Group for Learning in Art & Design Conference, 2015
Controversy and Conformity – 25 years of transforming the academy
Friday 27th February 2015
Sheffield Institute of Arts, Sheffield Hallam University

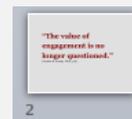**Elizabeth Kealy-Morris**
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The Bookbinding Workshop: making as collaborative pedagogical practice

Introduction

This paper will consider student engagement through collaborative teaching and learning practices I have developed within a series of bookbinding workshops away from the formal studio environment in which I develop new skills alongside my students. These workshops 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 teaching. 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 paper will begin to discuss the impact these workshops have had on the teaching of design subjects, 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. I say "begin" because I am still reflecting on this experience as I am immersed again in leading another series of workshops with new participants

Trowler & Trowler, in their 2010 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 also note that there are specific features of engagement which improve outcomes, including student-staff contact, active learning, and cooperation amongst students such as group work and peer support.

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Trowler & Trowler 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 NUS 2012 Student Experience Survey supports Trowler & Trowler's 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. Students want more engaging teaching styles that are interactive, use technology & props to make the subject more accessible and interesting.

The Workshops

The workshops' initial purpose was to introduce the variety of finishing skills L6 Graphic Design students require for professional output at their end-of-year exhibition and in their portfolios for interviews. With the popularity and success of the workshops over the past two years the current series of workshops has been opened up to students across the department. Much more than an exchange of skills training, the bookbinding workshop has developed into an opportunity for genuine partnership between me, as workshop leader, and students, as workshop participants. The craft of hand bookbinding is one I am developing skills in through my practice-based PhD[1] which considers how making artefacts might encourage embodied learning.

Research by Trowler and Trowler (2010) on engagement suggests 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.
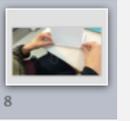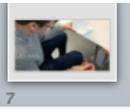
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[1] *The Artist Book: making as embodied knowledge of practice and the self*

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It is striking that these bookbinding workshops supported all those features. Included in the pedagogical experience for both students and I was the sharing of my doctoral research with students who expressed curiosity and interest in my enquiry.

Two areas of enquiry are stimulated by this experience: firstly, what kind of knowledge and 'knowing' are my students developing through these practice-based workshop experiences? Secondly, what is my pedagogical role as a non-specialist of the specialist skill I am demonstrating?

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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 a form did not exist before the 20th century, and even then in its current form, developed only since 1945. Drucker (2004) defines the artist's book as,

> "a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a preexisting work and … is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues" (Drucker, 2004, p.2).
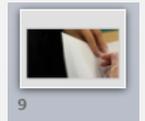
Drucker argues that there is a concept of 'bookness' – a shared conventional form (two covers and a spine) and "the idea that through thematic unity a book may establish its identity" (Drucker, 2004, p.327). Susan Stewart (1993) writes about the attraction to the Victorian miniature book by both makers 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" (Stewart, 1993, p.41).

Craft, memory & nostalgia

There has been a surge in interest in the making and purchasing handmade commodities in the past 10 years. Students' take up hand bookbinding for many reasons but most state they are keen to develop handmade craft skills. Workshop participants shared via an anonymous on-line survey that attending the bookbinding workshops has:

> "*…satisfied a long seated desire to learn about book making and binding. I now have the basic skills required to begin to experiment with book forms to enable me to produce bespoke one off pieces that work in unison with the internal artworks*" (Respondent 3, 2013).

> "*…encouraged me to consider creating and producing things myself, by hand, instead of relying on things other people have made, and buying pre-made things*" (Respondent 7, 2013).

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> *"… 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)

> *"…made me more open minded so instead of easily making a spiral bound book or just stapling pages I can create interesting structures with a variety of sewing skills and cover styles*" (Respondent 1, 2014).

There is a sense of rejection of the pixelated and the digital amongst those who attend the workshops, as if the skill of hand bookbinding is more 'pure' and 'honest':

> *"It is reassuring to know that analogue skills are still valued within such a computer driven industry"(*Respondent 3, 2013).

> *"It has emphasised how it is important to consider the hand crafted products*" (Respondent 6, 2013).

