Heutagogy in Action: An Action Research Project in Art Education

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Reflective Practice   Art Education   Heutagogy   Self-Determination Theory

This chapter describes the journey of a teacher (learning leader) and his students (learners) in applying some innovative approaches to enhance learning in a higher education setting. Based on the principles of heutagogy or self-determined learning, the learning leader used action research to implement and investigate some innovative learning experiences in a History of Art class in an Australian university. For both the learning leader and two groups of learners, this experiment in learner-centred learning was very successful because the delivery and receiving of required essential course material became less predictable, less prescribed. This created a sense of spontaneity and discovery of knowledge. Such engagement in the process makes for more meaningful learning and interaction between parties. The impact of implementing a heutagogical approach encouraged other lecturers to re-examine their teaching methods to re-structure some of their units of teaching.

Introduction

This project was undertaken at an Australian University and involved redesigning a subject within a visual arts degree using heutagogical principles. The subject is called 'The History & Theory of Western Art' and unlike other art-practice units, this unit is primarily theoretical, involving the analysis of key artworks rather than engaging in practice. Over the twenty-five years of having taught this unit, the learning methodology had remained essentially didactic via lectures with little time for discussion. Having attended a heutagogy workshop, I recognised that my learners might better identify relevance to their own art practice if I could make the subject more learner-centric rather than teacher-centric using heutagogical approaches. Thus, if some experiential engagement with the information could be designed, then it might become applicable to the learner's own art practice, providing a strong sense of purpose to continue as practicing artists outside, and beyond the requirements, of the degree. The rest of this chapter describes how I went about transforming this course and what happened in the process.

The process

Two cohorts of undergraduate students, in successive years, took part in this project. Each course was run over thirteen-weeks. There were 12 students in 2017 and six students in 2018. Their age range was 19 to 25 years, with a 68-year old woman in the first cohort. I explained at the outset that I was going to attempt a new approach to teaching the subject using heutagogical principles and told them what that entailed. The learners were also informed that I would

seek feedback about their experience during and at the end of the course. I took weekly reflective notes, about the effectiveness or otherwise of the heutagogical approach. This included examination of assignments and student feedback. Half the students responded to the invitation to provide written feedback about their learning experience.

Reflections

Reflections on preparation of the lecturer for the heutagogical approach

While designing heutagogical approaches, the prescribed accredited degree's "unit learning outcomes" could not be ignored or altered. The organisation and planning of the delivery of content was shaped by a major review of *all* participant's roles. A fundamental shift in mind-set saw me approach the content as a "learning leader", as opposed to "lecturer" and "students" saw themselves as "self-learners" (Hase, 2014b). It was anticipated that all would experience a noticeable difference in the learning environment and how subject matter was shared rather than experiencing the more traditional hierarchical framework, which employs dispensation of information from above to empty vessels below, with varying degrees of engagement.

Wanting the learners to have more engagement with class-content I, the learning-leader, needed to design a format of delivery that allowed for more lateral thinking and participation, while still maintaining an underpinning pathway to prescribed goals. I re-visited original power-points, stripping out "fillers" to leave windows for more participatory filling of gaps by learners. Short introductory narrated videos – maximum of 10 minutes – and a PDF of main images, were posted weekly and online to provide an overview of forthcoming class content. This gave learners advanced viewing, enabling thinking or research time prior to discussion in the wider group.

Assuming learners had little previous knowledge, this encouraged the learner's own critical thinking in anticipation of classroom discussion. A short video was also posted after the class, re-capping what had transpired. Any learner apprehensive about displaying a weakness in this unit had these pre-class resources to facilitate confidence-building. This process empowered the student to transition to a more learner-centred approach of study.

Reflection and action: Organising the learning

Learners appreciated the breadth of content available to them before the course. They remarked that they had looked over the PDF and video presentations. This encouraged class attendance, either because it appeared the class would be interesting, they had some self-confidence in what was expected of them, or they felt they would miss out on participatory experiences. Learners felt online content helped with revision for assessment items. The post-class review videos informed absentees of what they had missed. It not only brought them up-to-date, but also encouraged them not to miss classes for fear of missing out again.

