Experimentation & Connection as Enablers of Self-Learning

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Action Research Project

Project environment

- At the start of this academic year, I unexpectedly lost my teaching hours on CCW Foundation due to the merging of CSM and CCW Foundation and the cutting of all staff outside of the "entitlement" time frames.

- I have been running short courses with UAL and at City Academy but mostly, I have been teaching drawing and painting at Sunny Art Centre in a one-to-one capacity, helping students to build portfolios for BA applications.

- At Sunny Arts, the teaching model is traditional and instructive. The teaching model I prefer and have been part of at CCW is an *active learning* model. Encountering a more traditional teaching environment at Sunny Arts has been an interesting and challenging experience and has helped me to further define my teaching practice.

My Questions

The questions I have sought to learn more about in my teaching practice through the ARP are:

- Can students gain technical accuracy effectively by experimenting and looking in place of technical instruction?

- Does applying NVC principles to pedagogy help students engage on a deeper level with their thinking and making?

Research Methods: Qualitative

My ARP is based around teaching methodology, the outcomes I associate with this are long term and focused on how students think about the "success" of their work. I have chosen to focus on using qualitative research methods.

McKayala Giradin offers the following definition for qualitative research:

"Data in qualitative research typically can't be assessed mathematically, the data is not sets of numbers or quantifiable information. Rather, it's collections of images, words, notes on behaviors, descriptions of emotions, and historical context. Data is collected through observations, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and secondary research." (Giradin, 2024)

Key Influences

- Paulo Freire: *Pedagogy of Hope* and his writing on shifting teaching from a *banking model* to *critical pedagogy* which places both the teacher and the student as learners

- Auto-ethnography: *Good Auto-Ethnography* by Tony Adams (not the former Arsenal center back) and Frank Hermann helped to enable me to reflect more freely on the multiple layers that go into simple teacher and student interactions

- James Bury: *Non-Hierarchical Learning* puts forward how teachers can relate to students as collaborators allowing for *cumulative development* where a task can be more easily accomplished working together rather than by an individual

- Marshall Rosenberg: *Living Non-Violent Communication in Teaching and Learning*

Key Quotes

- **Paulo Freire:** *Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other* (Freire, 1968)

- **James Bury**: *In non-hierarchical learning, it is suggested that students should be given equal responsibility for their learning outcomes, this approach could allow students to develop a desire for deeper understanding and gain satisfaction from perseverance and success in difficult tasks* (Bury, 2018)

- **Caroline Ellis on Ethnography vs Auto-Ethnography or Sunny Arts vs Tommy Ramsay:** *Ethnographers want to master, explain, grasp. Those may be interesting word games, but Auto-Ethnographers don't think they're necessarily important. Caring and empathising is for us what abstracting and controlling is for them. We want to dwell in the flux of lived experience; they want to appropriate lived experience for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory* (Ellis, 2006)

My Intervention

1. Warm-up experimental drawing exercises at the start of every lesson with the aim of offering students new technical ways of working. This allowed students to be surprised by what they made and freed them from needing the safety of control when making work. This helped to shift preconceptions of representational accuracy as being the marker of a good or bad drawing.

2. I applied NVC communication in my conversations with students. Moving away from *power over* to a *power share* and away from verbal feedback on student work being good or bad onto asking questions which help students to come to their own conclusions.

Marshall Rosenberg says "*Power-Over leads to punishment and violence. Power-With leads to compassion and understanding, and to learning motivated by reverence for life rather than fear, guilt, shame, or anger.*" (Rosenberg, 2020)

Intervention 1: Experimental Drawings by Students

Task 1: Blind drawing…

Task 2: Drawing without looking down at the page…
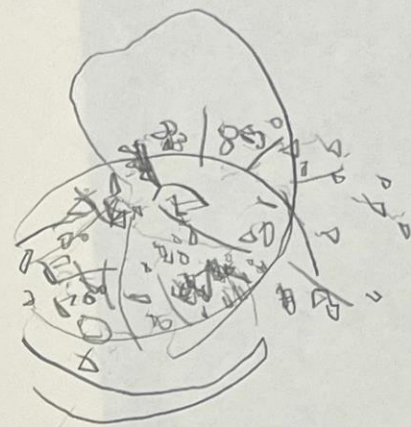
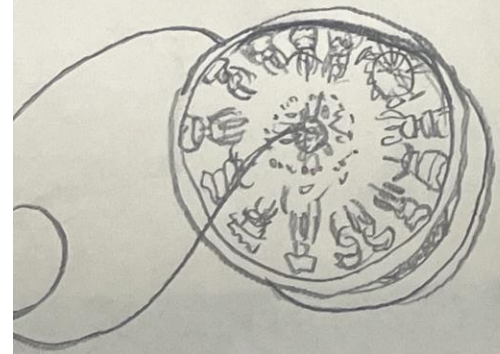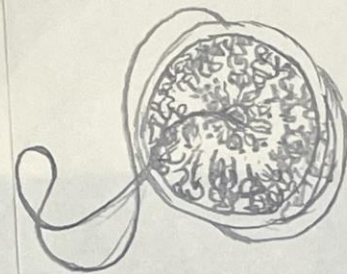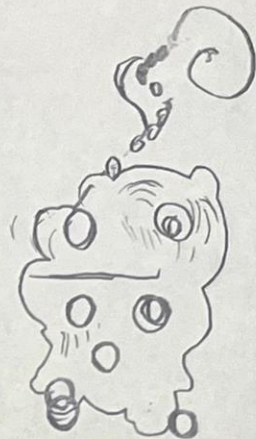Task 3: Observational drawing…
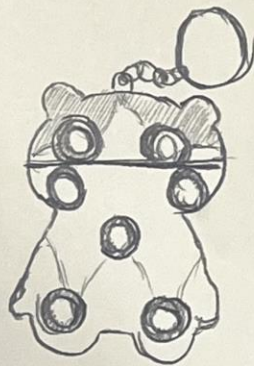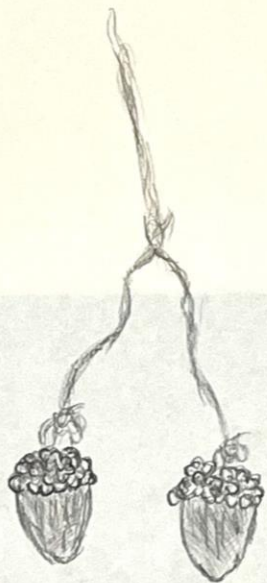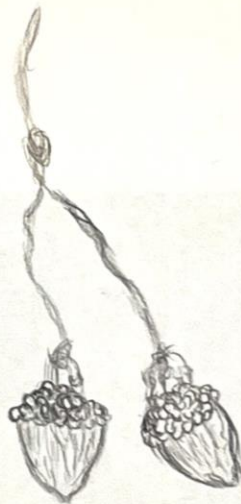
Task 4: Drawing from memory.

