

Drawing on experience: mature students and practical wisdom in art and design higher education.

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Introduction

The paper reports on the initial findings of a longitudinal study (2011-2015) about post-Access to HE students' experiences as they undertake their degrees in art and design. These mature students are described as 'non-traditional' because they are from diverse backgrounds and have entered higher education with an *Access to HE Diploma* qualification rather than the usual 'A' level route (Hudson, 2009; Burke, 2002, p.81). Post-Access students may look visibly different due to age, race, gender, disability; may act differently due to social class, religious backgrounds or previous experiences. They are often in the minority within an art and design programme and at risk of being 'othered' by art and design pedagogic discourses and practices (Hatton, 2012; Atkinson, 2002).

The analysis draws upon the narratives of these students at points where phronesis (prudence or practical wisdom) is recounted. Aristotle claimed that only a person of experience can practice practical wisdom (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 8). Phronesis can be a useful way of thinking about how post-Access to HE students use their life experiences in order to navigate around the barriers they face during their art and design education. Some mature students take on the responsibility to act well for themselves and others in order to live a good life (that which fulfils their hopes and dreams to become artists or designers).

This discussion considers Chad's story where I have noticed link to phronesis or on occasion, the absence of wise judgement. Chad is a post-Access student studying on a BA (Hons) Surface Pattern degree course. Surface pattern designers are concerned with designing for surfaces and embellishments which could include wallpapers, fabrics, flooring, and packaging. She is a mature student in her early 40s and is studying on a very competitive course (with a yearly intake of 60 students). Chad is the first post-Access student to get a place in five years. She previously has had a varied career in the Navy and as a flight assistant on a commercial airline. She began her degree with a small child to care for and lived with her husband who was in full-time employment.

Three significant points in the narrative are considered: Chad's first success; Chad's unexpected news and Chad's survival of level five.

Practical wisdom

Book six of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a model of deliberation known as phronesis, practical wisdom or prudence where the person who practises this is known as the phronimos (Ricoeur, 1994, p.174):

A sagacious man is supposed be characterised by his ability to reach sound conclusions in his deliberations about what is good for himself and advantage to him, and this not in one department of life – in what concerns his health, for example, or his physical strength – but what conduces to the good life as a whole. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 5 p.176)

The phronimos firstly recognises the singularity of a particular situation and is able to determine a best course of action. They understand what it means to act well, justly and with courage, (Wall, 2005, 315). Phronesis is about being able make good decisions that allow people to act well for themselves and others in order to live good life together. It is an intellectual virtue where acting well is not through habit or conditioning, but through thought and deliberation. It sits with the other forms of intellect *sophia* (purely theoretical intelligence) and *techné* (technical expertise) (Skilleas, 2006, p.267).

Practical wisdom is closely interconnected with cardinal virtues such temperance, fortitude and justice. The phronimos is guided by these virtues in determining the correct course of action (Nussbaum, 2001, p.306). Thus the person of practical wisdom can identify a situation in which courage is needed or perhaps another one in which moderation is required.

Nussbaum describes how there should not be a fixed way of understanding a situation; the generalities of character and principles should be modified in light of a particular context or situation:

Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception – albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid. (Nussbaum, 2001, p.306)

Being able to judge and act well is seen as intrinsic to being a human living a good life. How someone lives a 'good life' is in some ways dependant on context and the particularities of the situations thrown up by life. For Ricoeur (1994, p. 177) the word 'life' designates the person as a whole rather than a series of practices. He says that to live a life well is the standard of excellence which Ricoeur calls the life plan. The 'good life' is a nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements in regard to a life to be fulfilled or unfulfilled (Ricoeur, 1994, p.179). The good life is where all actions (even though they may have ends in themselves) are directed by these ideals and dreams. It seems that this is very pertinent to those mature students who choose to make difficult decisions in order to pursue the good life, by achieving a degree to become an artist or designer.

Chad's Story

Chad's First success

Chad and I met in a seminar room in order to discuss her first term on the course. The meeting was taken up with her relief that she was proving herself to be on the right degree but she still had anxieties about the future. She informed me that she had just received her marks for the first brief and was the only student to achieve over 70.

