

MATURE STUDENTS MATTER IN ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The creative practices of five people who had previously studied on an Access to HE course (art and design) in the United Kingdom were explored through narrative inquiry. All had participated in higher education after their Access to HE courses. After completing their studies, the participants set up various Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs) in order to support people who did not have access to the arts through formal education. The participants' stories were analysed in relation to various types of altruism (entrepreneurial, philanthropic, and selfless). It was found that the Access to HE learning experience stayed with some of the participants and encouraged them to open up learning spaces for others. Some of the 'Access values' relating to social justice, democratic education, student-centeredness and community engagement were modelled and developed by the participants. Their narratives suggested they were acting because of either entrepreneurial, philanthropic or selfless altruism. This challenged some of the neoliberal discourses around the individualistic motives of mature students that link access to higher education only to increased economic rewards and status.

Keywords: Access to HE, art and design, altruism, visual culture learning communities, adult learning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the wider societal impact an Access to Higher Education (HE) (art and design) course can bring that lies beyond the benefits to the individual mature student. It is argued that the altruistic motives of some of the students extend the sphere of influence of their education beyond themselves and their immediate families to other, wider, communities. In the United Kingdom Access to HE courses were designed to facilitate students without conventional qualifications progressing onto a degree course. They are mostly taught in further education colleges but some are delivered within Universities. They are similar to the enabling courses taught in Australia (Broadhead, Davies & Hudson, 2019).

By drawing on Nussbaum's (2017) philosophical discussion about the nature of altruism and Freedman's (2015) work on the growth of Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs), it is proposed that some mature students use their artistic skills and knowledge to help others. Through narrative inquiry, it can be seen that some students seek to share their skills and knowledge gleaned from their learning experiences, including those from Access to Higher Education. After leaving formal education, some mature students established informal learning communities, in order to provide opportunities for others who wish to learn creative skills, but are unable to do so in a school, college or university. The examples discussed here are *Sew for Change*, *Art School/Ikley* and *TCL Collective*. People who had previously studied on an Access to HE course set up these learning communities and now they are choosing to carry out these activities on the margins of mainstream education.

Within the context of neoliberalism, the importance of Access to HE courses is measured in terms of getting students into highly paid careers (Broadhead, Davies & Hudson, 2019). Universities in the United Kingdom currently collect data about what students do when they have achieved their degrees through the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE)* survey. However, some students decide to use their skills in ways that may not bring financial rewards or a stable job, but aim to benefit the wider community. Nussbaum (2017)

points out that altruism is multi-layered and complex; however, from the students' own stories it does appear that they are motivated to do good because they see that there is a lack of opportunities for people to study the arts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theoretical perspectives are considered in order to analyse the stories of experience shared by participants who were or are mature art and design students. These are altruism and Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs). VCLCs are informal groups of people who come together to learn about their art practices, support one another and share resources (Freedman, 2015). It has been noticed, through narrative inquiry, that some mature students have set up VCLCs after leaving formal education. A discussion of altruism may inform proposed reasons why this has occurred. A critical reading of the literature on VCLCs is also necessary in order to see how older people can fit into this model.

Nussbaum (2017) informed by the work of sociologist Kristen Monroe has explored altruism asking if, ultimately, altruism is motivated by a desire to leave something behind after a person has passed away. She identifies three forms of altruism.

Firstly, altruism practiced by entrepreneurs who seek wealth and influence, but whose actions also have social benefits. Secondly, philanthropists who appreciate the benefits of their actions to a particular cause, but still expect some personal gains (these could be in terms of enhanced personal reputation, reciprocating factors, personal satisfaction. The benefit is anticipated but may not actually happen.

The third model is that of selfless altruism where people do good because they see the value of a good deed to the recipients. Nussbaum (2017) conceives selfless altruism as a mundane matter rather than special behaviours of parents, friends or fellow citizens. Within this third model, Nussbaum (2017) has identified two forms of selfless altruism. The first is a good deed done because it will contribute towards the flourishing of human life in an Aristotelian sense. The person is aware that it is good that they act well.

The second form is slightly different, where the good deed is seen to be necessary, but the person's own involvement in producing the action is not significant. It is the end result that is important, it does not matter which person carries out the action for the greater good.

Nussbaum (2017) recognises that these models can appear as if the individual is rational, stable and consistent. Altruism could very well be a more fluid phenomenon. Motivations for doing good are likely to change as people's experiences and contexts ebb and flow. For example, Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) discovered that mature students were more likely to act with altruism, if they were confident that their families' material needs were being met.

Southan (2014) expressed scepticism that altruism and creativity were ideas that sat together, claiming that if people were being creative when others were hungry or suffering then this was not a means of making the world a better place. It could be argued that this comes from an understanding of creativity as individualistic artistic practice. However, Freedman (2015) has argued that learning within the arts is concerned with participation and collaboration and less to do with self-interested, personal practice.

