

Initial Art and Design Teacher Education: Transgression and Flux

Introduction

In this paper I hope to convey one piece of a project I conducted with a cohort of student art and design teachers. In this project, I looked to qualitatively chart participants' sense of optimism, and the sustainability of their ideals, while they navigated their placements in secondary schools.

Given this conference's theme, I will begin by outlining the character of initial teacher education (ITE) as a time of flux for those traversing this threshold into the teaching profession. I will also briefly touch on the contemporary English context - one that I believe acutely challenging for those who enter with certain artistic intent.

Next, I will describe my positioning and the methods employed in this project, before giving the latter half of this paper to relaying one of six thematic threads; the transgressive tendencies of student art teachers.

Most literature conceptualises ITE as a time of flux, where knowledge, identity, and values are disassembled, challenged, and changed - leading to ongoing and lasting transformation. Characteristics include navigation of new connections between personal and professional identities, associated crises of confidence, and resultant questioning of assumptions and values. Student teachers don't submit passively to change, and it is perhaps helpful therefore to view this flux as a negotiation, conscious or otherwise, between where a student teacher starts, is willing to go, and where they are being asked to travel by the requirements of the profession and their studies.

Some suggest common pathways through this flux; continua along which student teachers travel. These conceptual continua are occasionally antagonistic, with, for example, Kowalchuk (1999) suggesting student teachers move from self-serving survival to altruistic concern, while MacDonald conversely suggests a 'shift to surviving as opposed to understanding how to improve...' (2017) as her own experience. Szekely (2004, 18) highlights the gradient from 'theories of the university to practical realities of public school' as the defining shift in focus, and Chong & Low (2009) chart a similar slip towards the 'realism' of the classroom. Collanus et al. (2012b), note that:

The dominant discourse changes from ideals...to the practice of a teacher as a time manager, organizer, planner and question formulator. (Collanus et al. 2012b, 14)

Hanley & Brown (2017), through a critical lens, conceptualise this pragmatic turn as a distinct outcome of neoliberal instrumentalism in school education. Here, while many students 'began with an altruistic conception of what teachers do', this was 'drastically altered with greater experience' as students adopted exam performances, or league tables as measures of value. In the view of the authors these two positions - that of the novice concerned with social justice and of the recently proselytised - represent 'fundamentally opposed views of human agency and perhaps cannot be reconciled'.

For the art teacher, I might note disciplinary continua of change. First, from artistic criticality and contemporality to what Addison and Burgess term 'collective amnesia' (2005, p. 137) in the face of standardised schooling. Here, student art teachers, *more than their peers*, face a 'disjunct' between school cultures and their intent. Addison and Burgess's ITE students are characterised as starting the programme

‘fired up by the desire to reconceptualise the art curriculum’, while after school experiences ‘the status quo is assured, art becomes merely a means of cultural reproduction’ (Addison & Burgess 2003, 160). Bae notes that one artistic skill specifically – a confidence to take creative risks – erodes during pre-service experience, with ‘adoption’, or imitation, of teaching methods witnessed in schools prioritised.

Related to changing expectations on practice, from agentic and creative to standardised and conformative, there are challenges to student art teachers’ identity. Blair & Fitch encountered those who ‘felt a deep-rooted sense of frustration’ the cause of which was ‘the conflict between the dual roles...they were expected to take on: namely those of artist and teacher’ (2015, 93). Thorpe & Kinsella (2021, 542) write of art teachers being ‘torn’ between artistry and policy compliance, while Atkinson characterises this schism as requiring ITE students to occupy ‘conflictual discursive positions between...[their] desire for a particular pedagogy and the demands of...[their] tutors for a different approach to pedagogy’ (2004, 392).

Where artistic intent conflicts with a system defined by instrumental rationality, Lincoln et al. (2018) might invoke the critical concept of ‘divided consciousness’, wherein a student teacher encounters irreconcilable contradiction. Hetrick & Sutters (2014, 24) argue that in this instance ‘prior knowledge cannot copenetrate with disjunctive lived experience’; students must abandon their artistic ideals and concede this identity to that of schoolteacher or abandon their own education.

In conceptual contrast an earlier study by Grauer (1998), found preservice teachers emulating classroom orthodoxies when on placement, but that this ‘did not necessarily translate into a substantial belief change’ (1998, p. 362). Here a dual layer of identity is at work, with professional requirements and expectations a superficial surface, or socially established façade, below which personal philosophies survive.

However, as means to address the tensions experienced by novice art teachers, I’m not sure I could any more advocate for the adoption of a shallow professional persona as shield for authentic belief, as I might the total abandonment of artistic ideals.