> *"I wish there was more hand made graphic design as I think there is too much digital design professionally. (Attending the workshops) has increased my confidence of hand making objects instead of just using the computer"* (Respondent 3, 2014).

Adamson (2013) suggests that craft offers "the task of memory work" as an "understandable response to the crisis of modernity" (p.184), what Adamson suggests is the loss of our historical, contextual and embodied experience through mass production.

The dominant explanation for this sense of trauma, according to Adamson (2013), is that with craft's continual decline during the modern period from the mid 18th century with the industrial revolution we are now in a period of "…'depersonalization' (that) (w)e must try to turn the clock back, to revive craft's organic role in society, or at least slow the pace of its vanishing"(p.xiii).

Memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Huyssen, 1995, 1995; Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2006; Sturken, 1997, 2001; Wood, 1999) suggest that memories articulate and represent the past in the present for particular reasons in particular ways. Wheeler's (1994) suggestion that postmodern nostalgia can be understood as the expression of the desire for social forms which are able to articulate what has been 'lost' through modernity (p.95) helps to explain the rise in the numbers of

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our students across the disciplines represented in our department seeking support for binding their work by hand in book form.
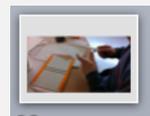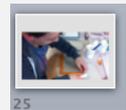
Chase and Shaw (1989) remind us that the past entices us with the "generated objects, images and texts which can be seen as powerful talismans of how things used to be" (p.9). The handmade books my students and I bind, therefore, acquire "potent totemic value" in their role of representing past practice for modern social needs (Adamson, 2013, p.187).

The Knowledge of Making: experiential, embodied and nostalgic

I am beginning to know the feel of a book: it's structure, anatomy, needs. I am a little less clumsy now, dropping the needle less often, pressing the bodkin more confidently to create sewing stations just where I need them and tearing those stations less with my thread as I sew. I can 'anticipate' now … when the thread may knot, when to adjust the tautness of stitches already sewn, when to adjust signatures so they will align. I begin to sit differently, to see, gaze, notice, look differently, to perform my making with more confidence. My body has begun to 'know' this performance, and even to foreknow the next movement. I am learning the skill. How has this happened and what is this knowledge? Is this a demonstrable knowledge?

> We know more than we can say, and the more we can say, the more our
> unarticulated or tacit knowledge grows (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:33).

These workshops are instructive, I am introducing new ways of making to most of the students who "chose themselves" to join the sessions; I am asking their bodies and minds to work together in new ways. From Polanyi (1967) I suggest 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, more basic and embodied – what we know but cannot say. Maykut
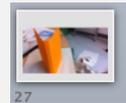
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and Morehouse (1994) note,"(a)s we articulate our observations, reflect on what we know explicitly, we will begin to uncover our tacit knowledge" (p.31). As this tacit knowledge is articulated and made explicit it then can be reflected on.

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 & Morehouse, 1994, p.25). Maykut and Morehouse state:

> In order to understand a person or a phenomenon, one needs to understand the context that surrounds the person or phenomenon…for the qualitative researcher, the person or the event can only be understood within the context or background (1994, p.33).

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"(p.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 experience 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
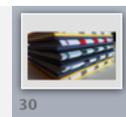
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which it is applied.

The bookbinding workshops

Percy (2004) suggests that "(s)tudents gain cognition and understanding through *attending* to their practice (emphasis in the original)"(p.146). The purpose of the workshop was to offer experiences to L5 and L6 students to gain a new skill and consider new materials and methods of displaying their end of year artefacts and portfolios. Six(6) students attended regularly last year, currently "The Bookbinding Club", as they have called themselves, has seven attendees, with more joining every week. Students signed up to attend on the sheet which made access across all three programmes (Fine Art, Photography, Graphic Design) possible; the majority of attendees are L6 as the workshops are scheduled during L6 studio time. One L5 student attends regularly.

The department has made a significant investment in hand bookbinding across all three programmes through stocking specialist equipment and materials including bookbinding boxes which students can book out to work independently. These are very popular and, while they were originally created for the Graphics students, many from other programmes are booking them out now. Students take great satisfaction in binding their work into designed cases, structures and covers and interest in hand finishing has spread beyond the 6 or 7 attendees to the workshops, several other students come to me for help in thinking through how they might hand-bind their work.

