pathways to improve teaching/learning practices and cultures, empowered neurodivergent HE stakeholders, and led to further work such as a dance commission 'Dysco' for Southbank Centre by a Glasgow PhD student (Watson 2021) and a journal article by a US neuroscientist (Zisk 2021). Members tell their own stories, instead of being ventriloquised, commodified or white-washed by others. Mobilising their new-found confidence, skills and knowledge, members forge new initiatives, and lead further changes at local, institutional and sectoral levels, to collectively make CA-HE and HE more equitable. For instance, a member, as Jisc Head of Strategic Support Unit, founded Jisc's first ever neurodiversity group, which is now 100 members strong. That group is supported by Jisc's new EDI director, while the member has gone on to become a Trustee of the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service. Members will co-produce *A Handbook of Neurodiversity and Creative Research* (2024) with a major academic publisher, with reviewers describing it as a 'distinctive' and 'valuable' intervention with a 'very high scope of impact' to HE.

#### Circulation, Courage and Curating Change

Neurodiversity is a subset of biodiversity (Singer 1998); ergo, TP 're-pays' nature and society, prioritising 'zero waste' in natural and human resources, and enacts 'Look, Think, Act' to 'sustain reform in teaching/learning ecologies' (Patterson *et al*, 2010). To enrich the 3Rs (writing, arithmetic, reading), TP 'up-cycles' frameworks like 'Curiosity, Compassion, Collaboration and Communities' (Orr 2021), rhizomatic learning (Guerin 2013) and 'tentacular thinking' (Haraway 2016). TP seeks to dismantle colonialist 'monuments' and master's narratives (Lorde 1984). Its 'unruly' tentacles celebrate 'multiplicity in knowledge production' (Zarabadi *et al*, 2019; Branlat *et al*, 2022) and, like the *audacious octopus* and ADHD-er, power towards unknowns. Last but not least, TP is about curating change. 'Curating' *originated in care*, and octopuses have thrived for 300 million years: TP nurtures future-facing models of leadership marrying compassion and vision. I seek to embody such a change-maker in what/how I teach/learn. As an outsider gate-crashing into environments historically shut to others like myself, I use my privilege to open doors for others, and make them *co-leaders*.

Circulation, Courage and Curating Change are enacted in a *new MA Creative Arts Leadership* for which I am Programme Leader, to be launched in September 2023 at Manchester Metropolitan University. Prioritising decolonised and environmentally-

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conscious models of change-making, the MA is with/for/by teachers/learners to generate personal, organisational, and social change, and addresses gaps in current HE offerings in leadership development and arts management/policy. Using examples like MMU alumna artist-turned-suffragist Sylvia Pankhurst, the MA counters the danger of a 'single story' (Adichie 2009) of how 'leadership' is taught/learned. The MA entangles creativity with business acumen, sustainability and inclusion.

The mission of the study of art and design is to develop 'cognitive abilities related to the aesthetic, ethical and social contexts of human experience' that 'contributes to society, the economy and the environment, both in the present and for the future' (QAA 2019). Amid multiple threats to CA-HE, Tentacular Pedagogy's nine 'tentacles' can extend teaching excellence in CA-HE and HE. TP's 'three hearts' of neurodiversity and how it intersects with race and gender, manifested in the examples above as subject and teaching/learning approaches, and in collaborating with neurodivergent teachers/learners, illustrate how a more inclusive CA-HE can foster a legacy of teaching excellence and make HE thrive.

*Dr Kai Syng Tan PhD FRSA SFHEA is an artist, curator, academic, consultant, agitator, change-maker, volunteer and gatecrasher who is known for her 'long-established expertise in using creative research as a form of critical co-creation of knowledge' that 'challenges dominant frameworks in and beyond the academy' (AHRC review 2021). Her keynote lectures, op-eds, exhibitions, creative interventions and more have been featured at MOMA (New York), BBC, Biennale of Sydney and Tokyo Design Week. She has (co-)led projects with budgets from £0 to £4.8m (opening and closing ceremonies of ASEAN Para Games 2015). Her creative leadership innovations include extending 'Running Studies' through her RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale. Apart from being the first artist on the Editorial board of the British Journal of Psychiatry Bulletin, Kai is a trustee board member of Hear Me Out (charity for detained migrants), and was Expert Panel Advisor for Media Authority of Singapore (2007-2012). Having taught/examined/consulted at more than 100 universities worldwide, Kai is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester School of Art.*

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