Given the hardship of contesting pedagogical norms within curriculum frameworks that refute artistic traditions or resisting educational policy that devalues the subject’s contribution entirely, Atkinson (2018) would question the legitimacy of a school art education altogether. Whether similarly resigned to the discipline’s incongruity with contemporary classroom conventions, or idealist about new futures (as we might hope entrants to the profession to be!) – those first experiencing conformative school cultures after an open-ended artistic practice might find this environment, as described by Dafiotis (2012, 142) ‘an unwelcoming place’.

Context

Once aware of the ‘disjunct’ inherent to artists navigating the transformative flux of ITE, I believe teacher educators need take responsibility for ‘guiding the way’ so that tensions might be employed productively, such that school art serves more than a reproductive function.

Within the contextual framework and professional ethics in which we work, this is a challenging endeavour! In England, the ‘core’ of ITE curriculum – the Core Content Framework (CCF) – is centrally mandated (Department for Education, 2019) in policy that details the statutory entitlement of beginning teachers. These entitlements transcribe the Teachers’ Standards (2011) into a long list of declarative and

procedural capacity statements – authorised knowledge for classroom application that intrinsically (and at times openly) favour a positivist ontology.

Coupled to this theory/practice misalignment are political positionings that arguably disenfranchise artistic thinking. In national documentation, the vernacular noun for student teachers is ‘trainee’ (Department for Education 2019), a homogenising convention I believe suggestive of the vocational nature of policymakers’ philosophy on teacher education, i.e., as a transmissive, instrumental process, or as Atkinson would describe, a ‘kind of cloning process, a kind of ventriloquism’ (2004, 384). This assertion is confirmed by the perceived need for a homogenised curriculum, and when the generic literature informing the CCF is inspected. Heavy investment in Rosenshine’s (2012) *Principles of Instruction* - wilfully interpreted as canonical knowledge - militates conformity over reflective or critical professional practices (arguably in a form against the authors’ own wishes).

As a teacher educator my hope is to build beacons to guide student teachers within the flux, such that the idealistic, artistic, personal or critical concerns that literature and experience suggests are damaged during ITE provision are not abandoned.

Clearly, pragmatic, and instrumental understanding is requisite to manage and lead an art classroom – but I might hope that acquisition of these prosaic qualities does not concurrently necessitate the abandonment of authentic disciplinary ambitions. I might conceive my work as teacher educator successful where graduates leave with a professional desire to *swim in* rather than move beyond ambiguity. Capable of oscillating between pragmatic *and* idealistic, or critical *and* imitative strategies, synthesising aspects of these as appropriate, this graduate commits to a continuous reflective practice. I believe such *integration* (Freire 2013, 4), wherein a students’ own idealistic, personal, critical, creative, and artistic worldview meets in productive tension with reality to construct a new, shared space, a plausible means to circumnavigate the equally unattractive prospects of divided consciousness or superficial professional facade.

Case Study Methodology

in direct response to my professional concerns regarding the capacity of student art and design teachers to defend and extend their personal ideals for future classroom practice - particularly during the school placement that constitutes 120 days of their experience - I undertook an extended case study.

Through a qualitative study designed with Freirean intent, I employed visual methods and elicitation interviews to better understand how a cohort of ITE art students’ ideals were altered or reinforced through adaptation or integration with placement school classroom practices.

At the beginning of their Art and Design ITE programme, nine participants created artwork in response to a ‘starting point’ I provided. This essentially asked them to present a visual conception of their ‘ideal art education’. I was keen to leverage the native capacity of my participants to think through artmaking, and although the scale of this presentation does not allow me time to expand on the specific nature of this methodology I was happy with the process in providing both primary data and springboard for latter discussion, capturing a multidimensional understanding of the phenomena of interest. These artworks were transcribed through novel application of Feldman’s art critical framework and synthesised with coded data from elicitation interviews held both prior to and post school placements. Hybrid thematic analysis resulted in the presentation of six interpretive themes.

To summarise *all* themes that I drew from analysis:

(1) I found participants arrived with ideals of an art education celebratory of what they believed to be the authentic attributes of the discipline, typically expressed as chaotic or organic in nature. They championed liberal, critical, and dynamic aspects of teaching and learning about art, and hoped to have progressive impact on the worldview and lived experience of their learners.

(2) By the time they had completed 120 days on placement some of this transformative optimism - i.e., belief in 'themselves as vital participating agents in the collective process of social change' (Rossatto 2005, 86) - had dissipated and resilient, or fatalistic optimism had grown, alongside a cynical view of both their professional and artistic agency.

