**Challenging the cult of normalcy: Arts education and transdisciplinary practices**

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(4475) words

**Abstract:**

I am interested in art education as a transdisciplinary practice which embraces a variety of mediums and world views and in how, through transdisciplinarity, art education challenges the cult of normalcy. The normalisation of the individual is, I suggest here, a limiting, destructive and pedagogically unsound basis from which to pursue any kind of education and particularly one where the contribution of the individual is as central as it is in art education. I argue here that the adoption of a transdisciplinary practice can be liberating on a personal, an artistic and pedagogic level.

This notion of not normal or abnormal suggests that the mind and body I live in (and that you live in) are not ‘good enough’ because they may not fit the confines created for them. Foucault (1977) would argue in fact that the discourse around normalcy causes the internalisation of the concept of normalcy. This ‘normalizing judgement’ (Foucault 1977: 117) brings about not only obedience but adaptation. The internalisation of normalcy inflicts macro and micro penalties. The confines of normalcy imprison us and disability becomes pathologised.

Goodley describes Disability Studies as

A broad area of theory research and practice…antagonistic to the popular view that disability equates with personal tragedy (Goodly 2011: xi)

Instead, he says, it is

A paradigm shift; from disability as personal predicament to disability as social pathology [and] it places problems of disability in society (ibid).

The body is a contested space. It is where disability and education take place. ‘There is an intimate and necessary relation’, says Dewey ‘between the processes of actual experience and education’ (Dewey 1938: 20). My research uses narrative inquiry which allows for the voice of the interviewee to interpret their education. Milchalko (2002) and Titchkosky (2011) talk about binary opposites. Like process and experience, ‘blindness and sightedness rather than existing as binary opposites, act together to achieve a sense of reality’ (Milchalko 2002: 27). Art education and disability studies can provide a space for manifesting this, a way of breaking down mind/ body; able /disabled ways of thinking, for challenging what Titchkosky (2011) calls the absent presence of disability.

As a Senior Lecturer in Language Development and Research Methods at Leeds College of Art, a specialist visual arts institution in the north of England, I initially and primarily worked with students who are dyslexic. I now work across undergraduate and post graduate programmes with a wide range of visual arts students, developing writing as part of a creative practice. My PhD studies use narrative inquiry to examine the writing lives of art students with dyslexia and I am now interrogating how transdisciplinarity can promote inclusivity, as well as holding notions of inclusivity up to question if its binary opposite is exclusivity.

**The cult of normalcy**

In order to progress my argument, I will set out some of my understanding of the framing of disability that contributes to the cult of normalcy. Normalcy descends from the empirical tradition and suggests a particular rightness of being which defines us. Most knowledge systems assume that truth occurs in some correspondence manner… that beneath the surface there are codes to be cracked that reveal a

Deeper truth that that was already present on the surface... correspondence thinking assumes that something is truthful or meaningful when it corresponds to some pre-given structure or pattern. (Potgieter 2003: 48)

For instance, in the Middle Ages, art was about mimetic correspondence; its job was not to depict human kind but rather ‘the divine biblical order…imbued with harmony truth and goodness.’ according to a western canon and the role of the artist was to mediate this reality and truth through their artistic representations (Potgieter 2003: 50). The language of art criticism grew from this western philosophical tradition – art criticism used language in the same way-as representation of absolute truth. Fine art, good art, worthy art- there was no doubt what these were…

Bal (1994) and Potgieter (2003) both start from the premise that there is no absolute correspondence between language and reality. They argue there is no truth which transcends all other truths, no assumed, value free truth out there somewhere which only the positive sciences and qualitative researchers can unmask. Post structuralism collapses these assumptions: ‘language should not be seen as a tool for unlocking a pre-existing reality’ (Potgieter 2003: 54)

‘The traditional view of language as representation or correspondence sees language as a convenient tool that acts as a mediator between humans and reality’ (Potgieter 2003: 49). But this assumes ‘a one to one correspondence between a sign and a thing, and between sign and concept.’ (Potgieter 2003: 49). So is language simply shorthand for a stable reality which we all subscribe to? This thinking is one way, and I argue, a significant way, in which knowledge is shaped.