It has been commented that some adult or mature students, in particular, do have altruistic motives in returning to study (Davies, Osborne & Williams, 2002; Maguire, 2001; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998). There has been a solid body of research about altruism and medical education (Hilton & Slotnick, 2005; Bishop & Rees, 2007; Burks & Kobus, 2012). Can altruism be seen in the actions of those who chose to study art and design subjects when returning to education?

Freedman (2015) has stated that VCLCs are becoming an important form of pedagogy that lie outside the academy. She argues that the visual arts should not be conceived as a personal path to enlightenment but as a form of dedicated communal practice. Many people learn about art in places other than schools, in museums, community centres or outside institutions all together. 'Non-traditional' or mature students may enter higher education because they have previously participated in a VCLC. They may continue to be part of such a community after they have left education or be instrumental in setting up a new VCLC. VCLCs provide a community of like-minded people, mediating against a lack of opportunities in formal education. They create a safe space for diverse practitioners to develop their identities as artists. Diverse practices that are sometimes absent in official sites of learning may be recognised as legitimate creative activity. People who participate in VCLCs share resources and skills. The informal structures of VCLCs can facilitate much-needed openings for dissemination, exhibition and critical review.

Karpati et al., (2017) have described VCLCs comprising groups of adolescents or young people engaged with expression and creativity outside formal education without adult supervision. Examples include manga, cosplay, contemporary art, fanart video and graffiti. They support young people's identity formation through creative practice and active citizenship. Freedman et al.'s (2013) research showed that VCLCs are formed because formal art curricula are too narrow and there is a lack of availability of classes. It was also found that VCLC members thought that art educators wanted to teach only traditional forms of art and were not what interested in their practices. Participants thought there was an adult bias against popular art forms in formal education. Many VCLC members said they were part of the group to learn.

Freedman et al. (2013) at the same time constructed a binary opposition between young people and adults. VCLCs are represented as being only for young people, creating learning spaces that exclude adults. In addition, it is assumed that adults misunderstand VCLCs believing them to be primarily about entertainment.

This paper argues that VCLCs can be set up by older people and can be places where intergenerational learning can take place. The reasons people who were once mature students create VCLCs may be understood in relation to the forms of altruism described by Nussbaum (2017).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research was undertaken based on narrative inquiry. This was because the students' experiences were central to this exploration and narrative is an effective way of documenting life stories. Previous work had utilised narrative inquiry to investigate post-access students' experiences in art and design undergraduate education (Broadhead, 2018; Broadhead and Gregson, 2018). Narratives do not simply end and this research was partly a continuation of earlier work, where one participant wanted to continue sharing their stories after they had left university. Narrative inquiry is a means of seeing the connections between significant incidents and longer-term impact beyond formal education (Andrews, 2014; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin and Connelly, 2004).

The people, who had set up three VCLCs, were contacted and asked if they would like to contribute to the current research project. One contributor (Eliza) came from *Sew for Change*, one (Jake) came from *Art school/Iikley* and three (Karen, Angela and Mandy) came from the *TCL Collective*. These people had all, at some point in their lives, been mature students and all but one had previously studied on an Access to HE course. The participants'

names were changed to protect their identities. They were asked about their VCLCs, why they had set them up and what impact their work had on other people. They were also asked how their own life experiences had helped them establish their learning communities. Their responses were initially collected through email and an informal interview. Afterwards the participants created a presentation about their work, which was shared with other mature students at an event called *Mature Students Matter in Art, Craft and Design* that happened in November 2019.

FINDINGS

Sew For Change

Eliza, who had previously studied on an Access course completed her undergraduate education and then went on to postgraduate study where she was able to take part in an international residency in 2018. This turned out to be a critical event in Eliza's story leading her to make the courageous decision to take time off from her paid work to develop her own creative practice outside the United Kingdom.

As part of an Erasmus+ project with a social design collective (Brave New Alps, 2019) Eliza travelled to Rovereto, a city and commune in Trentino in northern Italy. Once she had established herself there, she set up sewing workshops for refugees and migrants. Using her textile skills Eliza (2019) aimed to, "find out what their future is e.g. stay in country or return if possible, what they want their future to be and how they can make this happen?"

She sought to, "capture these questions/thoughts through the visual – by writing, mark-making or drawing on fabric. This would then be embroidered and eventually 'gifted' back to the women." (Eliza, 2019).

Eliza worked on her project for three months, which has motivated her to develop more projects that used sewing as a means of instigating social change.

Her presentation revealed how Eliza had also worked with many community groups in the United Kingdom, where she taught dressmaking skills, and was able to use this to gather stories from her learners. For example, she worked with a student-led initiative to tackle Period Poverty internationally by running workshops where people could sew, assemble and distribute reusable, washable 'Days for Girls' sanitary kits. (Freedom for Girls, 2019). Eliza claimed:

Two principal goals of helping: manage problems in living more effectively and develop valued outcomes/ utilising opportunities. [Participants] become better problem solvers going forward. Sewing is just another way! (Sew for Change, 2019).

