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‘Miss, what should we do with this now?’ – Collaborative arts practice in the sixth form classroom

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Abstract

Practice-based research is rooted in knowledge-making rather than knowledge-finding. We as artist researchers investigate the world through both actions within and action upon that world. In my own research, I investigate the pedagogy of collaboration through the process of art-making with others. Over the past five years, I have been developing inter-institutional research projects with young art and design students. During that time, we have been working with material, space and process. Through the collaborative development of artworks, we move from a space of not knowing to one of new knowledge. During this process, I have attempted to map the cartographies of these collaborations in order to unpack the value of this practice in secondary education. Problematically, the creation of artworks with others has led to the accumulation of often incomplete artworks that have fulfilled their pedagogical function. As a historical record of meaning-making, they may have value, but as objects of value to co-collaborators, they are outdated even as they come into existence. In this paper, I draw upon collaborative philosophies to explore the value of these neglected items and raise issues about their usefulness as pedagogical tools if the assessment of work at A Level is based solely on the assessment of students work created individually.

‘Miss, what should we do with this now?’ – Collaborative arts practice in the sixth form classroom

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‘Miss, what should we do with this now?’ – Collaborative arts practice in the sixth form classroom [Copyright holder Terri Newman].

The National Curriculum in the UK groups young people into ‘Key Stages’. Key Stages 1 and 2 include students aged between five and eleven years, Key Stage 4 includes students between the ages of eleven and sixteen years, and Key Stage 5 is used to describe the optional two years of post-sixteen education a young person may decide to undertake if they would like to continue with formal study; this is more commonly known as sixth form and commences at age 16, and the most common qualification studied for during this time is the Advanced Level.

The question that makes up the title of this paper was first asked by an Advanced Level (A Level) Art and Design student. As they asked it, they held up a piece of work that had recently been uninstalled from an exhibition in London. The work had been created in collaboration with a young artist from another school and was the outcome of a seven-week inter-institutional collaborative making project. The student raised the question because the object had formed a part of their personal artistic development, but did not fit into the narrative of their A Level project of ‘personal investigation’. The art object, although it had been created

and exhibited by this student, was not eligible for assessment because it had been co-authored; it was leftover and did not seem to fit within the system of assessment.

I continue to hear this phrase regularly. In fact, I hear it at the end of every collaborative module, and each time I find it difficult to answer. In my own practice research, I have been investigating collaboration in the art and design classroom and how making work with others can in itself be a pedagogic tool for learning. However, there is a conflict between the function of art in schools and the practice of art-making beyond the classroom. In my research, my practice has been concerned with making tangible the intangible notion of what happens when we work with others. I have been working with young artists to create works that are exploratory and exist as objects of meaning-making. Unfortunately, work that is created with others is excluded from being entered for A level examinations. In an educational system driven by assessment, this has led to dead art objects that exist in a redundant space for their creators and float around the studio, rendered functionless because of their collaborative mode of production.

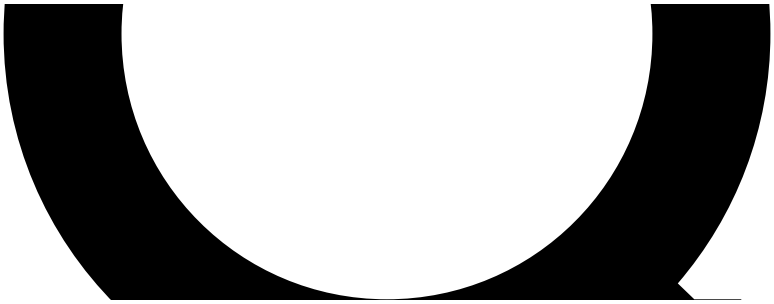

Figure 1: Terri Newman. Collaborative Mapping, 2018. Photograph. [Copyright holder Terri Newman]

A premise of my formative pedagogical approach is that knowledge is generated through action and reflection with others, and that the art created in this intra-action (Barad 2007) is a record of the investigative process rather than an articulation after the fact. In other words, artworks created in collaboration with others serve as a record of the collaboration; the artwork is not created in response to the collaboration.

