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Artists Becoming Teachers: Expressions of Identity Transformation in a Virtual Forum

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Artists Becoming Teachers: Expressions of Identity Transformation in a Virtual Forum

Abstract

This paper is an investigation of theoretical issues pertaining to art and design graduates as they embark upon their training as teachers. The expressive, 'confessional' nature of selected forum posts in their virtual learning environment are analysed in relation to the students' identity transformation into teachers. This transition is profound in the case of artist teachers, for whom the contrast between their practice as a critical artist and that of a regulated professional can be severe. The usage of these socially-oriented virtual forums, and the students' identity transition is analysed in terms of identity theorists such as Butler, hooks, and Wenger. There are problems of expression that are brought about by the juxtaposition of visually and spatially adept artist-learners constrained within a largely textual environment, yet this impediment appears to be ameliorated by their social-expressive exploitation of the forums.

Key Words

artist-teacher; identity performance; negotiated learning; virtual forums; confession; space.

Introduction

This paper is the result of a study that explored the experience of postgraduate art and design education teacher training students in the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE), available to them over the Internet during their one year PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) training course for qualified teacher status (QTS) at our London college. These students, averaging fifty in each annual cohort, have spatial and visual orientations as both

practitioners and as learners, being graduates from a wide variety of arts backgrounds such as Fine Art, Textiles, Animation and Graphic Design. The rationale for establishing an e-learning community stems from the specificity of their learning situation, the students being located in schools for two thirds of an intensive one-year course. These placements are geographically widespread, and as a consequence the students may be separated from college and their peers for extended periods, especially in the second half of the academic year. The VLE was originally set up for these students to provide a common means of communication with the college and with each other. The forums in particular were established to furnish the students with a means of mutual support, as a way of sharing their singular experience as learner teachers, and for peer collaboration (Bonk, 2004; Carswell *et al*, 2000). The study was prompted partly as a result of the attention the students attracted from the college's VLE administrators because of the high volume of e-traffic produced by the art and design site. The intensity of usage suggested that the study should investigate the learning significance to art and design graduates of VLE social forum posts during the transformative identity process from trainee to professional classroom practitioner. This transformation process is affected, and to an extent determined, by the specificities of visually and spatially orientated students' engagement within a text-based medium.

The bulk of the VLE's usage comprises forum posts in the site's asynchronous forums, particularly those concerned with sharing school experience, and it is from these that the majority of the data samples have been drawn. The main method employed was the analysis of samples of all forum discussion narratives over two years, in combination with questionnaires from all students upon completion of their course. The questionnaires sought detailed responses to preferences in usage and the benefits and constraints of online communication in relation to their training in the visual arts. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with volunteers and additional data was drawn from the VLE's records of forum usage and activity logs. The analysis of the forums initially comprised identifying posts that showed a variation from the normal usage, and that had content concerned with their identity, as defined as their performed roles, as artist or teacher practitioners. These moments of recognition and of transition, as the

students articulated and translated into narrative their performance in these board spheres of practice, form the focus of this study.

As a medium, the forum as a mode of communication has deficits to which these students as artist-teachers sometimes allude in both the posts themselves and in their evaluations. One significant deficit is often articulated as the absence of a pictorial, illustrative or spatial platform. Art and design students have, by definition, the particular characteristic of being highly visually and spatially orientated learners. This has immediately presented problems with the text-based VLE system that is available to them, forcing them to adapt to a mode of literacy for which many of them are less well equipped. In particular the frequently subversive approach towards technology and media, evident in many of our students' former art practices, rarely finds expression within the confines of our securely protected e-learning environment (Jagodzinski, 2005). There is the possibility, however, that the expressive outlets that the forums on the VLE provide is a vital requirement for teacher training art and design students in particular, a phenomenon that may be accounted for the pronounced identity changes that they have to undergo. The fact of a text-dominated medium may be less of a restriction, at least to some artist-teachers, than might be assumed. In terms of social engagement and expression it may be that other conceptions of space come into play that are fundamentally bound up with social engagement, and if so these may be much more conducive to our visually and spatially trained graduates, helping to explain their participation and disclosures through the medium.