This correspondence method manifests itself widely and deeply, Potgieter (2003) argues, where language is perceived as convenient shorthand that mediates between the representations of this stable truth and communicates it. We share language and meaning therefore we ‘understand’ what normal is and we ‘know’ that normal is a stable and constant truth. For instance- assumptions around normalcy are easier to enforce if we assume there is a reality stable out there that language represents, and that reality and means the same to all of us. But who are ‘all’ and who are ‘us’? Potgieter argues that correspondence theory breaks down this connection between presumptions of normalcy and language, and lays it bare for the man-made structure that it is.

Foucault, in some of his key writings, including *Discipline and Punish* (1977), *Madness and Civilisation* (1967) and *History of Sexuality* (1978) provides an understanding of how the correspondence paradigm controls the individual, of how the dominant identity becomes the acceptable identity and thus we go on to recreate normalcy in the image of this ‘whole, complete, perfect and self-sustaining individual’ (Davis 2006: 236). Able bodied ness is so ingrained within our concept of normalcy that it is identity- less: able-bodied-ness is the spear; disability the distaff side. (Davis 2006). Foucault’s analysis of the individual might be seen as ‘the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces’ (Biesta 2011). The obverse of this power is the demonization of difference:

‘The disabled person’s ‘’strangeness’’ can manifest and symbolize all differences between human beings…for the able bodied world we are representatives of many of the things they most fear… [attacking] everyone’s sense of well-being and invincibility’ (Goodley 2012: 190).

But the individual is not ‘whole complete perfect and self-sustaining’ (Davis 2006: 236). The individual is you and me. If we internalise normalcy, then disability becomes pathologised. ‘Has psychology created a vision against which the dis/abled individual is judged?’ (Goodley 2102).

The dominant paradigm for understanding disability throughout most of the 20th century has been the medical model which ‘identifies the source of the disadvantage experienced by disabled people as their medical condition’ (Hosking 2008: 6). The emergence of a social model of disability, as opposed to a medical model, led to the separation of disability from impairment. This moves the lens from the individual and their ‘lack’ or ‘issue’ to the way in which society oppresses and dis- ables. ‘To be a disabled person, therefore, refers to a person with an impairment who is disabled by society’ (Mallett and Slater 2014).

Davis argues that ‘an able body is the body of a citizen’, a sort of everyman (Davis 1995: 71). What then is the disabled mind, the disabled body? Under UK law dyslexia is classed as a disability. It certainly renders problematic some of the functions concerned with reading, writing, memory, organisation and comprehension and there are implications for students when undergoing formal education.

Disability studies’ perspectives offer an alternative to this notion of personal misfortune and deficit. According to Hamraie (2013) ‘Disability studies (DS) overwhelmingly treat the category of disability ontologically, focussing on what disability is and how it comes to be’. Disability studies rejects both the *noblesse oblige* approach to disability- charity and pity- and the fetishisation of disability, the disabled person as hero which manifests itself in the ‘super-crip’ stereotype (Barnes 2010: 193). Goodley describes it as ‘a broad area of theory research and practice…antagonistic to the popular view that disability equates with personal tragedy (Goodley 2011: xi).

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‘A paradigm shift; from disability as personal predicament to disability as social pathology [and] it places problems of disability in society’ (ibid).

Disability studies bores down into the prevailing constructs of disability, how it is realised and how it comes to be understood. ‘Disability studies’ project is to… expose the ways disability has been made exceptional and to work to naturalize disabled people’ (Linton 2005: 518). Disability studies argues that disability is the problem, not the impairment. The body and the mind may carry impairments but It is society that dis/ables, by judging, measuring, excluding, problematizing or marginalising. (Devlin and Pothier 2006). It is only because we understand or subscribe to the notion of normal that we can have abnormal. Goodley (2010) calls this normalising a cult. Disability studies pedagogy acknowledges behaviourist, humanist and cognitive theories of learning, whilst recognising the socially constructed aspects of understanding how we learn and how we understand ourselves in the world.

