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RESEARCH PRACTICE RESEARCH PRACTICE

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IDENTIFYING NEW CULTURES OF LEARNING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FINE ART EDUCATION

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An educational shift is emerging within the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art today. On first reading this statement sounds positive and will acknowledge what has become evident in most, if not all, educational environments, as it is abundantly clear that new technologies have shaped and informed many aspects of Pre-School, Primary, Secondary, Further and Higher education. However, what is becoming increasingly apparent within the context of fine art education is that it's not experts in the field of fine art pedagogy that are determining newer approaches to learning it is, in fact, fine art students. As an educator, having been at close proximity to the fine art student body for the past sixteen years, I have been fortunate enough to observe the emergence and evolution of a digitally conversant generation, and therefore feel I can confidently say that they *are* defining the way. Having also managed a variety of year groups during this time, and supported a plethora of complex educational needs and multifaceted behaviors, I can also say that no amount of sympathetic understanding and academic encouragement will return it to how it once was. Any attempt to abate this growth, or appease the increasing demands of this student orientated educational shift feels futile.

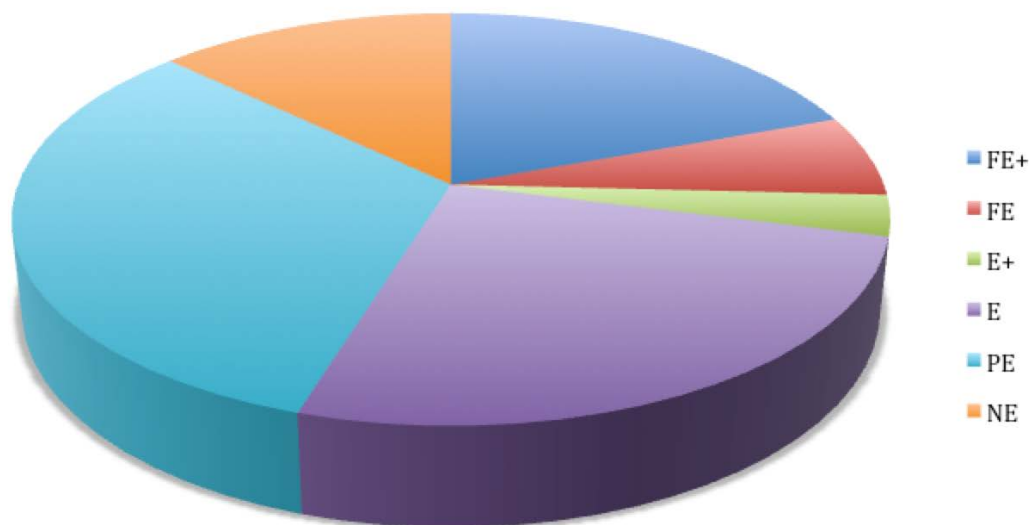
I therefore have to concede that we are, without a doubt, in the process of witnessing a significant change in approaches to learning this *will* become the educational norm. I am very aware that student trends come and go, especially in creative environments, however, what is occurring within this particular educational setting has a consistency to it that can no longer be ignored, or viewed purely as a fad, or a passing phase. Given all that I have been witness to, and actively engaged within, I therefore believe there is now a pressing need to acknowledge that a shift has indeed occurred, and that this shift is creating a tension that is unsustainable for everyone involved.

A TIMELINE OF CHANGING BEHAVIOURS

Looking back, changing approaches to learning started to manifest themselves in 2010 with the emergence of a very particular approach to engagement that was evident amongst only a handful of strategically savvy senior fine art students. In a very short space of time this calculated mind-set developed into a variety of separate approaches, where strategic thinking, opting out, and superseding the curriculum became a set of guiding principles and learning strategies. However, what manifested itself six years ago, as a singular and selfish approach to commitment and participation, has spread, has further developed and, more recently, has developed into an amalgamation of all three approaches. This new way is quickly becoming a way of life, or, the educational norm for a growing percentage of fine art students today. Moreover, these new learning methods present themselves daily, and appear to be part and

parcel of fine art students academic decision-making process. Furthermore, this tactical behavior is evident amongst all year groups; it is no longer Honours year specific – it's widespread. In an educational environment that provides an immersive learning experience for every student, this is a worrying development. In order to test my theory regarding an educational shift, I carried out a student engagement and participation exercise in 2015 that focused on the course commitment of thirty-two second year fine art photography students. The results of which subsequently confirm my hypothesis: 19.4% occupied the Fully Engaged+ (FE+) category, 6.4% occupied the Fully Engaged (FE) category, 3.2% occupied the Engaged+ category (E+), 25.8% occupied the Engaged (E) category, 32.3 % occupied the Partially Engaged (PE) and 12.9 % occupied Non-engaged categories (NE). The categories my observations and subsequent concerns relate to are the Partially Engaged and Non-engaged groups. When combined, both sections add up to more than 45 % of this particular year group. If this approach *is* to be the norm, this ratio is of great concern.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT EXCERSICE – 2014 -15