The bulk of the forum's use (and the site as a whole), is concerned with the prosaic practical and administrative minutiae of the routine operation of the course. Mainly these comprise discussions about assignments, workshops, lectures, teaching placements and social events. Of the dozens of discussions that the students initiate on the forums (approximately half of all discussions are student-initiated) in the course of the year, most are concerned with the students' negotiation of the strictures of their institutions (school and college) and the regulations (assignments, codes) imposed upon them. Ordinarily these are 'discussions' only in the loosest sense of that term, and can be grouped and summarised as requests for clarification, exchanges of technical information, and organisational issues.

Tutors post responses and initiate discussions, and their presence is ostensibly a utilitarian role, as providers of information and direction: maintaining the calendar of events, providing information about upcoming jobs and workshops, assignments etc. It would be disingenuous, however, to suggest that our presence in the VLE was therefore insignificant in terms of student contributions. All students' posts on the VLE forums are automatically emailed to all of the other students and to all of the tutors. Despite tutors' avoidance of pronouncements or involvement in students' discussions, unless invited to so, their known presence has effects, which may inhibit disclosures in which the students might consider themselves to be disadvantaged or misconstrued. Nevertheless, a small but rich strand of discussions upon identity exists, (rarely more than a fifth of all narratives generated) which provides interesting grounds for analysis, and is the focus of this paper. Given the caveat that it is impossible, within the scope of this study, to compare these with disclosures that might be given confidentially or to peers only. The audience of peers and students suggests a performative element, which is important in Butler's (1993) terms, in that the occurrence of the posts may themselves constitute performances of identities.

The forum posts under scrutiny are selected, and defined, where the narrative of the discussion attempts to articulate the ontological experience of becoming a teacher, and especially where they do this (even covertly) in relation to being an artist. All of the posts over a two-year period were trawled, looking carefully for signs of artist-teacher identity narratives. These were then analysed in terms of disclosure or 'confession', in the sense of bell hooks' (1994) argument for the importance of autobiographical narratives in the learning process, as well as for transformation narratives that could be analysed in terms of identity theory, particularly Butler's (1993; 1997) in relation to performance and embodiment, and Wenger's (2005) within learning communities.

Identity

The identities with which I am concerned in the context of this study are that of the artist and the teacher, particularly those associated narratives generated during school experience as

trainee teachers. One main premise that underpinned the study was that artist-teachers, like all trainee teachers, have to undergo an identity transformation during their training year.

'Identity' is a contentious concept, used here to approximately represent the complexities of subjectivity in its myriad social performances. As Butler (1993) argues, identity can only exist at the point of performance in a social **interaction**, and is therefore contingent upon the temporal vagaries of social **interaction**. Nayak & Kehily (2006), in their appraisal of Butler's theories of identification, explain that:

... identification is a partial, split and ambivalent process that, in the moment it announces itself as 'identity' (in common statements such as, 'As black man ...', or 'Speaking as a feminist ...'), conceals its incurable multiplicity and precarious contingency. In this respect, the act of identification is always an approximation, ...

Wenger theorises identity in practice in terms of the production of social narratives and roles, and argues for a contingent, experiential concept of identity in constant flux:

Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities. What narratives, categories, roles, and positions come to mean as an experience of participation is something that must be worked out in practice. [...] In the same way that meaning exists in its negotiation, identity exists – not as an object in of itself – but in the constant work of negotiating the self. It is in this cascading interplay of participation and reification that our experience of life becomes one of identity [...] (Wenger, 2005, p.151.)

The 'cascading interplay of participation' to which Wenger refers here can be observed through the posts of the VLE forums. Occasionally discussions and debates strike up through which the student participants may be observed in the 'constant work of negotiating the self' to which Wenger refers. Their identity as teachers is emerging from their former identity as artists, but not without the attendant struggle of what the former might come to mean in practice. The contradictions between those potential identifications, and those of their identifications as artist practitioner, are sites of negotiation and also, importantly, of resistance.

