

# Co-creating the Curriculum

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## Abstract

This article takes the form of a letter entering into dialogue with students about their experience of co-creating a curriculum and undertaking a creative assessment. It draws on a case study from an art history module, *Researching the Contemporary*, studied as part of a joint honours Fine Art and Art History undergraduate course and examines the ways in which theory and practice could be connected through an understanding of research as a creative practice. In framing co-creation as a creative process which produces different ways of being as learners, the article assesses various reconfigurations of classroom relationships: to learning, to each other, to research, to the institution and to our emotions. The text is structured in response to issues and ideas raised by student collaborators and explores the nature and experience of participatory and collective learning for the students and teacher. It reflects on the contexts of co-creation, the intersections between how and what we were learning, the links between history, theory and practice and our positionality as learners, researchers, producers and creators. The article argues that vulnerability, uncertainty, risk and not-knowing are productive and engender forms of creative thinking and doing essential for the learning process.

## Key words:

co-creation, creativity, risk, learning, theory/practice

“How can you bring a classroom to life as though it were an artwork?”  
(Félix Guattari, cited in Bishop (2012) p.273)

In this article I discuss the experience of co-creating a curriculum with students in the context of an undergraduate module *Researching the Contemporary*. The module is part of the art history component of the BA (Hons) Fine Art and Art History course and runs for second year students. In the opening section of the article I set out the reasons for presenting the discussion of co-creation in the form of a letter to my students, before moving on to the letter itself in which I address the role of creativity for student engagement, and enter into dialogue with students about their experience of co-creation.

In February 2018 I wrote to the group of students who had been involved in co-creating the curriculum asking for their reflections on the work we had done together in the previous year. In my email I let them know that I was intending to write about the project for a special issue on creativity of the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, examining the nature of our experience of working together and focusing on the role of creativity for student engagement. In particular, I requested that they reflected on their experience of the assessment, how they had decided on the form of presentation of their research and their feelings about it as a project. I explained that I believed the inclusion of student commentaries would help me talk more convincingly about collaboration as well as allow for their perspectives to be represented.

I received several responses from the student group, with the majority coming from those away on Erasmus programmes and therefore not working towards the final degree show. One was an extensive piece of writing addressed directly to me from a student who enthusiastically and critically engaged with a series of issues around pedagogy, partnerships and the concept of assessment beyond what I expected. All the replies were thoughtful and considered and each student articulated their own position in relationship to the experience, representing what they saw as the benefits of working in this way as well as confidently and critically indicating some of the flaws, tensions and unresolved aspects of the project.

My request to students to participate in the dissemination and wider discussion of the project was not the first I had made. In the summer of 2017 at the end of the module, a group of students and I presented the co-creation project as part of our institution's annual learning and teaching event, *The Festival of Learning*, which was attended by colleagues from across the university. That students agreed to co-present a staff development session reveals the commitment of students and their ownership of, and identification with, the project. As I listened to them articulate the challenges and successes of our work, I felt a sense of pride in our enterprise, particularly when they talked of how they felt that I was "in there with them", learning alongside them.

Given that co-creation is an attempt to develop a collaborative practice of teaching and that conversation is fundamental to the process of its development, it seems apposite to speak back to the students' reflections in their texts with my own letter, thus entering into dialogue with them. Each of the issues I address emerges from their perceptive commentaries as well as the critical writing produced as part of the assessment, which itself reflects on that process. At the same time, I am aware that presenting an epistle as an article is a device and awkwardness inherent in doing so, particularly as inconsistencies emerge in the shifting tone of my writing. However, as I will explore later on in this article, one of the tasks we set ourselves as part of the project was to consider ways of producing research in which the form of presentation itself worked to convey the nature and approach of that research. In this sense, I view addressing directly the students with whom I worked as appropriate to what is being discussed and the form of the letter itself as embodying the values and ethos of the project. Perhaps too, my concerns about the awkwardness of the form in this context mirror the ambiguities, messiness or "stickiness" (Orr & Shreeve, 2017) of art and design pedagogy and the co-creation experience in particular. The nature of the letter also implies that there may be potential future responses extending the debate and suggesting an ongoing relationship in which the conversation stretches out beyond the immediate context of the module, traversing what one of the students has referred to as the "membrane" of the institution (Daisy, 2018).