Learning begins with one's own experience of being in the world. Deleuze and Guattari position this as a process of becoming, a movement that extends into the 'universes', beyond the individual (Barrett and Bolt 2010: 25). I believe that art-making is the practice of articulating subjectivity. When this practice is extended through collaborative practice, paths of enquiry develop in relationship with the experiences of others by opening up the possibility of divergent strands of thinking and ways of seeing.

Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt propose that artistic practice be considered as the production of knowledge in practice. They draw upon Heidegger's notion of 'handlability', in which knowledge is derived from 'doing and of the senses' (Barrett and Bolt 2010: 1) from which the social cannot be excluded. Art-making is a social exercise of questioning, triggering, pushing and pulling, and one where the engagement with the art object in its process of creation is entangled with that of the becoming of the artist themselves.

Within this framework of art practice as a form of knowledge production, working with others collaboratively is unique as a pedagogy, in contrast to more entrenched ways of teaching and learning in art and design at sixth form level in the UK. Working with others is unpredictable and requires that learners be actively engaged with their subjectivity as both maker and researcher. No artist enters the studio as an

empty vessel; 'we take with us our values, gender, politics, ethnicity, … assumptions, categories, feelings and previous experiences' (Coe et al. 2012: 73). Co-authorship allows the opportunity to face the multilayered complexities of these experiences, pour them into the work and be confronted with the other.

Working with others allows us to gain insights into our human nature and place in the world. It forces us both to assess the parameters of our understanding in negotiation with others and to negotiate how we articulate our experience as an individual in relation to the other.

I see collaborative making as the practice of being with others: it awakens us to our being in the world and our action upon it. Deleuze uses the word 'affectus' to describe art and the ways in which it can form an assemblage of embodied subjectivities (Coe et al. 2012: 79). According to Deleuze, interaction with others is the 'point of expansion'. Each day unfolds as a series of encounters fracturing the past and bringing it together anew. With every coming together, a new highway is laid, a new road to a new place, where a new seed can be planted. However, this break can be violent: seeing in a new way asks us to turn from the old, to question the legitimacy of our previous understanding and to occupy, for a time, a space in between two states of knowing. Interactions between bodies, materials and spaces allow us to make and remake our experience of our selfness in the world. In making we reorganise ontological units as well as phenomena.

In 2016, student collaborators Annie Hines and Jesse Ajilore, both aged 17, introduced their artwork in the following way:

<blockquote>This piece came [about] as a result of two collaborators experiencing a clash in their styles & work ethic. They then found that they both shared … an interest in the portrayal of emotion. Their piece shows the unity of their practices through a change of expression. (Ajilore 2016).</blockquote>

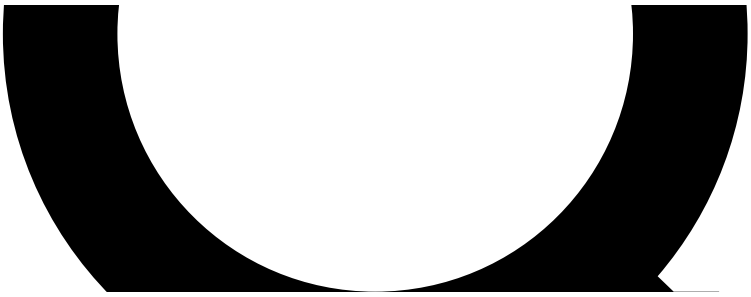

Figure 2: Terri Newman, Students communicating through emoji, 2016. Photograph. [Copyright holder Terri Newman]

Collaboration opens up the possibility of 'dynamic topological re-configurations/ entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world' (Barad 2007: 141).
Jesse and Annie, two high-achieving students studying Graphic Communication and Fine Art A Levels respectively, found that their likes and dislikes made them too different to work together. Over the course of the seven-week project they taught one another their areas of specialism and, in this, found a shared dialogue that they then communicated through an animation. In their own schools these students where at the top of their class and felt confident in their ability to achieve; in this project, they were confronted with the challenge of accepting the merits and opinions of another, as the project required them to develop an artwork that highlighted both of their strengths.