Wenger (2005, p. 149) categorises identity in practice in overlapping groups, the first of which is through 'negotiated experience'. Theorising identity in this way helps to establish the contingent character of identity, which, combined with Wenger's extended definition and

use of the concept of reification, provides a means of analysing the students' contributions to their online forum within the communities of artists, schools, and learner teachers. In each case the reifications, such as the regulations of the school institution and of the organisation of the practical teaching spaces, have to be socially negotiated, the process of which contributes to the production of their new identities in those spaces. Wenger also notes the idea of the 'community membership', whereby 'we define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar' (2005: 149). This is particularly important for the case of artist teachers, since it corroborates the idea that the transformation is exacerbated by the polarisation of these roles when viewed from the position of the other – the fundamental unfamiliarity of the practices, or reifications, of the artist for the teacher, and vice-versa.

The major identifications with which the students in this study are associated, are those constructed by the institution of the art college or university, especially within fine art, as routinely expected to perform as a critically creative individual. In the case of Fine Art (the majority of the students are drawn from this discipline), this is usually manifested as the individual who critiques the normative codes, rituals and conventions of the social milieu they inhabit. In doing so they establish themselves within the discourse of the artist, whose practice as an original producer is necessarily uncommon, unusual, or singular. This is itself a normative practice, and within the institutional context these traits are valued through critical assessment practices and exhibitions. Importantly, they are frequently valued in a critical context that comprises past practices of canonical artists, where the acknowledgement, contribution to, or progression of another artist's practice may be seen as commendable. A fine art student's visual references to Joseph Boyce's work, for example, through incomplete assemblages of domestic and semi-industrial materials, may be recognised and rewarded. Alternatively, and significantly, critical refutation or subversion of a canonical artist may also be celebrated: Yinka Shonibare's exposure of the colonialism present in the work of Boucher and Fragonard through his sculptural reworking of their paintings is a popular example of this.

Student artists from other areas such as illustration and graphics have learned to operate in a commercially orientated production market, but the overall picture is not dissimilar

in terms of the fundamental worth of the practices. Despite the ‘applied’ arts epithet, these disciplines operate under strikingly similar value systems, where innovation and social or artistic critique are privileged. These features and value systems, reifications in Wengers’ terms, are strikingly at odds with the heavily regulated teaching institutions (Brown *et al*, 2006) that the students are joining and developing identifications. They are necessarily on an ‘inbound trajectory’ (Wenger, 2005, p.154) whereby they are negotiating the concepts of the performance of professionalism as they are specifically reified and articulated by the institution – codes of behaviour, dress, language etc. These, in their occlusion of critical practices, may be entirely at odds with the value art systems from which they have emerged, and creates the site of an identity trauma, sporadically expressed in their forum posts.

Trauma and Contradiction

Analysis of the VLE’s records confirmed a high level of forum activity coinciding with the beginning of school placements. Akins *et al* (2004) discuss how e-learning technologies can be likened to a ‘lifeline’ whereby the participants are ‘retelling the trauma’ (p. 35). This seems to be particularly apposite for these students, for whom the trauma of their first teaching moments appears to require retelling daily, sometimes even lesson-by-lesson; students often post comments several times during the school day on the forums of the VLE. The content of these posts frequently includes attempts to articulate the traumatic character of their first teaching moments. It seems that the immediacy of the experience creates an imperative to engage in dialogue. Their posts at this stage reveal an eclectic mix of the personal, social and the professional, as they assume their new roles, as can be seen in these examples:

Post: “ Just finished teaching two lessons, year 7 & 8. I said some REALLY stupid things-apparently before even setting the first activity in yr 7 class I said sorry 7 times! [...] Can't seem to get to grips with the hardened teacher thing but got to remember I'm on faking it and think of all the things they turned some people into!”

