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Published in:
Studies in Higher Education

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Using critical discourse analysis to analyse the formative assessment method of a fine art studio practice curriculum, the author explores the espoused claim that *both* creativity and critical thinking are encouraged. Despite the prevalence of these often used terms, assessment practices and feedback were found to unwittingly encourage reproduction. A dominant negative dialectic at play in assessment practices was a modernist conception of the artist-student. The climate created by the imbalance between creativity and criticality was found to impact negatively on students' approaches to learning as a result of being alienated from their desires. Focusing on the South African context, this case study contributes to global concerns about strategic and uncritical adoptions of politically expedient discourses in higher education.

Key words: creativity, critical thinking, assessment, alienation, discourse

Introduction

Without reflexive investigation by teachers and assessors, curricula can be misaligned so that the very skills intended for development are unwittingly thwarted. Disjunctions between what is espoused and what is practiced can have dire implications for student approaches to (Marton and Saljo 1984; Biggs 1999b) and experiences of learning (Mann 2001). This paper looks at a case of the adoption of two terms prevalent in higher education, 'critical thinking' and 'creativity'. Concerns are raised about claims to foster such skills, without careful considerations by teachers as to how this shift in emphasis might and should impact on teaching, learning and assessment interactions.

Whilst 'creativity' and 'critical thinking' are concepts that are of interest to most teachers in higher education, they are often assumed to be fostered most particularly in creative arts disciplines, such as music, drama, creative writing, art and design. In many of these professional communities of practice, there is an understanding of the weighty implications and responsibilities of being 'creators' or 'image-makers' in contemporary societies. This paper focuses on a fine art studio practice curriculum at a South African university, where such terms have been adopted within the last ten years. This recent time frame allows for insights into possible reasons for the prevalence of these terms and related discourses.

Rather than claims to 'truth' and hard applied skills, Knight (2001, 7) points out that 'Western' higher education curricula seem to be 'giving increasing prominence to complex learning outcomes and to 'soft skills' - they are claiming to foster inter-personal skill, emotional intelligence, creativity, critical thinking, reflectiveness, incremental self-theories, autonomy and such like'. The commonly used term 'western' is used tentatively in this paper, despite its inadequacy to address post-colonial concerns that such a term ignores the vast differences (geographically, politically, economical, historically and so on) between developing countries such as South Africa and the United Kingdom for instance. However, many of the assumptions about creativity and critical thinking in this paper are also underpinned by a industrialized western bias. Influenced by such emphasis, one of the

intended purposes of higher education in South Africa is to 'contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens' through 'the development of a reflexive capacity' (South Africa DoE 1997 n.p.). As has occurred internationally, this creates an impression of shifting towards responsiveness, transformation and accountability, away from modernist conceptions of the university as 'ivory tower'. Whether termed personal reason, critical reflection (Mezirow 1981) or critical thinking (Brookfield 1995), such thinking is seen as a way to 'rub against the grain' and challenge existing paradigms.

I draw from a multi-disciplinary background to discuss the conditions necessary for developing creativity and critical thinking in fine art studio practice (FASP). The conceptual articulation between critical theory's emancipatory interest, emphasis on individual agency and reflexivity, and the 'work' of higher education and contemporary art allows for this. I firstly touch on how critical thinking and reflexivity should involve not only the *student* but most importantly the *teacher* in higher education. I then go on to outline dominant conceptions of creativity and critical thinking in visual art criticism and practice. This provides a conceptual framework and contextual background for the data analysis section. The alignment between a fine art studio practice curriculum (as espoused in the art school's documents and by its teachers), its assessment practices and effects on student learning is explored in the case study. Focus is given to the relationship between process and product, autonomy and reproduction, because of their impact on the development of creativity and critical thinking.

Critical thinking and reflexivity in higher education

Attempts to define the broad concepts of critical thinking and creativity have spawned diverse descriptions. According to the Delphi Report, interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation are aspects which comprise critical thinking (Facione 1990, 4). Although a slippery term to describe definitively, Biggs' (1999a) understanding of creativity incorporates abstract learning outcomes, such as hypothesizing, synthesizing, reflecting and generating ideas, and working with problems that have a range of possible divergent solutions. A study by The Five Colleges of Ohio (2007), distinguished improvement in critical thinking by the assessment of arguments and understanding the perspectives of others, and in creative thinking by risk, novelty and curiosity. For such thinking to be empowering, and truly emancipatory, it must be internalised and enacted in some way – it must be reflexive. Creativity involves aspects of both convergent and divergent thinking (Jackson 2003), resulting in dynamic and complex intersections and slippages between thinking critically and creativity (The Five Colleges of Ohio 2007).With human intentionality, there is the potential to act both self-reflexively and critically within society, what Barnett (1997) refers to as 'critical being in the world'.

The responsibility for creating the conditions to encourage or discourage these skills or habits (Knight 2002) rests both with the teachers (Jackson 2003) and wider teaching and learning processes. An effective curriculum should strive to 'establish good links between assessment, learning and personal development by, inter alia, allowing students some element of choice, encouraging self-assessment and reflection' (Luckett and Sutherland 2000, 107). Although inherently implicated in power dynamics, assessment practices particularly have been found in some cases to actively enable students to reconsider both their moral and ethical frameworks (Barrow 2006). Student engagement could involve 'valuing while critiquing knowing' (Parker 2003, 539) instead of flat conceptions of outcomes based

education (OBE) which often privilege 'doing rather than knowing' (Barnett, Parry and Coate 2001, 436).