(3) Most participants described the standardising expectations of leadership and/or reproductive curricula as key factors in the oppression of their agency and ideals.

(4&5) Two concurrent phenomena included an increasing acceptance of traditionalist pedagogies and an identity transition away from artistic sensibilities.

(6) However, many participants simultaneously described subversive attempts to transgressively enact personal aspirations, and it is insight on this last theme that I now want to share.

The Transgression of Student Art Teachers

For example, participants spoke of finding 'gaps', 'dropping' or 'shoving' aspects of their ideals in amongst the typical activities of their placement schools. While these actions resulted from the existential frustrations of exposure to suppressive school practices, I would frame them optimistically. That some participants implied intent to practice with professional autonomy post-placement *despite* cultures of standardising expectation, suggests they are already, at this early point in their career, hopeful of delivering authentic artistic education by any means necessary.

I was partly surprised by the prevalence of such attitudes, given they challenged the dynamic of supplicant student and institutional authority in a very regulated educational space.

Ashley twice talked about 'trying to drop in a little bit of art history', personalising and pluralising packaged placement school pedagogies that had been designed 'ready to deliver like they don't want you to sort of prepare anything'. Morgan described similar strategies, feeling compelled to transgress the orthodoxy of placement to exercise autonomy: 'finding the gaps to – not imprint myself at all – but to carry out my kind of teaching practice in a way that is maybe more...me?'. Morgan's personal pedagogy was exemplified in the wandering line of their artwork, quite evidently in opposition to the linearity of a standardised classroom sequence. Morgan contemplates such structures from the position of creative antagonist: 'how am I going to kind of navigate these frameworks and kind of...bend them I suppose', returning to again describe a rebellious intent to work *between* conformist expectations - cited on this slide.

Less surreptitious, Elliot spoke about 'trying to shove' some abstract and conceptual artmaking into the curriculum, in the face of a ubiquitous realism they consider misrepresentative of the discipline's breadth and Evelyne pushed their mentors explicitly to allow for, what most might consider minor, personal

innovation ('can I not just bring in a bag of objects?!'). Evelyne's negotiations might be described as admirable studentship - recognising one's developmental needs and brokering the conditions for advancement with one's mentor, but their attitude presented as transgressive, rather than compromising. Where participants felt contained by institutional expectations, they frequently asserted independence – practicing the risky act of subtle, or occasionally confrontational, dissent against convention that they simultaneously expressed hope their pupils will embrace.

This tendency to circumnavigate, to integrate idealist practice (rather than adapting one's ideals to convention) was explicitly discussed by some participants, particularly post-placement. Here, they held a self-image of themselves as subversive agents, purposefully imagining their careers as requiring work against institutional orthodoxy to realise personal ideals.

For example, Nicky took an overtly political stance from the beginning of the ITE programme, and despite finding synergy between placement experience and personal priorities continued to conceptualise the art classroom as a space where pupils might critically reflect on societal institutions.

Nicky was resigned to accept that, in practicing personal priorities or values, they 'will probably end up experiencing more strife...as I, kind of continue on my journey'. While such a stance suggests expectation of future friction, and therefore might be viewed as pessimistic – again I would frame recognition of such a reality as commendable willingness to assert idealised priorities in the face of oppositional forces – a tenacious transformative optimism.

While Nicky expresses critical reflection as important to ideal pedagogy, Elliot, Robin, and Ashley demonstrate this criticality themselves when reflecting on school placements and their own learning. Elliot expresses frustration over the low, fixed expectations of colleagues regarding the potential of pupil development and is vocal about their hope to avoid such fatalism:

The challenge is going to be *staying* so determinedly aspirational...I think that will be the bit that I hope I don't get bogged down in it, but...I'll see! I'm hoping that I can continue to be determinedly refusing of that. (Elliot)

As Nicky, I would frame Elliot's recognition of reproductive, or self-fulfilling attitudes among colleagues as productive, progressive subversion – a student refusing to conform to the deficient model of mentors. Robin too was happy to assert post-placement a rejection of observed practices – or at least a measured understanding that institutional and mentors' suggestions are subjective. They recognised that adaptation of one's own priorities would be defeatist, and instead learning from 'elements' of others' teaching might better 'secure your own ideas of how you want to teach'.

Ashley described compartmentalising the oppression of creative autonomy experienced in their placement school, 'boxing it', hoping that this was a contextual condition. In solace, they described a teaching interview where they 'did a lesson that I would never be able to do in my current school, and did that successfully', and after critical reflection outlined a future in teaching where they endeavour to 'fit into certain spaces' more closely aligned to their ideals.

