SAMANTHA BROADHEAD

FRIENDSHIP, DISCOURSE AND BELONGING IN THE STUDIO

The Experiences of 'Non-Traditional' Students in Design Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws upon the narratives of continuity and discontinuity from two design students collected during three years of their degrees in textiles which they studied in the North of England. This was part of a longitudinal study (2011-14) that sought to investigate the experiences of post-Access to HE students in art and design higher education. The Access to HE Diploma route gives students a broad introduction to art and design skills at level three, which is the required standard for entry to higher education and it enables them to develop a portfolio of work for their submission through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Narrative inquiry was used to show the ways in which students reflected on and took stock of their learning careers, (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Butler-Kisber, 2010). 'Chad' and 'Eliza' were participants who had gained places on textile degrees with an Access to HE Diploma, rather than the more conventional A levels, being mature students (both over 40 years old) with diverse social backgrounds (Hudson, 2009:25; Penketh and Goddard, 2008:316; Burke, 2002:81). The students were studying textile design but at different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Textile designers are concerned with designing for surfaces and embellishments which could include wallpapers, fabrics for fashion or interiors, flooring, and packaging.

The concept of phronesis/practical wisdom or prudence was used as a theoretical lens. Aristotle aligned phronesis with gaining life experience that, alongside other capacities, could be used to guide good judgements about acting well for the self and others. Aristotle claimed that only a person of experience could practice practical wisdom, and a young person was unlikely to have extensive life experience, (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, Chapter 8). By referring to the work of Paul Ricoeur (1994) it was possible to argue that generous or virtuous acts of friendship were an important aspect of phronesis.

The narratives were considered in relation to the ideas of phronesis, and in particular the role friendship between post-Access students and others in their

cohort played in supporting their learning. Both students revealed how they decided to continue or discontinue with their studies, because it seemed at that point in time the most prudent course of action. However, it was the virtuous actions by their friends that ultimately enabled Chad and Eliza to continue with their studies. It was of note that it was the generous interventions of younger students that helped the post-Access students overcome self-doubt and exclusion.

The discussion recounted some of the critical incidents within Chad's and Eliza's stories where I had noticed evidence of phronesis or at some points the absence of wise judgement. It was suggested that within the context of higher education mature students sometimes made poor decisions leading them to act in ways that continued their sufferings. This was because they did not always exercise their potential to act with prudence, (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, Chapter 5). In some instances the younger students did have the capacity to act well for others.

Finally it was seen that it was through the day-to-day discourse within the design studio space that enabled friendships between students with different backgrounds to develop. Inhabiting and working in the physical space with others was recognised to be an important part of developing a student's sense of belonging and eventually resilience and motivation. Unfortunately the virtual learning spaces seemed only to invite frustration and confusion. Eliza commented on the difficulties she had gleaning information from Moodle which was her institution's virtual learning environment.

PHRONESIS AND FRIENDSHIP

Book six of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics offered a model of deliberation known as phronesis, practical wisdom or prudence where the person who practises this was known as the phronimos, (Ricoeur, 1994, p.174):

> A sagacious man is supposed be characterised by his ability to reach sound conclusions in his deliberations about what is good for himself and advantage to him, and this not in one department of life – in what concerns his health, for example, or his physical strength – but what conduces to the good life as a whole. (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, Chapter 5 p.176)

The phronimos firstly recognised the singularity of a particular situation and was able to determine a best course of action. They understood what it meant to act well, justly and with courage, (Wall, 2005, 315). Phronesis was about being able make good decisions that allowed people to act well for themselves and others in order to live a good life together. It was an intellectual virtue where acting well

was not through habit or conditioning, but through thought and deliberation. It sat with the other forms of intellect; sophia (purely theoretical intelligence) and techne (technical expertise) (Skilleas, 2006, p.267).

Practical wisdom was closely interconnected with cardinal virtues such temperance, fortitude and justice. The phronimos was guided by these virtues in determining the correct course of action, (Nussbaum, 2001, p.306). Thus the person of practical wisdom could identify a situation where courage was needed or perhaps another one where moderation was required.

