

Practice-Based Teaching in MA Art and Social Practice and BA Fine Art Social Practice

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Arts education is by definition practice-based. However at Middlesex we also offer education in the emerging field of socially engaged art. This requires not only a holistic approach to the creative development of the individual, but engagement with others, both in the process of teaching and through the external projects that are the focus of practice on these courses. The MA Art and Social Practice and the exit degree BA Fine Art Social Practice in the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries are both relatively new courses. They nevertheless build on a long history of community-based arts in the faculty while also drawing on the methodologies of social practice developed in the professional field. The main practice elements of these courses are delivered by a team of just two people, each active as a practitioner and researcher, and with extensive connections in the professional world. This enables them to build into the teaching enrichment activities such as experiential visits, student involvement in conferences and events, and inter-university dialogue and debate. The development of students' practical outreach projects, which are the main focus of these courses, are facilitated through one-to-one tutorials a mixed-level support group and workshops. While the MA is part of a postgraduate matrix with two theory modules taught by other specialist staff, additional and more focused theoretical input is provided in the practice element of the course through a regular 'think tank' for which students often choose the texts to debate. A programme of mixed-level seminars and lectures raise issues pertinent to practice, and make significant use of the tutors' own experience and research.

Embodied

Creative work cannot be realised without tapping into the feelings and emotions of the practitioner, whether student or professional. Much focus is therefore given to this in the tutorial support. Students also support each other through a bi-weekly support group, where MA and final year BA students come together to talk about their projects, particularly where they are having difficulties or feeling 'stuck'. In all this work staff act as a facilitators to allow the interests and concerns of students to emerge and identify what they really wish to concentrate on. Student projects are based on their own interests, communities and networks, and represent the major part of their work on these courses.

Experiential and Participative

Since the aim is that students engage in activity that can make a difference in the world, this cannot be achieved without external engagement. Once students have identified the focus of their project, rather than developing a project in the abstract, they are encouraged to research their ideas with a relevant constituency. It is only through this engagement that they are then able to identify how and where they can bring their creative skills to bear on social or environmental need. All the projects undertaken are participative or collaborative in nature. To make these interactions work student find that they have to draw on all their existing interpersonal skills and experience, and these are then augmented through workshops in topics such as active listening and conflict resolution. The former employs listening in small groups to examples of difficult work-related situations each has encountered and observing what affects the quality of the engagement and experience, also methods for hearing beyond what is expressed. The latter takes examples of challenging community-based situations drawn from tutors' own experience in the field, where students take on different personas and support each other in a problem-solving role play. Another 'simulation' event is the Art Parliament based on a real-world international award for socially engaged art. Here students debate the actual shortlist, setting their own criteria and choosing the most successful candidate, before being introduced to the actual outcome. All seminars, lectures, workshops and external visits are followed by shared reflection, review or critique of the situation or ideas that have been encountered.

Engaged

Art cannot by itself make a difference in the world, and if artists wish their work to contribute to social change they have to find ways of collaborating across disciplines and experience. In order to discover these processes for themselves, students make contact with external groups or individuals who are striving for similar change and learn to both respect and pool expertise, whether held by other professionals, young people or community members with first-hand knowledge of the issue at hand. To enact this engagement they need the inter-personal skills described above, and to become a team-player, understanding that theirs are not the only skills that count. There is no better lesson to be offered for this than having to engage with an outside group. This becomes the source of their learning, but can nevertheless be a difficult negotiation, which makes tutorial and group support so necessary, in conjunction with the wider contextual understanding offered through the lectures, seminars and experiential group visits. This engagement is generally the most challenging but also the most profound vehicle for learning that each student encounters.

