

A PEDAGOGY OF UNKNOWING

*The aim of art is to uncover the questions that have been hidden by the answers*¹.

The pedagogic method I have developed in the last 15 years can be encapsulated by the above quote from James Baldwin. I have distilled this method's principles into a core set of exercises, lectures and seminars titled *Shaking the Jar*, which prioritise the unique subjective experience of each student in navigating, comprehending and recreating their worlds anew as artists.

This method is aimed at undergraduate, post graduate and research creative arts students as well as teaching and research staff from all backgrounds how to pay attention, how to deeply look, listen to and question what is going on around them - a precondition for making art. It also teaches how to detect one's own unconscious bias, how to put it aside in order to perceive someone or something in front of you afresh without foisting prejudicial preconceptions onto them.²

These methods draw their inspiration from diverse cultural sources including indigenous, majority south and other non-Western modes of thought and methods of practice. The aim of which is to break down the unconscious bias and unreflected-upon presuppositions of much European pedagogy, language and thought. These exercises aim to loosen the grip of unconscious and linguistic bias through self-reflection and perspectival awareness which is to bring to light the reality of perspectives other than one's own and thereby give each participant the experience of shared reality.

It is also a response to a context of linear programmatic learning in many of the programs in a creative arts milieu that increasingly validates 'getting it right' and working within a restrictive set of cognitive creative and material options in step with a culture of increasing regulation and risk minimisation.

It fosters the building of networks or communities of practice and constructive collaboration. Students learn as much from each other as they do from their tutors. Understanding the dual nature of practice, the individual and the collective aspects is seen as key to artistic success. These communities of practice arise from virtuous circles of communication, compassion and collaboration. At both undergraduate and postgraduate levels I have always prioritised building a studio community of committed practitioners. It is their diversity which unites them as artists.

Professional Practice

Professional practice emanates from the centre of studio practice, studio management, making for communication, considering audience engagement and display by default, not as an add on. As part of this have run a yearly seminar titled *How to be Lucky* with renowned psychologist Richard Wiseman³ and a panel of alumni uncovering the attributes of artistic success and their alignment with the powers of observation and perception practiced by artists.

I have led interdisciplinary, cross program activities, bringing for example philosophy students into our studios and fine arts students into philosophy seminars. We have forged alliances with galleries and Arts organisations in Hertfordshire for example Broadway gallery Letchworth, Herts Visual Arts and Courtyard Arts to create a

¹Baldwin, James *The Creative Process*, in *Creative America*, Ridge Press, 1962.

²Engeland, Chad. *Phenomenology*

³Wiseman, Richard. *The Luck Factor*

vibrant and supportive community for our graduates to enter into. Hertfordshire has a lot of artists, I am aware of 39 art societies within the county.

Pragmatic Responses to Practical Problems

My method is pragmatic and highly adaptable to emergent and unprecedented problems that can flare up without warning. An example was responding to student needs to continue their art practice during the two Covid lockdowns. I ran a series of online seminars titled "The Demountable Studio" with the aim of opening up possibilities within the students lockdown accommodation for studio practice. A remarkable range of innovative responses ensued in response to the question: How can I continue my making work outside of my campus studios and workshops? Students converted, adapted, refitted pergolas, kitchens, spare rooms, porches patios, decks, garages, greenhouses, erected tents and tarpaulins in gardens to create temporary productive spaces. The lesson learned was that practice is nomadic and can go with you whatever your situation and almost any situation can be leveraged to produce art.

Another example was changing from tutor-led to student-led seminars when vl budgets were slashed without warning the day before the start of term. We had to rewrite the timetable overnight to distribute far fewer staff hours without negative impact on student experience over the same number of students per year. These new student-led seminars became a net benefit - a kind of halfway house between independent practice after graduation and dependent studentship while on the course.