Moreover self-reflexivity is essential practice for teachers. This is because educationalists conceive of their practice by referring to theoretical models based on their espoused philosophies, which may or may not coincide with their theory-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974). Theodor Adorno in *Negative dialectics* (1966) cautions that the influences of paradigms come out 'negatively' in assessment. An example of this, which will be explored more fully below, is that artists or movements that define a certain style's 'high culture' have significance for FASP students, even those unaware of their existence, because assessors' judgements have been influenced by those works or philosophies. The 'absence' of these artists/ movements is embodied through 'presence' in the shaping and assessment of aesthetic judgement (Gibson 1986). With all assessors, the models, categories and concepts used to structure their interpretation of situations, are influenced in ways of which they are both aware and unaware. This 'cognitive unconscious' (Hymes 1995, 2) or Freudian 'preconscious' determines the relationship between structure and agency. And so the theory-in-use which emerges in a teacher's assessment practice, and his/her implicit philosophical model of the person as student, may or may not be in agreement with the espoused or declared theories of learning. As I discuss in the data analysis section of this paper, how critical thinking and creativity are encouraged and rewarded in practice, creates a negative dialectic of the student that may constrain or enable the conditions for their growth in those areas.

As an alternative to such 'non-identical thinking', Adorno suggests that philosophically reflexive aesthetic experience is preferable. In many ways, the encouragement of an outcomes-based approach to assessment can be seen as an attempt to make teachers more conscious of enhancing the validity of their practice, either through appropriately aligning (Biggs 1999b) or articulating (Hussey and Smith 2003) their teaching-learning-assessment interactions with the intended purposes of the course. But far more is needed, as reflexivity involves "the capacity to develop critical awareness of the assumptions that underlie practices" (Edwards, Ranson and Strain 2002, 533).

Artmaking, critical thinking and creativity

Contextual, discipline-specific assumptions and influences are important to consider when looking at conceptions of critical thinking and creativity (Jackson, 2003). Although located in South Africa, the fine art school of this case study was influenced by western notions of artmaking, creativity and critical thinking. In twenty and twenty-first century art criticism, modernist formalism and postmodernist discourse-interest are two dominant streams which have constructed different discourses of the artist in terms of creativity and critical thinking., In addition, these streams act as a conscious or unconscious framework through which art educators assess student work. These discourses are utilized to analyse the data of the case studied.

Modernism's formalist approach is rooted in the Romantic tradition where the artwork is seen as transcendentally free and beyond contextual influence. In this conception, the form or visual surface of the artwork alone is its content, and artworks are believed to belong to another more personal or spiritual realm of transcendence or enlightenment. In this tradition, mastery or technical quality of the artifact or product was most often privileged, with teaching in FASP involving a master-apprentice dynamic. Critical theorists argue that the

danger of such myths is that aesthetic experience is posited as escapism, where artworks become 'the medium for acceptance, resignation, passivity and reconciliation' (Gibson 1986, 71), often uncritical and detached from the social complexities of lived experience.

Romantic myths of the autonomous, authentic, artist-genius unwittingly silenced the artist and his/her intentionality, removing social constraints, responsibility and agency. Freeman (2006, 92) adds that

> These romanticized ideas of the artist's otherness, of art arising out of inspirational leaps taken by the innately creative, remain common currency in our general (in)comprehension of the creative process. As well as providing a somewhat misleading idea of art making, they fuel the belief that creativity is beyond analysis; that the ways of making art are instinctive rather than reflective, and that its processes should remain shrouded in secrecy. For those studying the Arts this is both problematic and reductive.

There are multi-layered arguments challenging the traces of this formalist 'doctrine' which persevere in contemporary approaches to the reception and 'reading' of artwork. A postmodern cacophony of 'voices' speak of how every act of representation is saturated with meaning and implied assumptions about 'reality' (McEvilley 1996). Such notions informed the shift from formalist 'quality' to the neo-avant-garde 'interest' of contemporary art (Foster 1996), which is discourse-specific. Unlike the escapism of modernist formalism, in this conception emancipatory potential lies in the artwork's engagement with the world. Instead of art being unknowable and the artist's process mystical and opaque, the postmodern artist is seen as both *subject* to social and historical forces, and having *agency* and *ethical responsibility* in his/her image-making.

For these reasons and others, current FASP contends the development of individual artistic practice which is responsive to social and cultural contexts is encouraged (Corner 2005). This would include examination of society and its cultural products (what Theodor Adorno calls the 'Culture Industry') to expose hidden assumptions that underpin them. Towards this, critical discourse is centred on dimensions of inquiry into social issues (such as race, gender, ethnicity) serving to interrogate, challenge and shape the artist-student's personal and cultural connections and assumptions (Sullivan 1993). Such 'look[ing] beyond the structures of their discipline or the interests of the individual to society' is in an attempt to build critical consciousness (Toohey 1999, 65). In this conception, the art student is encouraged to grow into 'being' a socially critical artist rather than reproducing or achieving mastery of technical skills. This distinction between criticality and reproduction, is one of the focal points within the case study explored.

Similarly, notions of creativity have altered. Informed by Freudian psychology, 'inspiration' is now seen as the realization or 'trigger' of ideas that have been dormant in the subconscious. Creative activity is no longer antithetical to analytical engagement (Freeman 2006), but rather the artist as 'practical intellectual' engages actively in critical reflection (Dallow 2003). Autonomous learning or 'meta-learning' (Nickerson et al 1985) has come to be understood as one of the central determinants of student creativity (Jackson 2003; Freeman 2006), and this necessitates a shift towards the teacher as a fellow artist acting as the student's critical friend.

