

# Learning Creative Practice by Starting from Difference

Chi Roberts, Jos Boys  
London Metropolitan University

**ABSTRACT** This paper describes the process and outcome of a two-year Arts Council funded collaboration between the Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design Foundation course and the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, and another year of research funds from The Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design, that centred on developing an agenda for creative practice from diversity.

The process of research has demonstrated positive effects for students of valuing what they already bring to their studies; enabling difference to be a reference point for their own creative practices and supporting both discovery about, and connections to, the wider world.

We began with exploring some of the opportunities that starting from difference offers as a creative force. The aim was to start from disability (and other identities) as often invisible, marginalised or ignored aspects of human difference, as a way of opening up the creative potential that valuing our multiple and diverse kinds of embodiment can bring.

Evaluation through the three years highlighted that both Foundation students and tutors felt it was important to: 1. Build on what diversity brings to learning and the teaching as a central element of the culture of a school; 2. Acknowledge the value of diversity and difference; and 3. Be aware of its potential for, indeed it's essential relationship to, creative practices.

Feedback from students, and tutors, suggested that, while there was a shared underlying commitment to diversity and creativity, it could be better articulated and implemented through projects, pedagogic strategies and an embedding in the whole curriculum; and that these are underpinned by reflection and debate.

The outcome of a three-point agenda is the starting point for further reflection on learning and teaching practices, proposals for possible future steps for a pedagogy of diversity and creative practices and research directions at Foundation level more generally. (301)

**KEYWORDS** pedagogy, diversity, difference, disability, collaboration, curriculum, creative practice.

## Introduction

A two-year Arts Council funded collaboration between the Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design Foundation Course and the DisOrdinary Architecture Project,<sup>1</sup> and another year of research funds from the Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design,<sup>2</sup> has centred on developing an agenda for creative practice from diversity.

The intention was to establish a research element within the course for students and tutors - to raise students' awareness of research aspects of the pedagogy informing the course learning and teaching, and to encourage tutors to investigate pedagogy to inform and develop their teaching practice.

The starting point of collaboration in 2016-17 took aspects of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project (previously run with undergraduate and postgraduate students in other universities) and adapted them to projects for students on the Foundation Course at the Cass. One outcome of this relationship is its co-director Dr Jos Boys' appointment as the Cass visiting professor of diversity and creative practice, based with the Foundation Course, in 2018-19.

Other starting points such as: 1. The level of the course, i.e. pre-degree/Level 3; 2. The type of course, i.e. the Foundation Course in relation to further study ahead in creative subjects; 3. Issues around diversity in relation both to social justice and to creative practice, have led to changes to the curriculum (validation 2017-18); to recruitment information and progression processes; and to learning and teaching practices and project content.

The collaboration started with two main aims:

To investigate how student engagement with diverse forms of embodiment can underpin and then enhance the learning of creative practice from the very beginning of academic study through:

- taking notice of your own and other ways of being in the world;
- opening up difference as a process of self- and creative development;

- starting from difference and non-normative as a creative generator.

To pilot studio-based projects that enhance creativity (in relation to the development of a creative practice) through engaging with diversity in this way by:

- collaborating with disabled artists to develop new kinds of teaching and learning projects, and modes of delivery;
- evaluating student, artist and tutor perceptions and experiences;
- learning lessons for the next steps.

In each year we began by exploring some of the opportunities that 'starting from difference' offers as a creative force; the disabled artists from the DisOrdinary Architecture Project co-designed activities with the Foundation course tutors. In each case, the aim was to start from disability (and other identities) as often invisible, marginalised or ignored aspects of human difference, as a way of opening up the creative potential that valuing our multiple and diverse kinds of embodiment can bring.