Being able to judge and act well was seen as intrinsic to being a human and living a good life. How someone lived well was in some ways dependant on context and the particularities of the situations thrown up by life. For Ricoeur (1994, p. 177) the word 'life' designated the person as a whole rather than a series of practices. He said that to live a life well was the standard of excellence which Ricoeur called the life plan. The 'good life' was a nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements in regard to a life to be fulfilled or unfulfilled (Ricoeur, 1994, p.179). The good life was where all actions (even though they may have ends in themselves) were directed by these ideals and dreams. It seemed that this was very pertinent to those mature students who chose to make difficult decisions in order to pursue the good life, by achieving a degree so they could ultimately become a designer.

Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, Chapter 11, p. 186) talked about how acting with practical wisdom was based on a good or fellow-feeling towards others; this could also be seen as an important aspect of inclusion. Within an educational context for example, students and teachers could have empathy for others whether or not they were similar or different to themselves. Ricoeur (1994) extended this idea of 'good feeling towards others' to a mutual responsibility, where an individual - to be an individual - must be part of a social relation. For Aristotle too, living a good life entailed acting well for and with others; friendship could be seen as an important aspect of this. Including others in education, for example, and being responsible for people who were not always like us entailed thinking with practical wisdom, whether one was a student, a teacher or a manager. Imagination also played a role in that subjects needed to imagine the impact of their actions on the lives of other people. The risks associated with being open to newness and difference might be experienced as fearful but at the same time as an opportunity for creativity and innovation in everyone's conduct. To paraphrase Ricoeur (1994, p.189) the 'other' could count on me and it was this that made me accountable, as I was 'summoned to responsibility'. He identified an asymmetrical power relationship between the self and other, (doctor/patient; teacher/student; lawyer/client). Ricoeur acknowledged that this needed to be considered during the

practices of phronesis. Although he also explored the possibility of mutual friendship between self and other, he saw the relationship as being fragile (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 184-189). Acting with phronesis meant that other people were included when deliberations, decisions and judgments were made. Being included in this way could improve a subject's confidence just as being excluded could erode a person's self-belief. Duckworth (2014, p.184) has also argued that friendship not only facilitated practical support it could be a way to counter any exclusion or symbolic violence a person could experience within a group or institution.

TWO STORIES OF DISCONTINUITY/CONTINUITY

Chad and Eliza were two post-Access to HE students whose narratives referred to them carefully deliberating about whether or continue their degree in textile design. Both appeared to use practical wisdom in order to come to a decision, and both had support from their friends. However, Chad who studied full-time was able to build friendships very quickly within the first year. Eliza who was part-time and could not spend as much time in the studio space did not seem to have such strong friendships nor did she seem to find her relationship with the staff very conducive to learning.

Chad did not socialise with the students, her friendships were created through the day-to-day participation in the studio. This was a space where people could move around, chat to each other, work and share ideas. It enabled discourse and creativity. During the second meeting of the year, Chad and I met in the design studio in her work space where sketches inspired by the 1950s were on the wall which was part of her workspace, she looked very tried and was a little wider around her middle:

> C: At the start of the year I was full of energy and really, really looking forward to starting and actually it didn't disappoint. This first term was excellent - I enjoyed it in fact, I enjoyed the whole year - but obviously I'm expecting! I'm six months pregnant now so at my age I'm feeling it - really feeling it - but the whole year has been … I've really enjoyed it - absolutely enjoyed it. It's been fantastic. (Chad, June 2012)

It remained unclear as to whether the decision to become pregnant was planned or unexpected. Nussbaum (2001, p.305) has said that the phronimos should be open to life's surprises and be flexible in order to change a course of action; to act well in response to an unexpected situation. The question was now how would chad deal with motherhood, pregnancy and a demanding course. Would she be motivated enough to remain at the hei or would this be an extra burden that meant

her dream to be a textile design was untenable? She told me she intended to take a year out, but was already planning how to turn this unexpected break in her studies into an opportunity to improve her own skills and abilities:

S: You don't have to start again at Year one?