**(Re) Defining an Arts Education**

Can a re-configured view of arts education which also recognises the socially constructed aspects of understanding how we learn and how we understand ourselves in the world be instrumental in destabilising the cult of normalcy? Well, first of all, what is an arts education? Derby (2012) describes it as the ‘know how’ and the ‘know what’; the synthesis of theory and practice, the physical visual manifestation of knowing. It is a combination of theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge and personal practice.

The art institution and the adoption of a visual studies platform, which questions the privileging of text over image, offers ‘rich opportunities for expanding disability studies pedagogy’ (Davis 2006), particularly for expanding an alternative positioning of dyslexia as a disability. Bourriaud (1998) wrote ‘Artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns’ (Bourriaud 1998: 9). Visual studies provide a space to explore pedagogical, social and physical possibilities.

Following on from the adoption of Discipline Based Art education programmes in the U.S in the 1980s (Derby 2006), the much of the arts based curriculum came to include

‘Critical and creative responses to global contemporary art and learners’ everyday diverse multimodal experiences. Such scholarship offers rich opportunities for expanding disability studies pedagogy’ (Davis 2006).

In other words, art education commented on, referred to and explored the problems of everyday life, socio political concerns, technological and economic change, identity and belief. The adoption of a ‘visual culture studies platform’ in the 1990s (Davis 2006) which foregrounded a recognition of the richness and fluidity of visual language and its varied response to cultural concerns was a response to had had been seen in academia as the privileging of the verbal and textual over the visual.

In addition, and critically, art education in the 1990s underwent another corresponding paradigm shift where Disability Arts Education (DAE) brought together the institutions and practices of art education and disability studies.

‘What is significant about recent developments within the context of disability art is that since the emergence of the international disabled people's movement in the 1970s, disability art has become inextricably linked to a radical new 'disability politics and culture'; its aim is to bring about a more equitable and inclusive future’ (Barnes 2003: 2).

In 1998 Bourriaud wrote ‘Artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns’ (Bourriaud, 1998, p9). Disability Arts Education has arguably provided a space to explore pedagogical, social and physical possibilities. Bourriaud (1998) refers to a space for transdisciplinarity where boundaries are rejected and limitations reassessed. This rejection and reassessment is highly pertinent to the notion of normalcy. Where normalcy relies on

the construction of individuals as others and all the assumptions that underspin educational understandings’ that this othering entails, Deleuze and Guattari would urge us to explore ‘productive models of desire and planes of immanence’- different ways of shaping our understanding: ‘pedagogies of “becoming” rather than “being” (Goodley 2007: 317).

**Transdisciplinarity**

Bernstein (2015) quotes Mahan (1970) in full in his article ***Transdisciplinarity: A Review of Its Origins, Development, and Current Issues*** where he puts forward his critique of transdisciplinary inquiry. He argues that this method of inquiry ‘would be characterized by a common orientation to transcend disciplinary boundaries and an attempt to bring continuity to inquiry and knowledge’. Other characteristics he suggests would be

Attention to comprehensiveness, context and frame of reference of inquiry and knowledge; interpenetration of boundaries between concepts and disciplines; exposing disciplinary boundaries to facilitate understanding of implicit assumptions, processes of inquiry, and resulting knowledge; humanistic reverence for life and human dignity; desire to actively apply knowledge to the betterment of man and society (Mahan 1970 in Bernstien 2015)

And inPiaget’s (1972) essay on the epistemology of interdisciplinary relationships transdisciplinarity is referred to as a

higher stage succeeding interdisciplinary relationships . . . which would not only cover interactions or reciprocities between specialised research projects, but would place these relationships within a total system without any firm boundaries between disciplines (Piaget 1972: 138).