The place of the letter in pedagogic practice and in relation to a collective dimension of learning has a significant precedent. *Letter to a Teacher* (1967) was written by pupils at the experimental school in Barbiana, Italy which had been set up by Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) for those students who had been failed or abandoned by the traditional education system. The letters critique the students' schooling, teachers, the institution of the school and its reproduction of social inequalities. Produced collaboratively with the teacher it was published in book form and played a role in promoting the possibilities of democratic education. Although, not directly inspired by this earlier example, as with *Letter to a Teacher* my writing addresses a

specific audience (in my case, students) whilst also speaking to a wider readership and navigating some of the issues of learning within an institutional context.

Throughout what follows I have employed student names with the agreement of those students referred to or quoted as a way of recognising their contributions individually. Although students were aware of the research context and potential publication as they wrote to me, it seemed to me that they were also able to articulate honestly the nature of the challenges they faced and to proffer criticism, for which I credit the relationships we formed in and through co-creation. Whilst recognising the artificiality of producing writing to be employed in published work, I would argue that students also embraced the act of generating meaningful feedback outside of institutional and national surveys in a way that appeared, at least to me, authentic.

Dear students,

Thank you so much for your highly considered responses to my request to reflect on your experience of co-creating the curriculum and designing and undertaking a creative assessment for our second year Art History module, *Researching the Contemporary*. Your texts raise many issues in relation to student engagement in higher education and, in particular, the role that creative practice may play in generating opportunities for student-led research, practice and learning more broadly. I have decided that it is appropriate to reply to your reflections in my letter-as-article because of how conversation was fundamental to how the module played out, both in terms of the module's approach and its content. This also allows for multiple voices to enter into the discussion, though I acknowledge the extent to which the significance and relevance of them are positioned in terms of my own priorities and interests.

In order to make my response dialogic, I reflect and draw upon the various issues you raise which I then structure through a series of headings which present back to you some of the major themes of, and convergences between, your texts. These sections address the contexts of co-creation, the intersections between how and what we were learning, our positionality as learners and researchers, the links between history, theory and practice and the relationship between risk, uncertainty and creativity. However, I also extend the discussion beyond your accounts aiming to situate each of the themes within wider historical and theoretical contexts.

To begin with, I set out the context of co-creation within our module, discussing some of the reasons and motivations behind working in this way. These stem from my interest in participatory and collaborative contemporary art practices, allied and intersecting with, a concern with the concept and practices of learning itself. Then I turn to look at the relationship between how and what we were learning. In her letter to me, Agnes talked about how the subjects with which we engaged prompted a form self-reflection about your situation as students in the art school. She wrote:

*this co-created module played out like a double layer of truths; we were learning about the productive disruption of education systems, such as Hornsey 1968, while trying to take back control ourselves.*

The third theme examining the student teacher relationship evoked in the final words of the quotation underpinned much of your commentaries; and this aspect involving the potential of a redistribution of power and authority was one of the tensions in co-creation within the context of the institution. What was the nature of our relationship as students and teacher? What principles, actions and ways of being allowed for any dismantling of traditionally constructed conceptualisations of our roles? In what ways were our identities as learners formed in and through our relationship in the classroom? Agnes suggested that we might have developed a much stronger sense of ourselves as researchers, by framing ourselves as creatively engaged with the production of knowledge in professional terms. In examining the both the process and products of your research I identify the hybrid, boundary-crossing nature of what you created, which blurred some of the traditional distinctions between concepts of history/theory and practice. The final section addresses how understandings of creativity itself are explored and made evident in and through research practice and outcomes, involving us thinking about research itself as a creative practice. What each of you produced as final outcome was distinctive in terms of your own interests, and ambitious in conception and form. The process of achieving this was also fraught with questions and concerns and it seems that we had to attend much more to the role of our emotions particularly to the apprehension we felt in relation to the risks we were taking by working in less predefined and familiar ways.

### **Context and co-creation**

The approach of co-creation emerged in relation to my interests in participation, collaboration and learning, and through it, I wanted to explore how working with students, with you shaping both what and how you learned could more fully involve you in the learning process and engender deeper and affective learning. I had become interested in the work of psychotherapist Carl Rogers whose writing both on psychology and education seemed to me offer ways of how to envisage teaching that was more inclusive and create opportunities for self-conscious learning to take place (1994 & 2004).