Creating opportunities for personal choice declares, subtly, that the learners have more control of their learning. The study area therefore became more fluid to the extent that a "tea-trolley", with tea and coffee and accompanying chocolate biscuits and soft drinks, was set up in the classroom. Having short breaks in the same room avoided breaking up the group atmosphere, allowing continued interaction. Conversation about artworks continued seamlessly in the informal setting. The cost of refreshments far outweighed the value afforded to the learning experience. Rather than a break in learning, another way of sharing or re-capping class content was experienced. It also had the advantage of breaking down perceived hierarchical barriers between peers and/or "lecturer" and "student". It allowed quieter individuals to talk about their ideas in a less formal setting, giving them a sense of inclusion in discussion. Some maintained it contributed to their overall enjoyment of the session, impacting on their decision to attend weekly classes.

Reflection and action: The flipped classroom

As images and support information was available through the intranet, learners could prepare for sessions, reminiscent of the flipped classroom technique (e.g. Lage, Platt & Treglia, 2000). Having looked at images in class, grouped learners discussed them in terms of *content, form* and *function* at the start of an exercise, which employed a

variation of the World Café method used to share information and ensure maximum input. Having split into small groups, an elected chairperson documented the discussion in bullet-points. The chairperson remained with half of the table-group while the rest of the table-group rotated around the other tables, taking the ideas from their initial discussion groups and contributing to the findings of the next table until all ideas were shared. My role here was one of stimulating discussion and adding any information that had not been considered. This requires the learning leader to be totally on top of their subject (Hase, 2014), being capable of intervening when necessary, so that all information is brought out while avoiding control or restriction of the way by which information is obtained.

Another exercise discussed artists' representation of Parisian life in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Learners then sought out one image, via their mobile phones, that would typify *their own* experience of 21st Century life. This meant exploring the meaning of "modernity" to them and their own times. They then arranged their devices on the floor, discussing their choices so as to best express the concept. This exercise was successful in both cycles. This practice and discussion brought older ideas into a contemporary context and gave them relevance.

Action and reflection: Experiential learning, emotion and reflexivity

Positive emotional experiences have been consistently shown to play a critical role in learning (Den Ouden et al, 2013; Tyang, 2017) and is a major component of heutagogy (Hase, 2016). Experiential learning has also found neuroscientific support in embedding learning (Schenck & Cruikshank, 2015).

This way of learning was applied to the investigation of art movements. Citing Marcel Duchamp's exhibiting of an upturned urinal of 1917, learners were asked, "Do you think that simply by an artist selecting something and calling it art, makes it art?" Learners lined up, with those on the extreme right representing "No, not at all" through a range of those on the extreme left representing, "Yes, of course." At the end of class this exercise would be repeated to see if opinions, through the practical experiences and group discussions in class, had shifted. This exercise was designed to encourage the learner to consider gut-reaction, based on limited knowledge, by comparison to informed response. Learners engaged in the discussion about initial impressions versus considered decision-making. Feedback was positive.

Further emulating Dada practices, learners created their own version of "The Cabaret Voltaire" nightclub in Zürich in 1916. An array of activities mirrored the cacophony and disrespect for the establishment akin to original Dadaists. This activity was very successful for both groups. Amusing and liberating while being instructive, it encouraged learners to be uninhibited, and required the learning leader to be equally participatory. This exercise facilitated meaningful learning through memorable lived experience.

The 1960s art movement, Fluxus, was approached in a similar way. A brief overview of Fluxus was given and, as its founder John Maciunas had done, a printout of his manifesto was flung out at the audience. Following the viewing of a YouTube recording of John Cage's famous silent musical performance, *4 Minutes 33 Seconds*. Class-discussion showed polarised responses from learners.

Having studied Dada, learners were not fazed by the experimental nature of Fluxus, but neither did they seem impacted by it. Being a musician myself, I was concerned with the complacency with which learner/audiences were accepting such art images, such as the *Solo For Violin* – a performance piece where the artist follows a written "score" that leads to the destruction of a violin. To counteract learners' complacency, I took what looked to be a perfectly serviceable guitar, and, following Maciunas' score to *Solo For Violin* – which has no formal musical notation but rather written instructions – began playing a "sentimental tune". Then, as the score required, hammers and nails, and eventually saws and an electric drill, were used on the guitar. The startled learners then contributed to the destruction of the instrument.