If art education is providing a lens through which to challenge and deconstruct issues of normalcy then transdisciplinary, it can be argued, provides the lexicon to do this.

transdisciplinary scholarship is not synonymous with multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary scholarship- it invites scholars across disciplines plus layperson stakeholders to establish ideas and artefacts that do not resemble disciplinary boundaries. (Flinterman et al 2001 in Derby 2012:1)

these ideas and artefacts are characterised by their universal and inclusive positioning of knowledge construction rather than posited on a notion of binaries.

We can see from this how transdisciplinary arts education differs from cross and inter disciplinary approaches. It is not about knowing or tolerating the representation of more than one branch of knowledge. Instead, rather than make boundaries permeable, malleable or consanguineous, it renders them both void and productive. By showing how knowledge systems are socially constructed they are laid open to enquiry, deconstruction and reconstruction.

‘A transdisciplinary approach within arts education focuses on lived experiences with intent to disrupt, contest and transform systems of oppression’ (Tavin 2003 in Derby 2012). The humanities have long considered social justice and identity; and art is a key player in the humanities. Art can be a site of challenge, discourse, expression, protest and compassion. In the privileged space offered to us by the art institution educators and students alike question and reposition their roles: writer, tutor, maker, learner, teacher, practitioner, artist, individual, collective- all of which are challenged through visual culture and arts education.

I have chosen to illustrate this exploration of the lived experience through visual culture by the example of Christine Hill’s *Volksboutique*, begun in the late 90’s. Hill is a New York artist and her ‘people’s shop’ was based for a while in her adopted city of Berlin. Visitors would open the door to be greeted by the artist who would serve tea, sell cheap clothes and encourage conversation even more than she encouraged commerce. Visitors congregated to discuss topics ranging from identity and self-preservation to the weather and the effect of tourism on the neighbourhood (Berger and Lippard 2004). The Berlin shop operated out of a location once used by the communist government as part of its network of *Volkseignen Betriebe* or ‘people’s own’ which was in effect ‘East German communist speak for state owned companies laden with populist ideological connotations also used by the Nazis’ (Kaplan et al 1998: 39).

Hill’s installation/outlet *Volksboutique's* *Home Office and Products Division* is now housed in Brooklyn, New York and its German context lends its American one a further pertinent and challenging identity, transcending countries and yet remaining a cogent reference to political discourse, spilling ‘awkwardly into the social structure of life’ (Kaplan 1998, p39). Hill herself describes the work as being essentially social in its nature. (Hill 2003)

‘Volksboutique is not theater. It is a production of life. Volksboutique is setting up one's own parameters and operating within them. Living by one's own design. Creating definitions. Freedom of occupation’ (Hill 2003).

The work combines performance, installation, commerce, visual display and graphic design. Hill’s art belongs in the domain of transdisciplinarity where it subtly explores normalcy, reminding the viewer of the repressive nature of ideologies which through their architectural and social structures seek to normalize and thus create visions of abnormality. What doesn’t fit must be unfit. And conversely if we find ourselves included by the message and images that surround us do we then discover that all those who are excluded are therefore not one of us? By making the shop the ‘norm’, Hill uses transdisciplinary practices to ignore outmoded notions of binaries and instead focus on what is there in front of us but also what lays beyond.

For instance, a student from my own institution produced a series of images of contemporary ballet dancers from a local academy. Each image was accompanied by a short biography provided by the dancer themselves. Some of these dancers carried physical disabilities but not one chose to discuss or refer to them. The body in this collection of photographs is presented as a thoroughly workable, functioning mechanism as well as the domain and ownership of its inhabitant. If the viewer ‘wants’ disability, they must search for it and place it in the frame themselves. Because it has its basis in the corporeal humanity of making and doing, art is a very human practice. It exists in the lived world. It is brave. An art education encourages risk taking, both theoretical and practical, and is often profoundly self-reflexive.

