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ijADE paper 2014

An 'Equality of Intelligences': Exploring the Barriers to Engagement with Modern and Contemporary Art in Peer-to-Peer Workshops at Tate Modern

Abstract

The data presented in this paper explores the effect on pedagogy when inclusion initiatives are bound up with learning objectives. It explores the generation of critical thinking skills in learning programmes at Tate Modern. Effective art education empowers young people to take a critical stance. In gallery education a decision has to be made: are programmes for young people about encouraging them to think about art or inviting them to think? I explore the position and status given to artworks and to young people's interpretations of those works through data gathered during a peer-led workshop. I illustrate the ways in which new critical voices are able to emerge and contrast them with potential pedagogic pitfalls in which such approaches become exclusive and ultimately work against their emancipatory aims. People who work in galleries and museums are 'cultivated individuals'. They can easily take for granted their judgements about art and consider them to be 'natural'. Because of this a disconnection can occur between people who are not acculturated and those who are. The purpose of this study is to shed light on cultural exclusion by exploring dialogue about art produced during a peer-led workshop.

Introduction

This paper explores the value of peer-led learning and poses questions about who benefits from learner-led frameworks in galleries: the organisation or the young people. The context is modern and contemporary art and the pedagogies employed foreground critical thinking as opposed to art appreciation or practical art making. In gallery education, where critical thinking skills are the main

learning outcome, a question arises: do programmes for young people provide them with the skills to think about art or do they invite them to think? In this paper I explore the dialogue about art produced during a peer-led event in a contemporary art gallery. I try to identify approaches to learning in the gallery that have a positive impact on building confidence and communication skills; to assess whether certain pedagogic strategies produce barriers by which some young people are put off engaging with certain types of culture.

The research described in this paper took place at Tate Modern, a modern and contemporary art gallery in London. Tate is a family of four art galleries housing the UK's collection of British art from 1500 and of international modern art. In order to develop their audience base and nurture successful funding support museums and galleries try to engage with ever-increasing numbers of visitors. This creates a situation in which gallery programmes often have in built objectives for widening participation. Such objectives determine the nature of activities on offer and can constrain programmes. Here, I explore the risks to cultural learning when the recruitment of new audiences is so highly prized.

Increasing access to galleries is important and is a high priority for Tate where a diversity-working group was set up in 2006. This group was formed in order to strategically tackle issues of widening participation across the organisation. A report entitled *Tate for All* was published setting out the organisations aims in relation to creating a more diverse workforce, greater access for diverse audiences and an enhanced range of art works on display.

Since 2000 Tate Modern has pioneered new approaches to the display and consumption of art and aims to continually reach out to new audiences. Gallery policy has evolved quickly during the 14 years since it opened, this has been largely to adapt to the needs of increased audience demand; to meet government requirements for measuring the number and demographic profile of visitors; engaging with diversity agendas; responding to a general increase in internationalisation and changes in economic circumstances.

In 2001, government funding was made available that provided free entry to museums across the UK. With this came greater accountability and a greater insistence from government to engage with increasing numbers of hard-to-reach groups. This impacted on the nature of educational provision particularly in relation to youth programmes whose underlying remit was one of audience development. Significant attention was given to counting the number of visitors. This over emphasised the importance of 'bums-on-seats' and this was, at times, to the detriment of providing quality, in depth experiences for participants.

I was Curator for Youth Programmes at Tate Modern from 1999-2011. This involved facilitating a programme for young people aged 15-23 years old called *Raw Canvas*. *Raw Canvas* was peer-led and young people were encouraged to take on as many aspects of running the programme as possible. In this paper I examine one *Raw Canvas* workshop at the gallery and use my analysis to unpick the learner-led learning that takes place there. I am interested to formulate effective approaches to accessing culture that appeal to a broad demographic of young people. Through my research I aim to increase understanding of the barriers to engagement that may be experienced by some new audiences.

There is an underlying theme of social mobility inherent within all cultural work that aims at inclusion. Certain participants are constructed as 'other' in the gallery's symbolic structures. The learner is constructed by the gallery and its curators most of whom, and I very much include myself in this, are unaware of their own cultivated status as anything other than an 'innate predisposition' (Jenkins, 1992, 133). Jenkins explores Bourdieu's work and highlights the importance of cultural learning in the 'admiration of art'. The specific processes of the educational system provide the learner with the 'cultural product' by which they can learn to appreciate art. This is not a natural disposition. Limited educational opportunities mean that some of the participants I work with lack the specific 'cultural product' necessary to appreciate modern and contemporary art. Should I try to teach them to admire art? Or should I start with the culture that they bring? In the gallery the established approach is to start with the culture that learners bring which seems open and inclusive but continues to

leave participants none the wiser about the value system that informs the gallery and the judgements of taste made in relation to the work that is shown there.

