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MATURE GRADUATES AND VISUAL CULTURE LEARNING COMMUNITIES: WORKING THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Mature graduates (defined as people who enrolled on their first undergraduate degree when aged 21 or over) who have studied an arts degree in the United Kingdom and subsequently have set up Visual Culture Learning Communities share their stories through narrative inquiry. Some mature creative graduates establish spaces where intergenerational learning about the arts can occur. These learning spaces make a valuable contribution to sustaining individual creative practices during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. A more nuanced understanding of graduate outcomes is required where this contribution is recognised.

Keywords: Mature students, visual culture learning communities, Covid-19 pandemic, graduate outcomes, higher education, arts education.

During the Covid-19 pandemic there have been difficulties for those working in the United Kingdom (UK) arts sector (OECD, 2020). Unfortunately, freelance artists and designers are vulnerable to the economic impacts springing from the pandemic crisis (Brabin, 2020). Additional funds have been given by the UK government to support the arts at this time (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport et al., 2020). However, it is not certain how well this support will assist creative people working with temporary or insecure contracts. The situation is likely to be especially difficult for those who have recently graduated from their arts degrees.

This paper concerns those mature students graduating with an art's degree. It considers what graduate outcomes have been possible for these students and how they have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants are referred to as mature graduates to indicate that they achieved their arts degrees later in life. Within the UK mature students are those who enrolled in their first undergraduate degree when they were 21 or older (OfS, 2020).

As mature students it has been argued that they are able to draw upon their life experiences to overcome any barriers they have encountered in their education (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Mature students/graduates, potentially, could continue to use their practical wisdom after they have graduated enabling them to respond positively to the current crisis.

One possible response to the Covid-19 pandemic is through group learning. Freedman (2015) has provided an example of communal support for artists through the model of Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs). This model will be evaluated and applied to the case of mature arts students who have recently graduated. VCLCs provide safe spaces for creative people to develop their identities, artistic knowledge and practices.

Three VCLCs are considered using narrative inquiry, a method that draws upon stories to investigate people's life experiences. The three VCLCs have been created or instigated by mature graduates. They provide informal arts education within local communities. Five individuals, who began their own educational journeys in their 40s and 50s, lead and develop these projects. During their learning careers as mature students, they studied on Access to HE courses in art and design before

pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate education.

Theoretical Framework

Freedman (2015) has stated that VCLCs provide an important form of pedagogy that lies outside the academy. Many people learn about art in places other than schools, such as in museums, community centres or outside institutions altogether. VCLCs provide a community of like-minded people, mediating against a lack of opportunities in formal education. They create a safe space for 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 opportunities 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 suggested 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 interested in their students' preferred practices. Participants thought there was an adult bias against popular art forms in formal education. Many VCLC members said they became part of the group in order 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. 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 be places where intergenerational learning can take place. The informal structures of VCLCs can facilitate much-needed openings for dissemination, exhibition and critical review. During the Covid-19 pandemic such opportunities are of great importance where VCLC members are able to share their work with each other virtually.

Research Design

Qualitative research was undertaken based on narrative inquiry. Previous research had utilised narrative inquiry to investigate mature students' experiences in art and design undergraduate education (Broadhead, 2018; Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). This project was partly a continuation of earlier research, where participants 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 impacts beyond formal education (Andrews, 2014; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

The people who had set up the 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/Ilkley and three (Karen, Angela and Mandy) came from the TCL Collective. These people had all, at some point in their lives, been mature students. The participants' names were changed in written or transcribed documents to protect their identities.

The research comprised filmed interviews, email conversations and online meetings. The current research began in 2019 but continued during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was an opportunity to observe how these mature graduates were able to draw upon their life experiences and the support from their VCLCs.

The data collected was drawn together into three narratives about the three VCLCs. The narratives referred to work done during the lockdowns imposed by the UK government in response to the threat to public health caused by the Coronavirus.

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. 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.

Eliza talked about how she had also worked with many community groups in the UK, 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 (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!"

Eliza saw a need and that her skills could meet that need; she did not do this for financial gain. Although she was supported on 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.

Eliza had a lot of demands on her time but she was still able to engage with others during the Covid-19 lockdown through Zoom. For example, she took part in an online event with the four other mature arts graduates for National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD, 2020). Her stories about her own experiences inspired and encouraged others to participate in the arts.

Art School/Ilkley

Jake 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:

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

At first it was uncertain how Art School would continue to hold classes during the Covid-19 pandemic as people were asked not to leave their homes from March 2020 until the restrictions were eased in the summer of 2020 only to be reinstated in January 2021. The Art School maintained its presence on social media sharing images of its members' work. When people were able to meet whilst socially distancing the Art School took the classes outside often using the opportunity to draw nature. The work the students produced in the pandemic was exciting and experimental.

TCL Collective

The members of TCL Collective worked together in many places in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Karen explained, "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."

Mandy went on 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!

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."

During the Covid-19 pandemic it was very challenging for artists to keep working and exhibiting. The TCL Collective created a 'mail art' project where each member posted materials to each of the other group members. They were then challenged to use the materials to create new artworks. The members were motivated to experiment with cyanotypes, collage, photography, and printmaking. The results were then photographed and posted on social media platforms for critical review. The TCL collective continued to be active during the pandemic due to their participation in a VCLC.

Conclusions

The mature graduates have shared their stories about their three projects. It can be seen that they have drawn upon their life experiences, previous education and practical wisdom in order to create VCLCs. For example, Jake had the entrepreneurial experience to help him co-construct the Art School that provided opportunities for people of different ages to learn. He did not do this in isolation but was able to collaborate with his partner who was an experienced artist.

The three projects shared characteristics that complied with Freedman's (2015) concept of VCLCs. They were all practitioner-led and aimed to provide opportunities for other people to learn about art. The groups' members were also able to share their artwork with the community so they could give and receive critical review. The projects created a learning space that was not provided by formal education. All three projects were able to talk about the audiences and participants they had

worked with and what motivated them to engage in the VCLC.

The research found that while the original notion of a VCLC was that it was a space for young artists, separate from the control of adults, VCLCs are also created by older people. They come into being for similar reasons - to provide a network of support and encouragement in response to declining opportunities for people to study the arts. The groups discussed in this article blended digital processes with physical art works rather than creating purely digital works. The use of social media was very important for connecting with audiences and the “blended” approach to VCLCs could be particular to those created by older artists.

Due to their small scale and flexible structures, the VCLCs have been responsive to the Covid-19 crisis. Strategies such as delivering socially distanced drawing classes in the open air and creating ‘mail art’ projects encourage communities to engage with the arts. Members’ works continue to be shown for critical review on websites and on various social media.

Implications for Adult education Theory and Practice

The UK Graduate Outcome Survey is concerned with gathering data about graduate careers. It is argued that a nuanced approach to thinking about graduate outcomes is required; one that recognises the contributions of those mature graduates who are interested in supporting people in their communities. Helping other people and “giving something back” to society appear to be values that motivate some people rather than the neoliberal discourse that links education to higher earning power (Burke, 2002).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been very challenging for many arts organisations and arts practitioners. However, VCLCs help maintain people’s creative practices and encourage participation and this has been a useful strategy to deal with the lack of social interaction and face-to-face contact.

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