Roger's conceptualisation of education is one which embraces the learner as a whole and in which the nature of the relationships (such as that between teacher and student) is fundamental to creating significant learning (2004). Inspired by his writing, I aimed to create a participatory environment and for us all to adopt the principle of learning through doing. The work of academics, Julie Hall (2015) and Catherine Bovill (2011) on curriculum co-creation offered useful case studies and advice on the development of projects. Bovill points out how academic staff are gatekeepers to the curriculum, and that co-creation offers a potential to dismantle hierarchies allowing for a more democratic and inclusive curriculum and learning experience (2011). For a module based in concepts and practices of research, I wanted students to engage more critically with knowledge and its production, which required some rethinking in terms of the operations of power and knowledge. What I think was interesting about the emergence of our curriculum was how you drew attention to the dominant canon of art historical discourse as a means to imagine other, less familiar narratives and diverse subjects of study.

Co-creation itself could be viewed as creative way of teaching in that it allows for decisions and ideas to emerge that have the potential to create new ways of thinking. However, co-creation does not sit comfortably within an institutional context,

where the operation of systems and regulations often work to codify, contain and measure rather than allow for more fluid, unstable, messy, responsive ways of working. I think you were all extremely aware of the transactional nature of higher education and open to the potential of co-creation as disruptive. I will reflect on the issues I faced personally later alongside your responses, but it is also worth acknowledging the tensions between creative explorative practices and the wider context of higher education. In their conference paper on encouraging creativity in higher education, the authors remark on the challenges and pressures faced by forms of innovative practice. They note that,

*the commodification of Higher Education arguably changes the learner's perception of the learning contract from an active engagement with learning to the passive purchase of a qualification in the Higher Education market place.*  
(Martin, Morris, Rogers, Martin, Kilgallon, 2009)

The predicament of working creatively within the framework and regulatory authority of the university system and the wider challenges of contemporary higher education point to the contradictions at the centre of our project. As lecturer in philosophy, Nina Power puts it,

*how to reconcile the desire to – on some level – treat students equally, with the simultaneous recognition that injustice necessarily lies at the heart of all assessment?* (2010)

### **Content – how and what we were learning**

In Agnes' letter to me she invoked the idea of how turning to look at the site of our learning and historical and theoretical alternatives to traditions of education offered a way of interrogating - embodying even - the relationship between what we were learning and the way we were learning. The module *Researching the Contemporary* has a dual emphasis on practices and process of research and contemporaneity in art and culture. In the initial stages, I furnished students with previous iterations of the module, and asked you to come up with topics, approaches, and activities, which we then ordered and framed in response to student concerns about the thematic coherence of the module as a whole.

What emerged was a series of ideas around how art history's relevance within contemporary culture could be explored, the ways in which the dominance of its canon could be challenged through a more inclusive approach and how history and theory could be more fundamentally connected to studio practice (the other half of students' programme). I particularly liked the idea of weekly five-minute slots which offered a forum for students to teach each other, as well as sessions which would take place in the studio, in the form of critiques.

I presented back to students a schedule of learning for the coming weeks which aimed to reflect the nature of our discussion and decisions so far. Using the so-called "educational turn" in contemporary art as our departure point, we turned to look inwards at sites of research, the art school and studio. The preponderance of models of collaboration, participation and inclusion in recent art practice, what art historian Grant Kester (2004) has termed "dialogic practice", offered both a site of interrogation and a way of thinking about module design. To this end, the whole

group worked on individual research tasks around our themes, and presented findings in relationship to a broader historical and theoretical framing by me - effectively we co-created and co-delivered the lectures.

In one session we focused on the artist's studio, exploring it as a site of research and its role in the construction of artistic identities. Each student brought an image of an artist's studio to the session in order for us to collectively explore sites of production and the function of place in art making. On view was a range of examples of studio spaces: Giacometti's, Hepworth's, Samaras'... revealing messy mark-making; contingent, gendered territories. Srijana's response to our weekly task was to make an artwork and present it as research. In explaining her photo-shopped image representing a cleaner at work superimposed with her own face, Srijana sees no difference between the paid work she does to support her studies and making art. The site of everyday labour is re-envisioned as art through her experience; her art-making is framed by the condition of post-studio production. Srijana's act generated discussion, enlivening the classroom and in some way infusing it with a fluid and more complex sense of contemporary art practice as well as presenting a model of how art practice and history could fruitfully intersect.