Anxiety

The way I address the pervasive presence of anxiety amongst my students is to characterise it as particular burden and privilege of making art and doing the job of an artist which is to recreate the world anew. Anxiety is a sign that what we are doing is meaningful, is worthy of the investment of so much of ourselves. For psychologist Kirk Schneider anxiety is a given, trying to extinguish it as if it were a disorder is barking up the wrong tree. Anxiety is not to be suppressed, rather it is necessary for us to achieve a state of passionate engagement, ethical attunement, and creative enrichment, all key factors in making art. Schneider distinguishes between life enhancing anxiety and life destroying anxiety, the former is prosocial - emancipatory for self and others, the latter is antisocial - shrinks the self, severs connection to others. He asks "What specifically do I mean by life-enhancing anxiety? I mean anxiety that enables us to live with and make the best of the depth and mystery of existence,"

If our anxiety calls us toward the other we allow the fragments of each of our individual realities to be combined - a consensual whole or bigger picture is created, something much larger and more complete than we can make ourselves. This brings us into communion with each other; it allows us to understand the reality of other minds of other points of view. And that is the main building block of a community, of friendship, alliance, being there for others which is what brings us richness and artistic fulfilment. It also helps set the groundwork for decolonising the curriculum by de-sedimenting or decolonising the thinking and approach of the students and tutors on the course.

Disorder, Disability and Neurodiversity

In recent years we have had increasing numbers of undergraduates with study needs agreements covering ADHD, OCD, dyspraxia, dyslexia and bipolar disorder; some of them very debilitating of their ability to

participate in groups, travel on public transport, organise their lives to properly equip themselves to their studies.

In discussion with psychologist colleagues I introduced a discourse to my students around the relationship between creative ability and disability. Rather than dismissing disability as a negative out of hand I have where I felt it appropriate encouraged students to step back from this and consider their condition from a more neutral standpoint. Not always but quite frequently, it was possible for students to change their attitude to whatever condition it was they presented with.

A good example of this was a final year student in 2022, who had always struggled to obtain grades higher than a pass and exhibited severe obsessive compulsive disorder symptoms. Through gentle prompting as to the meaning of the involuntary rituals of rhythmic tapping on entering rooms and other autonomic tics she came to see them as part of her emergent artistic persona and managed to incorporate them into her practice over her final year of study where they became actually productive and an asset in her unique rituals of daily practice. This resulted in her attaining a high B for her Semester B practice module, by far the highest grade of her studies. For her it paid off to think of disability and super-ability as sides of the same coin.

Making as Thinking

Talking can be an ineffective response to student impasses in their practice. Tutorials sometimes need to be making sessions. For example a recent top level MA student, intellectually and creatively brilliant, had a real problem of how to display her fragile assemblages of foraged plant based works, they could not stand up or occupy space themselves so a tutorial in the metal workshop with a new material to her, steel rod, forming it into elegant hooks, eyelets one of the most important factors in raising her practice to a new level was her adoption of the display system which she took to via experimenting with a new material steel rod - she intelligently articulated the relationship between this and the work itself at the same time keeping enough questions in play to keep the system alive.

Decolonising the Curriculum

My pedagogy aims to set the groundwork for decolonising the curriculum and loosening the grip of unconscious bias through self reflection. Decolonising the curriculum can only be meaningfully undertaken through decolonising the thinking and approach of the students and tutors participating in it. Neuro-plasticity is the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections, in response to learning or experience. This helps create a collaborative mindset, and a fluid rather than fixed identity.

SHAKING THE JAR

CORE CREATIVE CURRICULUM

Each of these moments is an invitation to further inquiry: looking deeper, zooming out, or in. Opening possibilities for a new way of being.⁴

Imagine a jar of pond water with a layer of sediment at the bottom sitting on a shelf in the garden shed. Pick it up and shake it until the mud swirls through the water. You have reformulated its arrangement. You have de-sedimented it -Maurice Merleau-Ponty's metaphor for the forming of new patterns of behaviour, habits of mind and body.⁵

We all need to regularly shake our jars, unsettle ourselves, retrain our muscles and neurones to form new patterns in response to new situations. This is a prerequisite for learning the creative fluency to cope with and make the inherent uncertainty and anxiety of art life-enhancing rather than life-destroying.⁶

Tune In

Are you curious? Do you notice things? Do you pay conscious attention to what may only be a flicker in your peripheral vision or the background hiss of a distant motorway on a still night? We are talking about something akin to 'dadirri', an indigenous Australian word meaning deep listening, looking and perceptual attunement, immersion in environment, a contemplative practice extending self into world and world into self; a state of attentive entanglement.