Reply post 1: “...thought it might be quite amusing, and comforting, if we had a forum where we could reveal our stupid mistakes that are quite obvious but we couldn't help but make. [...]”

Reply post 2: “As soon as I do something really stupid, (apart from thinking I could be a teacher) I will let you know.”

These posts, by focusing on ‘mistakes’, effectively illuminate the crossing of an identity boundary, the transition from artist/students to professional teacher. The concept of the ‘mistake’ may be usefully interpreted here as a metaphor for the assumption of a new and unfamiliar role, and one that will not be assimilated without some personal cost. The ad-hoc nature of these semi-social forum commentaries through the VLE appear to be helpful in the reflective process of ‘becoming’ with which the students are preoccupied at this stage.

Akins *et al* (2004) identified a stark contrast between the students’ professional rhetoric and the personalised social interactions that they observed in online discussions:

Their testimonies reflect a frank intimacy, an intimate nature that may seem initially awkward, almost embarrassing, especially within the guise of an art education discourse where school art lessons depersonalise/depoliticise identities and where any reference to the intimate is highly inappropriate, suspect and controlled. (p. 35)

Their findings may indicate that, for many art graduates, the identity transition between their former role as an artist and the new one of institutional art teacher (or artist-teacher) is difficult, and occasionally baffling – despite the mythology of liberalism within art education. One likely cause of these contradictions is the difference between the students’ expectations of artistic practice, based on their art school experience and its value system, and the actual art procedures to be found in their schools. In their posts and interviews the students’ frequently compare school practices with those advocated in the art colleges from which they graduated. As the students are constructed as classroom practitioners, this change begins to manifest itself in the students’ conservative selection of the content of their schemes of work, and their decreasing attempts to use the contemporary art practices that were valued so highly in their former role. The students’ shift in practice suggests that the stock-in-trade of many artists, the exploration of social world in its subjectivities and its intimacies, may be found to be inappropriate for the schools’ institutional practices. Studies such as those of Addison & Burgess (2002) and Page *et al* (2006) bear this tendency out, highlighting the contrast between institutional teacher and artist.

In addition to this there is the question of the professional structures that govern the teacher training process in England. As Atkinson (2003) explains:

‘When presented with the standards’ inventory [the UK Government’s standards for qualified teacher status] student teachers often pathologise themselves according to its demands.’ (2003:197).

He alerts us to the way that teaching is shielded from critical scrutiny by the mythology of an ideal practice to which teachers must conform, encouraging them to reject or deny the subjectivity of both teacher and learner. The regulated character of their placements in schools, and their attempts to conform, is a major source of discussion in the students’ posts, as found in the following sequence:

Post: “Am getting all jittery [...] and unsettled due to the fast approaching transition from 1st to 2nd placement school. Change is afoot, I'm not liking it, and 'big' school, oh! my, it's all rather daunting, is anyone else feeling the fear or am I the only one?

Reply post 1: “Hi all! How did it go? Made it on time? Found a smiling face greeting you at the gate? And are your students what you expected? How about your team? Well I went to school this morning thinking to myself... WHAT AM I DOING??! [...] Not all teachers are 'easy to get on with', they sort of make it clear on day one that they are boss... [...]

The forum here offers a platform for their personal subjectivity to be reinvested in their academic and professional practices, perhaps to an extent ameliorating the encumbrances and obstacles that they perceive. The comments are indicative of the specific character of teaching, with its demands for social performance and the representation of oneself within a regulated role. How these student teachers should represent themselves is a question to which the posts refer in various coded forms throughout the period of school placements, and appears to be a preoccupation to which these artist teacher students often return.