While the participants mentioned – Nicky, Elliot, Robin, and Ashley – subverted expectations through critical reflection on and ultimate rejection of the orthodoxy mentors encourage, Paris and Sam not only

refuted observed conventions but described tactical manoeuvres they intend to employ to promote their ideals in the face of opposing forces.

Paris suggested pre-placement that they might be 'quite content and revitalised' if portions of their teaching practice are authentic – 'a few days, scattered about...that explores um you know the potential of art for its own sake' even if technocratic priorities dominate, where 'I will have to put pressure on students and guide them through a successful mark'. Post placement, Paris returned to this theme, contemplating revolutionary ideals and enacting related pedagogies in current contexts. They described - on this slide - a 'dilute' radicalism, wherein a Platonic ideal is upheld such that it might be projected through a filter of palatable pragmatism.

They took a logical view on their capacity to resist convention, suggesting that an intelligent tactic when 'going against the norm' is to do so 'in small bits – it's not a radical thing. It is almost like being cheeky' (Paris). Such disobedient pedagogies, they suggested, cannot be sustained from a position of overt resistance. Instead, Paris advocated acceptance of the discipline's 'low status' in schools as means to achieve autonomy through reduced scrutiny, to own the stereotype of art teachers as 'mad' and leverage this role for subversive purpose.

Sam came to similar conclusions: that idealistic resistance is best achieved through pedagogic subterfuge. They described a placement scenario wherein, particularly as a mature student, they practiced ideal pedagogies opaquely, beyond the oversight of mentors – implying an interpretation of institutional expectation that student teachers are otherwise expected to be superfluous:

I think, I think, I have to be careful...to, you know not, not say too much for quite a long time and uhh, and just do it quietly you know? I think if you do it quietly and slowly for individual people you can, students, you can make a difference on the placement, you know, but you almost have to do it without being seen to do it I think. (Sam)

They too took a pragmatic approach to asserting professional autonomy, suggesting that 'on my placements I am going to have to keep my head down'. This was tempered by an optimism for post-ITE practice wherein 'I'd bring my head up and change it because I think morally and ethically it's right' – here commenting specifically on colleagues' fixed mindsets.

Paris's positioning of ideals as unobtainable paragon, a motivational luminary to pull practice in a progressive direction, suggested to me a mature model for conceptualising transformative optimism among student art teachers. Both idealism, and transformative optimism (Rossatto 2005), only exist in conditions inferior to their realised ambition; projects of directed change without expectation of conclusion. I believe living that contradiction – that one must strive for one's ideals in the knowledge that they are unobtainable – requires conditioning of the same codeswitching skillset that facilitates art teachers' productive life in the flux.

Summary and Implications for Teacher Educators

In this theme I isolated a common inclination to insubordination among student teachers when confronted by expectations judged to contravene the authentic potential of artistic education.

Of interest to my study was the clandestine means with which many participants described, actively or imaginatively, transgressing institutional policy. Parallel to fulfilling the criteria of mentors and ITE curricula expectations, there was a 'bending' of rigid norms, where creative content was 'shoved' and 'dropped' into pupils' ownership.

Participants' covert resistance might be variously interpreted. The transgression described could be pessimistically read as evidence that school art education is so yoked to generic pedagogies that student teachers see no legitimate opportunity to test or realise their ideals. However, I would suggest again that participants speaking in dissenting terms of practices they critically appraised as diminished, and began to actively transgress or subvert, be read optimistically as indication of a generation confidently committed to transformational agency.

Perhaps our duty, as teacher educators, is establishment of a strong community of disciplinary deviants during campus-based activity, to provide fortitude to those naturally inclined to practice transgressively on placement. If student art teachers are likely to find the placement school 'an unwelcoming place' (Dafiotis, 2012, p. 142), then perhaps the ITE campus is a compensatory space where a plurality of dissent need be welcomed.

The alternatives? Compassionate erasure of students' idealism? Knowing placement of double deviancy (where student teachers transgress both placement school policy, and their perceived expectations of ITE studentship) on student teachers, because they hold transformative ideals for the future of school art education?

Some might consider it dangerous, or equally homogenising, for critical teacher educators to actively position or promote student art teachers as anti-establishment actors. Such a stance could prove counterproductive - diminishing the discipline yet further in schools or discouraging individuals uninterested in subversive, integrative approaches from participation. However, given the insight provided by participants in this case study, I feel empowered in my personal practice to model transgression and guide my students through, where encountered, their own idealistic battles against an increasingly dampened school discipline.

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