Firstly, we advocated the students' 'distinctive voice' as in Giroux's assertion that:

*"You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say that these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it but we can't deny it."*<sup>3</sup>

And we sought to develop students' individual creativity using Friere's dialogical method and its relationship to critical thinking. The 'banking concept' of education; of knowledge 'deposited' in one (the student) from the other (the tutor) is not conducive to "develop[ing] the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world . . . rather than simply adapt to the world as it is." that we expect from creative individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey's encouragement is:

*“ . . . for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs and past experiences of those under instruction . . . to allow the suggestion made to develop into a plan and project by means of the further suggestions contributed and organised into a whole by the **members of the group**. The plan, in other words, is a cooperative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not the mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. The essential point is that the purpose grow and take shape through the process of social intelligence.”<sup>5</sup>*

We (the students, tutors and artists) were working together on ‘a plan and project’ using relationships between dialogical exchange and critical thinking, in the setting of the studio, to engage in the ‘learning by doing’ of the reflective practicum<sup>6</sup> as a way to “bridge the worlds of university and practice”<sup>7</sup>

### **Project and studio methods 1**

Each activity started with a ‘brief Brief’, as it came to be called, as it was important that the starting point was immediately graspable and provocative - not a dense ‘narration’<sup>8</sup> or long set of instructions using esoteric language that can be the habit at the start of projects. The student's responses were then both aided and bounded (prescription and proscription) by coaching from the tutors/artists who referred to ‘a basic set’ of means and outcomes.

For example, a group discussion with individuals (artist/tutor/student) using Mind Maps<sup>9</sup> to record relations between themselves and their experience(s); followed by dialogue between the student and the artist-as-tutor, and the student and tutor-as-creative-practitioner on translating chosen aspects in the Mind Maps through creative processes towards an outcome.

*“ . . . bringing to the classroom pedagogical structures that affirm their*

*[students'] presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics. This pedagogical strategy is rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience”<sup>10</sup>*

The initial project in 2016-17 with the sound artist Joseph Young<sup>11</sup> (hearing impairment) was with a small number of students in the ‘art, media and design’ group’ and a course tutor, and taught over 2 days/3-weeks. The students had chosen the ‘art project’ from a menu of projects that would inform their decision of which BA to progress to the following year,

Using binaural mic recordings and 2D representations of sound/noise in their process the students’ final presentation was both aural and visual interpretations of their Soundscape. The comments at the ‘crit’ were addressed in the familiar *viewing* of pinned-up composed 2D work and in the less familiar *listening* to sound compositions.

The unfamiliarity of aspects of the crit prompted novel exchanges, interpretations and ‘view’ points but also allowed for previous experiences and different perspectives to be brought into the discussions. For many students, perceiving sound as ‘a material’ from which to make compositions ‘in time’ seemed new to them compared to composing drawings on paper. Tutors/artists drew out and validated the student experience from eg. listening to music (that most of them did) and making music (that some of them did) to highlight aspects of music/sound composition (none in this group did this) that is shared across a wide range of art forms that they may call on. This encouraged a student to take compositional aspects from the ‘music he loved’ to his aural piece and to the 2D work.<sup>12</sup>

This approach was developed the following year (2017-18) into 2 different projects and with increased numbers of students.

### **Project and studio methods 2**

The ‘architecture and interior design group’ used Soundmarks as one of several ‘Mapping’ tools over a 2 days/5-week project, with Joseph Young and 3 studio tutors

collaborating. Although students are encouraged to use all their senses in gathering aspects of the site and experience their - in relation to (an emerging) narrative, to explore and develop a 2D representation of this - responses can be tentative and/or conventional.

From the developing work it seemed that the direct experience of recording through binaural mics nudged students towards a more subjective relation with the site – much like takings rubbings from a location instead of attempting to capture texture in drawings with, as yet, limited drawing skills.

The Soundscapes allowed for an immersion in the site; a more subjective experience and, for some, a personal/individual experience that they felt they could, and were encouraged to, bring to the Mapping.

Some students simply mapped what they *heard* rather than what they *saw* and this was a significant step for them. Others felt confident to explore the potential of their other senses. There were also examples of students becoming aware that different people (from the example of themselves) engage with place and space differently, and were able to consider what this may mean for their project.

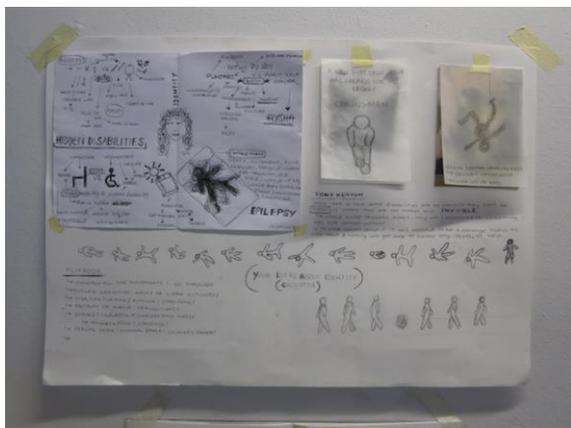


Fig 1 Project process for Dis/Un/En/Able. (Disordinary Project)