I had not acknowledged that 'people *learn* to consume culture and this education is differentiated by social class' (Jenkins, 1992, 138). I had assumed that all it took was an interest and learned skills. I didn't see the power of what Bourdieu calls the 'cultural unconscious' whereby attitudes; aptitudes and knowledge are developed in young people at some schools and in some families. Such 'interest' is learned along with the skills required to deconstruct an artwork. I underestimated how much the 'canons of legitimacy' in the fields of art and culture were considered to be universal and uncontested, by which I mean that the shared understandings of the nature of art and culture are not accepted by everyone, in fact there are big hierarchical distinctions between art forms and between personal tastes (Bourdieu, 1991).

Cultivated individuals thus confront their own distinction as taken for granted and natural, a marker of their social value, their status (Jenkins, 1992: 133).

People who work in galleries and museums are 'cultivated individuals' they possess high 'social value'. They can easily take for granted their judgements about art and consider them to be 'natural'. Because of this it is easy for them to form a barrier between themselves and those they are trying to communicate with. The invisibility of such a barrier can cause a disconnection to occur between people who are not acculturated in that way and those who appreciate modern and contemporary art. This problem has formed a guiding theme within my research.

The research context

Raw Canvas grew out of the *Young Tate* programme, initiated at Tate Liverpool in 1994. The aim was to build new audiences for modern and contemporary art and to respect young people as contributors to discourses about culture. One of the projects run by *Raw Canvas* was called *We are all Experts* and this paper aims to

explore dialogue about art that occurred during the *We are all Experts* workshops.

Through my research process, I have become interested in exploring the difficulties that *Raw Canvas* faced in attracting broader audiences. As the programme Curator *and* the researcher I collected lots of anecdotal evidence that emphasised the successes of the programme in terms of engagement, popularity and innovation but the undeniable fact was: the audience still wasn't getting much more diverse and my pressing concern was to understand why. I wanted to get 'underneath' this issue and explore the complex barriers faced by young people especially those from so called 'hard-to-reach' groups and to do that I had to look at the gallery, its ideology, the staffing and the professional and pedagogical discourses produced there to see what kind of learner was anticipated and how they were moulded by the agendas that informed decision making at the gallery.

I was troubled by a dilemma: was the purpose of opening up the gallery simply to acculturate a new generation of young people to passively 'appreciate' the art on show or could it be to engage young people in questioning the hegemony that exists in the interpretation of modern and contemporary art?

Research method

The research methods I employed did not follow the usual pattern in which a question is set at the beginning that dictates the flow of the research process. The methods I adopted were to look back at the wealth of material collected and archived and to select specific projects to explore in more detail. Such an approach will be familiar to cultural workers who experience the continual cycle of programming, delivering events and reflecting on their successes whilst simultaneously planning the next events, there is little time to pause and take stock. As an artist, I conceived of my research according to the processes I employ when making art, in which there is no separate predetermined

methodology but instead an approach which is an intrinsic part of the developing ideas (Sullivan in Smith and Dean, 2012). The practical and theoretical methods that I used have constantly informed one another causing amendments and adjustments to take place throughout the process.

The data I collected is concerned with exploring the pedagogical beliefs of educators and how those beliefs develop into pedagogical relations in the gallery. These conflicts are highlighted by the *We are all Experts* project and raise the issue of who speaks and who has the right to speak (Rancière, 1991; Biesta, 2010; Jacobs, 2000).

One of the reasons for doing this research is to think about the way that the learner is presupposed by the educator. In the gallery this has different characteristics than learner subjectivities that we find in more formal sites. Through this data I explore the challenges of creating a pedagogic approach for an unknown learner, as was the case with *Raw Canvas*, where the educator would meet the learner for the first time during the sessions and, because of this, would employ strategies in which extreme flexibility and responsiveness to the learner and to the status of knowledge were key aspects; this contrasts with a longer term approach where getting to know the learner and pursuing a particular learning path are possibilities (Sayers, 2011).

The lack of a formal curriculum created a situation at Tate Modern where the educator had enormous freedom to construct pedagogic experiences from over a thousand artworks. The artworks provide the 'curriculum', they dictate what is to be learned, and shape the way that the learning event is constructed. As a result, there is great autonomy for educators at Tate and in other cultural settings. But how does the educator decide what to teach? What criteria do they use to select the appropriate knowledge for the learner, and how do they know if they have been successful? Through the data I present here, I explore the decisions made by the educators in terms of which information is important to draw out and what approach to take. The data presented here explores the

'attitude to knowledge' within the learning team at Tate Modern during the research period, 2002-2011.