Freeman (2006) provides a useful differentiation between 'weak' and 'strong' acts of creativity. The former is evidenced by students limiting their approach to solving problems to which they are directed, the latter when the problem or subject area is opened up to multiple problems and possibilities, involving convergent and divergent thinking. While the former could be linked to what is known as a 'surface' or 'strategic' approach to learning, the latter

could be linked to a 'deep' approach (Marton and Saljo 1984). The process of 'problematizing' subjects echoes the concerns not only of critical theory but also postmodernism, where learning processes involve 'the continuous deconstruction of knowledge, of playing with contradictions, and of creatively and productively opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths' (Kilgore 2001, 60). In fact, the importance of play is given much significance in artmaking. 'Play' here does not mean 'non-serious endeavours' but rather 'playing with, trying out, discarding identity, purpose, shape' (Parker 2003, 541). Creativity in this context involves active engagement in creating, shaping or interpreting whatever one is doing. Winnicott (1971) maintains that through this the individual gains a sense of 'self'.

This conception of artmaking involving a reflexive balance between creativity and critical thinking requires that art schools create conditions conducive for the development of both skills. However, as both creative and critical thinking involve cognitive and affective skills (The Five Colleges of Ohio 2007), such 'play' can only be made possible within a context of trust and acceptance (Winnicott 1971). For this reason, art education is ideally intended to be experienced as 'luxurious but not elitist' (Talbot 1998), with enough time and allowance for students to explore their aims and extend their limits, with the 'space' for play, uncertainty, maturation and critical reflection. What this necessitates is a pedagogic approach that 'is facilitating, enabling, responsive, open to possibilities, and collaborative, and which values process as much as product' (Jackson 2003, 5).

An outline of the methodology

These concerns about critical thinking and creativity ran throughout a larger research project I conducted in 2007, which explored the disjunctions between the espoused curriculum's claims and its theory-in-use in the case studied (Belluigi 2007). Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), I analysed the paradigms and discourses underpinning the relationships between 'form' and 'content', 'process' and 'product', 'intentionality' and 'interpretation'. Post-structuralist CDA reading practices focus on the fractures, ambiguities, contradictions as the philosophical details or 'units of analysis' upon which to focus interpretative efforts (Locke 2004:29). Emerging from this data, was a negative dialectic constructed specifically from an imbalance between critical and creative thinking, which was contrary to the espoused aims of the School's curriculum.

Many of my decisions around the methods of this project have been informed by socio-psychological theories of CDA, which acknowledge social conditions of cognition and emotion (Meyer 2001). In such theories of text-context relations, it is argued that as discourses take place within society, they can be understood in the interplay between social situation, action, actor and societal structures (van Dijk 2001). As tacit values, intuition and uncontested traditions influence assessment, the actuality of assessment processes are potential *sites of research* into the theory-in-use (Brockback and McGill 1999). Assessment reveals what assessors value, transmitting not only what is considered important about the subject, but also an 'act of cultural communication transmitting what the collective 'we' intends' (Boud 2000, 160). For this reason, I chose to excavate the theory-in-use emerging during formative assessments at this School (called Critiques or 'crits') to determine its worth and relevance. Multiple sources and methods of data collection were required to explore the declared aims of the curriculum and the teachers, and the effects of the underlying processes of teaching-learning interactions on student learning. I drew from official documentation on

the curriculum, brochures and websites, to data collected from teachers and students, and my observations of those teaching and learning interactions. All attempts were made to ensure the confidentiality of individual participants and the participating institution, requiring withholding of identities by mutual consent.

   To explore the dynamic power relations between teachers and students, and how they 'mutually condition each other's perceptions and practices' (Ashwin n.d, 8), I made use of purposeful sampling. Five of the seven current assessors in the chosen art school participated by responding to a written questionnaire comprised of ranked statements and open-ended questions. Of these, two participated in in-depth interviews; and another two corresponded via email. Whilst these sources and methods were helpful, as Foucault has pointed out, observations about the nature of the *practices* of those in power and their *effects*, are often far more revealing than their motives. Therefore, data from two observed Critiques (of over three hours) was balanced with that gathered from the other sources and methods. Eleven of the forty students enrolled in the penultimate and final year of the four year Bachelors Degree participated, representing a diverse range of competencies. They were provided with a journal to record their experiences from three days before until three days after the relevant assessment event, and then drew from these notes to construct their own stories. As I had discussed the merits for reflection and contemplative distance of approaching the familiar as strange or foreign, some chose to write these 'little narratives' in the third person and adopted pseudonyms, as will be come clear from excerpts in the next section. Using Mann's (2001) framework to investigate whether teaching and learning processes encouraged commitment or created feelings of alienation from the students' desire, I was able to see how this impacted on their approaches to learning (Marton and Saljo 1984).

   As a researcher with previous experience of teaching and learning in fine art studio practice, I had to be self-reflexive of my insider/ outsider positioning while conducting this research. Both within this paper and the larger report (Belluigi 2007), I have attempted to be explicit of my ideological stance while being as critical as possible of my subjectivity during interpretation. This was another reason why data was triangulated from a wealth of methods and sources before drawing conclusions.

Data analysis

This representation of my findings begins with a focus on the conditions necessary for the development of creativity and critical thinking, as sketched in the first section of this paper. In the first two sections, I consider how the theories espoused and those practice faired in terms of (i) whether student agency was facilitated towards engaging with a learning process of risk taking and experimentation, suggesting the contemporary discourse-specific stream of art criticm, or (ii) whether the focus on product encouraged reproduction and mastery in tradition of modernist formalism. Creating a similar dichotomy in his 'Notes on a creative curriculum', Knight (2002) pits teaching and learning practices that favour novelty against those that tend towards reproduction. I then go on to look specifically at the resultant effects on student experiences of learning. Exploring beyond this, the emerging negative dialectic of the student in terms of creative and critical thinking is discussed. The data analysis then concludes with a consideration of whether the disjunctions, between the espoused discourses and the School's actual practices, may have been due to a strategic adoption of politically-expedient discourses prevalent within higher education in South Africa.