1

2

3

4

1

2

3

4

1

2

3

4

Student "Y" Likert Scale responses to experimental drawings

	Rating from 1 – 5 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5
A	I have found the experimental drawings to be a new way of working?					X
B	I understand the thinking behind why we are doing the experimental drawings?					X
C	I have found the experimental drawings to be generative in new ways of thinking about making my work?					X
D	I have found the techniques used in the experimental drawings to be useful in making my work?				X	
E	This way of working has opened new things for my work?					X

Intervention 2: NVC

The core fundamentals of teaching and learning through NVC are:

- Helping students connect with their intrinsic motivations for learning, rather than extrinsic motivators such as reward or punishment.

- I applied NVC communication in my conversations with students. For example, an NVC conversation with a student could go as follows:

Observation: *I noticed that you stopped working on this section of your drawing*

Feeling: *are you feeling frustrated*

Need: *because you would like to have figured out a solution by now*?

Request: *would you like some help with that problem?*

This way of communicating shows empathy and asks the student if they would *like* help.

Student "B" Likert Scale responses to NVC communication

	Rating from 1 – 5 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5
A	I feel empathetically supported in my studies?					X
B	I feel that my tutor made observations rather than judgements when discussing my work?				X	
C	I feel more connected to my work by being asked how I feel about my work?					X
D	I feel more motivated by being asked what I feel about my work rather than being told by my tutor?					X
E	This way of communicating has opened new things for my work?				X	

Student "J" Feedback via email interview

T: How did you find the experimental drawing warmups at the start of sessions? Did they influence the observational drawing that you made afterwards?

J: The first session of experimental drawings was challenging, but by the next session I found them to be a fun and interesting experience. I often choose to use the experimental drawing techniques in my paintings as well if I am a little stuck or unsure how to make something.

T: How do you feel being asked to learn by looking?

J: It has helped me to feel connected to what I was making, and I was able to work for a much longer time on each work. Being asked to look more meant there was more to work with in each still life painting and drawing that I made which I really enjoyed.

T: Looking at your drawings and your work, how do you feel your work has changed with this way of looking and making?

J: I feel much more confident with my work, and in these sessions, I have made my best work so far. I think this is because I am thinking about how to describe each object that I make rather than judging how well I am copying it. I enjoy working this way too and I feel more responsible for my own work!

Evaluation or Observations

- The experimental drawings have enabled students to feel more comfortable with their work being less representationally accurate. My selection of the objects themselves is important, the objects must have some ambiguity to them when held blindly e.g. not be a pinecone. Students have always preferred the 3 experimental drawings where they have had the limitations in place and have often used these in their other work.

- The implications of the NVC intervention are more tangential. I feel that from conversations and feedback from students that there has been a clear shift in how we communicate and the expectations that students have of the power balance in the student/teacher dynamic. These shifts have allowed students to place a higher value on their own feelings when observing their work.

- The combination of the technical and cognitive shifts from the experimental drawings has worked alongside the NVC communication to help students to work with more self-awareness and to make work with more engagement and confidence.

Teaching Positionality post PGCERT

Our education system historically is based on a form of retributive justice. Where we are judged as right or wrong, good or bad, creating a system where we feel that when we are in line with these rules, we deserve to be rewarded or punished accordingly. This kind of system is a basis for violence.

This system makes connection and empathy less within our reach. It creates a system where we are in competition with one another, instead of working together and enjoying contributing to each other's goals and journeys. It makes it harder to access what is *alive* in each of us. It is a system that makes it harder to have *shared* values.

It stops us developing a connection to our feelings. Feelings are an integral part of what makes us human. Developing a literacy to access these feelings allows us to develop who we are, which is what I want to help students to access.

I believe that connection is the key, when I am *grounded* or connected with myself, I can connect to the subject I am teaching, with my students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.

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Full list of references available here: Reference List