The workshop transcripts that I analyse are from a series of gallery sessions, which took place in 2009 and were led by *Raw Canvas* peer-leaders. I explained that I was recording the sessions for my PhD research and I sought specific permission from the people that I have quoted here to use their names and images in this research.

Across all of the *Raw Canvas* activities, there was a desire for a pleasurable practice to emerge. We believed that to be successful at attracting participants pedagogic strategies must be fun. Opportunities for learning, which was challenging, were limited. Driven by the importance of the social atmosphere specific pedagogies emerged to introduce new audiences to art. Like most learning activities at Tate Modern at that time, the emphasis was not on art making, not imparting practical skills to young people as it was felt that schools provided young people with practical art making skills and that the gallery should concentrate on interpretation skills. Instead the focus was on giving young people a voice, giving them the skills to form opinions; to be critical thinkers engaged in self-learning and learning with others. Activities were essentially directed towards discussions that took place around artworks in the gallery. Although no formal assessment targets were in place in this setting the objective of widening participation provided external targets, which determined activity with arguably greater force than a formal syllabus would.

The workshops

The *We are all Experts* series was a series of workshops on a Friday evening. It was conceived as a way to challenge the usual roles of teacher and student. As a core, and therefore, legitimated part of the Tate Modern Youth Programme (*Raw Canvas*) the events served to academically sanction or legitimate the young people who were invited to participate in them. The approach was by nature benevolent or philanthropic as it assumed that including young people in talking about art would be good for them. The potential for the experience to be

negative, challenging or create problems for them was minimised or unrecognised. It is not acknowledged that learning about art can lead to disharmony for the individual and the new ontological space that they enter can create a kind of fracture with their family background (Jenkins, 1992).

We are all Experts aimed to challenge the authority of the scholarly voice by creating an event in which young people take over the territory, literally occupy the gallery space. *Raw Canvas* attracted audiences who were new to Tate. The 'experts', who were invited to speak about the art on show, were friends or acquaintances of *Raw Canvas*. **They were not art experts, most were not regular gallery visitors and many were non-British in origin, perhaps studying or visiting the UK.**

Overall, the aims of the *Raw Canvas* programme were to provide opportunities and skills through which young people could develop thinking and communication skills. This happened through the pedagogic process of looking and talking about art and through the development of skills in critical thinking, debating and event organisation along with soft skills like confidence, self esteem and surety in your own ideas.

The status of knowledge was crucial to this pedagogic approach. India, one of the *Raw Canvas* peer-leaders said, "We believe that we are all experts whatever your knowledge". **The usual assumption would be that the expert has the most knowledge and everyone else has less. India is challenging this assumption and through that, questioning a relation of power in which the expert has knowledge and the learner is an empty vessel. In India's pedagogic approach everyone brings knowledge but they bring different kinds of expertise to the conversation. Rather than adopting Freire's (1970) 'banking method', in which the passive learner is subordinated to the teacher and must be filled with knowledge. The *We are Experts* project takes an approach that tries to adopt Freire's (1970) 'problem-posing' method of education in which learners are encouraged to think critically and in so doing to be freed from the usual power relations of teacher**

and student. 'The banking system imposes authority at the expense of the students freedom' (Bingham and Biesta, 2009, 65).

India talks about how they came up with this particular pedagogic approach, she says, "during the thinking process we explored the difference between talking about art we know and art that we don't". This is important in terms of interpretation and a sharing of knowledge. In this instance, all parties are learning subjects. The pedagogy, which insists that new works are used, constructs them all as learners. This is an important aspect of gallery education pedagogy. The art on show in the gallery is virtually limitless and no one has in depth knowledge of all of it. Therefore, this kind of pedagogic approach is especially possible in this space.

India goes on to say: "*Raw Canvas* works within an institution but we don't want it to speak for us". *Raw Canvas* do not want to be seen as a Tate product through and through, they want to have opinions about art that contradict the gallery. From India's statement, I think that you can hear that the group is trying to demarcate some space of their own. To use Rancière's terminology India is referring to a particular 'distribution of the sensible' and the question of who can speak and who is allowed to speak. That is not about who has the power to let *Raw Canvas* speak but rather is as Bingham and Biesta (2010, 140) refer to when they say, 'a particular distribution of the sensible in which some 'sound' exists as 'noise' and other sound exists as 'voice'. *Raw Canvas* want to be heard and therefore to have 'voice' and not to be listened to as 'noisemakers' would be. Bingham and Biesta consider speech and the 'learner' as the subject of education and dependent on explanation. The learner cannot yet speak and won't be able to until the 'end of education has arrived' (Bingham and Biesta, 2010: 141). Until then, they can only produce noise and only through the educator's explanation of meaning can they come to speech. *Raw Canvas* tries to create a new 'distribution of the sensible' in which participants' voices can be heard speaking. The use of the label 'participant' suggests active agency rather than 'lack' that might be suggested by the term 'learner'.