It was like a race to get onto this course. Now the pressures off now and it's a lot less stressful, it's really enjoyable and now I can relax and I don't mean not work hard, I mean concentrate on the subject you enjoy. It's almost like a hobby; what I do at home, if you know what I mean? That's the way I see it now; I have been allowed to do my interests now without having to, I don't know, litter the kitchen table. (Chad, November 2011)

In comparison to her Access to HE course being very intense the first term of Chad's degree seemed to be less pressured. She aimed to carry out her design work within college time. Here Chad makes a link between her success and her previous experience where she has developed an eye for perceiving the problems of managing her learning alongside her home life (Koethagen et al., 2001, p.27). The motivation of desire is mentioned here; the love of the subject. Doing her art work in a formal educational setting means it doesn't impinge on her home life. Aiming to have clear boundaries between professional and home activities seems to be a means of relieving stress. Emotions that are in balance with rational thought enable Chad to act well for herself and her family (Nussbaum, 2001, p.308). Chad at this point tempers her desire to be a designer with the need for order at home.

There are students on my course who are phenomenal on computers. I am absolutely atrocious on the computer; it's not that I am unwilling to learn. It's just something you need to be doing all the time to get the practice up. I am going to have to make time to have a go with it. I bought a package at home for my computer so I'm able to start practising with that. There are people who are stronger in different ways and their time will come. Digital Design - this won't be my strength and I'm not bothered by that. I'm quite realistic about it. I'm just glad. The reason why I'm happy is that I have set the standard for myself because I have justified being on the course. I have managed to justify being on the course in this term and that's what it's about. (Chad, November 2011)

Chad has perceived a possible problem in her design education, the first requirement of acting with prudence is to be able to 'size up' a situation and to recognise a need for appropriate action (Nussbaum, 2001, p.300; Ricoeur, 1994). She has a fear of not being as skilled as other people in computer aided design and has recognised the need to practice her skills. She is trying to moderate this fear by acknowledging her strengths in other areas that confirm she belongs on the course. At the same time Chad has to justify that she has made the right decision to pursue her education. She decided to act and buy a programme so she can practise the skills that she sees as being necessary in digital design. At this stage in Chad's

narrative it appears that she is acting prudently. It could be questioned as to whether her fears are appropriate, are all other students as skilful as she imagines? What seems to be an indicator of practical wisdom is Chad's ability to look at the bigger picture, to be more circumspect (Aquinas, Summa Theological, part 2, question 48) and she considered good marks an indicator of her other strengths as a means to temper her fear of not being good enough. Temperance is a significant virtue when acting prudently so that emotions do not become inappropriate and out of balance with rational thought (Nussbaum, 2001, p.308). However, buying a package with which Chad can practise with at home was contrary to her initial aim of keeping her studies and domestic life separate. Mature students need to make sacrifices and accommodations in order to study and manage a young family.

Chad's Unexpected News

During the second meeting of the year, Chad and I met in the design studio in her work space where sketches inspired by the 1950s were on the wall. She looked very tired and was a little wider around her middle:

I'm six months pregnant now, so at my age I'm feeling it, really feeling it but the whole year has been ... I've really enjoyed it, absolutely enjoyed it, it's been fantastic. (Chad, June 2012)

Nussbaum (2001, p.305) has said that the phronimos should be open to life's surprises and be open and flexible in order to change a course of action to fit an unexpected situation. The question was now how would Chad deal with motherhood, pregnancy and a demanding course? Would she be motivated enough to remain at the college or would this be an extra burden that meant her dream to be a textile design was untenable? She told me she intended to take a year out, but was already planning how to turn this into an opportunity to improve her own skills and abilities:

S: So do you intend to keep working on your design practice even though you're not here for this next year?

C: I won't be producing any work but I will be collecting visual imagery for future projects; getting some sketch ideas together to give myself more of a springboard for the second year. I'd like to have a collection of work for me to start the print-making projects. That's my first thing the second one is to learn Illustrator and Photoshop.

S: Have you got those packages?

C: Yes I've got those packages, I just haven't had the time to ... I'll try and do as much as I can when the baby comes along. It's going to be difficult that's why I'm taking a year off because they just take over. Babies take over; I said this on Access that you can't do it. I have to take the time out it's just not possible to work and juggle that at the same time.

Chad deals with this new occurrence by employing her practical wisdom. She plans activities that will be achievable in the time constraints she has. One activity she enjoys is undertaking visual research which she recognises is important to later success on the course. She is able to deal with the surprise of pregnancy whilst still keeping her eye on her long term goal. Here her desires to be a textile designer and

a mother are woven together in order to ultimately live a good life. During Chad's deliberations she uses her past experiences of caring for a baby to limit her expectations of what she can achieve during the year away from college. She has gained an insight into her physical capabilities and knows it is prudent to take a year out.