C: You do in a way with new people, I'll start the second year with completely new group and they'll have established themselves as a group. So it'll be more difficult for me to fit into that year. But my classmates in this particular year will be in third year and be next door. It won't be so bad, my friends will be around so… (Sam and Chad, June 2012)

Chad demonstrated foresight (Providentia) in how she imagined her return to education after a year at home; showing a concern for possibly feeling isolated. She recognised the importance of the social aspects of the studio culture. Indeed this first year had been about establishing that she belonged on the course both academically and socially. She now felt she part of the cohort; Vallerand, (1997, p. 300) has defined a sense of belonging as being connected to the institution and feeling that one is accepted as part of the social milieu. As the only mature or 'non-traditional' student in this cohort there had been a danger of Chad not feeling a subjective sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012), but actually she had been successful not just academically but in establishing a body of friends.

She tried to moderate her fear of future isolation by seeing that she could position herself next to her old friends in the studio. Chad had been able to make friends during her first year and has recognised their importance in contributing to her future success. However, she did not seem to have confidence that as she had already made friends with younger students this year, she would be able to bond with a new body of students again in a year's time.

Chad did take a year out but continued with the research project. She came into the HEI's library bringing her new born with her so she could to talk to me. It became apparent that the bonds of friendship still continued:

C: They text me all the time. I was really busy at one point and I didn't … I wasn't in touch with them for a couple of weeks and they were worried. They kept sending me a succession of text messages - all of them - Lorraine, Vicky, Ryan, Sophie, Eleanor - all of them. "What's the matter, are you alright?" So I missed them more than anything. I missed the class more than anything and I'm kind of apprehensive about going back because again I'm starting from scratch. (Chad December 2012)

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S: Good, so last time I saw you, you said you were going to spend time sorting out files and everything, did you do that?

C: No, I have got them - they are continuous - they are not something that I've put on the side-line. The files are there but he has to go to nursery, as soon as we get Christmas over and done with I'm doing them on an evening as soon as he's going to nursery. He goes in June for the odd day, till he gets to full-time in September - then I'll get back on to PPP [Personal Professional Planning] and all the rest but I've got loads of stuff in the pipeline especially with my friends. Still I got lots of friends off this course that have just left and they're keeping me up to date with what's going on and what's needed for the next year, which is lovely and it gives me… I won't feel so bad about going back - I won't feel as rusty because I've already got a couple of projects in mind. (Chad, December 2012)

It was interesting that Chad drew upon the experience of others in order to plan for her future projects. It was the stories her friends told her about their own experiences on the second year that allowed Chad to imagine what would be expected from her when she began her education again. By staying connected with her friends Chad continued her sense of belonging and they provided her with a vicarious learning experience. Her work in the short term involved continued planning with her friends who had kept her in the loop about what was going on at college. The person of practical wisdom could draw upon the stories of others based on their actual experiences because they could empathise with people and could gain an insight into their motivations (Skilleas, 2006, p.268). It was an indication of how well she had established herself on the degree during the first year that her friends were so supportive.

In Chad's previous careers (Navy and commercial airways) she had been part of a team, working closely together in highly regulated situations, these past experiences may have given her good social skills.   Inherent in her narrative was the importance of being well-prepared when she returned as she was not sure how she would manage her course and two young children. The next meeting was in July 2013 and Chad would be beginning the second year in two months' time. Chad continued to acknowledge how important her friends had been:

C: I haven't done any work sketch-wise. Research, have been writing notes down and thinking about what to get into when I go back. Friends have helped me a lot, the guys that have just left and they're going back to 3rd year they've been fantastic. They've been so encouraging and I see them all the time so they come to the house. It's nice to have that contact I know they're

in the 3rd year now because I've had to take a year out it's almost like starting from scratch yet again. So this is about the 3rd break I've had. So it's been like from what a normal person would take to do a degree in 3 years, it's taken me 7 or 8 years to finally get to the end of it. (Chad, July, 2013)

