

Painting by Numbers? What my lockdown teaching experiments, followed by encounters with a new kind of unit design, taught me about Fine Art and its special approach to HE teaching and learning

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INTRODUCTION

In two short pieces on lockdown teaching and learning experiences (O’Kane, 2021a and 2021b), I strived to wriggle out of the pandemic dilemma: I felt proud of the way in which both those pieces, and the practices they describe, helped me to find creative ‘wiggle-room’ in which to reach across a divide between lecturer and students, opened by suddenly imposed, screen-based, online teaching and learning (Wolff, 2013). **N**

Since then, however, I, and some of my colleagues, have encountered a new kind of unit design that seems to have been influenced, in its own way, by lockdown. Colleagues from colleges other than my own have recognised my description and experience of these unit designs and expressed similar concerns to those voiced in what follows. It is not yet possible to name this ‘kind’ or ‘type’ and so I have evolved an acronym, based on one colleague’s summarisation of: ‘the rapid emergence and dominance after the pandemic of a *new* type of *teaching and learning* [NTL], one that can be *counted, measured* and *controlled* [CMC]’ – hence ‘NTLCMC’. In this chapter, I critique and share ideas emerging in response to my experience of these NTLMCs. I hope to thereby help peers and colleagues to prepare for encounters with NTLMCs, while taking the opportunity to clarify, defend and promote the highest values of fine art teaching and learning.

VENDING MACHINE OR FARMERS' MARKET? – FINE ART'S SPECIAL CASE

My recent, highly varied, lockdown and post-lockdown experiences (accompanied by the useful reflective facility of preparing the texts for *JLDHE*), have taught me that we should not allow the experience of a pandemic – or comparable crises – to allow lower bars of creative and pedagogical aspiration to take a hold of fine art units or courses (Gunderman, 2013). Rather, we should continue to aim high, higher, and highest; fine, finer, and finest, as our students, our forebears, and future generations would surely want and expect us to do, always pursuing the special excellence that resides at the heart of fine art's ever shifting and slightly mysterious goal (Brack and Cowling, 2015).

While it is clearly a managerial issue as to how to contend with a pandemic or other significant disruption, it is nevertheless fine art's role and duty, not only to innovate and excel, but to disrupt and 'trouble' – as Judith Butler (1999) would put it – given and prescribed structures, methods and values. Fine art teaching is always a creative and speculative discussion between generations of artists, and this dialogue might be diminished by NTLCMCs.

The constant, dynamic, and difficult exchange that associates fine art with progressive and ethical issues, dates back to an era when modern art first defined itself in part by overthrowing academicism. However, NTLCMCs, with their relatively generic, design-oriented aims and prescriptive means, could mislead us into a new academicism, anathema to fine art's famously progressive legacy (Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger, 1998; Barlow, 2000).

NTLCMCs seem designed in such a way that, should a pandemic once again seal us within our cells with the result that 'in real life' teaching and purpose-built college rooms become inaccessible, or should a lecturer's strike or similar disruption mean that live lecturers are unavailable, then an adequate modicum of higher education might still be provided.

Admittedly, it is worthwhile having such facilities available for emergencies, but it would be a mistake to allow them to become unquestioningly deployed in ways that diminish or suppress the unique tradition of our best fine art teaching and learning (Wolff, 2013). The fear arises that qualities and standards of teaching and learning on NTLCMCs might be reduced to that of a pedagogical 'vending machine' with its limited array of fast food choices, compared with (to extend the metaphor) the *dégustation* or 'farmers market' represented by the best fine art teaching and learning.

DRIVERLESS CARS

NTLCMCs, which involve students from many courses and disciplines, all following the same tracks, seem to have been encouraged by the pandemic. While following these more prescriptive, more technologised units, students are invited to regularly respond at given points, usually in the form of a brief textual or visual input, such as a file uploaded to a conveniently designed piece of software. This may have already become a familiar model in secondary education and may have crept into higher education where fine art has had to adapt and work around it. However, NTLCMCs seem to take this tendency to a new limit. We might even say they are designed with the potential to run like driverless cars. After all, while working on one such NTLCMC I noted that a single Graduate Teaching Assistant or GTA (recently graduated student helper) would be sufficient to guide a group of about 30 students through the unit. However, this meant that the unit was anathema, and even

disabling to my own seasoned fine art teaching skills, for which I was unable to find any place or use. This was a painful personal experience, but it is noteworthy for a wider audience that a teaching unit can be designed in such a way as to make a seasoned, highly skilled and qualified lecturer feel superfluous (Wolff, 2013; Crook, 2015). Nevertheless, this may, in turn, encourage us to think carefully about some critical questions: how are we teaching future generations of not just fine art students but fine art *lecturers*? What kind of teaching environment will future lecturers grow into and inherit? What skills will they need, or perhaps no longer need?