### **Student/teacher relationship**

As previously articulated, Carl Rogers has provided some of the most important frameworks that can allow us to see learning not just in the context of higher education, but in the wider world as well. Fundamental to Roger's perspective is the notion that significant learning is based in a significant relationship, whether that was between client and therapist or student and teacher (2004). I recall explicitly asking you all early on in the module whether you trust me, aiming to reassure you that this way of learning alongside each other would work out, that we could make a space for our subjectivities whilst - or through - collaborating. As I saw it, in order for an active, participatory learning experience to take place, we needed to destabilize the conventional balance of power within the classroom to create a sense of being all in it together.

Educationalist Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka argues that co-creation fundamentally changes the nature of the student-teacher relationship creating a partnership that can contribute to, or create, an ethos of social justice in the classroom. She writes:

*I would argue that more just and innovative forms of teaching and learning including co-creation of the curriculum can help students and staff to engage critically with knowledge to facilitate more intrinsic purposes of higher education including 'human flourishing' (Case, 2016, p.2). (2016 p.2)*

The curriculum that emerged in the process of co-creation sought to challenge the kinds of knowledge traditionally produced by the discipline and offered ways to rethink our situation in relation to knowledge and to each other. I particularly like the phrase "meddler-in-the-middle" coined by educationalist Erica McWilliam (2009) to capture the nature of the shift away from authority figure of the teacher imparting knowledge, or one facilitating from the sidelines. She further comments that,

*This meta-category is descriptive of active interventionist pedagogy in which teachers are mutually involved with students in assembling and/or dis-assembling*

*knowledge and cultural products. Meddling is a re-positioning of teacher and student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world. As a learning partnership, meddling has powerful implications for what “content” is considered worthy of engagement, how the value of the learning product is to be assessed, and who the rightful assessor is to be. (2009, p.288)*

Perhaps you as students were not aware of the extent to which I meddled and muddled my way through the year? I struggled with the notion that I was a teacher and that I somehow needed to know more. Although we were working on content together, I found it hard to let go, and would spend hours researching and preparing for sessions - though with the significant benefit that I certainly learnt a lot.

The notion of meddler-in-the-middle invokes a range of ideas about positionality and approach in terms of challenging traditional learning and teaching. Particularly relevant for me was the aspect that McWilliam notes of,

*less time giving instructions and more time spent being a usefully ignorant co-worker in the thick of the action. (2008, p.265)*

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, philosopher Jacques Rancière, offers a critique of instruction (or explication) through his account of schoolmaster Joseph Jacotot's (1770 - 1840) development of the concept and practice of universal teaching. He argues that:

*explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. (1991, p.6)*

Rancière's conception of radical equality is one in which equality of intelligence is a presupposition and not an outcome. It is our attentiveness to what we encounter which is fundamental to learning and this offers an incitement to re-imagine the learning process as well as how we, as teacher and students, could learn alongside each other.

But as McWilliam (2008) also points out if we are all in it together, who is the proper assessor of the value of the work? McWilliam continues,

*A further challenge for the teacher-as-meddler is whether and how one can and ought to assess the quality and quantity of a student's role in co-creating a cultural product. If the rethinking of pedagogy as co-creation of value re-positions teacher and student (or one student with other students) as project partners, as co-directors and co-editors of their social world, who then is the rightful assessor of the value of that cultural assemblage? What does it mean to make judgements to credential individuals on the basis of the quality of the co-creation? What new dilemmas does this set up around 'objectivity' and assessment? (2008, p.267)*

Both Daisy and Agnes were particularly attentive to the problem of assessment in reinserting the traditional roles of teacher/student or master/apprentice. Your comments prompted a great deal of thought and reflection about the role of assessment and my position as marker and grader, as also highlighted by Nina

Power earlier on in this text. It seems to me that there could be greater consideration in this context in terms of how we could collectively assess our work, whether that is done through processes of peer feedback or indeed through redesigning the criteria for assessment together. This would perhaps allow for creative engagement with each other's practices more fully and encourage a level of meta-cognition. However, as Daisy has recently suggested, there may be more far-reaching and successful ways to circumvent the emphasis on grades by bypassing it altogether. In her dissertation which explores forms of alternative art education, Daisy discussed the practice of the Alternative Art School, set up by Cathy Gale at our institution (Gale, 2017). She notes the strategy employed there in relation to assessment, where all students were awarded a first prior to undertaking the project, meaning they,

*developed a healthy disregard for chasing grades, preferring to immerse themselves in the act of learning by doing. (Gale, 2017, p.111)*

She suggests that this was a more radical proposition than the suggestions I make above, allowing students freedom from the demands of criteria and redirecting energies into the learning process itself.