Learners' emotions ranged from bemusement and amusement to concern for what, from a conventional understanding of a guitar's use, resulted in a destroyed instrument. They then reflected on these feelings as a means to enhancing learning (Dweck, 2006). In both cycles, mobile phones voluntarily emerged – learners documenting the "happening" for themselves with a view to sharing with others through social media. Posting content taken from their

theory classes indicated that the learner saw relevance to his or her contemporary world and social sphere, demonstrating that academic information had become valued, meaningful knowledge.

Reflection and action: Engaging the senses

When investigating the artistic practice of collage as in the works of Cubists, Dadaists and Surrealists through to that of Pop art and subsequent "remediation" and "recycling" of imagery and sounds of post-modernism and beyond, I engaged in class "parlour-games" to demonstrate the interweaving of the arts and wider culture. I would perform songs, accompanied on guitar, with projected lyrics and associated images, so that these could be discussed in relation to artworks.

Feedback from participants was that such live performances lent association to, and recall of, historical information. Learners cited the spontaneity and break in mood as enhancing and contributing much to their learning experience. This is consistent with the way that engaging multiple senses improves recall, which is essential for learning (Shams & Seitz, 2008).

Reflection and action: Consolidating learning

In Class 1, major works that had been discussed were collated onto one screen for quick re-cap purposes. In Class 2, this was substituted by the more interactive online *Kahoot* quiz format. (The *Kahoot* quiz is set up online prior to the lecture – questions and content are set by the lecturer to target or revise whatever topic is appropriate.) Learners used their own mobile phone devices, created a fun nickname and competed against each other, and against time, to answer the questions; music and images could be used. The *Kahoot* end-of-session quiz was incredibly popular. Learners volunteered that it helped them consolidate their learning, and reinforced that repetition is essential for long term memory (Maccotta & Buckner, 2004).

Reflection and action: Experimentation

A great deal of learning from birth is achieved by exploring, by being engaged in doing things and discovering how the world works. The more satisfying, engaging and exciting the education process, the more internally reinforcing it is to the learner through the release of dopamine (Willis, 2006).

For the session investigating the Fauves art movement, I drew outlines on canvases of works from earlier periods of Art History – Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or John Constable's *Haywain*, for instance. A colour reproduction of these originals were on-hand while learners painted-in the outlined images using reversed/complementary colour values of the originals, applying paint more abrasively – apropos *Les Fauves*. Learners discussed the nature of the original works to that of the works they had recreated in the Fauve style.

The practical working through of the Fauvist theory and technique opened-up the learners' appreciation of this modernist movement. One learner decided to use a mobile phone to look at his/her? own 'fauve-like' rendition. By turning the mode to black and white, they could compare the tonal values of the radical colours to the tonal values of the original work. This was a significant learner-led break-through. Learners all took to looking at their works in this way and recognized how tone is related to hue and colour – in short, how Fauvism works. Similarly, after a brief overview of iconic cubist works, a practical drawing session cemented academic information through lived experience. Preconceived biases from learners questioning the merit of some Modern and Contemporary art movements became much more balanced and informed.

This impact of practical workshopping was perhaps best demonstrated in the session addressing American Abstract Expressionism. Having discussed some pivotal Jackson Pollock works, learners mixed, then threw, dribbled, and poured paint onto a huge canvas on the studio floor. Animated discussion ensued as to what colour to use and where to pour it, what technique to use to go over preceding colours. The learners' meeting with "Jack the Dripper" was, suitably, a visceral experience. In this practice/learner-led approach, learners experienced and recognised theory in practice and, perhaps more importantly, saw application of the knowledge to themselves as practicing artists. Learners displayed practical artworks made in the theory classes on the university walls. Such displays gave extended credence to the

work. Such positive "advertising" of an available subject within a degree course attracts other learners from other courses. Having learners enthusiastic in choosing classes equates with the viability of courses.

Conclusion

For myself, the learning leader, and the learners, this experiment in learner-centred learning was very successful because the delivery and receiving of required essential course material became less predictable, less prescribed. This created a sense of spontaneity and discovery of knowledge. The experience was a huge shift from didactic teaching to a learner-centric approach. Feedback from the learners was extremely positive, with learners feeling they had contributed in no small part in shaping their learning experience. The impact of implementing a heutagogical approach encouraged other lecturers at the university to restructure some of their approaches to teaching. While this was a small case study, it might provide other learning leaders with some ideas about applying heutagogy in their own setting, whether it be in school, higher education or non-formal educational settings.

I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.
— Confucious

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