Expressing and Resisting ‘Inbound Trajectories’

The students’ forums operate through asynchronous postings, as opposed to synchronous ‘chat rooms’, and this method seems to bestow a certain amount of gravity to the contributions that they make. The VLE allocates a thirty-minute editing time, and this allows the students to re-read and rethink their posts once they have seen them in situ in the thread of the dialogue. The students also know that the posts are permanent and will be publicly available for the duration of the course. This has discernable effects upon the posts, such as fewer errors or abbreviations than those found in their emails or phone texts. The additional thinking time

generated by the VLE provides opportunities for consideration of the text, which may be theorised in terms of the condition of ‘seriousness’, a quality that hooks (1994) identifies as intrinsic to a progressive pedagogy. Students’ responses indicate that the depth of critical reflection, the seriousness, which is observed within the posts appears to stem from the relatively slow pace of the exchanges in the asynchronous environment. This also enhances the ‘confessional’ aspect of the discussion, and results in a personal yet critical debate centred on the experience of teaching.

The shock of performing for the first time in this singular social situation, that of the school, especially for those who are unfamiliar with classroom practices, often dominates the students’ representations of their experience. A common feature of the forum posts is their preoccupation with their bodily presence in the spaces of the school: their abrupt exchanges with pupils, their concern with their appearance, their enforced voice projection, and the unfamiliarity of the space, reveal what seems to be a variant of hooks’ (1994) ‘confessional narratives’, where the students root their academic identity overtly in their personal experience. As an example, one student, Kelly, posted this early in her school placement:

[...] had a hairy day a while ago with boys sexually insulting me, but the senior staff have come down on the boys quite heavily, felt kinda bad for getting them into trouble since they have been cool since. Although I keep being reminded it’s going to happen because of the way I look in a place like this! [...]

She is not permitted to forget her bodily presence in the classroom, subject as she is to demeaning and pejorative comments. In her case the trauma of the event is significant in terms of gender as well as teacher. In terms of identity transformation the gender normalising of the teacher professional (Addison, 2007; Dalton 2001) may a particularly difficult step for the student artist teacher to take. This results from the prominence of radical practices like those of Emin, Orlan and Lucas in the contemporary art world, which at times offer scathing critiques of such gender normalising. At times such as this the artist and the teacher are polarised in opposition.

Zizek's (2001) idea of embodiment and the concept of the 'spectral body' can be applied to the imagined and anxious body that is described in Kelly's comments. Crucial to the notion of a space in an electronic learning environment is the concept of embodiment.

[Virtual reality] is not the experience of being bodiless, but the experience of possessing *another* – etheric, virtual, weightless – *body*, a body which does not confine us to the inert materiality and finitude, an angelic *spectral body*, a body which can be artificially recreated and manipulated. (Zizek, 2001, p.54)

Zizek characterises the use of virtual space as a kind of antithesis of disembodiment, a reinvestment of the body into technological experience. He is careful to account for this by describing the virtual body as psychically 'uncanny', and likens it to that of a 'spectre'. This seems to follow directly from Merleau Ponty's (1962, 1964) seminal disquisitions on space, where he insists on a conception of external space that is totally dependent on a perception of bodily space. 'Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. [...] For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions.' (1964, p.5). Kelly's bodily presence in the classroom, in its sexualised and demeaned form in which it is constructed by some of her pupils, is artificially recreated once again in the imagined space of the forum, perhaps this time garnering solidarity from other forum users. The performance in the classroom and its subsequent performance in the recounting in the forum post constitute the transformative states of the body in the identity construction of the teaching process. As Grosz (1994) observes, the body is completely dominant and central in the organisation of perception. Applied to the performance demanded in the classroom, this centralising theory would yield results consistent with those observed in Kelly's post. She expresses the social space of the school in bodily terms, and she is forced to give precedence to the visually sexualised and gendered identity that is thrust upon her. Kelly is not passive in this, however, and the decision to display (perform) her narrative in this way – an accessible forum post – is in itself an act of resistance, as well as a sign of identity transformation. She knows that her narrative of sexuality is coded to reference the explicit and assertive sexualised work of artists like Lucas, and can therefore be seen as an act of resistance, in part against the very regulatory system to which she is compelled to conform.