### **History/Theory & Practice**

Given that students on the module are fine art practitioners there is a sense in which introducing creative practice appears natural or obvious, as fundamentally, creativity is already a given constituent of the course. Yet within the art history side, much of the curriculum has been tied to traditional conceptions of the discipline and forms of delivery (lecture) and assessment (essay).

Lecturer in visual culture, Jenny Rintoul (2014) has discussed the ways in which art historical studies taught as a component of, or in combination with, Fine Art (such as Critical and Historical Studies) is often seen as antagonistic or oppositional to studio-based practice. Frequently that distinction is made evident not just by contexts of teaching but by the forms of assessment which appear to reinforce the theory/practice binary divide. However, she suggests that where the terms theory and practice are,

*recognised not as polarised but as integrated, co-dependent and supporting one another, there is scope for students to achieve critical, informed and intuitive creative practice. (2014, p.350)*

I would argue that the assessment project which permitted forms of creative practice within the academic context encouraged a more porous understanding of the course as a whole, connecting theory and practice. In her reflection on the module, Imogen commented on the crossover between art history and fine art:

*I really appreciated that this project was self-initiated in a way that I could merge my Art History practice with my Fine Art practice, and produce something that could potentially further influence both aspects of my degree in 'academic analysis' and 'experimental making' (or another way to describe Fine Art and Art History).*



Our final assessment task of visual presentation and critical commentary emerged through conversation as the question of how to present research in an appropriate visual way. Could other forms of visual representation communicate the research more effectively than traditional forms of essay writing? Students responded by finding forms of representation that in some way embodied their research processes, practices and themes - examples include a book, an Instagram account, a visual essay, a film and a screen capture. What I think was particularly successful was the ways in which those forms of representation articulated the nature of the subject being addressed similar to the way that the content of the module and the way we were learning were productive of each other.

In his introduction to *What is Research in the Visual Arts*, visual culture theorist, Marquard Smith situates the concept of research as an activity which involves searching, creating and making meaning (Holly & Smith, 2009). Research is framed as a “doing”, and,

*the encounter with and the enactment or performance of research – is itself a thinking, a writing, a teaching, a curating, a making.* (Holly & Smith, 2009, p.x)

The understanding of yourselves as creators (as you do in the context of your fine art work) is an aspect that certainly could have been emphasised much more in terms of articulating our assessment as creative in approach and outcome. As Agnes remarked:

*I think I might have felt more confident with the task if it were described earlier as a chance for us to assume quasi-professional positions as ‘researchers’ (in some way) and carried out the brief as such. In the school environment, it was hard to get over the student/ teacher roles and step up to the part of researchers and active learners.*

Research then could be framed in academic, professional terms as discussed, for example in the work of Healey and Jenkins (2009) and/or more explicitly situating the student collaborator as a producer of knowledge (Neary & Winn, 2009).

### **Student as researcher: process and product**

In order to foster a culture of research the assessment could have been set up earlier (as suggested by Agnes) with the learning directed towards developing it by also emphasising the significance of the name of the module *Researching the Contemporary*, both in term of research-as-practice and the conditions of contemporaneity. Perhaps I should have given more of a sense of how I was feeling my way through the experience, from needing to undertake research in areas I knew little about, to gauging your responses and thinking through what might work as an assessment task. Agnes remarked that the term assessment is,

*perhaps a term that hindered us seeing past the institutional confines we were in. In the future, maybe it could be described differently? Although re-naming it seems a rudimentary way of re-contextualising something that we all know to be an assessment, it might have helped cement in us that we were working outside the conventional format of our education system.*

The word assessment brings with it all sorts of connotations, though we are also bound by the terms of reference of studying within an institution with its regulations and language. There is a duality here between a sense of seeking to challenge some of the distinctions and operations of the situation we are in and still being in that situation. I will return to this issue of positionality, but let us look more closely at the assessment: what you did, the different processes you engaged with and outcomes you produced.

