

**Research article**

# Collaborative Practices in the Secondary Curriculum for Cultural Sustainability

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**Abstract.**

This paper examines how collaborative practices in the secondary art and design classroom can be formulative in the sustainability of cultural beliefs, practices and heritage conservation. This research takes its point of departure from the traditional culture of teaching and learning practices that feed the ideologies of the institution and entrench a whitewashed curriculum that favours westernised ideologies of arts and design practices. This paper draws upon my research that investigates collaborative pedagogies in the curriculum and seeks to illuminate how micro-relationships within the classroom enable young artists, craftspeople, and designers to look to one another to better understand a sense of themselves as active agents for change in the world, rather than passive receptors of the ideologies of the institution and the distribution of power. In this paper I employ the Lacanian understanding of the other, and Rencier's Distribution of the Sensible to discuss how collaborative pedagogies enable the preservation of cultural sustainability not of the institution but of the learners.

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The theme of this conference is the complexity of Art, Design and Education to preserve cultural sustainability. I am taking as my point of departure that the meaning of culture in this context is defined as the set of beliefs, morals, methods and collections of human knowledge and the ways that they are transmitted. In this presentation I would like to discuss how Collaborative pedagogies enable younger generations to self-identify and share their cultural beliefs, ideologies and human experience and in turn, work towards a decolonised curriculum.

I will discuss how I believe collaborative pedagogies can support young artists to create a curriculum that enables them to rethink structures of control, leadership and expectations within the classroom. I will discuss why I believe that there is a need for this redistribution of hierarchies, and draw out two strands of theory that support this proposition before outlining my experiences of collaborative pedagogies as a teacher, researcher and as an artists.

 **OPEN ACCESS**

As an educator I ask myself regularly; what is the job of the school? Some may say that it is to enable young people to pass exams, others to teach the skills required to be a valuable member of society and others to formally learn about the subjects that one feels passionate about. After being a student, undergraduate, postgraduate researcher and now a teacher within the same system for 33 years, I feel informed to declare that the schools system exists to reinforce the cultural beliefs, values, ideologies and behaviours of the institution, or perhaps the society that founded it.

The school system has formed structures of obedience, lone working and aesthetic ideologies that, I would argue do not educate, but in fact close the child to the possibility of anything other than that which is expected. To 'succeed' in school is to learn to fit the model and to preserve only the dominant narrative. As time passes we see the ebb and flow of political party principals played out in the approaches to teaching and learning within our schools that seek only to prepare students to be passive, conforming and unquestioning recipients of what has come to be known as 'British values' in the United Kingdom [1].

Brent Wilson's 1974 *Outline Theory of Child Art* [2] continues to hold relevance 48 years after publication. "In effect the art teacher often says: 'do this project and if you do it well, I'll give you praise, recognition or a good grade.' on the other hand he [sic] says: 'if you don't follow my rules, I'll reject your work, or you, or I'll give you a bad mark.'" [2]. The subtext here of course is that the student must produce the project in line with the taste, ideals and aesthetic values held by the teacher or risk being 'bad'. We see this again in Efland who articulates the detachment between the artwork of artists who create it in response to a 'constellation' of situations that reside within a culture, [3] and the schools based projects that intend to educate young people about the world. I suggest that these projects, although well meaning, only pay marginal lip service to the complex, diverse and interconnected nature of what it means to be an artist and indeed a young person in the world.

In short, art education in schools is not a pedagogical tool for an emancipated society, but rather, one that creates a tunnelled vision for the function of dominant discourses. The school, I propose, is an exemplification of what Jacques Rancière described as a distribution of the sensible, a regime of what is possible and what can be understood. A distribution of the sensible is a "set of self evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" [4]. As a learner of art and design, the curriculum as it stands rewards those that speak, and act in ways that support the

dominant narrative who are rewarded with continued access, whereas those whose life experiences do not mirror the dominant narrative are not.

As a side note here it is worth mentioning that the experiences that I am speaking of have come to be known in the UK as the 'protected characteristics' of equality and human rights: Age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation [5]. Now, I must stress that this is not a suggestion that the education system in the United Kingdom actively excludes any young person that falls within one of these categories but it is the subtle nuances of behaviour that are engrained within the system that indicate a curriculum design that promotes the dominant discourse and fetisizes the non-dominant.