For Ricoeur, (1994, p.180) phronesis aimed at the ethical intention of, 'the good life with and for others in just institutions', where people of practical wisdom were of good character and were concerned with friendship, justice, courage moderation and generosity. It could be seen that the practices of Chad's friends had been driven by these virtues in determining the correct course of action, which was to support her through her year out (Nussbaum, 2001, p.306). Ricoeur (1994, pp. 184-189) explored the possibility of mutual friendship between self and other, the relationship was seen as fragile. However at this point in time even though Chad thought of herself as different to the 'younger students' they had a bond that had stood the test of separation. Her friends had taken time out of a competitive and busy course and had shared their experiences with her which was a generous and moral thing to do. It also could be seen as democratic act where those on the margins were included (Bernstein, 2000, p.xx). The studio space enabled people through day-to-day contact and discourse to get to know each other facilitating virtuous actions. Although Chad discontinued her course she was in a good position to return to her studies again.

 Eliza was studying a similar subject of textile design but at a different institution. She studied part-time as she needed to keep working during her education, but this meant she did not have the same day-to-day contact with students in the studio space. So, her sense of belonging was not as quickly established. Unlike Chad, Eliza had begun to seriously consider leaving her course at the end of level four (or at the end of the second year as she was studying part-time). The reasons she considered leaving were to do with not understanding how she would be assessed; what she needed to do to improve her work and how to manage her practice alongside her sketchbook work:

E: I am thinking about leaving this ridiculous course. I was looking forward to the second year (moving up to the level 5 now as it is a part-time course). I was so looking forward to doing a new brief as I had done quite well on the previous one. But it was not a positive brief. Our six designs were to be given to an American firm – six designs – so I knew I had to produce the work. But my sketch book wasn't progressing or up-to-date as I was working hard in the print room. I knew it was supposed to follow your working process. The tutor told me to leave it to the end – but I wasn't sure about that.

> The last project I did really well, but I didn't really understand visual research – every time I was stuck I asked for help. (Eliza, February, 2014)

Eliza did act with wisdom to some extent as she was not averse to asking for help when she required it. Common themes within her story were frustrations with the systems of communication used to tell students about their assessment. Briefs (the assignments by which art and design work by students is assessed) were not written specifically for part-students so they had difficulty in understanding the volume and quality of work they should produce. But also communication with staff had proved to be difficult, especially as a part-time student Eliza was not in the studio as often as she would have liked and so was not freely available to talk to staff.

> E: I got my last lot of work back which was not too bad you know. I did talk to the tutor and basically said, "You know I'm not sure if this is for me and you know really I'm not enjoying it and if I'm spending two days of my life for the next three years, it's not a good use of my time really." And she was a bit shocked and bit surprised and basically said to me, if I could get through the next year (which is this coming year), things will be a lot easier in the final two years because it's much more bio-self-direct stuff. (Eliza, February 2015)

Eliza had thought about her time-commitment and was making a rational decision about whether to stay or leave. She was asking the tutor about it so she seemed to be taking into account the opinions of others. The tutor was surprised that Eliza had considered dropping out, so it could be assumed that she had not noticed how frustrated Eliza had been and this supported the notion that communication had been very difficult. Eliza had been encouraged to stay, to 'get through' the second year as if it would be a trial with the promise that the final two years at level six would be easier because they were more self-directed. There was no suggestion that the course would change to address to some of the problems Eliza had been having. Why would level six be easier than level five? Was Eliza ready for level six now and that was why she had been frustrated at levels four and five? Although the tutor had been encouraging, the underlying problems were not really thought about in depth or addressed. The tutor had not listened to what Eliza was unhappy about and assumed it was do with finding the course difficult when actually the issues had been to do with communication, misunderstanding and exclusion. Eliza decided to stay for another year and was attempting to accept that she would have to keep being pro-active in getting the support she needed as a part-time student.