Turn On

Making art, music, architecture or film comes from the mindset and capabilities to think for yourself. These exercises teach you how to perceive every bit of the world, you encounter in its uniqueness rather than applying the default categories society hands down to you. They equip you to reimagine and recreate the world anew, to articulate the possibility of alternatives to the systems we are enmeshed in.

Make Art

I say to my students I am more interested in how you make rather than what you make. If you don't fully know the outcome in advance, if you follow the thread of material and method you realise that you are but one of the elements in a larger process or system. Art practice oscillates in and out of the known and the unknown. Mystery, groping in the dark, not consciously knowing where you are heading, not knowing quite how you got there, trusting your instincts, failing, are prerequisites to success.

LEARNING THRESHOLDS

By far the most important thing to learn is to learn how to think and to be really thinking is to be ever at the threshold of the unknown; like opening door after door to mysterious rooms and passages in an old house. Some of these thresholds require a profound shift within the learner that could be a new perception, method, frame of reference or mindset. Imaginative leaps to new concepts sometimes need the learner to

⁴ Rubin, Rick, *The Creative Act*

⁵ Meyer, Jan; Land, Ray; Baillie, Caroline, eds. (2010). *Threshold concepts and transformational learning, Educational futures: rethinking theory and practice*. Vol. 42. Rotterdam; Boston: Sense Publishers. ISBN 9789460912054. OC.LC 649651179

⁶ Schneider, Kirk, *Life Enhancing Anxiety: Key to a Sane World* - 2023 ISBN 10: 1955737185

make room by letting go of something they already know. Reconfiguring our worldview to something new can feel unsettling but the more we do it the easier it gets.⁷

Threshold Concept: Making as Thinking

It is not the mind that imposes its forms on materials, but rather the materials that give shape to the forms of thought.

Tim Ingold, *The Textility of Making*

I use the word thinking interchangeably with the word making - making as a form of thinking and thinking as a form of making.⁸ Following the material, keeping the ideas in the background to sort themselves out you can arrive at something you could not have imagined. Intervening in the material world as distinct from rummaging through ideas in your head is to enter a material space of radiance. You are swept up into the vectors and forces, the tensions and twists, the density and gravity, the light and levity of matter.

Threshold Concept: Circular Causality

The artwork comes out of a need, an impulse to make it and the meaning emerges over the making of the work. The only meaning the work has in advance is the need for it to exist.

William Kentridge

Circular causality - destination emerges from journey, present acting on future

Linear Causality - destination predetermines journey - future acting on present

...ideas emerge from the work emerges from ideas emerge from the work emerges from ideas...

Threshold Concept: Material-Discursive Practice

Material-discursive a term coined by Karen Barad, physicist and historian of science reunites thinking and making, mind and matter, theory and practice. Each of these dyads form an axis that includes making, designing, reflecting, reading, observing, drawing, indeed any creative production in any discipline. The flows of material and process determines what gets made as much as the maker does, the maker is entangled within a shifting manifold of matter and meaning.

Threshold Concept: Pay Attention!

'As artists, we seek to restore our childlike perception: a more innocent state of wonder and appreciation not tethered to utility or survival. Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act*

Artists are attuned to their own first-person experience. They trust it more than any a-priori or theoretical understanding which skips the step of actually being present to what is in front of you. For artists the bare language of generalisation that collapses things into categories is not enough. Artists learn to un-know that the name for the system of horizontal and vertical wooden elements in front of them is chair; they thrive on the unique first-person perspective that opens up in every encounter. Artists know something we forgot: how to pay attention.