The 'art project' ran once more; this time with artists Tony Heaton<sup>13</sup> (mobility impairment) and Zoe Partington<sup>14</sup> (sight impairment), in collaboration with 1 studio tutor in a project entitled Dis/Un/En/Able. Artists/tutor used the Social Model of Disability<sup>15</sup> as an example of thinking differently; audio-transcription as a 'mode of seeing'<sup>16</sup> and again from the 'brief Brief' - the aim for the students: "within the project time-frame to devise and produce an

intervention . . . from creative practices to effect a change".

The response from the students to this project was very positive (see below) from the start and in their feedback at the end. There was though one student who surpassed any expectations we, or they, may have had and stands as an example of what is possible.

The student describes themselves as having a non-visible disability that they did not want disclosed; it was not included in the Mind Map session or related discussion. Following a presentation from one of the artist's and tutorial discussion between student, artist and tutor the student made the decision to bring the disability into the project. The student referred to the artist's presentation of their experience as empowering and comfortable with making work from their own experiences.

The idea's and the practical/material issues were developed in studio and the student's work moved into a medium and form of presentation they had not previously considered part of their creative practice. The final piece – a short animation film on the experience of an epileptic episode – was well-received at the crit. The student was invited to show the film at a one-day Disordinary Spaces conference alongside other artist's work; their first public show.<sup>17</sup>



Fig 2 Animation film presented alongside conference proceedings (Disordinary Project)

### Project and studio methods 3

In 2018-19 the collaboration is with 2 artists, 2 tutors and the Foundation course's 2nd cohort (known as TERM 2) of approx. 40 in number made up of AMD and AID students. In this iteration the artists, Zoe Partington and Joseph Young, are collaborating as researchers

working within a different module - gathering, evaluating and feeding back to tutors - on the application of lessons learned in previous years and how this affects, say, the 3 starting points, and identifying any other effects. This iteration has yet to be fully evaluated and reflected on in relation to the previous projects.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION - WHAT WE LEARNED . . .**

The evaluation following the first 2 iterations (from anonymous written feedback and focus group/ individual interviews) <sup>18</sup> highlighted that both Foundation students and tutors felt it was important to build on what diversity brings to learning and teaching as a central element of the culture of a school (pedagogy); acknowledge the value of diversity and difference (social justice); and be aware of its potential for, indeed it's essential relationship to, creative practices (teaching creativity).

*Tony brought out something in all of us about identity, something different – I moved well-beyond my expectations. He brought out something that I was not expecting. He helped us so much - student*

*Having Tony working with us literally modelled the pros and cons around choosing to claim his identity as a disabled artist (...) rather than having lectures on diversity, or sitting in meetings talking about BME stats, here he was showing how diversity is a creative opportunity – tutor*



Fig 3. Artist/tutor and student discussion of work in progress (Disordinary Project)

*The process of research has demonstrated positive effects for students of valuing what they already bring to their studies; enabling difference to be a reference point for their own creative practices and supporting both*

*discovery of, and connections to, the wider world - tutor*

*I liked the way Tony included discussions of power, who controls what gets said and how it gets said - student*

*It is incredibly important to think about different ways of being in the world - this is vital to people's work (...) identity; difference; such a big thing to do and discuss about; such a big issue; so important in the current day - student*

However, it was also felt that this was not much underpinned by reflection and debate; not made transparent and explicit in pedagogic strategies and projects and not developed as an embedded element across the whole curriculum. Feedback from students suggested that while there was a shared underlying commitment to diversity and creativity this was very unevenly articulated or implemented in their learning experiences.

*This 'opened my door;' why doesn't this happen elsewhere? - student*

*This would've been good for all foundation students - student*

*Issues of diversity increasingly have a voice and are spoken about more widely - student*

*We need more conversations about these broader things – and beyond disability to cover the range and fluidities of identities - student*

*Would also be good to explore through the work of relevant non-normative artists - student*

*Accessibility issues in this building are just terrible (...) we should all take responsibility for this not just make it disabled people's problem - student*

And there was also common ground for students, artists and tutors expressed as:

**Valuing difference** – the importance of starting from what each student brings to their learning.

**Taking notice** – understanding the centrality to learning of close investigation using all the senses and connecting students at a detailed level to the world around them.

