

# **Inclusive Practices, Inclusive Pedagogies**

Learning from Widening  
Participation Research in Art  
and Design Higher Education

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## Chapter 9.2

# Accessing and Decoding Communities of Cultural Capital<sup>1</sup> **Ken Neil and Eileen Reid**

[...]

### **Distinction, taste, aspiration**

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) is renowned for his work in sociology on a number of themes, from Franco-Algerian politics to fashion. We are interested here in the ideas and arguments which stem from his 1979, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. To boil them all down: the insurmountable conclusion of this book is, simply, that because the meanings and values of culture are contingent on the context and on the social conditioning of producers and consumers, *taste is not pure*. (Bourdieu, P. 2005)

By this Bourdieu means that, despite practices and appearances, taste must not be seen as the sole purview of select initiates, dependent on the deep knowledge of the inherent properties of items of cultural production. Taste is not, to extend Bourdieu's logic, attainable by only a few who have been

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fortunate enough to live amongst the objects and debates of high culture. That fact is, we think, something that educators in HE Art, Design and Architecture, should continually recall.

Expressions of judgements of taste are, rather, vocabularies to be learned (for progressive as well as conservative reasons) then applied to whichever manifestation of culture seems most relevant. The conservative adoption and practice of vocabularies of taste can serve the wider workings of what Bourdieu termed *cultural capital*. The stranglehold which the affluent classes had in France on the outputs and events of high culture was strengthened by a sharing of learned vocabularies in respect of expressions of taste.

Such expression can be understood as a *capability* (not a skill endowed at birth). If HE Art, Design and Architecture can persuade the potential applicant that this capability is not a prerequisite to access but a credible critical achievement to be won following access, then a healthy scepticism might develop with regard to some of the more conservative value systems in operation within admissions teams.

Bourdieu's investigation made clear that the educated middle classes are socialised in the circuit of cultural capital and that that social fact perpetuates class distinctions and the advantages of privilege.

Bourdieu's analysis explains that we must understand cultural practices (taken to mean both active engagement in the making of culture, and passive enjoyment of the fruits of that activity) as being socially formed predispositions, predilections and forms of knowledge that equip individuals, in turn, with competence in deciphering cultural practices. He suggests that 'a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded'. The ownership of this code is secured through a long process of acquisition or inculcation through education, the family or group.

In *Culture, Class, Distinction*, Tony Bennett *et al* summarise that in this way, and confirm the analysis of Calvert and Sennett:

The salience of class in contemporary Britain is not sufficiently understood as a set of increasingly polarised economic positions. A positive consequence of approaching class through the optic of Bourdieu's work is to suggest that culture – understood as a form of capital, as an asset – is central the constitution of class relationships. Culture is not simply an add-on to class positions whose logic is provided by economic relations represented in the form of an occupational class structure.

(Bennett, T. et al 2009, p. 56)

The consequences of this perspective on culture are considerable, and welcome. To be able to register and explain to potential participants that the prescribed attributes and attainments of successful Art, Design and Architecture candidature are something other than indisputable, is a crucial part of the decoding of the structures of HE Art, Design and Architecture.

Following Bourdieu's groundbreaking work, to be confident as Art, Design and Architecture educators in stressing the contingent nature of cultural value is vital, for the effects of the status quo, often dangerously inconspicuous, can be pernicious and discriminatory. The subtle exercising and affirmation of established value judgements based on aesthetic taste (applied to all forms of cultural production from easel painting to neo-conceptual installation) can be easily overlooked and can serve to mask the true contingency of matters.

The attribute of aesthetic sensibility is a favoured example in the elucidation of the meanings of Bourdieu's research. Taking the aesthetic sense to mean that sensibility or disposition which would allow an individual to express value judgements about the 'pure' properties of, say, a work of art, Bourdieu made clear:

The aesthetic disposition is one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others which presupposes objective assur-

ance and distance. It is one manifestation of the system of dispositions produced by the social conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence.

(Bourdieu, P. 2005, p. 56)

This states what many know to be true but struggle to articulate: namely, that the expression of self-assured judgements about artworks, for example, is frequently done with overt self-assurance because the expresser can predict that fellows within his class stratum are more than likely to corroborate the *manner* in which such an expression is made (tone, language, platform and so forth) as they are the actual details of the judgement itself. Given the importance of class identification for self-identity as forewarned by Sennett, this corroboration is compelled by necessity as much as authentic agreement with the content of the expression.

Tacit machinations of class affirmation can serve to relegate the detail and potential significance of actual judgement – corroboration supersedes critique: perhaps best exemplified in a visual art context by the inevitable uncritical bonhomie of the typical opening night.

