Discomfort Zones

Editorial - Miranda Matthews

Expanding from standardised ways of thinking and making work, artists and educators enter spaces between modes of practice that can be termed 'discomfort zones'. These liminal spaces offer opportunities for new events of learning, for captivating interest in the arts, and for problem-posing around social issues – for example of inclusivity and representation. Each artist, researcher, and practitioner in this *Discomfort Zones* special edition of iJade has connected with the theme in relation to their practice research. The uniting concept recognises the importance of boundary-work that encourages the expansion of learning capacity, of connection and difference.

In 2020 we saw global changes in how educators and students communicate with each other. The arts offer affective spaces in which we can say what we feel in whichever sensory expression is most appropriate. However, the multisensory forms of arts practice, and their physical relations to audience interaction became projected future experience. The spatial, embodied presence of arts practice was forced to exist in virtual and imagined spaces. Art and design education has, therefore, faced unprecedented challenges in developing, exhibiting and assessing practice. We were physically and emotionally moved out of our comfort zones in the change to online connectivity for art education and exhibition audiences.

There was also a dramatic acceleration in relations between learning and digital media. Arts educators have tried to maintain the warmth of relational affect in the remoteness of cyberspace (Gilbert and Matthews 2020). In these altering circumstances we need to acknowledge the digital divide (Mihelj, Leguina and Downey 2019), that is the inequality of access to information technology. Some students were able to comfortably access remote learning and extra tuition, whereas others struggled in households that do not have a computer. These boundaries of access and opportunity are key areas for action.

Through the Covid-19 global pandemic, the evident need for inclusivity, caring and kindness in education could be seen as informing an ethical shift in how learning is programmed (Dernikos et al 2020, Amidu and McGuinness, NSEAD 2020). Black and minority ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19, and by a lack of sensitivity to their cultural communities (UKRI 2020). In addition, white tolerance of the discomfort zones of unequal representation in the arts has escalated the 'arts emergency' in the 'cultural policy puzzle' (O'Brien 2019). We are called upon to consider equality and representation, if the arts are to be recognised as beneficial for everyone (Warwick Commission 2015). Artists such as Bolanle Tajudeen, Theaster Gates, Jacob V Joyce and Raju Rage are refusing to accept this inequality of access and are exploring arts practice as a force for cultural representation. Art continues to open possibilities for bridging gaps in understandings of otherness; art introduces 'strangeness' (Rancière 2010, p. 142), anticipates uncertainty and ambiguity (Matthews 2019) and enables an imaginative view beyond states of division.

The authors represented in this *Discomfort Zones* special edition have interpreted the theme according to its relevance for current issues in their practice research. Emma Sutton

writes about 'Discovery from discomfort' and the boundary work of liminality in autoethnographic arts-based methods in art education that work through the 'initial discomfort' of this approach. With a similar interest in reflexive presence, Rachel Payne gives an account of the 'Disrupted Professional', and what it is like to be an artist teacher in lockdown.

Encountering the tensions between galleries and widening participation, Denise Wright explores the 'potential tensions and values' of creative exchanges between Tate Liverpool and a Sure Start Children's Centre. Ruth Boycott-Garnett brings decolonisation of learning from an early age into the gallery context; she investigates art's potential for revisiting history through the playful experience and uncomfortable colonial history of sugar. This article acknowledges the interdisciplinary potential of art practice. Boundaries between fields of study, and layers of historical knowledge are also challenged by Gina Wall and Alex Hale, who look into the 'space between and beyond Art and Archaeology'.

There is a strong thread of reflection around collaboration in *Discomfort Zones*. Terri Newman discusses the positive aspects of 'uncomfortability' in collaborative learning. Kirsty Ross and Marianne McAra also look at collaborative processes, in a project between design students and industrial partnerships

Peter Gregory and Claire March reflect on 'territorial boundaries of learning' to 'value voices' in alliances between schools and artists. Madeleine Sclater and Lorraine Marshalsey bring virtual community building into our field of view, and the difficulties of facilitating all the guiding principles of studio education through remote learning.

Janna Graham and Anthony Faramelli write about constructions of otherness in relation to collaborative counter sites of institutional pedagogy, with consideration of wellbeing in the institution. There is a connective relation here to Anne-Marie Atkinson, who focuses on discomfort around inclusivity, in the context of working with people with disabilities.

We may find unity in the supportive and facilitating voices of art educators as allies in all areas of activity, voices that build collaborative interventions in learning experiences. We may also ask how we can move out of the immanence of the emergency situation with more affirmed confidence in art educators' ability to make decisions about best practice. The significance of teachers as key workers in the pandemic has brought the value of education to the fore. At this point, we could become more insistent than ever about the importance of the arts for a relational interdisciplinary curriculum, a curriculum for meaningful learning (Durham Report 2019). In the recent GCSE and A Level assessment debacle in the UK, it was the voices of teachers who had built learning relationships with students and who knew their practice well, that reached through the chaos of an algorithm that appeared to reinforce social prejudice.

As schools begin to open their doors, the NSEAD has argued for returning students to begin their studies in art alongside subjects prioritised by the state. (Gregson 2020) Young people are emerging from isolation and associated limited opportunities for self-expression, and we are working to lift their hope and to validate creative learning. Art and design education, can forge cultural connections for learners whose life pathways may otherwise never have

engaged with such channels for invention and imagination. Spaces for creative exploration, and affective self-expression have an integral relation to wellbeing (Pickard 2019, Piscitelli 2020). Art and design also has increasing significance in problem-posing (Howard 2020, Payne 2020) approaches to society's needs for social and economic reorganisation. The arts illuminate life's pathways, and practice makes both the material substance of culture and the affective and conceptual methods for mapping its existence. The arts in education continue to challenge comfort zones and extend learning into responsive, relational creative vitality.

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