

## A Reflection on Dialogic Diving Boards and Decolonising School Art: The African Mask Project

### Introduction

In this presentation, we hope to relay our critical reflections on a recent experimental conversation – both to yourselves as audience, and for the first time, to each other. Time permitting, collective discussion will follow, and we might hope that this is participatory – i.e., we would be greatly interested in your thoughts too.

We are four colleagues working in teacher education at the University of the West of England – each with different but intersectional, interests, roles, and responsibilities, and I will ask my fellow presenters to briefly introduce themselves when they come to speak.

I'm going to start by providing a little context to our discussion and reflections:

### Rationale

A few months ago, Malcolm - a new member of faculty - came to my door to ask an operational question, at an inopportune moment – for him, anyway; I was reviewing material for an upcoming seminar with PGCE Art and Design students looking at our disciplinary curriculum; in particular the 'school art' orthodoxy and the student teacher's position if asked to teach materials, in a placement department, that they might personally conceive of as anachronistic, banal, or at worst, culturally offensive.

In brief, the concept of a school art style or orthodoxy, came into popular use after Arthur Efland's 1976 analysis of American primary school art practices and products. This orthodoxy might be characterised as faux-expressive, superficially aping a Modernist formalist function, but presenting only the symbolic illusion of freedom within otherwise authoritarian educational conventions. Olivia Gude (2013) convincingly argues that this 'style' carries beyond Efland's context, both temporally and geographically, and is an inevitable outcome when our discipline meets suppressive models of schooling. So ubiquitous, and potent was this curriculum orthodoxy in England at the end of the last millennium, Arthur Hughes (1998) noted it as effective in quashing radical intent among new teachers and, as Carol Wild (2011) has since argued, this stasis has been exacerbated by the risk-adverse pedagogies that result from accountability and surveillance practices in English schools. The outcome – a disproportionate residue of legacy curricula that does little to recognise the cultural and contextual reality of artistic production, nor school pupils' lives, in England today.

An online teaching resource that I had seen was the catalyst for the seminar – I'll share it shortly - and while I knew the resultant discussion with students would be wide-ranging, this particular image frustrated and angered me. Innocent Malcolm, who I knew had a scholarly background in curriculum diversification, found himself assailed on the historic and cultural context of the 'African mask' project; a stubborn curricula staple in many art departments, conceived somewhere between the Cubist concern for exotic ethnographic aesthetics and a benign late-20<sup>th</sup> century multiculturalist agenda. For me, the continued existence of ill-judged 'African mask projects' in many school departments I know, is the apotheosis of a stagnant school art orthodoxy.

It is this *content* that informed the primary objective of this presentation: To undertake **informal analysis of the cultural diversity and positioning of art objects that populate curricula in English schools**, starting with the 'African mask'.

After 5 minutes or so, Malcolm and I agreed that this was a conversation – sensitive, complicated, and urgent – that we needed to unpack in more detail (or at least Malcolm, desperate to move on from the doorway of my office, suggested so). At that moment, we also realised the synergy our situation shared with that of art teachers in schools – in that there was often a latent interest and sense of moral purpose in addressing outmoded curricula, but rarely the *time* or faith in one's isolated understanding required to do so effectively.

## Process

The result of our encounter was the establishment of an email quartet. While we would not claim academics writing emails in itself a technological or conceptual innovation (!), we thought this might be a novel way to proceed, for a number of reasons:

We hoped (i) that the tangibility of the written word would allow us to hold the complexities of our discussion in place; reference and respond to each other's uncertainties with clarity. The digital medium of email, proactive in alerting one of conversational advancement, democratic in delivery, and ubiquitously accessible, we hoped (ii) might alleviate the requirement for our calendars to cooperate while facilitating a stuttering sense of linear (if messy) progression. (iii) The content of our talk we knew might benefit from the distancing of a written communication; heated discussions on potentially controversial insensitivities can create anxiety for with uncertain feelings, upset professional dynamics, or favour belligerent personalities. We speculated that this social unease might indeed be responsible for many otherwise collegiate and conscientious art departments operating with collective curricula blind spots; individuals unwilling to question shared schema. (iv) Finally, we thought that the reflective silence between contributions would deepen, and moderate our conversation beyond that often achieved through live, impulsive debate, creating an outcome more considered in its collective direction.

We added contributions to this email chain over the course of two months, organically – occasionally daily, often infrequently. Today it stands at about 6000 words in total dialogue, spread over tens of messages. It is this *process* that informed our second objective in this presentation: **to explore whether such an approach might be beneficial to the curriculum planning process among school art teachers**. Might an ongoing, unobtrusive conversation on curricula improvement allow for an evolutionary approach to inclusive reform?

## Theoretical Context & Research Questions

To varying degree, all presenters consider themselves critical pedagogues – interested in the central tenets of a Freirean perspective on education. For the purposes of this presentation, we might describe that as holding an ethical interest in promoting curriculum content that integrates with pupils' lived experience (Freire 2013), and where dialogue is foregrounded in the classroom as primary vehicle of a democratic pedagogic interaction – both between interlocutors, and as pupils learn to 'read' the world (Freire 2014). It is important to us that we uphold and promote these ideals in the face of policy and practice in English schools that seemingly favours increasingly didactic pedagogies, and prescriptive curriculum models (DfE 2019; Ofsted 2022).

Attempts to create inclusive curricula can be aligned with Freire's socially transformative ends, and our process with critical pedagogy's lionisation of democratising dialogue (Freire 2014).

## Reflections

As mentioned at the open of this introduction, we are yet to hear the formative thoughts of each other on the process and content of our email exchange: – so the following **reflection on dialogic diving boards and decolonising school art** will hopefully prove enlightening for all present.

Jamie

Ros

Will

Malcolm

## Discussion

Thank you.

## References

DfE (2019) Initial Teacher Training: Core Content Framework. DfE: London.

Hughes, A. (1998) Reconceptualising the art curriculum, in *Journal of Art and Design Education*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp.41-49.

Freire, P. (2013) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Bloomsbury: London.

Freire, P. (2014) *Pedagogy of Hope*. Bloomsbury: London.

Gude, O. (2013) Questioning creativity, in N. Addison (ed.) *Debates in Art and Design Education*. Routledge: Abingdon.

Ofsted (2022) *Education Inspection Framework*. Ofsted: London.

Wild, C. (2011) Making creative spaces: the art and design classroom as a site of performativity, in *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 423-432.