Let me provide an example;. Within my department there are currently over 80 young adults between the ages of 16 and 20 studying for a full time qualification in Art and Design in different specialisms and levels. My team consists of only four teachers. All of us white, all of us able bodied, all of us born and raised in the United Kingdom, all of us presenting the gender assigned at birth, and all of us only speak one language. The students on the other hand are a much closer representation of the diversity of the population. Between them they speak many different languages, they are from five of the seven continents, some are extremely wealthy and others live in poverty. These young people have seen domestic violence, war, famine, gender reassignment surgery and debilitating medical conditions that leave them disabled. Who am I to tell them who and what their art is for?

If we return to Rancière, artistic practices are “ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” [6]. Art making, under this suggestion offers voice to those silenced, it enables a redistribution of the sensible following a disruption of dominant discourse and therefore enables the young artist to rearticulate an understanding of their own experience rather than form fitting to the status quo. Is this not the objective of all artist? To articulate their understanding for an audience? to education? shed light upon the unseen? Somewhere along the way, the education of art and the way that it is schooled have become vastly separated from the intentions of what it is to be an artist within the world.

The reader will not be surprised to learn that this paper offers a proposal. A proposition that a rethinking of the Lacanian L Schema may open out the opportunity to look beyond the teacher-student binary towards a more rhizomatic [7] learning model. Collaborative pedagogies have been the focus of my research practice since 2014. In a collaborative pedagogy, like all collaborations there are a minimum of two parties. The



other (small o) and Other (large O) as one falls away and replaces the other in a learning relationship that is in constant evolutionary flux.

Before I go on to apply this to some real life examples within my practice I would first like to make clear the applications that this has upon our plight. By equipping young artists with the tools to look for learning encounters with their peers, the teacher negates the requirement to bring *only* their voice into the classroom. The school becomes an environment that does not have one dominant narrative but in fact one that is rhizomatic in nature and does not rely upon the ideologies of the institution to build knowledge structure systems. Put differently, collaborative pedagogies enable the young artists to learn about themselves in the gaze of the other(S) rather than in the gaze of the teacher.

The Collaborative projects that I facilitate as my practice have taken many iterations over the past 8 years but follow a similar format when they are placed both inside and outside of the curriculum. Each stage of the projects are designed to subvert the teacher-student relationship and turn the learning gaze towards peer learning relationships in order to create communities of praxis in the classroom.

Firstly, learners are positioned in collaborative pairings and are asked to always see their partner as their first point of call in all matters, following ice breaker activities the young artists undertake a think-pair-share activity that culminates in a group discussion led by the facilitating researcher. During these conversations the young artists must decide upon a set of assessment criteria that will be their guiding principles throughout the project. The shift from working towards the externally set examination based assessment criteria supports the young artists to see the project as assessed differently from their 'usual' work. This, I have found enables them to break away from some of the constraints enforced by the examination boards and see the artwork that they create as not being formulative in the pursuit of a grade but rather for a function of making art for a different purpose, one more like we see in the artworld outside of the educational institution.

This academic year (2021), the assessment criteria decided upon by the artists are as follows:

1. Make sure all people have their say and feel confident to share ideas
2. All artists feel that their individual intentions are represented within the work
3. Be mindful of your partners comfort
4. Combine abilities
5. Communicate with honesty and respect

6. Have clarity on what your intentions are
7. Be there and apply yourself
8. Embrace the experience

The second phase of the projects undertaken by all 'participants' is what I have come to call a three dimensional mind map. In this, all learners work together to link together their areas of interest and artistic intentions. The objective of the three dimensional mind map is to encourage the young artists to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of their retrospective practices as a group.



**Figure 2:** Artists Co-creating a three dimensional mind map (2018).



**Figure 3:** Artists Co-creating a three dimensional mind map (2020).

Following these two activities the young artists spend the remainder of the project working together to co-create their artwork. Regularly reflecting back on the progress

that they have made and the ongoing purpose of their work. The nuance of the teacher-student relationship becomes far more difficult to navigate during this phase of the project as the desire to guide students in their ideas and intentions is deeply ingrained in the identity of the teacher. When undertaking these projects the difficulty is in stepping back and not interjecting. Allowing the young people to make stylistic and thematic choices that I do not like or find distasteful reminds me daily that it is not *my* work that they are creating but their own and if we are to move into a space for a culturally sustainable future, it must be my voice and not theirs that must become quiet.

The intention of this paper is to offer a proposition that collaborative pedagogies in the classroom offer young artists the opportunity to redistribute knowledge through their own experience rather than relying on top down disseminations of knowledge. I have discussed some of the key underpinning ideas of my research and some of the methods and methodologies that I have employed to counteract the colonised curriculum in the United Kingdom educational system. I propose that the positioning of the teacher as the font of knowledge is a misunderstanding of not only how people learn, but can also be an act of silencing the voices of the students that we claim to be teaching.

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