Works of art illustrate… they also change the thing they illustrate in their own way. Instead of understanding reﬂexion as a theoretical activity that could be reconstructed in representational terms we should rather understand it as a *practical activity, that* changes our understandings, our ways of seeing, hearing and behaving, our ways of narrating aspects of our lives and so on. These changes include quite diﬀerent dimensions, like dimensions of habitualization or dimensions of normative revaluations of our ways of thinking, seeing and hearing (Fiege 2010: 139)

Because of these qualities it is ideally placed to disrupt context and transform systems of oppression (Tavin 2003 in Derby 2012).

Jennifer Eisenhauer’s *My Bipolar Body* (2012) unapologetically champions the place of the visceral and emotional response through a series of text and image presenting the experiences of electro convulsive therapy treatment (ECT). Eisenhauer’s piece is not a passing reference to mental health but a transdisciplinary representation of the complete being, body and mind, containing but not defined by her mental wellness or otherwise. Eisenhauer’s ‘accounts of subjectivity organically merge disability studies and art education scholarship through the creative intermingling of visual and linguistic texts’ (Derby 2012). Her work again transcends barriers and disciplines, becoming instead an ‘amalgamation of theory, prose, and visual art [which] provides promising examples of transdisciplinary scholarship between Disability Studies and Art Education.’ (Derby 2012)

**Dyslexia**

'Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involve in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.’ (Rose, 2009). It ‘mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills...likely to be present at birth … [and] life‐long in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities’ (British Dyslexia Association 2007).

Dyslexia however can shine a light on presumptions of normalcy, unearthing the conclusion that best practice in dyslexia teaching suits all learners. Rather than linking resources to the categorisation of disability, best practice in dyslexia teaching- which is multi-sensory, kinaesthetic, recognises the whole and the parts of the whole, and which encourages critical analysis through careful and rigorous decoding of language and meaning- is best practice in teaching, period. This might be a useful way of looking at boundaries and definitions in teaching and learning- to explore the whole person rather than their disability. This often leads to the recognition that we are all dis/abled in some way. ‘A disabling society is experienced subjectively and emotionally’ (Goodley 2010: xii) by all its members. Even if this does not affect our daily lives, even if we do not locate ourselves in this way; we all fail to meet the demands of ‘perfection’ and ‘normalcy’ at some point or another in our lives.

Working with students with dyslexia I have observed the oppression of expectations and limitations placed on them by academic study. In a study of my own, related to my PhD, I interviewed students about their experiences of dyslexia prior to Art College (Tobias-Green 2015). Almost without exception my respondents recounted a narrative of both loss and gain, of being undiagnosed, wrongly diagnosed or badly diagnosed; of losing touch with friends when moving to school as a result of having to chase better dyslexia; of being misunderstood and, often, under estimated; the sense of unfairness felt by many young people at a point in their lives when they were powerless to articulate it.

Alongside this I heard narratives of gaining self-knowledge, discovering compensatory strategies, finding the freedom to be themselves despite their dyslexia: a sort of be-coming. Above all, the space offered by the art institution as they entered further or higher education was seen as transformational. The art institution offered the chance to merge theory and practice, to explore language as they might explore painting or sculpture, to immerse themselves in both visual and textual language in a positive way. It was itself seen as a transdisciplinary environment, allowing the transcending of definitions of dyslexia.

In simultaneously studying multiple levels of, and angles on, reality, transdisciplinary work provides an intriguing potential to invigorate scholarly and scientific inquiry both in and outside the academ’ (Bernstein 2015).

The study of dyslexia and the transformativity of art can become a part of this rich inquiry.

Art academy students reported significantly more signs of dyslexia than non-art university students. Objective testing showed that art students had significantly poorer phonological skills than non-art students. Thus, according to self-reports combined with objective testing, the incidence of dyslexia was far higher among art students (Wolff and Lundberg 2002: 84).