Playing with process versus assessment of product

Sloane and Nathan (2005, 19) claim that 'creativity or imagination is central to the arts, and fostering this capacity in students through the critique is at least as important as developing mastery of skill or technique'. As discussed, play, experimentation and process have been linked to autonomy, developing evaluation skills, and are considered integral to the creative process of learning (Winnicott 1971; Freeman 2006). These elements are dominant within discourse-specific conceptions of artmaking and art criticism.

   In response to the questionnaire statement 'the student feels confident to play', all of the participating teachers indicated it 'essential' that 'the student takes risks and pushes his/her own boundaries'. In addition, although they all may have indicated that 'evidence of experimentation' was valued in assessments, triangulation with other data indicated that this was not reflected in practice. Experimentation was not recognised as one of the implicit or explicit assessment criteria, as an assessor explained in an interview,

> I know that I place a lot of value on experimentation, but I know that other lecturers do not. In this case, I cannot expect to see, and subsequently reward, the same levels of experimentation from all the students at the crit.

Working within a norm-referenced system, students were left to deduce the implicit criteria in Critique interactions. This practice itself can be problematic for critical thinking and creativity, because where students lack understanding of 'the rules of the game' they tend to stay within familiar and safe parameters (Knight 2002). This can be particularly detrimental to experimentation and process, as both require risk-taking and play.

   From my discussions with the assessors, it became clear that experimentation or play was billed as what developing students do in their first two years of study, and was equated with immaturity. Experimentation was not given value at the end of the degree where the student was expected to exhibit his/her 'mastery' at the summative degree submission exhibition. Unlike the practice in many art schools in the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, in this School portfolios with reflections on the students' learning process were rarely used and not integrated into assessment practice. In the method of assessment-by-exhibition students were graded solely on the artifact displayed, creating much emphasis on the importance of the product. Data collected from participating students confirmed studies that summative assessments often undermine the creative process (Dineen, Samuel and Livesay 2005). Davies (1997, n.p.) claims that

> making sense in art and design is a risky business even for competent students. As the emphasis has always been on the artefact as the principal criterion of success, rather than what a student has actually learned as a result of the project, experimentation in sense-making can only go so far.

In fact, a 'work-in-progress' submission that has for some time been considered perfectly acceptable within contemporary artmaking, would be judged negatively at the School's summative assessments. One assessor believed this was because 'as much as the process is play, and experimentation is exciting, it can also be apathetic'. The emphasis on product can create an environment contrary to the conditions for creativity and critical thinking, because students need to feel safe to take risks with foreknowledge that they may fail. In an interview, an assessor described that Critiques 'can get dreadful in that respect… to be able to be creative you have to have self-confidence'. The timing of these formative assessments, determined according to logistical convenience rather than being placed sensitively within students' cycles of reflective learning, also had negative effects on students' learning. An

assessor recounted in an interview, 'there have been instances in the past, when a student was midway through a process [with] the teachers saying "god no, it's not going to work, it's a disaster. Cut it up"', which s/he felt was premature.

When examining the data, it became clear that the few supervisors who encouraged students to experiment or be 'in process', failed to recognise or confront the backwash of summative assessment practices. However students seemed well aware of the disjunction between this espoused encouragement of risk taking, and the constraints of the assessment practices which did not make allowance for process or failure but rather emphasized the final artifact. This disjunction added stress to this student's experience, reflected her journal:

> The teacher in his arty way had said 'Just do it! It doesn't matter if you bugger it up! That's how you learn!', just that sentence sent the perfectionist Chloe into a panic frenzy, 'Just do it?' How could she just do it, it was half a years worth of work, what if it was a mess? How would she fix it? How would the assessment go? Would she pass?

Enforcing the summative assessments' backwash towards production, in formative assessments I noticed that very little feedback or interaction was devoted to challenging assumptions implied by the artwork/ student. Contrary to the emphasis in contemporary discourse-specific practice, often no time was assigned to placing the works in context – whether in terms of the project set, prevalent discourse, subject matter, the student's intentions or assessors' interpretations. Teachers' comments during formative assessment were mostly task-focused, such as 'you need something to show for assessment'; 'instead of redoing the project, for assessment see what you can do with what is here'. Most comments indicated an instrumental rationality where fact was often separated from value with the focus on 'how to', such as the amount of output, sizes of works, display or framing, and time constraints. This is contrary to studies that have found that student creativity is fostered by an emphasis on process rather than product (Knight 2002), "where the process of learning is as important as the results of that learning" (Jackson 2003, 7).

When the emphasis is on the product, it can too easily become part of a system of exchange undertaken for strategic reasons. Drawing on Marx's four perspectives on alienation Mann (2001) notes that this occurs when, firstly, there is alienation from the product of one's labour; secondly alienation from the process of production; thirdly, alienation from oneself as a species-being; and lastly, alienation from other human beings. Perhaps because of the School's strong value of the artwork as 'product', in their journals and stories most students indicated that at some point in the build up and aftermath of the Critique event, they experienced alienation from their artworks, from their artmaking, from their 'selves' or from other people. This is of concern because of the importance that commitment, desire, experimentation and play have in fostering creativity and critical thinking. The following extract from a student's story expressed anxiety around the process of artmaking,

> I am so worried that it will not be done in time, and the even more frustrating thing is that there is nothing that I can do about it. Feel like I'm just waiting for a lost cause. I am so worried.