Students selected many different forms of visual representation to present their research: from a visual essay to talking papier-mâché head - all accompanied by a critical commentary. What I think was evident was a high degree of both critical and creative engagement, which demonstrated a level of autonomy and ownership of the work. Zazie remarked that,

*The critique of pedagogy put forward by our tutor was of paramount importance in the way our studies were conducted through the year, and as such, our final assessment reflected new-found levels of critique for each of us students.*

For Edward, the emphasis on the processes of research as a method of selecting, making and relating was central to his approach and choice of media. He carried out research on the work of American performance artist Chris Burden referring to his work *TV Hijack* (1972) which was the first of his ventures into televisual transmission. He wrote:

*For my visual presentation of my research, I decided to make a film. The 8 minutes long feature presents a screen capture of me opening and interacting with significant material from my time researching the work of the artist Chris Burden. I also type two important quotes, which you see me doing 'live' in the bottom right corner. I wanted to make this film in order to demonstrate the ways in which I as a 21st century viewer undertake research into work such as *TV Hijack*; I have to interact, interpret and understand the work through the digital screen of my computer due to it largely existing as only an online entity.*

For Daisy the creative research project (visual representation) felt much like a request to produce an art work and then justify in it writing (critical commentary). Daisy's visual representation consisted solely of her re-uploaded Turnitin receipt, acknowledging that her assessment had been submitted to the system and gone through plagiarism detection software - an action intended to highlight the transactional nature of higher education. The written element was conceived not as supplemental but offering its own form of creative practice, in which she circled around issues of artistic identity, labour and failure resisting any imperative to explain the work she had produced. In situating the practice of contemporary artist Frances Stark whose work engages with concepts of artistic identity and subjectivity, Daisy wrote in her critical commentary:

*Stark grapples back agency by highlighting her subordination, highlighting the hierarchal structures and thus transcends it. I have shoddily tried to attempt the same. Pushing my capabilities to achieve something in a shorter time frame, while asking the question; is it for my own fulfilment and progress or is it for my master? I have also tried to gain the agency Stark achieves by writing in a way*

*that has documented the process of my writing and researching whilst it is happening.*

Each of these projects sought to question the nature of production itself in and through a position of self-reflexivity. In her email to me, Daisy reflected on the problematics of having to account for what had been created as she argued that critical thinking was embodied in the production of the work. However, she commented that the assessment project,

*encouraged consideration of the context in which all of the work art students are making – the oppressive environment of educational institutions. The task increased my awareness and the importance of considering location, its demands and pressures and how that filters into the production of work.*

Edward's project encapsulated notions of experimentation and the experiential drawing our attention to processes (of research, of thinking, of interaction) over outcome. The agency of the student in the production of meaning is also evident in the way the student visibly represents himself in the film, attesting to the way research, and, I would also suggest, the learning process, is relational and made meaningful through situating ourselves within it.

### **Creativity, risk and uncertainty**

As I noted earlier there may be a sense in which creativity seems an unsurprising transposition into the module given that the other aspect of your degree programme is fine art, more conventionally understood as a creative practice. Your ways of thinking, doing and researching as fine artists allowed also for hybrid practices to emerge and for fluidity and permeability to come into play, not least in cutting across assumptions about how to categorize theory and practice. As I see it, the creativity you demonstrated showed,

*a propensity for epistemological agility rather than a propensity for artistry, although the former may well include the latter. (McWilliam, 2009, p.282)*

What you revealed was a “capacity to work productively across knowledge domains” (McWilliam, 2009, p.283) through which new ways of thinking and idea generation emerged in diverse forms. This understanding of the concept of creativity is rooted in the notion of the transformational, one in which expectations and traditions are challenged and new meanings and ways of conceiving are produced.

In their case study and analysis of how creativity might be encouraged in higher education, the authors point to the way that this more potentially transformational approach can often be riskier and uncertain (Martin et al., 2009). Many of you talked about how both the process of co-creation and lack of clearly defined project created feelings of insecurity. Zazie recalled that,

*The title of our assessment was broad: “Visual representation with critical analysis”, a title which at first was somewhat unnerving. The broadness of this title left me with feelings of uncertainty and mild confusion, as at first, I was unsure what was expected of us.*

As I have implied, perhaps I underrepresented my own feelings of uncertainty at the time. I rather like this quote from Deborah Britzman, who asks, “What kinds of practices are possible once vulnerability, ambiguity and doubt are admitted?” (1989, p.17). She suggests we embrace the potential of uncertainty and accept the discomfort that accompanies it, since this opens up possibilities rather than over-defining them or closing them down. For psychotherapist Carl Rogers the notion of openness and vulnerability are fundamental to learning. He says:

*I find that one of the best, but most difficult ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try and understand the way in which in his experience seems and feels to the other person.*

Adding that,

*I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try and clarify my puzzlement, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have. (2004, pp.276-277)*