In Rancierian terms the *Raw Canvas* peer-leaders interrogate and demand speech. They use prompt questions during their workshops that encourage contributions from their peers. They don't tell participants what to think instead they follow in the same lines as Rancière's three-part question that is used to summon the equality of intelligences and that seeks out the will which sets the student on the right path: What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it? Like Rancière *Raw Canvas* demand speech and then they verify that the 'work of intelligence is done with attention' (Rancière, 1991: 29).

'What is at the heart of emancipatory education, therefore, is the act of revealing "an intelligence to itself"' (Rancière, 1991: 28 cited in Bingham and Biesta, 2010: 137).

Through the workshop transcript that follows, I explore opportunities for 'equality of intelligence' between facilitator and participant (Rancière, 1991). I am searching for evidence of whether equality was actually possible within this context.

The dialogue

The group, are led up the escalator and arrive in the monographic Anselm Kiefer display *Palm Sunday* (2006) on Level 5 of the gallery (Fig. 1). The first invited expert, Greg, prepares to speak (Fig. 2). He was invited by the *Raw Canvas* peer-leaders. He has been given a set of prompt questions to help structure his looking and his responses. Greg is not familiar with looking at or talking about art. He has visited the gallery the day before with his friend Hannah, who is one of the *Raw Canvas* peer-leaders. He has chosen this work and he and Hannah have talked about it. During that conversation, Hannah has used the set of prompt questions that were devised by the *Raw Canvas* group. These questions provide a guide for the speaker to structure their presentation although speakers are not bound to only using these questions; they are also free to invent their own.

The prompt questions

1. Who am I?

Why are you here? What would you normally be doing on a Friday evening?

2. Right now.

Have you ever done this before? Why is it important that you are doing this? How does it make you feel? Are you nervous? Are you happy?

3. Trust your instincts.

What are your first impressions of the work? What were the first words that came into your head? What is it saying to me?

4. Describe it.

What's it made of? How big is it?

5. Ask the artist?

What's the message? Why did you make it?

6. This reminds me?

What does it remind you of?

7. Love it or hate it?

Does it hit the mark? Does it make you explode with happiness or shake with rage? What are you looking for in an artwork? What makes it successful? What would you do differently?

8. What question would you like to ask the artist?

Why is it shown in this way?

9. Ask the audience?

How does it feel to be in a gallery with this artwork? Would you put it in your house?

10. When and where?

Would you think differently if it were in a library?

As the expert, Greg has been invited to speak for 5 minutes about a work he has chosen. To be free of the oppression of needing to appreciate certain pre-selected works it is important that this is his choice not the choice of *Raw Canvas*. This follows the Freirian model of an 'educational project' carried out with the oppressed rather than 'systematic education' done to the oppressed. It is important that Greg is empowered to make the choice and that *Raw Canvas* support that by allowing his interests to lead. He says:

Greg: I have always found it quite difficult to engage, cause it's kinda like a vicious cycle. I don't really know anything so I don't really have a way in, as it were.... And so I thought this might be a good way to achieve that, to learn a bit more about art. My first impressions of this, I am not even sure what it is called, but the first thing I thought was like a big slayed beast of some kind some kind of mythical thing that you might get in a kid's story or in your dream, because obviously it is a tree, but the root here with all the little roots coming off, looks like a head and hair and then a body and then some kind of horrific leg system. And then all of these, I don't even know what to call them, panels or whatever, they didn't really register when I first came in they were just some other thing in the background that didn't quite seem important and it took me a while to register, it took me a while to look at it, before I even started thinking of these. When I did it started reminding me of fossils in a museum, like if you went to the Natural History Museum and you would see little bones like these from some little animals or old plants and their colours, the white there, and then the strange background (strange isn't a very good word), but yeah like some kind of fossil anyways.

Greg's narrative introduces a different aspect of pedagogy: its personal challenge. He is performing a self-curated pedagogy (Atkinson, 2011) and here his motivation to take part is the will for self-improvement, as he sees it. He says that he wants 'to learn a bit more about art'. Greg excuses his choice of language by indicating that he thinks that 'strange isn't a very good word'. Even though he 'doesn't really know anything [about art]' he is conscious to use special language when talking about it. He expresses his feeling that nonspecific words like 'strange' that are used in normal talk are inappropriate here.