I'll start the second year with completely new people and they'll have established themselves as a group. So it'll be more difficult for me to fit into that year but my classmates in this particular year will be in third year and be next door. It won't be so bad, my friends will be around so... (Chad, June 2012)

Chad demonstrated foresight in how she imagines her return, showing a concern for possibly feeling isolated. Again she tried to moderate her fear by seeing that she could position herself next to her old friends in the studio. Being able to imagine a possible future as well as drawing upon past experiences is an important aspect of prudence (Erben, 1998, pp.10-11). Ricoeur (1994) would say that the ability to think narratively enables Chad to weave the imagined future with the experienced past into a narrative unity, (Simms, 2003, p.103). Chad has been able to make friends during her first year and has recognised their importance in contributing to her educational success. However, she does not seem to have the confidence that as she has made friends with younger students this year she will be able to bond again with a new cohort of students in a year's time.

Surviving level Five

After taking a year out Chad does return to complete her course having given birth to a baby boy. The final interview with Chad is at the end of her second year. She appeared to have lost a little of her sparkle.

I am determined and enjoy designing but it is impossible to weave it into the rest of your life. I should be enjoying it but its deadline after deadline. I am not twenty years old – I would never take on five or six deadlines at once – you have to be discerning. It's not as bad for the young ones. (Chad, May 2014)

Chad makes the point that through her experience of life she knows what she can manage, but when on a course deadlines are set by people who do not understand about her other commitments.

They are happy to keep me up at night. We get given deadline dates well in advance which is fine. But then they give us loads of other tasks. Like the 3000 word essay I finished at 3.30am the night before. I am sure the neighbours think there is something strange going on at our house as the spare bedroom light is always on until the small hours. I creep to bed so I don't wake my husband he is tired and has to get up early. This is driving him mad. There is no point talking to the tutors because I will only cry and the work still has to be done, I don't want an extension and I don't want to lose marks. Nana's in hospital – broken her hip – and I'm the only relative in the

area so I visit her and watch the kids as well – What the hell! (Chad, May 2014)

The last interview echoes issues to with choice and control.

I am not giving up. This is my path - something is making me stay and not give up. At the moment it's not easy; it's hard on Access students. When you get older the difficulties are your choice, when you are younger they are imposed on you. Older people make choices but you can't make a choice on this course you just have to do it. (Chad, May 2014)

The last comment that Chad makes raises some pertinent questions. What is it that keeps her on course? Her own personal capacities for resilience; the personal investment she has made in terms of time and also lost time with her family; is it a strong desire to achieve and be a designer? The demands of the course are seen as inflexible 'you just have to do it' and this seems to taking away her adulthood; her ability to make choices. It is also interesting that she still defines herself as an Access person as if that identity is still with her she still views herself as being different from the other younger students.

Conclusion

Looking at Chad's story overall it seemed at first that she was adept at practical wisdom. Chad wanted to live a good life and part of that for her was to be a professional designer. She recognised the need to balance her education with her home life. She was able to identify the skills she needed and devise a plan of action to educate herself. Chad was able to recognise her fears about, firstly, being 'bad at computers' and secondly about not fitting in with a new cohort of students. But she was able to temper those fears by recognising her strengths or she was able to plan strategies for overcoming future problems. Chad had to consider others like her children, her husband and her Nana when she made decisions. She drew upon the experiences she had on Access to HE to help her settle in on her course. She also remembered her previous experiences of being pregnant in order to understand she needed to take a year out when she got pregnant again.

However, as time went on it became apparent that the issue of feeling inadequate in the area of computer aided design was not being resolved. Chad refused to ask for help when she was struggling as if that would show weakness. She seemed determined to represent herself to the tutors as being able to cope as well as the other students. She imagined that the younger students had an easier time on the course. A constructed 'generalised other' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2007) was used throughout Chad's narrative as a representation of normalcy against which she could judge or evaluate her aptitudes. This imagined group of 'normal' students was often described as being younger as opposed to her maturity. She imagined that they were more computer literate, had more free time and were coping with the stress of the course more effectively.

In the last meeting Chad talked about having to accept the difficulties that the course threw at her. She felt that her choices had been taken away so she was forced to comply with what was demanded of her. Does the institution disable Chad's (and

other students') sense of agency and ability to be a person of practical wisdom? Within the field of higher education Chad's account of her learning experiences substantiates the work of Williams (2013) who argues that some of the practices of higher education 'infantise' students. The culture of the course is not explicit in Chad's account, but it seems to be very challenging; by 'keeping students on their toes'. But is this appropriate for a mature student and mother? For Ricoeur (1994, p.180) phronesis aimed at the ethical intention of, 'the good life with and for others in just institutions.' The demands that are made of Chad and her family do not seem just especially at level five. She doesn't mention her friends during the last meeting and this made me wonder how the supportive group ethos of the cohort could be maintained within an individualistic, competitive course culture?

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