To cope with such a sense of estrangement, students often became compliant, creating a climate conducive to a loss of ownership in the learning process. But as discussed earlier in this paper, agency, autonomy and support are fundamental to the development of both creativity and critical thinking.

Autonomy versus reproduction

In both the School's documentation and the approach espoused by some of the teachers, student independence and agency were claimed to be considered important. In response to the questionnaire, one assessor wrote that students were supposedly 'encouraged to make decisions and are supported in their decision making'. Another teacher acknowledged that 'students need to be responsible but they need to have agency in doing that'.

However, in a number of observed exchanges, student agency was entirely denied by the assessors, with unexplained suggestions and instructions often given against students' desires. This suggested an imbalanced power dynamic, more akin to master-apprentice than one of guidance and facilitation. Opportunities for sharing positive feedback were rarely taken, and in one instance a student was even warned that by trying a different approach s/he would 'fuck it up'. Such responses undermine the conditions for creativity and critical thinking, which require "sensitive, trusting and responsive teacher-student relationships necessary to facilitate, continually respond to and adapt to what emerges from the process" (Jackson 2003, 8). These dynamics were perhaps due to the lack of value ascribed to student intentionality in summative assessments. The backwash seemed to result in formative assessments that were often unrelated to the relevance of feedback for students' learning processes. As with Blair's (2006) study on feedback, such Critiques were experienced by students as ineffectual, demotivating and confusing. One student expressed in his story that 'the crit seems to have been a bit silly, like they completely missed the point of what he was doing and therefore couldn't give him any helpful advice'.

Data collected from students reflected the sense of turmoil that formative assessments created, as expressed in this extract from a student's journal,

> Damn, I hate crits!! [They] make me very very very very very nervous. I don't like the pressure that's put on me, AND they ain't very 'fond' of me, so, I hate crits! Would rather pretend I was sick so that I didn't have to go through with it!... DAMN CRITS!

Because 'the self' is contingent on events and dependent on others (Winnicott 1971), a loss of self was seen to result from power dynamics where the student's sense of 'self' was not validated through the Critique event or by supervisors as assessors. A number of students' stories indicated how dependent and anxious they were to get the approval of the assessors. For many, their sense of 'self' was indeed dependent on validation by the assessors, most notably the supervisor. In this student's story, a lack of validation created experiences of alienation,

> The criticism ends up confusing him and leaving him feel demoralised, like nothing he has done has been worthy of time. 'Why am I making art?' he wonders. He goes back home feeling desolate, not knowing why he ever decided to [make] art. He feels completely unmotivated to create at all.

Instead of students 'constructing their own voice', a strong reproductive ethos emerged from my analysis of the data. Because students experienced feedback as alienating, they adopted surface or strategic approaches to learning by adopting the assessors' suggestions. This certainly seemed counter to enabling strong acts of creativity.

A dimension of this investigation into reproduction is that realism, the dominant style evident in students' works, was rewarded without critique of its reproductive properties. Western realism's codes are easy for the viewer to decipher and retrieve information. The style seems 'real' or 'naturalistic' because the viewer is too familiar with (and therefore unaware of) this representational system. Instead, postmodern artworks involve eclectic

selection, synthesis, appropriation of traditions and discourses, layering of texts and hybrid styles (Bolton 2006). This 'archeological art' exposes what lies beneath or determines the artistic appearance of a particular style, by utilizing the rules that establish art's discursiveness (Kuspit 1993). In this way, more active engagement is demanded from the 'reader'. The dominant adoption and uncritical reward of realism in this School could therefore be interpreted as problematic. It is inherently reproductive of the Culture Industry, in no way encouraged criticality in the students nor facilitated ways for the viewer to become an active reader.

Similar to the Victorian drawing school of old, one medium-specialization was described in official documentation to prospective students as where 'we train our eye to see... translate the appearance of things before us... The main focus of the X [medium specialisation] course is to develop primary skills like observation, and technical facility, while at the same time demanding a continual critical appraisal of what one is doing, and how one can do something more precisely or interestingly'. What is of interest here is how the word 'critical' is used so broadly that it can be linked to precision (a technical concern of reproduction or mastery) and being of *interest* to the viewer, rather than challenging or questioning assumptions.

Coupled with the dominance of Western realism and a reproductive ethos, a 'professional finish' or 'look' was one of the few implicit criteria that came across clearly at this School. In response to the questionaire, two out of five assessors indicated it important that 'the student can reproduce a certain look/ style'. According to Hardy (2003, 340), 'the imposition of a house style smacks of cowardice'. The surety of certain styles removes all possibility of the student's, and in turn the School's, failure. But in so doing, this certain executable endpoint removes much experimentation and innovation while learning, thereby thwarting the student's autonomy. A student's perception of his/her supervisor's role reflects this:

> X'll never say it outright, but X's aesthetic is always there, imposing itself on us. Now I understand that that is the way supervision works, that you don't just get a person, you get an aesthetic too, but how hard it is when you disagree with the aesthetic and the person fundamentally.

Student experiences

Because creative and critical thinking impact on the construction of individual and collective identities, the *effects* of disjunctions between the espoused and practiced curriculum on student learning should be of concern. In this section I look at those effects related to the development of critical and creative thinking.

In official documentation, such as websites and brochures, prospective students of this School were told that 'studying Fine Art at X is a wonderful and enriching experience', with a curriculum that 'aims to empower students' and 'to maintain the highest degree of learning'. Ideally, formative assessment should be underpinned by such notions, increasing students' confidence and 'intrinsic motivation, leading to increased creativity' (Dineen et al 2005, 165). However my research confirmed Diseth's (2007) findings that students' approaches to learning are influenced by their perception of the learning environment itself, which in this case was not developmentally orientated. Stories students told suggested that they experienced varying levels of alienation, perhaps because of disjunctions between the espoused curriculum and the theory-in-use.