E: so now we've started this new brief and again it starts. I need to start now; sit down and go through everything. So again I emailed last week and said, "Can you let me know if I need to bring anything this Friday nothing is on the Moodle? Do we have our own [part-time] brief on the internet?" Liz is now the course rep. so she's actually sent an email to say, "You know nothing is on the Moodle. Just read the brief today and it says very clearly that a lot of information will be put on the Moodle. We're expecting you to do that." I went on Moodle again today - nothing there. I kind of know what I need to do. I know that I've got to start doing surface design trend forecasting. I just need to have designs ready to go by Friday. Also I'm working at night so I'm thinking, "Right I need to get this done and it's quite an interesting brief or not as the case may be, about being innovative; innovative through fabrics and I don't understand what that means." (Eliza, February 2015)

The Moodle or VLE was very important for students who were part-time as this could be a means of including people who were not able to attend certain sessions. However, as had happened previously, Eliza and Liz did not get what had been promised and continued to work in the dark. In effect the claim had not been heard. The student representative system would only instigate innovation and change if students were listened to and their concerns acted upon (Biesta, 2010, p.122). Eliza said she 'kind of knows' what she needed to do, but then went on to say that she did not understand what the phrase 'innovative through fabrics' meant, more information on Moodle could have helped her respond to the brief well. The scenario that Eliza described was very similar to the problems she had had in the first year: there was no brief designed for part-time students; no understanding that last minute time changes made it hard for students to plan their time and, finally, information was not made explicit on Moodle. The VLE had not been used to create a virtual community of friends and did not seem an effective way of sharing experiences as the physical engagement and immersion in the learning space had been for Chad.

CONCLUSION

Both Chad and Eliza used their ability to act with practical wisdom to deliberate about whether they should continue or discontinue their courses; for different reasons. Chad recognised that she needed to take a year away from her degree based upon her finding the later part of her first year tiring. She knew it would be a physically demanding time in her life. However, she was able to plan how to use her time when she was away from her degree. She was also able to temper

her fears about returning to education by imagining the support she would get from her friends. She imagined being close to them in the studio and this comforted her. Her younger friends also showed their capacity for practical wisdom when they took time out to see Chad when she had had her baby. They shared with her strategies for future success, by telling her about their experiences on the course in the second year. The bonds of friendship meant that Chad was more motivated to return to education after she had taken a year out.

Eliza also deliberated about leaving her degree. She was uncertain about her ability to improve her work. Often she felt the channels of communication were difficult, so she could not find out how she would be assessed. Because she could not spend as much time in the studio due to her other commitments Eliza had not developed a range of friendships with other students and a rapport with her tutors. She also struggled to learn the more practical skills such as CAD. However, even in her story there were examples of virtuous actions from others, such as the student who took the time to make a CAD guide for her to use. The relationship with Liz the student representative demonstrated how Eliza was recruiting supporters to help in her quest to get the information she needed. Eliza had listened to her tutor and had decided to stay on her course even though she recognised it would be challenging. From Eliza's previous experiences it is possible that she may continue to 'suffer' in that she may continue to find studying textile design on a part-time basis very difficult; perhaps it is an unrealistic dream? This could be an instance where it would have been prudent to give the course up and continue when she had more time to give to her study.

From these accounts it was possible to speculate that younger students in higher education as well as the mature ones had a capacity to act well with and for others and were capable of acts of generosity and friendship with people who may be very different from themselves. As Ricoeur (1994) argued, recognising that someone else had a particular need and acting for that person was an important aspect of phronesis. This qualified Aristotle's claim that it was most likely that older people had the experience to act with practical wisdom.

The design studio space (both in its physical and virtual form) was revealed to be a place where horizontal discourse took place between students from different backgrounds, enabling friendships to grow (Broadhead, 2015). Through friendship and a sense of belonging students were able to continue with their studies even though they met with unexpected and difficult challenges. The help given by others was practical but also supportive emotionally. It entailed the sharing of knowledge and learning experiences. At the same time, the studio in its wider sense could also be an alienating space that potentially confused and frustrated some students, making them consider discontinuing their course.

When relying mostly on a virtual learning space rather than being physically present in the studio it seemed more difficult to cultivate those relationships with others which could enhance a person's chance of achievement in art and design.

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Samantha Broadhead
Leeds College of Art