Deleuze and Guattari articulate the body in a constant state of 'becoming' in relation to other bodies, in a

permanent renegotiation of the self and its space in the world. They describe the body as 'permeable and open to the influence (and imposition) of others' (Coleman and Ringrose 2013: 33), that is, inescapable from the effect of the social. I propose that to assume art-making is an isolated task is to ignore the potentials of art beyond its ability to reproduce the taught school art style. Art-making with others is a catalyst for the expansion of ideas and knowledge-making, allowing those involved to be more active agents in the practice of their own existence.

Jacques Rancière (2015) champions 'critical' art and its ability to give agency to excluded voices. Having a particular occupation thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; for example civil servants working within the Department for Education on behalf of the government will have access to and the ability to make changes to policy that affects the lives of teachers and students across the country. Teachers must follow this guidance whilst having no ability to impact it. The distribution of the sensible is the regulation of 'what is seen and what can be said about it', 'who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (Rancière 2004: 12). We see this in the exam board's reluctance to diversify the types of practices acceptable within the A Level criteria. Work that is exemplified at moderation events is overwhelmingly two-dimensional, and emphasis is placed on the students' ability to render the most lifelike recreation of images. Students whose work is expressive and/or does not follow the conventions of 'example drawing, painting, sculpture' is accepted for submission but grades are often awarded at a lower level compared to more conventional work (AQA 2020). I would like to propose that the current trend to champion STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths subjects), outlined by the Department for Education as the subjects that are 'helping to empower future generations' (Department of Education 2011), ignores the importance of arts subjects to affect change in the world. Pressure to create art with the proper 'look', to hang on to what art is expected to be, ignores art's ability to empower and inspire generations and limits the subject's strength within the curriculum.

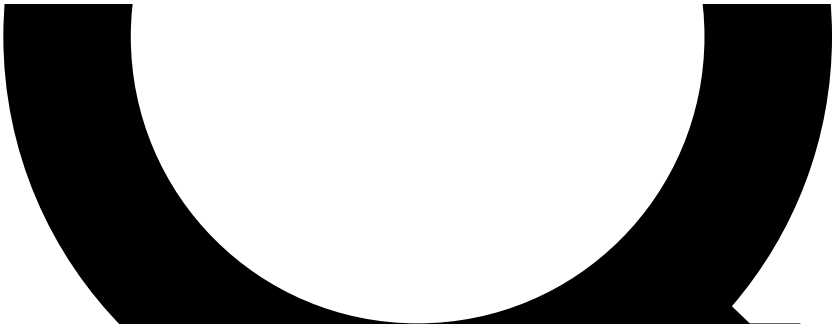

Figure 3: Terri Newman, Students working together to erect a sculpture, 2018. Photograph. [Copyright holder Terri Newman]

Pressure to make arts subjects more academically legitimate forces exam boards to support lone working in order to use assessment methods that fall in line with subjects that are seen as more acceptable, more visible, more 'empowering', which constrains methods of art-making that require more creative assessment strategies such as performative, interactive and collaborative approaches. The concept of the distribution of the sensible highlights the ways in which power structures construct the social in order to reinforce the status quo. Therefore, art is taught to the way that it is assessed, and students are encouraged to create work that is two-dimensional and inspiring and lacks function. Collaborative pedagogies encourage learners to question the constraints of the institution and are therefore seen as dangerous. Collaborative pedagogies

call for a radical rethinking of the ways in which art can be taught and assessed in schools, which means they have a power to affect a redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004).