In the next section Greg is responding to the question 'What is it saying to me?' This question looms large for new audiences to art. The fact that Greg has chosen to respond to this question demonstrates an area of stress for him – the idea that art 'should' speak to you. Of course it can't – artworks cannot actually speak, they

do not *contain* meanings. The meaning comes from the viewer who looks at the work. It is not there under the paint, somehow waiting to be switched on.

Greg struggles with the idea of art 'speaking'; he is being constructed in a particular way by the question. He continues:

What's it saying to me? This is something I have always found really difficult, I don't know. It definitely has to do with death and things decaying and that kind of thing and er, these backgrounds make me think of a dream, a dream fantasy world, well more like a nightmare, something that might be in your dream and you don't know what's going on. And I don't know what it's saying. It's kinda scary but that's all it's saying to me really. Does it remind me of anything? And err! Does it remind me of anything? [Voice tails off, pauses, crinkling paper, voice raises and quietly asks] How many minutes have I got left, how many have I used? (Greg)

These questions have unsettled Greg. He doesn't know how to answer them. They come from an attitude to art and semiotics that suggest a certain metaphysics of representation: that art objects can metaphorically 'talk' to the viewer. Greg expresses the fact that he has struggled with this before: the idea of art works 'saying' something and he doesn't seem convinced about this. It is a very art specific question and in order to respond to it he has to agree with the assertion. Where is Greg's opportunity to disagree with this? Or, to explore the fundamental idea that an artwork *does* contains meaning, perhaps it would be more productive for him to consider the contrasting notion; that the affect of art is to generate meaning.

Greg is participant/visitor/audience and struggling to adopt the consciousness of the art organisation as he grapples with whether or not the artwork can speak. This illuminates the dominant ideology. This is a representational paradigm in which meaning is assumed to pre-exist. In this way it can be described as 'speaking' to the viewer. Greg is not comfortable with this ideology within his interpretive framework. The power structures of teacher and learner emerge in this situation and support a view that he does not accept. He requires an interpretive critique that enables him to escape from ideas, which constrain his communication.

The ideology of *Raw Canvas* strongly states 'your opinion goes here' and therefore, by implication, that your opinion will not be subjected to judgement or critique. This is in order to create a situation that is inclusive and open to new audiences. The idea that an artwork can speak may be a false consciousness for Greg as learner and as such it is repressive.

The gallery's pedagogic approach in this instance could show more interest or willingness to explore Greg's consciousness rather than encouraging him to adopt an idea that is alien to him. Does he need specific art training to appreciate this work fully? Certainly the agenda of widening participation would say that he does not but his self-curated pedagogy *does* require him to accept certain metaphysical perceptions as facts, such as the idea that an artwork can 'speak'.

Looking at the dialogue it seems that what may have been more fruitful would have been to stop talking about the artwork itself and talk instead about whether or not a work *can* 'say something to you'. Such an approach would have more potential for achieving one of the programme aims: breaking down the perceived barriers around modern and contemporary art, or indeed any art, where there is an assumption of prior meaning. My struggle to recognise this and the pedagogy's apparent inability to really take account of the learner is something that I have returned to often in my research when I have talked about the invisible codes that surround participation in the art gallery.

Conclusion

Whilst an open approach to knowledge and learning is one that I subscribe to I am concerned that it fails to retain young people who are familiar with a more conservative attitude to knowledge and learning. For these learners the authority of fact is important. *Raw Canvas* used a predetermined principle or ideology of non-reproductive interpretation: where the emphasis was on the experience of the learner and divulgence of facts about the artworks was limited. For young people who are new to the gallery it important that some information is offered about the works on show but it is not pure conservation of history that is required but openness to evolution in which the foundations of knowledge are

allowed to mutate into new interpretations. Such an approach feels as if it would be more learner-focussed and achieve greater results in terms of widening participation.

Through the themes that I have explored there is an underlying sense of benevolence or philanthropy at Tate aimed towards helping those who are less confident or less familiar with the gallery. A philanthropic attitude is natural for people who value art and want other people to do the same. This philanthropy can be put to good use but it sometimes hampers real discussion from developing and could be seen as patronising or limiting to the new comer. People who work in galleries and museums need to be aware of their own cultivation in order to recognise the needs of their audience. Otherwise a disconnection will occur between people who are *not* acculturated in art in that way and those who appreciate modern and contemporary art.

Gallery education programmes should be nurturing young people in order that they can think for themselves rather than becoming too preoccupied with young people's ability to think only about the art objects that are contained within houses of high culture.

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