I wonder if it would have been useful to express my apprehension in relation to the sense of risk I felt, perhaps to more fully acknowledge the mistakes I was making as I felt my way through the process of learning to teach in this new way? This would more fully convey the extent to which I might be the kind of teacher, who as McWilliam suggests, is,

*in there experimenting and learning from the instructive complications of her errors alongside her students. (2008, p.266)*

In *Unlearning to Teach*, McWilliam (2008) quotes *The Weightless Society* (2000) by Charles Leadbeater who asserts that “what holds people back from taking risks is often as not... their knowledge, not their ignorance” (p.4). McWilliam reflects that,

*Useful ignorance, then, becomes a space of pedagogical possibility rather than a base that needs to be covered. ‘Not knowing’ needs to be put to work without shame or bluster. (2008, pp.265-266)*

The idea of useful ignorance as a space of pedagogical possibility is one in which learning can be imagined differently through creatively redirecting it away from certainties and fixities. I suggested earlier that a significant aspect of the experience of co-creation for me was the extent to which I was willing to abandon concepts of expertise – and indeed authority. I read Rancière’s *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) as a provocation that one could teach what one does not know, as a way to permit experimentation and exploration in the classroom; repositioning our learning as an adventure in the pursuit of knowledge in which we were all engaged. As Rancière puts it,

*Universal teaching is above all the universal verification of the similarity of what all the emancipated can do, all those who have decided to think of themselves as people just like everyone else. (1991, p.41)*

## Concluding thoughts

How then to assess the success or outcomes of the project? Each of the students on the module identified their own project and mode of representation, each demonstrated ambition and commitment to doing the research differently. One of the significant findings as a result of the project was the high level of student engagement in the project specifically in the assessment. Whilst, early on in the module there was concern about the amount of freedom and choice, once decisions had been made, students worked extremely hard in developing their own set of parameters for research and presentation. Tutorials which supported students through the assessment process worked well to address some of these fears. Students selected their own visual means to represent their research accompanied by a critical commentary. Through co-creation of the brief, the self-determination of form, and articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of their choice, each student was deeply invested in the project and the quality of the work produced was truly excellent.

The benefits of co-creation identified by students included an awareness of the importance of active participation and inclusive decision-making. Agnes remarked,

*I think this co-created project highlighted that attended to and engaged/happy minds are more productive than passive ones. And that really, at this stage in our education, the content of courses should matter greatly to us.*

Some students commented on ways in which conceptions of the discipline as well as the way learning itself was expanded through the process of co-creation. Zazie wrote,

*Overall, the assessment (as well as the methods of teaching throughout the year) was very successful in both broadening our (the students) ways of thinking, and broadening our definitions of the forms that art history can take.*

Co-creation and the relationships formed through it also appeared to encourage a level of critical engagement. This is demonstrated in the emails to me in which students felt able to analyse critically the process we had been through and to offer suggestions for how it might be improved in the future whether that was through a more integrated model employing studio-based techniques of learning (Imogen) or the recommendation of a much clearer emphasis on research as a professional activity not simply aimed at carrying out an assessment (Agnes).

In assessing the project itself, the traditional criteria of measuring success in terms of quantifiable outcomes and evaluation of quality seem to predetermine and restrict understanding of the process and the forms of thinking and doing which came into being. We not only learnt new things and skills but also had a different sense of what learning is and could be. Zazie sums this up well:

*I believe that the combining of my artistic and art historical fields led to my initial feelings of uncertainty, as I had never done it before. It became clear that our tutor was aiming to foster our creative sides through this assessment, and that there were no prescribed outcomes that she expected. Once the lack of prescription and definition was made clear, our methodologies and ways of*

*working became more experimental and free.*

Co-creation is open to the potential of new things and the unexpected, allowing us to rethink what the classroom can become. When Guattari asks “How do you make a classroom like a work of art?” (2006, p.133), the question, as Stephanie Springgay and Nikki Rotas (2015) point out, is not intended to be prescriptive or dogmatic, rather that locating it materially engenders a way of thinking of its capacity and possibilities. If we understand art as an affective event, as a force of relations, enquiry into the analogous potential of the classroom, allows us to see it, too, dynamically and relationally. I suggest that, in effect, our classroom came to life through the complexities of the relationships formed to each other - to learning, to the institution, to research and through which our subjectivities as learners came in to being. In this sense, we might understand the co-creation project as an attempt to reconfigure relationships but also to think through relationality – the relational field of the classroom, the curriculum and the institution. I understand the act of thinking through as an act of re-composition: our experience of co-creation constructed different ways of participating in the classroom – as opposed to the habit, tradition and consensus of how it is done. Even though we were working within the confines of the institution, if we imagine the classroom as a work of art, we can embrace unpredictability, not-knowing and the creativity potential of learning. In reflecting on this I look to what theorist Dennis Atkinson has to say about reworking or rescuing “an idea of learning related to notions of ‘not-knowing’, ‘becoming’ and ‘immanence” through what he terms “pedagogies against the state” (2013 p.4). This involves us thinking about,