Mann (2001) argues that after repeated experiences of alienation, a student may feel it is safer to disengage by repressing his /her desire and approaching his/her studies from a superficial perspective. In this study two students, who had recognised their own strategic

adoptions of certain discourses, seemed embittered by what they perceived as the hollowness of the Critique ritual,

> Personally, I'm learning the fine art (pun intended) of crits. I treat it like a performance, or a presentation, even a lecture. I spend a lot of time scripting what I am going to say, which is great because I can just read the script in the crit and not look at anyone's face.

> It is Wednesday, the day before Beatrice's long-dreaded crit... Is she to invent a whole new string of fiction that justifies her work or is she to re-tell her previous concoction?

These two students were top-achievers who had learnt not to treat the formative assessment event as a place of honest disclosure but rather to approach it strategically. They can be seen to have developed a 'false self' (Winnicot 1971) to survive the assessment practices (Mann, 2001). Of concern is how this may have impacted such students' intrinsic motivation, a recognised central characteristic for the development of creativity (The Five Colleges of Ohio 2007). In fact, data from students' stories and journals revealed that only one of the eleven participating students indicated a desire to engage mentally or physically with his/her work in the days after the crit event. Excluding this one exception, the Critique method as utilised in this School did not encourage commitment or engagement with students' desire or meaning making, but rather stifled critical thinking and creativity.

This alienation may be directly linked to the prevalent adoption of surface or strategic approaches to learning by the majority of students. Certainly, the majority of students generally adapted how they articulated themselves at formative assessments, picking up the skills necessary to perform or protect themselves within this social structure. This adaptation of articulation may have been at the expense of developing skills of evaluation necessary for reflexivity between creative and critical thinking.

In a story, one student expressed how difficult it was to separate feedback from the formative assessments from his/her own sense of accomplishment,

> I would like to pretend that I don't care about the crit, but I do. I care because I want to be an artist, a practicing artist (and that's all) for the rest of my life. – so [I] obviously take advice and criticism to heart. I'm not just getting a fine art degree to then carry on after varsity in a completely different field. This is my life.

This extract provides insight into how strongly a student's self-concept can be intertwined with his/her studies in FASP. The placement, inclusion or exclusion, of identities is determined by the borders formed by disciplines and discourses (Becher 1989). It is for this reason that it is important to consider how dominant discourses within this School operated to construct certain types of artist-students.

Constructing a negative dialectic of the artist-student: Creativity and critical thinking

Drawing from the myth of the artist as creative genius, modernist FASP teacher, Ruskin, contended that artists are found and not made (Hardy, 2003). A similar modernist notion of creativity emerged when a student was told by a teacher during a Critique that 'we can only help you so far… You cannot teach creativity, you must come with creativity'. As discussed in the first section, a part of this modernist myth is that the artist exists, and can make art, autonomous of his/her context. Interpretation is left to the art critic or historian, the artist simply transmutes what inspires or wells up mystically from within, without questioning or interrogating assumptions or ideologies the images may suggest. In response to the

questionnaire, all participating teachers indicated it important that 'the student acts on his/her instinctual 'feel' for the subject', without problematising this further. One added that 'the student should be committed to creating scenarios that invite/inspire interpretation, but the meaning is not the student's responsibility'. That this argument was not isolated is evident in the assessors' decision to exclude student intentionality from the summative assessments. The notion that students are not responsible for meaning-making in their artwork not only removes authorial responsibility but unwittingly, as with modernist formalism, authorial agency.

For a curriculum to be transformative each individual student should draw from his/her 'own diagram of the interacting aspects of knowledge, 'self' and action... How do her or his intellectual concerns inform her/his ethical, political, religious and personal life?' (Parker 2003, 541-2). The espoused curriculum linked criticality with 'the self'. The exit level outcomes for the Bachelor of Fine Art Degree stated that students should 'demonstrate a capacity for independent thinking and learning'; 'independent, critical thought'; and that 'along with this broadening personal dialogue, the development of important abilities of self-criticism are encouraged'. However more prevalent than a critical discourse was what can be described as a 'personalised' discourse, in both the espoused and theories-in-use. In official curriculum documentation, brochures and websites, the School claimed to have 'a supportive environment, which encourages creativity and personal development' and 'develop[s] individual visual syntax and technique'. Scaffolding of learning throughout the degree led to the pinnacle that 'in the third and final year of study, students' journey toward formulating their own philosophy and approach to art making', so that postgraduate students will explore their 'own personal approach to the discipline'. From their theoretical major, FASP students would find 'various concepts, themes, contentions, arguments, discourses and sites for intervention, which they might want to explore at a personal level in their practical work', where they are supposedly given the 'freedom to pursue their personal visions'. Unfortunately, when looking at other data, it was found that such approaches to 'the self' were often *at the expense of self-criticality*.

When asked in the questionnaire to indicate whether the subject matter students explore should have social or political relevance, one assessor marked this as of negative value for summative assessments, and added 'isn't the personal political??' That the psyche and the family are political agenda items is an important acknowledgment in both left feminism and Western Marxism (Agger 1992), and perhaps an assumption informing transformative learning. What I would argue is problematic within this case study was how 'personalising' a representation without self-critical examination by the student was seemingly considered acceptable by assessors during formative assessment. In a common occurrence, one student whose artwork was treading on politically incorrect ground was instructed at a Critique to 'personalise it, it is stereotypical otherwise'. In each of such observed instances, the political aspect of 'personal' was left unexplored, and an important opportunity for transformative learning lost. Such 'personal' explorations were prevalent, to the extent that it was noted as a dominant feature of the School's graduates the previous year by the external examiner.

