

RuPedagogy: Self-Knowledge, Self-Worth and Education for Social Justice

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Introduction

"I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we do not know." bell hooks (2009: 10)

Who are we?

James Hunting and Sam Wingate are Senior Lecturers primarily within the BA Textiles and BA Fashion Textiles courses, but also across the suite of degree programmes delivered at the School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University.

We chose to initially present our thoughts and findings in the form of an essay using memes - open access images that can be captioned and used to convey thinking quickly yet provocatively. For the purpose of publishing, however, we have created original drawings (Sam) and embroideries (James) to illustrate the sections - please enjoy.

Our lived experiences

"Queer people don't grow up as ourselves, we grow up playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimise humiliation and prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us and which parts we've created to protect us."
(Alexander Leon (2020) - activist educator and LGBTQ+ rights advocate)

Our lived experiences inform both our teaching and our practices, and we want to afford the same rights to our students, to make sure that they give the appropriate value to the experiences they bring to the classroom. We both identify as gay men with queer practices (in art and in teaching). We grew up with the sense of otherness and not necessarily belonging within the community we were in, eventually realising our strengths, creating our own support structures and finding our communities or tribes.

Often academic pedagogy forgets the real lived experiences which underpin ideas and bury them deep beneath heavy language and constructs which both alienate and ghettoise. Through respecting the lived experience of everyone in the room, tutors and students alike, we can learn from our students. Acknowledging that we too can learn, from them, can build up confidence and leadership within the student cohort. Involving students in co-creating the educational experience does not 'play to the audience' but can highlight omissions and areas of neglect which can, consciously or unconsciously, create barriers to participation.

As Axel Honneth (2012) proposes: "the 'I' is dependent on forms of social recognition embodied in groups, since neither self-respect nor self-esteem can be maintained without the supportive experience of practising shared values in the group".

Running through the evidenced learning experience of our students is a thread of self-doubt, the 'inner saboteur' as identified by RuPaul (see below) - or the unrecognised cultural capital as identified by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Recognition and acknowledgement of our individuals and the value they bring with them can begin the journey to knowing one's creative identity.

Why Ru and what is "RuPedagogy"?

RuPaul Charles (born 1960) is arguably the foremost American drag queen. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a huge international TV hit and a firm favourite with many of our undergrad students. It's an amalgamation of talent formats (*America's Next Top Model* meets *Project Runway* - an American

reality television series) and it has done a massive amount to lift drag queens from provincial bars onto an international stage. However, the show is not without flaws; the 'individual' or 'other' in representation of drag performance is actually being disappeared in favour of the production's ideal of the 'perfect queen'. This is the diametric opposite of our own pedagogies (James and Sam) and is more redolent of the teacher-centred approach where students (or contestants) must learn from those who know better (in this instance, RuPaul) in order to fit the mould and perpetuate the leader's ideas.



"RuPedagogy" actually came about from a Gayer place of thinking. As an early (initially untrained) teacher Sam would often sit in a tutorial and think: 'What would Ru do?'. This idea was endorsed by James, who thought this could either be really clever pedagogy or something personal to us. However, through further discussion on the topic, we found common ground *regarding RuPaul's Drag Race*, FX TV Channel's *Pose* (a drama series looking at the ballroom scene in New York), and then the deeper roots in the American Ballroom scene of the 1980s and 90s, along with our own lived experiences - so we wove them into a pedagogical event. This also corresponded with James gaining Senior Fellow status with *Advance HE* (a UK-based sector organisation for enhancing Higher Education) - a recognition of the impact of pedagogic thinking on the teaching team, and the student experience - and Sam achieving distinction grades in his modules in the *MA in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* course at London Met.

Referencing our own pedagogical ideals through popular culture has also helped connect our students with "teachy-thinky". Within the Textiles courses, and indeed as evidenced by the response during our presentation about "RuPedagogy" at the London Met annual Teaching and Learning Conference 2021, *Drag Race* seems to be a common ground for staff and students alike, and discussing pedagogy and RuPaul with students presents theories in a less academic language, enables a recognition of shared understanding, and thus welcomes the students as active members of a pedagogic journey.

Our RuPedagogy approach

1. Identity

Why start with identity? Creative developments and outcomes draw on the makers' lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs, their identities in fact - an acknowledgement of identity therefore underpins engagement with the learning and teaching environment and therefore is the starting point of our pedagogy.



2. Diversity

If, as we do, we work with individual identities in a group, we cannot be unaware of the fact there is no one model of a student, there is no one way to do anything, and individuals face non-belonging and otherness at many different points in their journeys, as they encounter tables and gatekeepers.



Our students are very aware of the invisible yet real **tables** that exist which extend invitations to those they wish to 'invite' to join them. The 'table' of television entertainment did not have room for Drag in the mainstream, so RuPaul made a new one.