My practice-based research is located in the context of post-sixteen education for art and design in the UK. 'Sixth form' refers to the two years immediately following the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the compulsory formal education certificate awarded to young people, usually aged between 14 and 16 years. The A Level curriculum and qualification in Art and Design is offered by three examination boards, AQA, OCR and EDUQAS, which in all cases are similar in both content and assessment criteria. Each board requires students to engage with 'innovative creative learning experiences' (EDUQAS 2015: 3), 'provide all students with a platform to inspire a lifelong interest in, and enjoyment of, art and design' (AQA 2015: 5), and develop 'intellectual, imaginative, creative and intuitive capabilities' (OCR 2029: ii).

To the learner, these declarations might feel exciting, progressive and full of possibility, but in reality they lead to the implementation of a restrictive practice that reinforces entrenched ideologies of what art is, does and how it is made. There is a school art style that exists totally detached from artistic practice outside of the institution, in which young people are fed conventional themes, materials and processes that lead them to create work that conforms to the expected look (Efland 1976: 37–44). If we look to the AQA Standardisation materials (AQA 2020), work that receives the highest grades follows the conventions of drawing and evolves to become rendered in a variety of materials such as ink or pastel. These images are then frequently 'developed' with increased 'skill' to become more proportionally accurate. At this stage, often a third process, such as Modroc, will be introduced to create texture on the surface, or alternatively a shattered mirror might be stuck to the canvas to represent the fractured emotions of a high school teen.

Since the criteria set by the awarding bodies restrict the assessment of artworks to individual student practice, working collaboratively in the art and design classroom is actively discouraged, methods of making are hierarchised and practices that exists beyond isolated creation are actively forbidden in all work that is used to determine the grade of the learner. For AQA examinations (the examination board favoured by many schools in the UK), students are asked to show an ability to 'explore and select appropriate resources, media, materials, techniques and processes, reviewing and refining ideas as work develops' (AQA 2015: 5). The board asks students to select and develop a body of work that shows an 'exceptional ability to explore and select appropriate resources' whilst also requiring students to declare that all work, ideas and insights are exclusively their own (AQA 2020).

When I approached OCR and AQA to ask about their views on collaborative work being presented as part of the 'body of work' submitted for the respective qualifications, I was informed by AQA subject specialist Karl Goodere-Dale that 'work submitted by a candidate needs to be done by that candidate only' (Goodere-Dale 2020). He drew similarities between the ways in which art subjects and maths are assessed, suggesting that art and design students are not permitted to submit work that has been created collaboratively.

I would like to suggest that because of the desire to standardise testing between subject areas, little attention is paid to the ways in which these subjects are fundamentally different, even though success criteria cannot be quantifiably compared between these subjects. Perhaps the ways that we assess young people's 'ability' in art and design subjects reinforces the existing distribution of the sensible and limits the ability of education to be transformative.

Eduqas were more open to the merits of collaborative practice. They suggested that work could be created collaboratively outside of the assessed portfolio but posed the following questions: How can the individual role and work of the candidate within group projects be identified for assessment purposes? Can the student fulfil the assessment objectives when working collaboratively (Badbury 2020)?

There is little doubt that developing artists have found that working with others on collaborative projects has contributed valuable experiences to their creative development, but it is frustrating that, despite collaborative practices being actively championed in art and design undergraduate programmes in higher education, collaborative work is deemed to be too entangled and ambiguous in terms of authorship to be assessed at the sixth-form level. Under the current assessment models of the examination boards for A Level Art and Design, collaborative artworks are rendered redundant. This generates an excess of artwork that is too meaningful to discard, yet too problematic to be submitted for grading.

I would like the reader to consider the function of the collaborative artwork and its value within the A Level curriculum. If we continue to see collaborative practice as extranumerary in the secondary school classroom, where time and resources are increasingly scarce, can an argument be made for generating work that exists outside of the curriculum? And, if so, is it alright for art to just be? If not, how can we negotiate a legitimate space for it to exist?

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Terri Newman is a PhD student at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the head of visual arts at Elstree University Technical College. She works to bring together young artists studying at sixth form and technical colleges across London to develop communities for learning. Practice-based research investigates the pedagogy of collaboration.