Students are adept at combining analogue and digital aesthetics. The graphic design students are proficient with the entire Adobe CS suite of computer programmes. The work that is hand bound is sleek, sharp, typography that signifies professionalism, layouts that connote full adherence to the rules of corporate design. From their survey responses it is clear that a motivation for

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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 weren't 'one trick ponies'.

Q9: After learning bookbinding do you see design any differently in terms of possible outcomes?

> *"I now will consider hand crafting things myself, instead of relying on computer graphics and the work of others"* (Respondent 7, 2013).

> *"i feel because i know more i can then use a range of techniques to express myself"* (Respondent 2, 2013).

> **"***it has widened my view of the possibilities available within the industry and how it overlaps with other disciplines such as fine art"* (Respondent 2, 2014).

> **"***Bookbinding has made me think about the encasement of items in a detailed way individual pieces of design"* (Respondent 4, 2014).

One of my goals 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
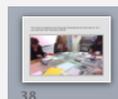
and events continue to have printed elements.

Q7: What effect has learning bookbinding had on your confidence in your design abilities?

> *"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).

> *"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)

> *"It has increased my confidence of hand making objects instead of just using the computer"* (Respondent 3, 2014)

> *"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).

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The Workshops – Sharing and gaining knowledge

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 is a sense of industry in the air, and a common purpose, with participants supporting one another in learning new skills. What has developed through the workshops is what Reid & Solomonides (2007) 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" (p.28). Reid and Solomonides suggest that this phenomenon evidences that creativity is socially constructed.

The workshops were developmental and their outcomes were not assessed. Students included the bound structures in their design portfolios to for summative assessment to evidence skills of exploration, experimentation and development of new practice skills. A few of the structures I had never attempted to make before the workshop series began and so I used the workshops to push my own skills. Once I got over the anxiety of not know more than my students I embraced the concept that they were supporting me as much as I 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 on-line survey I asked participants to answer, they responded that they enjoyed that aspect of the workshops the most.

> *"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. every one was learning new skills in a calm environment"* (Respondent 1, 2014).

> *"It was good, it made me less nervous about getting things wrong myself".* (Respondent 2, 2014)

> *"i didn't feel pressured that i had to work at the same pace as everyone else, i also think it was made easier as we were able to see the structures being*

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made by someone else alongside us making the structure for the first time" (Respondent 3, 2014).

"Liz was very committed and enthusiastic and I preferred the fact that Liz had better understanding and patience since she was learning too. I could tell Liz had good knowledge so it gave us confidence to follow her. Everyone was really well looked after, we had great support and had fun book binding. It's a class I already miss being a part of" (Respondent 4, 2014).

Conclusion

In the introduction to this paper I noted that there were two areas of enquiry which were stimulated by my experience leading these workshops: firstly, what kind of knowledge and 'knowing' are my students developing through these practice-based workshop experiences? Secondly, what is my pedagogical role as a non-specialist of the specialist skill I am demonstrating?

Student survey responses suggest through these workshops they have been involved in a deeper level of learning contextualised by learning a new skill valued by their profession in a community of creativity. Reid and Solomonides' research (2007) indicates that for creative students to engage successfully in their studies they must have the opportunity to "develop a robust Sense of Being [sic]"(p.37). They suggest that the most valuable pedagogic conditions will be those that create learning opportunities that encourage this embodiment of the creative self. 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" (p.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.

With more such workshops incorporated into the creative programmes timetables students might feel part of the community of learning, that their opinions matter,

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that the work they are engaged with in the studio has meaning and worth to their

lecturers' research, writing and teaching. Mistakes and imperfections are part of

the design process, even for staff. Tenacity and resiliency may grow along with

confidence and independent enquiry. In general terms, students may find the

transition from Level 3 to Level 4 less frightening, and Level 5 students may

relish their autonomy rather than fear it, Level 6 students may have more

confidence to test their voices in word and image and Level 7 students will begin

to forge their individual encounters and engagement with theory and practice to

pave their own paths to answer their research queries. 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.

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