Eliza saw a need and that her skills could meet that need; she did not do this for financial gain. Although she was supported in her trip to Italy and this was an opportunity for her to travel, she did have to contribute a lot to the project herself. She also risked the stability of her day-to-day existence by taking three months off work.

Art School/Ilkley

Jake was someone who had studied on a part-time Access course in art and design and then, because of his previous experiential learning was able to undertake postgraduate study, achieving his Masters in 2016. He then, set up *Art School/Ilkley* with his partner. *Art School/Ilkley* held regular art workshops for young people after school and creative courses

for adults in the evening. In addition, there were regular weekend day courses that explored drawing through stitch, printmaking and life drawing. Jake (2018) claimed, "My sense is that the arts in schools are at an all-time low but there is a sea change. Access and undergraduate study needs to be defended...the only available route for many at the moment." He continued:

I have worked on two collaborative projects, which involved residency, response and exhibitions. I am also project managing new studio and exhibition space as part of the new project. This space will also house Art School, of which I am joint founder, which runs workshops and classes for the community, working with 11-18 year olds after school, and adult classes in the evening. This month, under the Art School banner we have facilitated a Bradford School Trust to celebrate creativity in education. This involves nine schools coming together for a single day of celebration, music, visual arts, performance and dance. (Jake, 2018)

Jake went on to talk about how some of the students had used the sessions to prepare a portfolio so they too could attend an Access course. Thus, a progression route had been made into formal education for those who needed it.

My life experience has given me entrepreneurial skills, which helped me set up a project that would pay its way. From the confidence, I have gained from Access and my Masters I have been able to pass it on to other people. I treat them like professional artists. (Jake, 2019)

Jake founded *Art School/Ikley* in order to provide art education for those who could not access it formally. He is currently working with a wide range of traditional and 'non-traditional' learners who wish to be creative practitioners through sharing his skills and knowledge.

TCL Collective

The members of *TCL Collective* had met in higher education and decided that they would set up an exhibiting group after they completed their Master's course in Creative Practice. They had worked together in many places in Ireland and the United Kingdom. " *TCL Art Collective* are preparing for their forthcoming trip to Southern Ireland, Kinvara. Fellow artists will be joining us. Our mission is to respond to place and generate work that will culminate in a pop up exhibition at the KAVA (Kinvara Area Visual Arts) at the end of the week." (Karen, *TCL Collective*, 2019)

Mandy went on to say, "My work is community orientated, I exhibit in cafes, community centres, art trails." She continued to talk about the impact her work had on others:

*Through the arts trail, I have worked with other people. I have given some of them confidence. Broken down barriers and fears. If I can do it, you can do it! It can be overwhelming, for example, I was working in a community hall where someone had seen my work on Instagram and came rushing over with enthusiasm, wanting to buy it! (Mandy from *TCL Collective*, 2019)*

Angela, another member of *TCL Collective*, reflected on the emotional impact creative work can have on other people, "Someone bought my work because it contained the colours of their wedding day, when they told me, at that point it did make me tear up."

CONCLUSIONS

All three groups worked with people of different ages and backgrounds, these projects gave an opportunity for intergenerational learning that more conventional forms of education discourage. The value of learning within a diverse group of people has been noted in previous research (Broadhead and Garland, 2012).

The Access to HE learning experience stays with some students and encourages them to open up learning spaces for others. In some cases, the impact or scope of influence does not just stop at the individual student. Some of the Access values proposed by Broadhead, Davies and Hudson (2019) such as social justice, democratic education, student-centeredness and community engagement are modelled and developed by the students. This challenges some of the neoliberal discourses around the individualistic motives of mature students that link Access education to increased economic rewards (Burke, 2002).

It is very difficult to say which of Nussbaum's models of altruism reflects the participants' actions. Jake did say his entrepreneurial experiences helped him set up his art school project, however, he was being pragmatic, wanting to create a venture that was sustainable. Philanthropic and selfless altruism do appear to be relevant. Eliza from *Sew for Change* and Jake from Art school/Ilkley identified a need and used their skills to do something about it. *TCL Collective*, perhaps, are more entrepreneurial in that their exhibiting activity raises their profile and reputation. The good it does to others is a positive repercussion of the activity but not *TCL*'s primary motivation.

Implications for Adult education Theory and Practice

In the United Kingdom mature students have been absent from recent discourses relating to widening participation where the focus has been on school leavers. When considering the subject area of art and design, it can be seen that there are examples of mature students drawing upon their educational experiences to give value to their communities. Mechanisms that measure the impact of higher education used by the UK government such as Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey are not designed to capture the impact mature students have after they leave formal education. This is because it focuses on employment and salaries rather than the creation of small, localised initiatives. Practitioners need to argue that mature students matter in art and design education, partly due to the 'ripple effect' of their participation. The complex area of altruism as a motivation for adults studying within art and design requires further interrogation.

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