Situated

The term 'situated art practice' is one that I favour over the other current terms of 'social practice' and 'socially engaged' art, and is one that I have used for my own book on this subject¹. This is because it anchors the creative experience in an actual place or in relation to a real constituency, which provides a context against and within which ideas can be tested. There are many instances of art students wishing to relate to the 'general public' a concept that I would contest. Therefore our students have to engage with people and places to which they return, bear some responsibility and with whom they develop real relationship. This prevents 'skating over' difficult issues, but rather requires them to be worked through. In this way students come to recognise perspectives and positions that can

¹ Leeson, L. 2017 *Art: Process: Change – Inside a socially situated practice*, Routledge, New York and London.

bear little relation to those encountered in academia yet require some conceptual resolution, a process invaluable in broadening social and cultural understanding. The 'experiential visits' we organise offer encounters and dialogue with artists working in the community, plus learning about how artists are able to develop their practice and earn a living in the wider world. They have included visits to creative co-ops in South London, an artist residency in a care home setting and a trip to Margate to encounter the effects of arts-led regeneration on its local and incoming creative communities.

Emergent

The creative process is one of 'not knowing' and follows a narrow line between order and chaos – too much order results in the predictable, while too much chaos is just a mess. However this is a dynamic line that cannot be set in advance, and one which requires constant negotiation. When planning their project, each student is encouraged to put certain parameters in place – deadlines, resources, the limits of their own creative and other skills, preferences and experience, plus a set of aims developed through negotiation and listening to the needs of the other parties involved. However, while the overall project output might be shared, the most important outcomes for each can differ. For example one student has been working with a local poet and residents on a North London housing estate. They have planned an event to celebrate the cohesiveness of the community in the face of proposed demolition and dispersal. For the student the outcome will represent the successful management of her creativity in relation to community needs over an issue about which she feels strongly. The poet might be appreciating the opportunity to develop their work and hold a public performance. Local residents will hopefully feel empowered, enjoy the communality, and feel that their message to the local council and developers has been reinforced.

This student is successfully engaging in the process of building a project that none could have previously envisaged, and could only be produced through creative collaborative process. This can be highly challenging task for those as yet unversed in these processes, but more achievable if broken down into its constituent parts. The first practical 30-credit module in MA Art and Social Practice is entitled Developing Practice, and focuses on

research and development to help identify the kind of project each wishes to pursue. The next is Practice Through Engagement, where contact generally begins with outside agencies and constituencies to firm up ideas and develop a proposal for a practical creative initiative based in a social or environmental situation. The final 60-credit Major Project is the practical realisation of this work. Although projects might extend beyond the duration of the course, the graduate show provides a moment to present ideas, process and outcomes in a visual or other creative format with which others will be able to engage. The module also allows for the possibility of realising the work in a publically accessible or virtual location, which is documented at the graduate show. Practical work for each module is augmented by a reflective statement that includes how the project has addressed the learning outcomes.

Co-constructed

All the project work carried out by students is participatory or collaborative and necessarily crosses disciplines in the addressing of social and environmental issues. It is also entirely the student's own creation. The outreach work they do is not 'placement', although this is an approach I have used in the past. Rather it has gradually evolved into students negotiating and developing their own creative projects in the public domain, which has proved significantly more satisfactory in terms of engagement and learning. Tutors' professional contacts furnish further optional engagement opportunities in external initiatives. This might be as volunteer assistants at relevant conferences, documenting events, or assisting in staff projects. We also connect them with students in other universities through initiatives such as the virtual symposia in which we collaborate with University of Highlands and Islands, to involve students and staff from other universities to share their current work and ideas. Up to five universities have been involved at one time, with live input from some of the key authors on the course reading lists, which certainly helps to bring theory and practice together whilst widening student's perspective on their own practice.

Summary of an approach or project to enhance employability

Below are listed key elements of the practice-based teaching described above with regard to employability:

- Development of transferable skills, particularly in terms of listening, negotiating, consultancy, managing people and transforming conflict.
- Experience of creative problem-solving.
- Balancing own desires and ambitions with the needs of others.
- Recognition of the importance of empathy and use of emotional intelligence.
- Work with external groups and organisations creates contacts, experience and understanding of collaboration and teamwork, plus opportunities to apply learning.
- Respect and understanding for diverse disciplines and experience, including knowledge held by non-specialists at local level.
- Experience of pushing boundaries, and to reflect, review and adapt to change.