*developing pedagogies that are not trapped by established methodologies, policies or ways of thinking about and supporting learning, as though we know what learning is, but through responding effectively to the different haecceities of learning we continuously expand our understanding of what learning is or can become. (2013, p.2)*

The process of reflecting on my own learning both during the module, its reiteration the following year and the process of working on this article has allowed me to think through my own position in relation to my teaching practice and to theorise and locate myself within the literature on art and design education and pedagogy more broadly. What I think the practice and discussion of it in this article offers are ways of thinking about student partnerships in both practical and philosophical terms, exploring the complexities of teaching in this way and situating it as fundamentally inclusive. I suggest that, in working this way, there needs to be an attentiveness to the formation of relationships in and through the learning process, to the specific challenges of working in institutional context and the particularities of the local, contingent factors of the context.

The conversational device of writing the letter which echoes the idea of co-creation, I see as presenting the notion of an ongoing dialogue with students, which as I suggested earlier, reaches out beyond the immediate context of the classroom. Thank you to those students who read and commented on the article in draft form. I was particularly interested to learn that you enjoyed the discussion of vulnerability, and that you found the format of the letter appropriate. For my part, I have been stimulated by our discussion of art education, curriculum and pedagogy during our

dissertation tutorials this year, and have gained some understanding of issues of risk, privilege, criteria and assessment from the students' perspective as well as a sense of the stress of competition you feel.

Many thanks to Daisy for sending me a draft of her dissertation which explores subversive and alternative notions of art education after the “educational turn” in art, taking the reader on a journey through our own art school. The text is highly conscious of the student's own position within the institutional context, drawing on three case studies where she identifies the “membrane” of the institution is stretched, crossed or dissolved. These examples consist of the Stanley Picker's Creators Academy (2016) by designer Onkar Kular, in which the gallery is transformed into a “hybrid co-working and educational space” (Kular in Rossi, 2017); the Alternative Art School project, described as “a ‘school’ within a school” exploiting “the opportunities of art school to envisage alternatives in a staff–student collaboration” (Gale, 2017, p.99); and our own module *Researching the Contemporary*.

I really appreciated Daisy's engagement with and critical reflection on the process of undertaking the module and my writing about it. I think particularly interesting is the way she talks about risk as a student, the awareness of the risk in writing the dissertation as a form of exposure and concern about the potential effect on the grade.

In her overall assessment of the co-creation project Daisy reflected that,

*our curriculum was antagonistic of the institutions limitations, penetrating it, and furthered the illusion of a dissolvable membrane.*

She draws upon the notion of fugitive study (Harney and Moten, 2013) as a way of characterising this approach in its attempt to evade the more straightforward positions of opposition and subversion. Daisy further suggests that appearing collaborative, creative and productive allows us to “slip past the authorities”.

I share her optimism about the potential of co-creation and believe that,

*its ability to exist and be implemented shows that art education can function within the physical institution but never within its terms.* (Daisy, 2018)

This allies itself with what Atkinson has termed “disobedient pedagogies”, where moving away from established patterns of behaviour can be seen as “an event of non-compliance that opens up new ways of thinking and acting” (2018, p.195).

In our exchange of drafts and reflection on each other's writing we navigate the relationship of dissertation student and supervisor. I become aware of reading Daisy's draft not as a formative assessment point in order to give feedback but more curiously to learn of her perspective, ideas, references and analysis of the project through the lens of student participant. I am grateful to all the student participants in the co-creation project for your engagement, open-mindedness and thoughtful critique. I have enjoyed learning alongside you and I look forward to an ongoing conversation about the future of art education and how we might continue to find ways of learning fruitfully and creatively.

Best wishes,  
Helen

With many thanks to the students undertaking *Researching the Contemporary* during the academic year 2016-17, and especially to Agnes, Daisy, Edward, Imogen, Srijana and Zazie, for their contributions to this article. Thank you to my colleague Elisa Adami for the suggesting the reference to *Letter to a Teacher*.

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