Ultimately, for NTLCMCs, the lecturers, or GTAs, as well as the students themselves (assuming courses of this kind might go ahead without a lecturer present) do not really require specialist fine art experience, qualifications, and skills; students and staff simply need to be briefed, and repetitively if necessary, on how to follow, complete, and assess an NTLCMS unit's relatively limited, linear, and prescriptive format. But note that a repetitive briefing, which might take up one or two mornings, here becomes comparable with or equivalent to years or decades of rich, hard-won experience, research, qualifications, and skills. Again, these developments should be noted, critiqued, and monitored (Brack and Cowling, 2015).

PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY?

The NTLCMC unit that I experienced at first hand (I cannot say I 'taught' on it) appeared to encourage students to explore, experiment and research, and yet this seemed to me, as a fine art lecturer, to mean sticking too closely to a prescribed journey and working towards

too prescribed a goal while keeping within certain guidelines and using a specific (and again prescriptive) software. All of this might add up to a version of teaching and learning that, while attractively cost-saving, time-saving and space-saving, is not so much a form of progressive pedagogy as it is a prescribed and linear *image* of progressive pedagogy. The special idiosyncrasies, unique perspectives, and emerging agendas of fine art staff and students are thereby compromised or set aside for the sake of satisfying a sense of effective completion. Interestingly however, this has taught me to keep in question any presumption that fine art education should be as concerned with ‘completion’ as it currently is. Perhaps, after all, too much attention and energy is currently given to ‘completion’ – e.g., in the ritualistic finality of the awarding of degrees; in spectacular graduation events and degree shows; as well as in the regular ‘completion’ of units that have – we might say falsely – dissected, quantified and geometrised a far more mercurial and heterogenous experience of teaching and learning that HE fine art students may actually experience.

FINE ART VS. DESIGN

While writing this chapter I received reports from colleagues that both anecdotal evidence and official surveys showed that, on these NTLCMC units, fine art students in particular are often dissatisfied and confused, while design students, whose training involves more prescriptive brief-setting exercises, are more satisfied and less puzzled (O’Kane, 2021a; O’Kane, 2021b). This discovery then led me to question anew the traditionally assumed association of ‘art’ with ‘design’, and to wonder if these quite different disciplines could or should be converging or diverging today? That is, should ‘art’ and ‘design’ perhaps be treated as more different and more distinct than in recent decades they have habitually been perceived to be? Furthermore, should we unquestioningly combine students of

different disciplines and professions into homogenising and generic teaching units on the assumption that this is always a positive and progressive notion? After all, the process might suppress or disguise just how radically different these disciplines are, and, correspondingly, how special and bespoke the skills of their lecturers and the requirements of their respective students might be.

COLLABORATION AND PLAYPENS

If NTLCMCs reveal a tendency towards a more prescriptive, generic, homogenising and hi-technologised form of teaching and learning, the unit I witnessed also came clearly wrapped in an advocacy of ‘collaboration’. However, from a fine artist’s perspective this seemed to presume too harmonious a compliance between student and student, as well as between student and lecturer; and one that might suppress more real and productive difference and difficulty. Collaboration, in the sense that I know it from fine art teaching and practice, acknowledges that creative work, and any accompanying political and ethical debate, often emerges from real tension and difficulty, from honestly working with difference, and even encountering alterity. Collaboration then, in fine art, is not presumed or prescribed as a successful achievement, neither is it seen as primarily pragmatic and utilitarian – as it might tend to be with design subjects.