**Locating creativity** – that creative practices grow out of the development of both valuing difference and taking notice of what these differences can offer in interpreting and responding to given situations.

*It's important to value what they (the students) are already. With any of the things we do as staff we try to respond and guide the student. They are the catalyst, and we try to find a way through into one final project that is very much 'theirs'*  
*Students can find their own awareness and space and their own voice. So this is very personal. Even though the projects are similar year to year the outcomes are different because they come from students' responses - **tutor***

*The cohort is very diverse (...) the way the studio works, the community of learners is already going in that direction (of creativity in diversity). This is a strength. Learning is not about becoming someone else but about finding who you are and using that productively in your work/creative practice - **tutor***

This reflects hook's experience that

*All students not just those from marginalised groups seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them . . . Students may be well-versed in a particular subject and yet be more inclined to speak confidently if that subject relates to their experience. . .*

*"professors must learn to respect the way students feel about their experiences as well as their need to speak about them in class room settings" and to develop a critical pedagogy where "the notion of experience has to be situated within a theory of learning" <sup>19</sup>*

## Conclusion

In terms of the first of our **2 main aims** - investigate how student engagement with diverse forms of embodiment can underpin and then enhance the learning of creative practice from the very beginning of academic study - there was positive feedback from the students and examples of developing creative practice of high quality, AND there were 3 areas where many students wanted more, ie.

- explicit engagement with identity and difference;
- enabling personal and creative discoveries through an attentiveness to detail, and by using unexpected and emergent analytical methods;
- more activities that foreground these issues and embed these throughout their studies from the beginning.

In terms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> aim – the piloted and developed studio-based projects have evidenced an enhancement of creativity through engaging with diversity in several effective ways that we will build on through further practice and research - the outcome, of a three-point agenda, is the starting point for further reflection on learning and teaching practices, proposals for possible future steps for a pedagogy of diversity and creative practices and research directions at Foundation level more generally.

## Agenda

1. Build on what diversity brings to learning and the teaching as a central element of the culture of a school;
2. Acknowledge the value of diversity and difference;
3. Be aware of its potential for, indeed it's essential relationship to, creative practices.

But we feel there has also been '**collateral learning**' as through this process we have been:

**Challenging the norm** - giving consideration to *Difference* as not just about access to a wider diversity of tutor (by bringing in 'disabled artists') but by making a difference to what was 'sayable' in the tutorial context; enabling students, specifically in the AMD group, to discuss disability and impairment (as well as marginalised identities) in an open engaged and positive way; enabling students to think about their own creativity practices

within the wider context of social and material justice and ethics.<sup>20</sup>

practice at the Foundation level more widely, and embedded more deeply.

**Finding productive ways** – to ask questions about what kinds of bodies come to count and be valued (in studio practice, in contextual studies, in other aspects of the curriculum) and what/who gets ignored or downplayed; to provide and use open-ended spaces for students (and tutors) to feel safe enough to take personal risks, ie exposing aspects of themselves and learning to pay attention to the multiplicity of others in order to develop creatively and critically.<sup>21</sup>

**Making space and time** – to forge connections across educational and real-world experiences and contexts, as an integrated and co-designed process; to co-explore how starting from difference can enhance students' learning and creativity; to go beyond the additive model of adapting existing curricula, where feasible, towards more explicit engagement with disability and diversity issues in teaching and learning activities.<sup>22</sup>

In this year, following the final iteration where we are developing this practice and research activity in modules where AID and AMD groups are taught together, we will be seeking to embed forms across the Foundation programme through building-in, and evaluating, relevant support structures for students and tutors in the curriculum.

Thus, building on the past 3 years our future research will consider:

- Resource effective ways to introduce students to diversity awareness and engagement in support of the development of their creative practice;
- opportunities for Foundation tutors to design and implement learning activities that make diversity and creative practices more explicitly discussed and reflected on;
- learning outcomes that better reflect the importance of diversity and creative practices in the curriculum of the Foundation course;
- critically reflecting on outcomes, and propose possible future steps, for a pedagogy of diversity and creative

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