As fine art specialists, we all know that the education provided within a fine art context is quite specific. It relies heavily on student engagement where, through a variety of academic, technical and critical means, full immersion is actively encouraged, supported and embedded in order for students to experience, understand and attain the many skills required in order for them to *become* fully formed practicing artists. However, a growing number of students today are taking short cuts, and are now cherry-picking their way through an education that was never designed to be approached in this manner. In the long term, the full consequence of this new methodology gives cause for real concern. Not only in relation to the depth and integrity of what is learnt, and what is made, but more importantly, the effect limited engagement will have on their depth and integrity as practicing artists. As with any skilled training the complexity of what has to be learnt cannot be rushed, nor can it be achieved by way of fractional, fragmented or partial engagement - even in a technologically advanced age. Regardless of what decade or millennia we occupy, the evolution of *becoming* an artist *does* take time, and full engagement is

still a key component in this very particular journey. In truth, this is where genuine frustration lies. One cannot convince students that an immersive approach will lead to greater discovery - they have already found a quicker way, one that appears to suit them well, and one that still provides them with a degree at the end of their studies. This is a paradox that is also worth addressing, because what is occurring is institutionally supported, yet, is clearly academically and pedagogically unsound.

DETERMINING A NEW CULTURE OF LEARNING

At what point, can one confidently say that a new culture of learning exists within the context of fine art education? To my knowledge there is not, as yet, a comprehensive study into this specific creative environment that will help confirm, deny or fully answer this question. Of course, as the new millennium has progressed a plethora of texts have been published regarding art school education in, and for, the 21st Century. However, unlike those documents the perspective of this doctoral study is not centered around the multifaceted problems related to art schools absorption into universities, or the changing architecture of art school buildings where available space is based on economics rather than education. It will instead be an in-depth investigation into the appropriateness of today's fine art education, as it appears that current fine art learning and teaching methodologies are quickly becoming irrelevant to a new generation of fine art students. This *is* apparent in student's behavior, and is now evident in how, and why, they are choosing to approach their education in the manner they do.

It is my hope that the following descriptions help articulate certain qualities that, at present, assist in my search for an appropriate definition of learning and teaching methodologies in fine art education today.

WHERE LEARNING OCCURS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT FINE ART EDUCATION

The term *School* implies, and therefore invokes, a visual and theoretical understanding of site as the primary place or location of learning. However, when discussing site within the context of fine art education one has to firstly understand that location is broad, and in real terms is limitless; there are no definitive boundaries - locale is everywhere. For most student's this broader understanding takes time to fully comprehend as it sits outside of their previous educational experiences. However, by encouraging the learning strategies that are outline below, students gain an insight that subsequently becomes a way of viewing and negotiating the world. What is unique about this awareness is that it also pertains directly to them (individually), where particular meaning arises, and infinite possibilities present themselves. When assisted by the following teaching methodologies, this approach helps encourage and enable student's individual arts practices. Which, in theory, reach far beyond the confines of the institution, the lecture theatre, the seminar room, the workshop and the studio.

FINE ART EDUCATION OR WHEN KNOWLEDGE BECOMES FORM

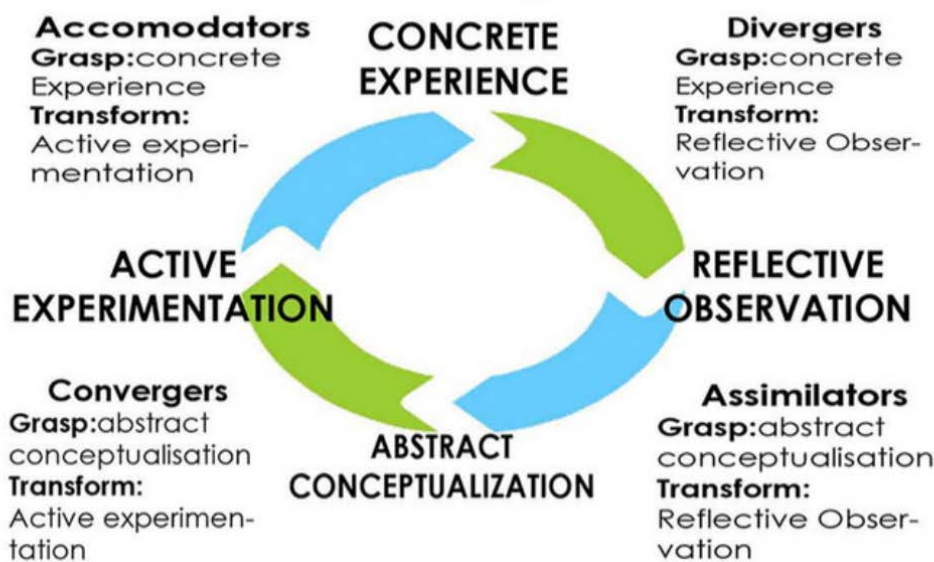
The pursuit to textually defining what is essentially a visual and material manifestation of what

one learns in a creative environment is a particularly difficult task. As words alone do no real justice when trying to explain how knowledge manifests itself, how ideas become forms, how an arts practice is fostered, or indeed, how and when a fine art student emerges as an artist. Moreover, nor do they adequately describe, nor explain, the vast capabilities of the creative mind. However, in an attempt to better articulate the many subtleties involved in developing artists, I will begin by drawing upon a number of learning theories and teaching methodologies that collectively create space for a clearer understanding of what continues to be learnt, and taught, in fine art institutions, schools and departments today.