This marriage of 'the self' to personal expression is evocative of the humanist notion of an essential-self (Addison 2007). An assessor's statement in an interview confirmed this link between this 'personalised' discourse and modernist notions of autonomy and creativity,

> We make art for our selfish issues, [if] we're doing it for other reasons then there's already a question mark in my mind, 'why are you doing the work?'... your initial impulse is to make art for yourself and your own gratification and enjoyment, but there is

> an expectation, that one then shares it and goes public. That's where you start exhibiting and you get other people.

This is contrary to postmodern notions of the personal-political thematic, which are fundamentally involved with criticality and a concern for ethical relations with 'the other'. This critical postmodernism

> refuses to dispense with a concept of the subject; instead, together, these theoretical currents suggest a notion of objective subjectivity, of historical subjectivity, and a notion of intersubjectivity (Piccone 1971) that provide a semblance of radical energy in an overstructured, overdetermined world (Agger 1992, 298).

An uncritical discourse of creativity dominated in this case's theory-in-use, with negative effects on student learning as indicated in the previous section. I will now briefly consider how the adoption of certain discourses in the espoused curriculum may indicate strategic adoptions of certain politically expedient discourses.

The School's strategic adoption of discourses

In this section, I discuss possible reasons behind the School's espoused claims to encourage both creativity and critical thinking. I consider the probable misfits between the adoption of both the 'reflective practitioner' discourse and the 'discourse of excellence' in the absence of a social 'transformation discourse'.

Often articulated in official documentation of this School was the aim to develop both creative and thinking skills: 'courses promote creativity and innovative thinking'; providing students 'scope to develop their creative and intellectual abilities'. An exit level outcome of the undergraduate degree was that the students should 'have gained experience in a variety of generic and transferable skills, particularly creative thinking' and 'familiarity with lateral thinking and innovative problem solving'. Similarly, all participating teachers indicated in the questionnaire that they consider it 'essential' that 'the student thinks critically and self-reflexively'. Such consistent links, made between creativity and critical thinking in the School's documentation, may have been adopted from the academic discourse of 'the reflective practitioner'. According to Smart and Dixon (2002, 191), this concept associates 'processes of learning with the development of a capacity to be objective about our creative activities. Indeed, without reflection, the whole notion of assessment-as-learning-tool becomes nonsensical'. However, after analysis of the School's practice, it would seem that most often such terms were bandied about in this School, without much interrogation or implementation of the necessary teaching-learning-assessment strategies that would facilitate this.

An impression was created that the School had a socially critical orientation, through such statements in official documentation as, there are 'opportunities for artists to make major contributions to the development of society'; students should 'demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of contemporary art making, within the context of the student's individual art practice and an appropriate area (or areas) of critical theory within which the subject of the work is located'. In response to the questionnaire, one teacher highlighted that 'a broad message communicated though the teaching and learning at the department is the importance of creating critical and self-reflexive work which is embedded in art and visual cultural theory'. Such statements suggested that the School wanted to be perceived as generally

informed by critical theory, with social and political concerns seen to have relevance to student learning and artmaking. However, critical theory

> seeks to locate artistic work in its social context, to consider author and audience in the light of history, to seek the social shaping of criteria for aesthetic evaluation, and to identify the social purposes and interests served (Gibson 1986, 12).

The lack of embeddedness in critical theory became apparent when, in response to the questionnaire, two out of three teachers indicated they ascribed little or no value to the subject matter students explore having social or political relevance. In terms of students making socially critical artwork, one teacher noted in an interview that 'you do get some students who feel quite passionate about some things, but many of them are quite apathetic… it's a change in times as well. But it's how it's encouraged'. If 'facilitating' transformative learning, should the teacher not complicate the student's every day understandings, to encourage critical thinking and ethical artmaking? Rather, as discussed in a previous section, an encouragement of reproduction emerged in practice.

In this School, I found that critical thinking was deemed important for the art criticism major but not integrated with conceptions of creativity for art making in FASP. In the former, students considered postmodern notions of critical thinking when they engaged with 'the multiform ways in which art, among other media and visual practices, represents, constitutes and also critiques dominant social ideas and values'. However in the latter, a discourse of reproduction, responsiveness and tolerance to context rather than criticality emerged in assessment practices. To some extent this was reflected in the documented exit level outcomes, where it was stated that students should

> produce art works which embody and reflect the culture and context of their production
>
> [be] aware of the complex nature of Southern African society and able to incorporate this appreciation into their analysis and solving of visual problems.

These statements should be seen in the broader context of the need for South African higher education to be seen as 'embracing' the national political dispensation in post-1994, and so are presenting a discourse *responsive* to diversity. In fact, critical 'transformation discourse' is noticeably absent in these documents. Singh (2001, 8) has noted other cases of expedient adoption where 'transformation has been used as much to denote the repositioning of higher education to serve more effectively as the 'handmaiden' of the economy as to signify the drive to align higher education with the democracy and social justice agenda of a new polity as in South Africa'. The absence of any references to social transformation within this School's documentation may be indicative either of an 'ivory tower' understanding of its role in society, or replacement by corporate styles of the 'discourse of excellence' that were noted as prevalent at that university by an institutional audit report. In terms of the latter, in brochures, websites and other documents, the institution was described as being 'a top-rate university' that 'emphasises quality education', and the School as having an 'enviable reputation' and 'a history of success'. According to Light and Cox (2001, 3), as 'excellence is not so much concerned with 'what' but rather 'how', it brings a whole new way of conceiving higher education. It is a way less encumbered by issues of cultural significance or educational value, as by issues of social and economic effectiveness and efficiency'. Such instrumentalist concerns match other modernist discourses which I previously discussed that operated with this School.