The sharpening of perspectival awareness deepens creative practice and reconfigure artist relationship with the world. Phenomenology, is the study of experience from the subjective or first person point of view. Experience always exists in the world as well as in our minds. Why is this important? Because perception observation and critical awareness underpin creative practice. The better we get at experiencing things afresh the better artist we will be.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ISBN 9780415834339, 2013 Routledge

⁸ *Thinking as handicraft, What is Called Thinking?* By Martin Heidegger

How does one do this? Via the method invented by the founder of modern phenomenology Edmund Husserl - *epochè* or bracketing.⁹ It is the deliberate practice of unknowing, suspending what we think we know about something we are experiencing so that we can see it afresh in an as open as possible encounter without falling back on what we've been told a thing is.

Threshold Concept: Dialectical Method

Dialectic – the interaction of two opposed or contrasting ideas, elements or forces.

Thinking dialectically is always thinking of something in terms of its opposite. Dialectical method starts you making in a way that articulates and clarifies relationships within your work - dialogues of material, form, space, line, colour and idea. It is a specific type of dialogue between people, within yourself or within elements of an artwork. It is a way of testing an opinion, finding a better way forward, critically assessing what you are making, interpreting another artists work, evaluating an opinion different to your own. It sharpens the ability to reflectively think for yourself, perceive connection in the apparently unconnected and vice versa. It is a way of seeing under the hood of conventional commonly held belief and makes you a better artist.

Threshold Concept: Being Ecological

Being ecological means seeing things as outcomes of relationships, seeing ourselves refracted, imbricated, dissipated in others, in where the water and nutrients we ingest and excrete, the gases we inhale and exhale came from within a world so many of us have forgotten we are part of. Process Philosophy sees process as primary, things emerge from relationships and not the other way round – the world is flux, made of processes and relationships rather than pre-existent substances.

Threshold Concept: Escaping the Prison of Language

There is no word for and therefore no concept of nature in pre-Columbian indigenous Peruvian languages.

Such a concept is nonsensical as humans are as of nature as any animal plant river or tree.

Artists need to alter the way they think about the logic of the language of thought. Rather than saying I am making art, carving a lump of wood or painting a canvas- subject, verb, object - it makes much more sense for an artist to say a process of making within which I am participating is making me and an artwork verb subject/object. The important bit is the verb, the doing, the subject and object are outcomes of the doing not the other way round.

as larger experience is creating me and artwork, verb-(subject/object). Or as Tim Ingold says of craftspeople and artists - material and tools make the artist – object-verb-subject If our language and therefore thinking only allows subjects doing to objects then we are stuck in an artifice, prisoners of a language that only recognises a single linear direction of agency. The words and syntax of our sentences imprison us in fixed identities and render materials as inert and passive.

⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/#PheEpo>

EXERCISES IN EXTENDED PERCEPTION

Each of these is done by the whole cohort in morning sessions over a semester

I See You See Me.

Draw something in front of you. Try to forget what the thing is called, focus on its basic appearance, not what we are told the thing is. Draw what you can see of it from your perspective and bring to awareness the parts you can't see. Holding that, extend your awareness to the perspective of another observer in the room. Try to imagine and draw what they are seeing.

Where Do I End?

...the perceived split between human and nature isn't real: the inside of your body is connected to the world around you, and your body too has its ecology, and what goes into it – whether eaten or breathed or drunk or absorbed through your skin – has a profound impact on you!¹⁰

Draw an x-ray diagram of your body focussing on its interfaces with the world. include sense organs blood vessels, bones, nervous, lymphatic, digestive, pulmonary systems. How do you and the world interpenetrate and interact? Where do you draw a boundary between you and the world? Is this even possible? Where does your body's impact end and how do you embody all that has impacted you? How far do the vector lines of all that you consume and produce extend through space and time? Where do you begin and end? When did you begin and when will you end?

Where Does London End?