However, the art institution offers a space to foreground the voices of dyslexic students. The student is dealt with as a whole person, as a creative person first and foremost, and teaching is delivered from the place of possibility rather than place of limitation. Wood (2005) asks ‘can you imagine objects from different perspectives…read complex diagrams quickly and easily…create new ideas, possibilities, understandings?’ He describes these as some of the ‘positive symptoms’ of dyslexia.

Many creative practitioners who teach in my institution identify as having dyslexic traits. A survey of dyslexic- type traits reveals the numbers to be as high as 50%.and successfully use strategies which they pass on to students, something which cannot be underestimated as a contributory factor to the generally collective and responsive approach to dyslexia within the institution. Staff use assistive technology, voice recording equipment, audio visual tutorials, face to face tutorials and group critiques to facilitate a wide range of approaches to learning and teaching. The notion of exploratory, interventionist and questioning pedagogy helps to promote a sense of transdisciplinarity-­‐ not a merging out of borders, not a tolerance of ‘others’ but a borderless and holistic approach which takes the ‘us’ and ‘them’ out of the equation.

**Visual culture**

Mirzoeff describes visual culture as a tactic, rather than an academic discipline. It is, he writes, ‘a fluid interpretive structure, centred on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life’ (Mirzoeff 1999: 11). It is therefore, I would argue, perfectly positioned to reflect the mind-set of transdisciplinarity providing instead a framework for questioning our own ways of othering being othered and raising issues of care and social justice in creative teaching and learning. The experiences of art students with dyslexia are not unique and these experiences are not only related to dyslexia, for instance Artur Zmijewski’s (2001) exploration of the normative stereotypes around hearing impaired children *Singing Lesson*.

Zmijewski recorded deaf-­‐mute and hearing impaired children singing in a Polish Cathedral. The resulting sound may not be the sound we are used to hearing when we think of the words choir, cathedral and music. ‘As a challenge to our notions of "perfection," Zmijewski's work is near perfect’ (Brodeur 2004). The children cannot hear their accompaniment or each other but they create a sound which is alive, vital, challenging and, more importantly, just *is.* So they cannot be labelled as anything other than what they are at that moment unless, again, the viewer or audience chooses to label them.

This resonated particularly with me: ‘The physicality of the human body -­‐ it’s the primary unit in Zmijewski's scheme’ (Brodeur 2004). Like the corporeality of Eisenhauer’s struggle with her mental well-being; the cognitive struggle with processing of dyslexic students; my student’s celebrations of dancer’s art and dancer’s bodies; and Hill’s visual and vocal parade, Zmijewski is transcending notions of normalcy through visual culture. Visual culture has shown itself able to reflect the human condition. Its multimodality gives it a myriad of voices to speak with. From within my own institution I am able to point to modules and assignments which require students to produce work which is socially engaged, which places the student within a community of participants in a real world space and uses text, image, making, doing, visual and spoken literacies to create socially vibrant collaborations.

**Conclusion**

In a post-modern world, universal truths and absolute knowledge become concepts harder and harder to sustain. The freedom to consider, question and reject cannot be under estimated but this freedom has led, it could be argued, to a sometimes frantic desire for self-exploration. This leads to the promotion of a culture of ’betterment’ or ‘self-improvement’. The danger of obsessive self-interest however is a fixation with the pure, the idealised and the ‘right’ type of individual. Goodley (2014) and Davis (2013) argue that this in turn promotes a cut of normalcy- the ‘ideal’ becomes normal. There is no binary opposite; no able/disabled schism that neatly separates our knowledge and identities. Instead transdisciplinarity alerts us to the construction of knowledge and to its possible reconstruction. Hill, Eisenhauer, Zmijewski and others use their work to challenge and interrogate these notions of individual perfection and, by transcending definitions of individual and social truth, perfection and normalcy, they show the value of transdisciplinary arts education in presenting a framework for both collective integrity and individual responsibility.

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