As Brown et al (2006) explain, utilising Butler's theories of subjugation, the desiring subject 'seeks the sign of existence (as a teacher) outside of itself in official training discourse'. Yet Kelly's post can also be read as a sexualised performance of resistance to subjugation through the VLE forum, even as she succumbs to the authority of the practice and the institution. This is rather like Nayak and Kehily's (2006) findings in their study of schoolgirls whose appropriation of the tropes of sexual insults enable them to effectively resist boys' abuse.

In her critical pedagogy hooks dismisses arguments that the privileging of personal experience obscures 'truth' or distorts factual knowledge (1994, pp. 88-89). In forum posts, between the jokes and the fantasies, students raise questions about the acquisition of a classroom identity. An interesting question is how intrinsic is the personal, imaginative experience to this acquisition? hooks might argue that the imaginary, the anecdotal, and the shared fictions are the necessary ground for academic and professional inquiry, in the manner that the reflections on her experience by student Helen in the following post, functions to locate her within a new, pedagogical, field:

Hi all! I also had those 'I can't draw students', seemingly through general lack of confidence. [...] In some strange way the chewing gum stuck to chairs, the dysfunctional Nike rucksacks (I have a dysfunctional Burberry paper one), and my new nickname [...] has grown on me. Nervously excited... To be continued...

Helen's post indicates the way that the ad-hoc framework of the forum allows for moments of poignancy in terms of their 'inbound trajectory', overcoming some of the significant difficulties that Ellis & Calvo (2006) identified with debate in their online discussions. Helen expresses and itemises her identifications as she is produced as a subject in her new institution, with its roles and its reifications. Her willingness and seeming fondness for doing so can be accounted for by Wenger's analysis of newcomers' identity in a practising community:

While newcomers are forging their own identities, they do not necessarily want to emphasise discontinuity more than continuity. They must find a place in relation to the past. In order to participate, they must gain some access – vicarious as it may be – to the history they want to contribute to; they must make it part of their own identities. (2005, p.157)

Conclusion

Our postgraduate art students, in the course of their previous practices, were encouraged to challenge existing orthodoxies about the very nature of their subject and the boundaries of the field in which they worked. This is a distinctive pedagogic feature of UK art courses, in that they demand a rethinking of the basic premises upon which their work is constructed; this critical reflection transforms into a *modus operandi*. They are often encouraged, as part of the stock-in-trade pedagogy of art and design degree courses, to offer critiques of social and moral codes and conventions. In view of these dominant critical practices, that champion subversion and dissent, it is not surprising to find that a sizable proportion of art graduates have a tendency to pursue these strategies in their post-graduate work, even when operating in alien new fields, such as those of professional school teaching (Atkinson & Dash, 2005). Of necessity, however, pragmatic concerns such as complying with the professional conventions that dominate their school experience frequently efface their former critical practices entirely (Adams, 2003).

Tutors often find themselves in a contradictory role in this process of conformity: the requirement to support the ongoing development of subject knowledge, and at the same time enable its pedagogical application. This may often be contradictory, and imply a simultaneous revival and suppression of critical art practices; that which formerly shaped many students' practice are compromised to the point of abandonment within the professional framework in which they find themselves. This contradiction finds expression in the students' use of the VLE, and their confessional narratives explore this dilemma. The 'confession' woven into otherwise mundane and workaday posts in the forums may, as hooks has suggested, be an important, even vital, component of their progress as learner teachers. The transformation of artist into teacher, adds poignancy to the confessional, performative model that the students appear to adopt as a means, or even a prerequisite, for identity transformation.

The performance of identities, through the virtual environment during the short period of training, as the students become absorbed into the new fields of practice, is a singular phenomenon in the case of artist teachers. As 'spectres', they haunt the virtual discussions as

they uneasily slough off the critical practices that encumber their assimilation into school.

Perhaps the challenge that remains for any hope of a radical critical pedagogy is to seek out ways to conserve as least some of these threatened artist identities, maintaining the ground for teachers' critical practices as artists within the fields of teaching and learning in schools.

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