Draw a map of London from memory embedding it in its surrounding countryside as much as possible. Include as much detail as you wish, significant places to you, parks, river, orbital motorways, railways ferrying commuters between the main terminals and home counties, remnant bits of greenbelt swallowed up by housing. Where does London end?

What is a Thing?

An object is a monotonous process. A stone is a vibration of quanta that maintains its structure for a while, just as a marine wave maintains its identity for a while before melting again into the sea...¹¹

Describe an object-to-hand as fully as possible. Include its history, its physical attributes, what it is used for, what it relates to, how did it come into being, how long will it endure, what is its significance? We see that we cannot isolate an element without losing its meaning, purpose and function. What we name a 'thing' is a transitional state within a process. Things are transient nodes in a process of ceaseless transforming.

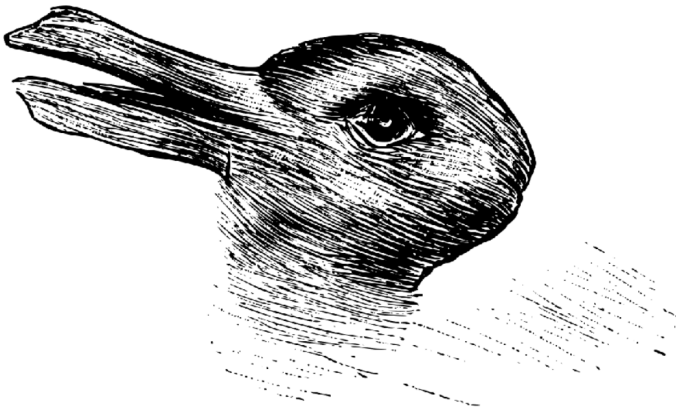
I Am You Are Me.

Draw a diagram of people that are affected by and affect you. Think about someone who might be thinking about you. Make a visual representation of this in a drawing, diagram, list of names or any thing else you might come up with. Order the diagram to prioritise those who you feel are most likely to be thinking about you but keep going to include those less likely to be thinking about you right up to the least likely, eg the myriad of trivial or fleeting encounters we have with others in going about our daily lives. Where do you end? Where do they end?

¹⁰ Margaret Atwood: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, 50 years on, essay in the Guardian, December 2012

¹¹ Rovelli, Carlo Reality Is Not What It Seems, 2017 Penguin ISBN: 9780141983219

DIALECTICAL METHOD



Duck or Rabbit?

Aims:

- Kick start a fluent and productive studio practice
- Put you in sharper dialogue with your ideas, your work, and your context. -Get better at linking ideas and practice
- highlight and expose dialogues alignments and contrasts in your work -learn to work with the total spatial/visual/sonic dynamics.

Dialectical method is a specific type of dialogue between people, within yourself or within elements of an artwork. It is a way of testing an opinion, finding a better way forward, critically assessing what you are making, interpreting another artists work, evaluating an opinion different to your own.

It sharpens the ability to reflectively think for yourself, perceive connection in the apparently unconnected and vice versa. It is a way of seeing under the hood of conventional commonly held belief and makes you a better artist.

It helps you make better choices with composition, colour, and material as well as the relationship of your work to its context

You do it by asking what is the opposite of or in contrast to a word an idea, a compositional element in your work . Eg light/dark, rough/smooth, calm/disturbed, red/ green, figure/ground...etc

Do this solo or with a partner; write down words relevant to your work, look at its composition, e.g. figure/ground, red/green colour contrast, emotional temperature, idea or concern it is communicating.

When you have at least 5 choose an antonym or opposing concept to pair it with. This is the dialectical pairing you will carry through the process of making a new work

This new work should emerge from your existing work and practice strengths. embody some form of dialogue which could be between its parts, between the work and the space, with the work of another student, etc.

The dialogue also occurs in the making process, between choosing this or that experiment to go with, between tool and material, between the emergent positive and negative spaces in the work, between all the contrasts of colour, form, density, lightness, luminosity and shadow etc etc. Keep the dialectical flame alight! Don't stop if blocked, go around , over under, switch approach to your material.