DEFINING LEARNING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT FINE ART EDUCATION

When attempting to define an appropriate fine art learning philosophy it quickly became apparent that no one singular approach accurately describes the learning processes involved in *becoming* an artist. What therefore follows is a methodology that is a hybrid of a number of meaningful approaches to learning, that help define how one acquires knowledge within the context of fine art education.

Firstly, David A. Kolb's 1984 Experiential Learning theory is an example of the form of learning that occurs within a fine art educational context as it places an emphasis on our internal cognitive processing abilities in relation to learning, and is based upon four key learning stages that are defined as follows: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation. It is extremely important to highlight the significance of Experiential Learning in an art school environment as it is essential, not only to the development of ideas and the production of work, but it is also a fundamental component in the evolution of the individual arts practitioner as a *whole*.



Bearing in mind the notion of the *whole*, combined with the previously discussed *becoming*,

certain parallels can be drawn from Holistic education. However, for most fine art students today the emphasis that holistic practitioners place upon the spiritual and the meditative sits slightly outside of what is generally experienced within the context of a fine art education, and therefore feels less appropriate when attempting to find a clearer definition of how fine art students learn to *become* artists. Nevertheless, in the search for finding a suitable learning model that sits comfortably alongside Experiential Learning, the educational philosophy that lies at the heart of the Whole Language movement appears to be far more applicable. This is primarily due to how knowledge manifests itself through an extended and interconnected meaning-making system. In fine art education, this is established through the broad spectrum of what students academically negotiate via lectures, seminars, tutorials, critiques, technical instruction, and critical and theoretical inquiry. Interestingly, it will come as no surprise that the Whole Language movement has its roots firmly embedded within the Steiner school of thought. Furthermore, when this philosophy is combined with Kolb's Experiential Learning methodology, a clearer definition of how learning occurs within the context of fine art education presents itself.

DEFINING TEACHING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT FINE ART EDUCATION

'*Drawing out and leading forth*' is the title of an essay written by Julie Ault and Martin Beck, and this titular phrase best describes a teaching philosophy that is carried out primarily in studio, and is demonstrated through one-to-one tutorials, group tutorials and class critiques. Where the individual students pre-existing knowledge and experiences are mined in order for staff to better support their learning. By actively listening, staff articulate their practice based knowledge and experience back to the student in order to help locate appropriate subject matter. Students are subsequently encouraged to seek further information via appropriate research, and making activities, in order for them to better communicate their own interests, their own ideas and their own concerns. This process is repeated in a variety of situations. What is therefore discovered, via this learning and teaching methodology, slowly becomes embedded in the work students make. Within the context of Higher Education this reciprocal form of individuated teaching is therefore quite unique, and is essentially a key component in the process of students *becoming* artists.

SUMMING UP BEFORE MOVING ON

The information outlined in the above section is a learning and teaching methodology that has its origins in the Basic Design Movement, which was developed by Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton during the mid 50's and early 60's. However, this 20th Century learning and teaching method is now almost sixty years old, and what is becoming increasingly apparent, via student-determined approaches to learning, is that it's becoming outmoded and, more importantly, is unsuitable for a digitally conversant generation. Student behavior, internal quality enhancement questionnaires, external national student surveys, league tables, and recent art student demonstrations are all testament to this statement. When combined, these platforms and assessment mechanisms clearly point to greater educational ownership where students have a voice, and where institutions are held accountable. For a variety of reasons, students today *do* have more power, and it is this strength that I'd like to return to as I hope this energy will provide answers to the many questions that lie at the heart of this paper.

FROM THE PERIFERY TO THE CENTRE

Today there is great emphasis placed upon the democratic process involved in educational transformation. However, through further reading, it quickly became apparent that each and every text regarding art school education in, and for, the 21st Century all had one common denominator. That being, art students were very much on the periphery when it came to decisions made in relation to their education. From my perspective, I firmly believe students are very much at the center of this debate, and to marginalise them runs contrary to current thinking in relation to student advocacy, and the impact their contributions have on educational change. It is therefore my belief that fine art students *must* be include students in the process of new knowledge production.

STUDNETS AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS, CO-RESEARCHERS AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

Since the turn of the new millennium it has been proven, via a variety of research projects, that the best way to understand what, and how, students learn is to include them in the discourse of learning. Where their voices and their experiences are key components in the continual improvement of their own education. What has also become evident, via the results of empirical studies, is an acknowledgement that active engagement empowers students, and better-educated individuals emerge through the process of inclusion.

By repositioning fine art students, and embedding their voices, experiences and opinions into the discourse of learning, it is my hope that what is discovered through this form of democracy will, firstly, provide a real opportunity for fine art educators to fully understand the educational wants and desires of a new generation of fine art students. And secondly, for institutions to use this valuable information to begin to implement changes that will assist in the development of a suitable and sustainable fine art pedagogy for the future.

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