Another fear arises here that an enthusiasm for collaboration could be misused on an NTLCMC as a convenient way to leave students in charge of their own and each other’s education, effectively play-penned by a sequence of prescribed and scheduled tasks (James and Nerantzi, 2019). Students thereby become self-supervising, without the need for a lecturer present. But is this ‘higher’ education? Does it truly challenge, encourage, and allow

students to raise their standards, increase their knowledge, and develop their skills? One second year fine art student described their NTLCMC (in a one-to-one tutorial) as ‘A-Level-ish’ – hinting at an infantilising effect. But this criticism has allowed me to begin to identify and articulate a special kind of maturity and responsibility, perhaps peculiar to fine art, that rubs along with its more playful and anarchic attributes (Haraway, 2016).

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND PAINTING BY NUMBERS

During the process of writing this chapter I have also learned, or been reminded of, the fact that the central and crucial value of fine art education involves giving students of a new generation opportunities to expand their own ideas, confidence and powers, and in such a way as to enable them to question everything and anything. This includes questioning the ethics, aesthetics, forms, processes, and contents of any pedagogical exercise proposed to them by representatives of another generation and culture. But as well as the widest range of permissible ethical agendas, fine art students should also and always be encouraged to experiment with *all* the tools and possibilities available to them, whether these be lucratively acquired hi-tec teaching-and-learning software, or relatively ‘Lo-Fi’, cheap, anachronistic, or traditional resources (Brack and Cowling, 2015). It is therefore notable that, on NTLCMCs, new technologies seem to play an even more significant part than is already common in the daily lives of fine art students – and this despite the fact that we know that both students and lecturers are already suffering from hi-technology overload; and despite the fact that fine artists and fine art students are unusually open to exploring the widest range and the longest histories of both ‘high’ and ‘low’ technologies (Brack and Cowling, 2015).

We only have to check who the richest organisations in the world are today to note that educational technology is highly profitable, and so it is perhaps inevitable that we begin to see the technological 'tail' wagging the pedagogical 'dog', as teaching and learning software comes to shape, determine and predict the development of teaching, learning, lecturer and student (Vega, 2013; Witte, 2008). We seem to be rapidly reaching a point where, rather than teaching and learning technologies providing us with helpful tools to enable the delivery of our materials, we find that teaching and learning is being increasingly designed *for* a particular software.

Two currently popular softwares (many seem fly-by-night), Miro and Padlet, might be salient examples, recently building, as they do, upon the transformative millennial eruption of PowerPoint and Google into our classrooms. I have heard Miro and Padlet championed by lecturers as being 'less linear' than some other technologies. However, I would argue that both significantly reduce and tie down the potential for fine art students and lecturers to think and work outside the hi-technology 'box'. They therefore diminish opportunities to think and work in more diverse, heterogeneous, multi-dimensional, unexpected, even culturally traditional or 'old fashioned' ways (Vega, 2013; Witte, 2008). Indeed, several of my fine art students are currently showing a renewed interest in their unique and personal handwriting, perhaps as a riposte to inhuman, intimidating, homogenising and alienating software, and now AI also appearing on their horizon.

The fundamentally *quantitative* basis of computer logic seems not adequate or appropriate to the exceptionally *qualitative*, multi-sensual, affective and often dis-organised realm of

fine art thinking and making that Deleuze and Guattari's (2013) concept of a 'Body Without Organs' captures as perhaps a useful model for accommodating twenty-first century complexities via acknowledgment of formless becomings, intensive behaviours, and refusal of a paradigmatic modern tendency to organ-isation. Thus NTLCMCs, and their tendency to prescriptive, hi-technologised teaching and learning (according to which the student progresses towards a pre-desired outcome via a pre-established route within a particular software) may be fairly compared with the childhood game of 'painting by numbers'.

It may be that, technically speaking, whenever we wield new technologies, we are dealing with zeros and ones and therefore *literally* 'painting by numbers', echoing the key theme of Sadie Plant's book *Zeros and Ones* (1998). But we can pursue this idea metaphorically too, i.e., a child, when recreationally 'painting by numbers', is encouraged to keep within prescribed lines and to adhere to a pre-established code that determines which colour equates with which number. This achieves the fleeting satisfaction of revealing a desired outcome latent within the exercise, but this approach is antithetical to fine art students' critical and creative pursuit of open-ended speculation, genuine risk, and discovery. It also contradicts a perennial invitation for each new cohort of fine art students to trouble, question and disrupt given and established norms – to question and even break the rules of any game with which they are presented (Butler, 1999; Haraway, 2016).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Fine art, and its current generation of lecturers, enthusiastically accommodate the rich array of twenty-first century difference that annually comes to UK colleges from all over the world, made up of students who aim to explore and question themselves and the wider