We encourage our students to look at the tables, if they do not feel invited then we encourage them to look at differing strategies, either to insist on joining the same table, or build their own, or look for alternative tables, often found outside the normative ones. We encourage the students to not measure themselves within structures and traditions that have been formed by those who want

to keep the 'others' out- 'create your own measure of success and recognition'. The canons of what is 'right' and 'good' and 'tasteful' and so accepted, are created to maintain the status quo: any acceptance will be on the terms of the gatekeepers. Ignore them, do not ask for a place - create your own. Once you have a table to sit at, other tables want to be in the room with you.

Comparisons can be drawn between 'The Table' and 'The University' or more importantly 'university assessment and success measures', so we focus on building the confidence of students to see beyond the gaze of others to find their tribes of recognition.

We are a diverse teaching team in the Textiles department, and we have a diverse community of learners - we are a 'House'. 'Houses' within the Ballroom scene have existed since the 19th Century as self-forming networks or 'families' of support and belonging, made up of disenfranchised or rejected members or 'children' of the LGBTQ+ community. Houses have a Mother or Father, a figure to which RuPaul is often referred as "Mother Ru". Houses, unlike many families, celebrate difference, dissent and the individuals within their group.

In discussion about the FX series *Pose* and the landmark documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) about the Harlem drag-ball scene of the 1980s, we quickly saw parallels of this within our student cohorts. If we substitute the idea of exclusion due to sexuality with the forms of exclusion that comes through not feeling welcome, not having support or understanding due to educational choices, or not feeling like you belong, the importance of a community of learners and support becomes evident.

Drawing on the Ballroom tradition, the teaching team in Textiles refers to itself as the "House of Nook and Cranny". We strive to celebrate the differences between each of us as a team and each of our students. There is a lot of acknowledgment of recognition and celebration of difference within our teaching methods and approach.

3. The House of Nook and Cranny

"Inclusion" is a problematic word for many people growing up outside the normative structures and values, neither Sam nor James wish to be "included"; this represents an erasure of individuality and also has a 'tolerant and accepting', almost paternalistic, approach to difference: 'WE accept you because WE can and WE decide to do so (on OUR terms)'.

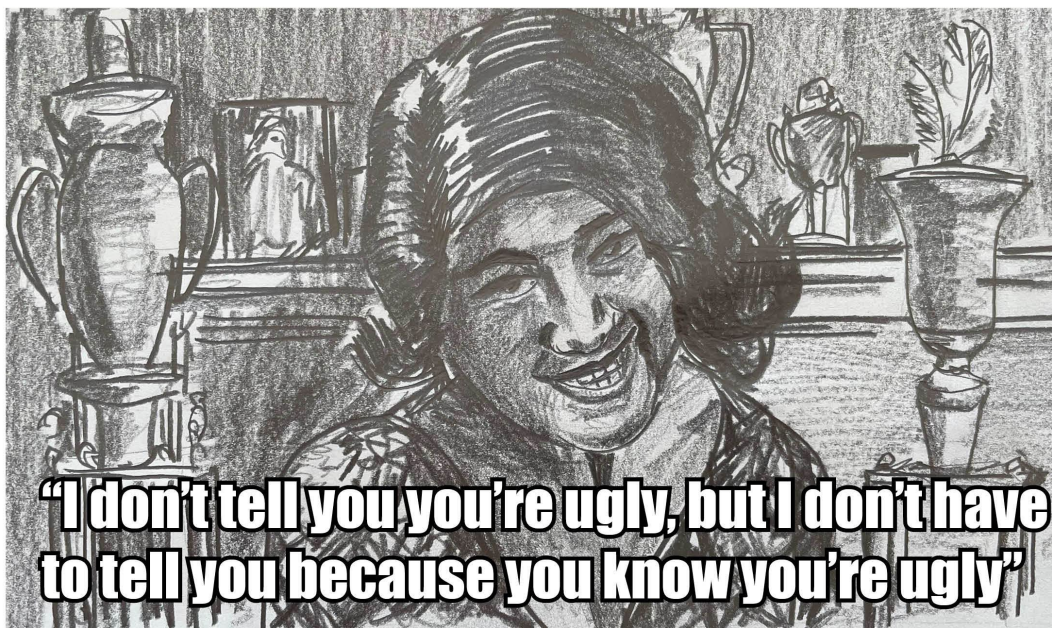
Academia and policymakers focus on the "inclusion" of others, but in our discussions about our experiences it is not a term **we** use. We feel it creates smooth and homogenized communities but does not really allow for the uncomfortable or challenging-the messy realities of **actual** lives.



One could now reproach "RuPaul's Drag Race" for being "inclusive", as being in the process of erasing the drag queens who do not fit into the accepted formats.

In our House, we use "Shade" as a path to self-awareness and reflection.

"Shade" is recognised verbal and non-verbal form of communication within the LGBT community - the raised eyebrow, the glance and the well-placed word 'really?' or 'are you sure?' - and this has often been commented upon by students as a teaching strategy employed by the Textiles team. We can attest that by Level 6 students are able to self-deliver "Shade" and know what needs to be done.



