

Conference Presentation

Criticality Performed: Performative Learning Through Agonistic Interventions

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This is a paper presented at the Provocative Pedagogies: Performative Teaching and Learning in the Arts conference.

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Recommended citation:

Cooke, A. and Jones, P. (2017), "Criticality Performed: Performative Learning Through Agonistic Interventions", *Provocative Pedagogies: Performative Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, 14 October 2017, University of Lincoln.

<http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/campuslife/whatson/eventsconferences/provocative-pedagogies.html>

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Criticality Performed: Performative Learning Through Agonistic Interventions

In this paper, we develop a proposition where the performative aspects of teaching and learning in an art school context operate tactically. Through applying a reading of the political theories put forward by Chantal Mouffe we explore the role of democracy within the art school and how in making visible conflicting opinions, politics and philosophies allow for a space to open up by which the construction of new subject positions can be proposed.

How do students respond to antagonisms, often bubbling under the surface, both in their specialisms and the art school? How does this manifest itself in their attitudes and work? How do these antagonisms effect the teaching staff's attitudes about what they do? Chantal Mouffe defines public space as that in which many antagonisms exist, where conflicting points of view are expressed and challenged (Mouffe, 2013, p. 92). If we allow ourselves to project this concept of agonistic public space into the realm of art schools and art education, we would therefore allow for and encourage many conflicting views of teaching and learning, allowing a plurality of belief systems to exist but each consenting to the fact that there is no way to reach an absolute consensus. We could imagine that the students, and in some cases teaching staff, operating within the cracks between these competing hegemonies of what constitutes pedagogy in art.

Frustration, confusion and conflict arise from what can appear to be restrictive modules and the cryptic learning outcomes outline within them. Often the case is that students feel as if they are receiving a one size fits all instruction. This has both a negative and positive effect. In some cases, it can act as something to kick against leading the more autonomous student toward divergent and deviant outcomes. However, to a small number of students the anxieties and conflicts entrenched in the curriculum, module aims, objectives and learning outcomes are obstacles and contradictory to their own learning agenda.

Much has been written about the performative aspect of the 'hidden curriculum', through which students seek fault lines within programmes in order to discover more personalised and deeper learning opportunities. An example of which comes from Annette Krauss' 2007-2014 study investigating unintended or unrecognised forms of knowledge obtainment as part of the learning process and everyday life within schools.

Three times a year the art school puts on an event outside of the constraints of the module system. Currently known as DOT DOT DASH, it permits the student body to take over the art school for short durations of time, creating alternative performative pedagogical experiences. It is a cross school activity bringing together students from design, fine art, performance and applied arts disciplines. Students decide the agenda, create posters, organise performances, exhibition spaces, workshops and seminars. During the event, the student body operate freely, creating a network of resistance against the limitations of module led activity. DOT DOT DASH acts as a tactic of momentary emancipation where the dominant ideologies of curriculum are challenged. This event acts as an example of liberal democracy, giving space for dissent and where alternative examples of learning and teaching through art can be vocalised and performed by the students. Although conscious of their own individual ideologies the role of the staff is to encourage and become part of the conflicts and counter-hegemonic dialogues raised by the student body. Notably, the event

acts as a place of learning for academics also.

When asked what the most significant part of the DOT DOT DASH events are, the students response that it is the people who turn up and get involved. It is the student body themselves, who organise and take part in the event whom are seen as the network by which ideas, skills, problems are shared and re-configured. This is the point at which the general silo approach to teaching, that is, each discipline has a place holder often intensely protected by the teaching staff, is broken down. During DOT DOT DASH we have illustrators, graphic designers, makers, fine art students, performance art student, and journalism students working together through a performative mode of engagement. Of course, conflicts are still present, however, they are accepted as part and parcel of the situation. DOT DOT DASH acts as a release valve for both students and teaching staff. Often, the students are able to achieve real cross school collaborations, unlike the teaching staff, who because of their obligations to module and curriculum restrictions, administration loads and research output pressures routinely put on hold indefinitely such opportunities.

This reading of DOT DOT DASH leads to a consideration of performative teaching and learning situated within what De Certeau defines as the strategic and the tactical. For De Certeau, a strategy belongs to those in a position of power. Tactics, on the other hand, operate through taking advantage of temporary weak points in that power system. Tactics make use of the cracks and ruptures that briefly appear at the fringes of power. Tactics make use of surprise and luck in order to gain advantage. They are interventionist, ubiquitous and about infiltrating and traversing the rigidity of the strategic.

The relationship between antagonisms and art practice are discussed by Pablo Helguera in his 2011 book *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Helguera understands that antagonism and criticality are important parts of socially engaged art, in fact all art pursuing the advancement of a dialogue on a specific issue demonstrate and invite a certain amount of opposition (Helguera, 2011, p. 59). For Helguera, a confrontational approach in art practice does not automatically mean that an answer is implicit. Rather, its attraction is in its ability to open a space of questioning (Helguera, 2011, p. 59).

Helguera notes that many social engaged art practices appropriate strategies from performance art (Helguera, 2011, p. 68). Even though, as he points out, many socially engaged art are politically driven, some of this practice is directed towards simply engaging audiences in experiences which they are unfamiliar (Helguera, 2011, p. 68).

Through applying an agonistic model which places active difference at the centre of art school education, we permit the political to be visible, and in turn remove the ability for one political position to dominate. This levelling out thus assists in the creation of new positions, where difference is seen as constructive rather than a problem needing to be resolved through some form of consensus, which if we agree with Mouffe, is impossible.