Even more disconcerting, the absence of a socially critical discourse may be indicative of the School's approach to diversity or 'the other'. Although diversity can encourage both critical and creative thinking (The Five Colleges of Ohio 2007), during assessment the opaque top-down relationship was often insensitive to the student-artmaker's intentionality and exclusionary of his/her peers' feedback and participation. In addition, the criteria of individual supervisors were not discussed. One of the official exit level outcomes of the degree was that students should be able to 'co-operate with others to pursue the common good. In order to meet this outcome, learners will... be aware that judgements have moral and ethical implications and will act accordingly where appropriate'. Given the implicit and often coercive nature of assessment practices in this School, it is questionable whether 'moral and ethical implications' of judgments would be acted on by students. One assessor intimated in an interview that s/he is

> not convinced that the art students are making now has necessarily got such a critical image. I think sometimes it masquerades as having such, but that they are either ignorant to it, or have been given sometimes the solutions that make it look or masquerade as if it's doing that.

Such 'masquerading' is not endemic to this case only. In the 'art world', while some are optimistic about attempts to create more socially relevant art (Gablik 1991), others are cynical about social and political agendas, reflected in artist Hans Haacke's term 'the consciousness industry' (Siegel 1988). In this School perceptions of what was currently aesthetically prevalent or sought-after in galleries seeped into the implicit assessment criteria, as an assessor explained in response to an opened question, 'I think that the department aims to produce students that could exhibit successfully at contemporary galleries'. This would reflect a non-critical approach to the Culture Industry.

It is possible that some of the strategic, uncritical adoptions of discourses by the School resulted from a sense of alienation. This could be, on the one hand, due to the tardy responsiveness of this School to shifts that had occurred in other FASP curricula nationally, themselves following trends from the 'west' influenced by postmodern philosophies in contemporary artmaking. On the other hand, it could be due to alienation from the recently imposed OBE discourse. Most of the official curriculum documentation for this undergraduate degree had been written in hasty preparation for an institutional audit. The wording used in such documents was adopted from edu-speak OBE discourse, rather than that commonly used by those within the discipline or the community of practice. It is possible that the lecturers constructing these documents felt their own creativity constrained by those anticipated readers, or by the newly introduced requirements for clear outcomes and objectives.

Such responses have occurred in many other contexts. Harding and Taylor (2001) warn about higher education institutions in the UK adapting principles to transform and comply with quality assurance requirements, while more recently Dysthe (2007) looked at the effects of the top-down reforms on as localized a level as student writing. Others intimate how deciding to 'pay lip-service' rather than be critical agents within these new discourses have had horrible results (Parker 2003). It is for this reason that I join the few other voices who believe there is an imperative for educators in creative disciplines to become more informed through research in teaching and learning, and more open to engaging in critical conversations with our colleagues about notions of 'good' practice. This is in the hope that the quality of student learning is enhanced and that imperatives are not determined elsewhere (Davies 1997).

Conclusion: Arguing for informed change

In current educational theory, reflective practice is considered essential for teachers who hope to be effective in fostering student learning. This argument, informed by critical theory, is that teachers should examine and make explicit their own beliefs, values and ideologies. In this paper, I have highlighted how dominant discourses can operate to construct a negative dialectic of the artist-student which is contrary to the espoused curriculum. Without reflexive investigation, 'core aspects of the subject can be inappropriately structured and presented to students in a way that doesn't support their learning and artistic development' (Corner 2005, 335).

Creativity in students is promoted by supportive, student-centered environments that value divergence and diversity; encourage playfulness, risk-taking and experimentation; and important in this context, assessment practices that focus on positive feedback and diagnostic evaluation (Dineen et al 2005; Jackson 2003). In this study, teachers' feedback and behaviour during assessment practices were found to create a negative 'backwash' (Biggs 1999b) on the teaching-learning relationship. Careful consideration of the assessor's role and power dynamics is necessary if teachers truly wish to facilitate commitment and deep approaches to learning rather than encouraging reproduction. Instead of 'experts' within strong hierarchical social dynamics, a more socially critical approach to curriculum would position the teacher-assessor as aiding students to a deeper understanding of where their views originate; challenging their preconceptions and stereotypes; guiding consideration of other possibilities (Toohey 1999).

By teaching reflexively, the teacher can model more ethical relations with the student 'other'. If students are expected to be self-critical, then teachers should practice what they preach by being self-reflexive about the roles they play in potentially engaging or alienating students' from their processes of learning. As assessors, they should attempt to engage in 'strong evaluation' (Taylor 1985), not dissimilar to 'strong' acts of creativity. Perhaps because the personal beliefs and expectations of individual assessors are central to the process of interpretation (Smart & Dixon 2002), more transparency and reflexivity is required of *the interpreters* in this method (Shay 2004). To do this, teachers need to go beyond the narrow confines of 'self' or personal expression (personal or collective tastes or desires) to assess and enhance the quality of those judgments. Such 'double reading' (Shay 2005) would require reflexivity within the community of assessors.

If misalignment in such cases were to continue, between the espoused and practiced curriculum on issues such as critical thinking and creativity, students may 'lose their capacity to connect with their own desire, voice and language' (Mann 2001, 12). A curriculum with more validity would involve placing value explicitly on the reflexivity between creativity and critical thinking demonstrated by the students.

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