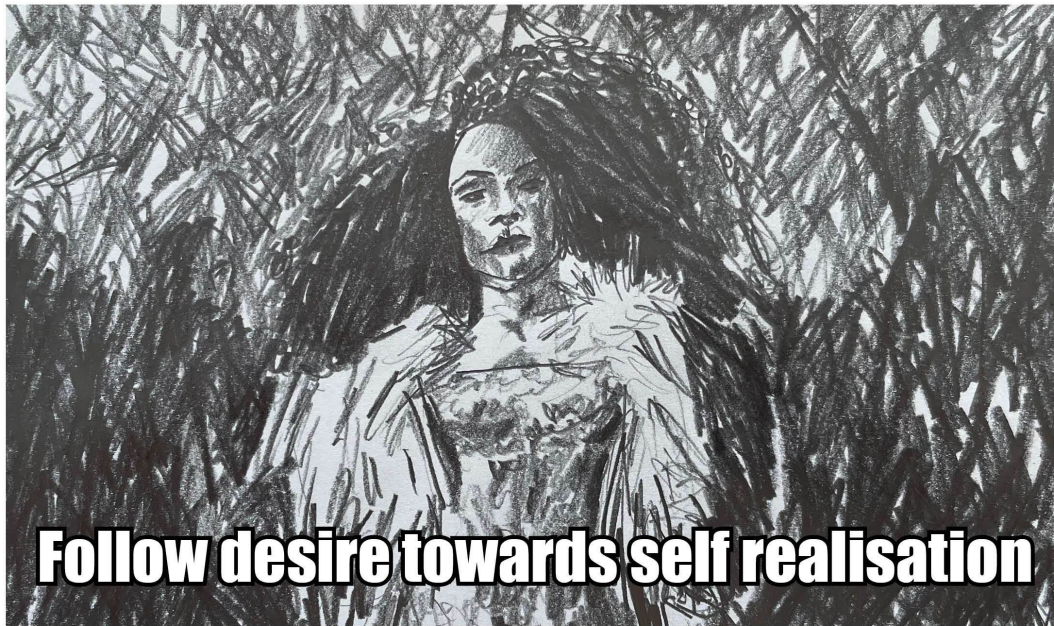
And that's shade.

Addressing the forward destinations of our graduates, we once again consider 'What does Ru Paul do?' Houses and *Drag Race* work within the constructs of "generations" - passing down skills and traits.

Successful contestants in *Drag Race* are either bought in as coaches or are referred to in sketches and memes in subsequent series. Giving this platform not only supports the person in the spotlight, but it is also aspirational to current contestants.

As a parallel, interestingly enough James, growing up as a member of the gay community pre-AIDS, experienced the 'learning from the ones that went before'. Gay pubs were spaces where all ages, experiences and sub-groups gathered and shared, with newer members acquiring 'understanding' from the elders.

So, within our course we draw upon our graduates to inspire, motivate and present a high bar for our students to look towards, as they develop their future goals and move towards self-realisation.



In light of all this, we would like to make a call for a mentoring scheme that takes our graduates who want to enter university teaching and creates an experience where they can develop their craft by working alongside those who are in post, sharing ideas and, additionally, creating an MA course which blends creative practice and teaching pedagogy, thus allowing teaching practice to develop within the experience of delivery.

Conclusion

We had intended to provide a specific case study reflecting the impact of our approach; however, as it is interwoven throughout the academic year and all student projects, it is difficult if not impossible to choose one project which demonstrates our holistic approach.

Instead, as an indication of the inspiration, diversity and confidence we foster, we provide a list showing the range of projects undertaken by the Level 5 and 6 students in 2022 for their final major projects, which are self-led and self-determined:

- a digital print collection of contemporary textiles based upon the theme of tenacity and perseverance;
- a digital video drawn in response to music produced by a student with visual impairment celebrating faith;
- a collection of hand-drawn print designs bringing a 'William Morris approach' to pattern into the 21st Century;
- a collection of highly coloured, sustainable woven waterproof fabric;
- a collection of woven samples based around the repeat gestures of the woven act;
- a knitwear collection based upon aspects of 'beefcake' and 'masculinity';
- a knitwear collection looking at body issues and appearance within the trans community;
- a manifesto or 'call to action' produced by a student heavily involved in, but disenchanted by the greenwashing of, fashion textile companies;
- a knitwear collection aimed at celebrating the othered physicality of the 'real world';

- a knitwear collection looking at the promoted 'look' and 'styles' of the early 2000's produced by an 'outsider';
- a crochet collection based on issues of wellbeing and disability.

Feedback from our students indicates that our pedagogical approach builds a recognised environment of non-judgemental experimentation, where each individual can thrive in an environment of respect and mutual learning. This was acknowledged by our External Examiner (in their 2021 report), who noted, quoting a student, that the constant individual support was described by our students as "the scaffold to which we all clung and built around during this year. Nobody was ever at risk of falling off or falling through."

References

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Pose: TV series 2018-2021 - see IMDb website: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7562112/>

RuPaul's Drag Race – see website: https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race

Biographical note

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