world, just as much as they aim to explore and question fine art (Butler, 1999; Haraway, 2016). Those fine art students are chosen as ready and able to disrupt and deconstruct, trouble, and transgress established values. Thus, we should always be asking our fine art students to engage with, exchange, and challenge the incumbent generation's ideas, ethics, politics, skills, and experience, and not provide them with generic and prescriptive exercises based on currently established beliefs, positions, and opinions.

The best fine art teaching and learning in which I have been privileged to participate during 25 years of lecturing, involves a particular lecturer, candidly sharing, trying out, and creating – more or less 'live' – their own idiosyncratically accumulated knowledge and hard-won research, the result of – in many cases – decades of genuine risk and speculation often precariously founded on the gamble of a life and career nervously built upon the speculative adventure that is fine art (Brack and Cowling, 2015; Wolff, 2013). By contrast, the NTLCMCs discussed above seem designed to be delivered, not by any particular person, artist and lecturer, but remotely, as if from on high, by an anonymous author, the distanced designer of a generic unit that, once created, can be delivered by any lecturer or GTA, anywhere in the world, and even played out and worked through by students without need of external assistance (French and Kennedy, 2017).

However, as we have spent recent decades conscientiously inviting, encouraging, and cultivating the increasingly diverse student intake who now boost and transform our colleges with a newly vibrant multi- and global-cultural profile, surely we should not confront these students with an unprecedentedly generic, highly prescribed, software-defined and homogenising form of teaching and learning? If so, we risk squandering our

proud legacy and might become incapable of building and growing the future of our institution upon our celebrated local idiosyncrasies and unique forms of excellence (Vega, 2013; Witte, 2008).

NTLCMCs may be convenient, cost-effective and profitable; and they may be useful in an emergency like a pandemic or strike, but if they are allowed to become a rule rather than an exception they could deprive us of the rich, varied and challenging qualities of fine art teaching and learning for which our courses and colleges won their formidable renown as now world-famous 'brands'. And it is worth noting here that these reputations have been won, not by the rapid deployment of the latest technologies in a defensive moment of managerial anxiety, but through decades of dedicated, experimental, and creative teaching and learning, perennially provided by generations of passionately devoted fine art lecturers, always creatively and inventively working through a more or less constant state of 'crisis' in art and education.

The recent encounters that have motivated this text, have also suggested to me that measurements of progress and achievement of fine art students' work should be regularly renegotiated by and with students and staff, as appropriate to each particular project, exhibition, event or workshop; as appropriate to fine art as a particular discipline; as appropriate to a particular year group, and as appropriate to a particular time and place in a rapidly changing world. In this way, we might eschew the imposition of inappropriate, unwieldy, overly quantitative, geometric, generic, and homogenising methods of fine art teaching and assessment.

Therefore, when it comes to innovative and progressive unit and course design, rather than placing our trust in prescriptive units, quantified progress, and lucrative software to nurture and cultivate our fine art students' potential, we should use to their best advantage the rich 'grass roots' resource of our subject in the form of our new and experienced lecturers and GTAs, working sceptically, critically, creatively, and radically with students, at the 'coalface' of our dynamically evolving discipline.

Finally, through my own encounter with lockdown, and then soon after, working on an NTLCMC, I have been reminded that fine art should always be *anything but* convenient, generic, and prescriptive. Unwieldy difficulty and difference are crucial parts of the identity and history of our famously progressive and speculative fine art teaching and learning, for which 'trouble', particularly in the wake of Judith Butler's use and dissemination of the term and its subsequent promotion by Donna Haraway, is a desirable value, tool – even a destination (Butler, 1999; Haraway, 2016). Therefore, we should not respond defensively to difficulty, passively accepting the imposition of flat-packed, top-down models of fine art teaching and learning. Doing so will always be contra to the hard-won, long-standing, noble and progressive profession of fine art teaching and learning in higher education, whose standards today's fine art lecturers, GTAs, and students have a duty, a right, and a responsibility to uphold.

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