### **GSA's Prato Project: demystifying and profiting from cultural capital**

The theoretical underpinning of the Prato project is not based on an absolute denial of, or wistful hope for, objective standards of taste; and widening participation in HE Art, Design and Architecture should not be preoccupied by settling that particular debate. Just as importantly, the Prato project is not premised upon a deficit model if that is taken to mean the assumption that widening participation students need to abandon their working class cultural identities in order to cope with art school. Rather, the success of the project is partly constituted by encouraging a healthy scepticism of dominant cultural value systems which can easily intimidate a young person from a working class background. Scottish students from such backgrounds often feel out of place and inferior to students whose

backgrounds have allowed them to accumulate cultural capital. This 'deficit' of cultural capital affects how students see themselves, how they are seen by others, including peers and academic staff. They can easily come to feel isolated, out of place, as not really belonging. These students do not lack talent or ambition. That is, they lack no objective feature required for success. What they lack is confidence in themselves and in their usage of operative vocabularies.

As Bourdieu's work relays, cultural capital takes a lifetime to accumulate, and we don't have time on our side. High impact interventions are needed, and this is what the Prato project has shown. If we want to improve the participation and retention rates of our target groups in years rather than decades, we need to find imaginative short-cuts. The Prato experience, a brief but intense two-week interlude in 4 years of undergraduate study, has demonstrated that there are effective ways to build confidence in working class students in art schools.

GSA was invited to bring a group of students from underrepresented groups characterised by very low participation rates in higher education to Monash University's Prato Centre in Tuscany to join their course 'Concept and Creativity: the development of Italian Art and Design'. The project is possibly one of the first international widening access programmes of its kind in higher education.

For two weeks our students study, alongside Monash University students, the development of Italian Renaissance art, architecture and design. The Monash teaching programme was developed specifically for on-site teaching and an innovative approach to teaching in that its curriculum is comprised of site visits and on-site lectures at galleries, museums, architectural sites and urban spaces in Italy. The lectures and class discussions are aimed at providing an awareness and appreciation of Italian art and design and its social and cultural contexts. The programme includes a large number of site visits within close proximity to Prato, including Florence, Siena, Arezzo, Lucca and Pisa.

The key features of the project:

- Intensity of the experience (high impact in a short period of time)
- Induction into different cultures (both Italian renaissance and Australian university culture)
- Development of healthy scepticism in terms of understanding and appreciating difference and specific cultural perspectives
- Development of a peer support group that can be relied upon on return to the GSA (a support group)

The value and relevance of the first three features is clear enough, and require little further comment here. Further elaboration of the last, however, is instructive. It is not simply a two week course in Tuscany to give working class students exposure to high culture they hitherto have not experienced. Exposure to historical cultural practices also illustrates vividly to students that *current* standards of taste are contingent thereby rendering them less ‘mandatory’ and less intimidating. This is important where the preservation of working class cultural identity is an issue: there is no need to adopt the dominant cultural value system in order to feel included. Recognising this allows the student to develop the confidence required to take control of the experience of great works of art (historical and contemporary), and by extension those individuals who, by dint of their conditioning and more privileged upbringing, unhelpfully see these treasures as somehow more their entitlement than working class students. Thus the Prato Project is not patronising, for, following Sennett, the ambition is not to intimidate the students into hurdling their class position to adopt another cultural identity; rather it is a concerted effort on the part of GSA to improve the individual’s capacities to understand and move within different perspectives on cultural capital, to their own advantage, and ours.

In this context the project is having some success as we hope the following selection of quotations from participating students show:

I feel that the visit and experience of travelling within a small group gave me time to get comfortable with the other students and be able to project a comfortable self.

It made me feel valuable, first time at art school a 'superior' actually bothered to ask my thoughts and opinions without motive, which gave me a sense of pride and made me feel more confident.

I feel more confident, both socially and in my art school work. I feel more comfortable about doing a 3<sup>rd</sup> year exchange and going somewhere where I don't know anyone.

Overall, I believe the Prato trip developed me as a person... and came back a more confident person. Seeing another side of the world motivated me to learn more about other countries and cultures.

I thought I was prepared for what was going to happen on the trip. I don't think I knew exactly how much it would have contributed to the person I am today. It changed many things about me such as my confidence, independence and my hunger for learning.

Meeting all the different people really gave me the confidence to chat to anyone now, it really opened me up.

I have always wanted to see the world and see different cultures, however, now I actually have the confidence to do so. I really did come home from the trip a more together and focussed person.

Coming from a high school like mine, I was fairly uneducated as far as art and history were concerned. This gift from the GSA was very thoughtful. I think it is great that people like me were given this



chance, as I often can feel inadequate in my class. It made me more confidence in giving my opinion to some of my peers.

It was a very Glasgow experience. All of us came from similar backgrounds and were experiencing the same kind of things with the School, so the trip provided a lift – like part of a team.

We believe experiences like the Prato Project are very likely to increase and improve participation and retention – our primary concerns. But the difference this project has made to the lives of our participants goes beyond mere quantifiable outcomes. As said, class identity is not coextensive with economic status but describes also an individual's deep sense of self and cultural identity, a sense that is not easily transformed. A working class student may reasonably want to be mobile in terms of economic status, but might be ambivalent if not hostile to change of the 'cultural self'. The Prato project demonstrates that this need not occur and that widening participation in Art, Design and Architecture does not require such a transformation.

[...]

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