

Understanding Discomfort of a Symptom of Grown in the Artist Educator Identity Formation

The idea of the ‘artist-educator’ in secondary education focuses a significant duality on the role of being an art teacher. Seemingly two diverging professional entities converge to form an integrated being. This ‘interdisciplinary fusion’ implicates necessities of existence, those being the professionalism to maintain an individualised art practice and the professionalism to teach the appropriate learning from that practice (Anderson, 1981, p. 45). This fusion is assumptious in its belief that art practice meets harmoniously with what can be taught under the framework of curriculum. Curriculum is inherently focused not on the singular existence of an art teacher's practice, but instead on the assumed foundations that all art teachers can disseminate a standardised learning irrespective of practice methodology.

One of the struggles I found and have been challenged by within my educational practice is the sense of discomfort found when teaching beyond my art practices boundaries. This centers on media, techniques or subject matter that I as an art educator must disseminate to students, without having a central connection or identification of practice to them. In Sally Maitlis’ *Bringing My Selves to Work: A Revisionist History of an Academic Career* (2024), Maitlis describes the acknowledged decision for the ‘splitting, segmenting, and often concealing each of two meaningful work identities ... ‘ (Maitlis, 2024, p.346). The discomfort felt often leads to an implied restriction of practice elements, limiting the breadth of art practice to what can only be deemed as previously mastered.

In response to this acknowledged issue, I’ve sought to implement elements of a reflective practice. From the wider viewpoint on education, reflective practice offers an introspective viewpoint of professional and personal identity and the convergence of both identities towards a desired mediation. The key theoretical frameworks informing this introspection include Schön’s Reflective Practice Theory, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and Brookfield’s Critical Reflection Theory. These provide a structured guidance that seeks to address the sense of discomfort for the purpose of developing a broader understanding of practice. A key focus for this reflective practice was the adaptation of teaching practices and beliefs in response to the discomfort. The unpacking of both unique identities of artist educators focuses this reflection towards assessing through autoethnographic exploration and a qualitative reflective methodology.

In James G. Daichendt’s *Redefining the Artist-Teacher* (2009), Daichentd’s offers a set of criteria or characteristics that he believes can be seen as applicable from the earliest art education philosophies of George Wallis’ time to contemporary classroom settings relating to the artist teacher. One of the aforementioned criteria is that ‘Teaching should be a direct extension of studio practice’ (Daichendt, 2009, p.37). Daichendt’s characteristics of persona relating to the artist-teacher entity, bypasses a reflection of the commitments of the divergent practices, instead it relates the persona to the desirable perceptions of non participants.

In questioning how the art practice may be shaped, altered or censored for application in the classroom context, I come to question my own discomfort with teaching beyond my art practices constraints. The compatibility of both practices is often overlooked in a wider educational context, and the authority to segment the two aspects is often not afforded. This can be related back to the argument of Gaztambide-Fernández that the view of the artist as representator shares ... the notion that artists are transmitters of something larger than themselves' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008, p.250). Art teachers are seen as viewpoints of the two broad categories of profession, those being the arts and education. The apparent dichotomy between art practice and education practice is often not an authoritative choice of the art teacher, but a response to the conditions of habitation, curriculum and educational readiness.

In my experience I would routinely feel a sense of vulnerability in terms of my professional identity as an art educator due to inherent self doubt focused on my proficiency or lack thereof in media extended beyond my art practice of sculptural ceramics. Within my artistic practice of ceramics and as it exists within the classroom, I felt a greater sense of personal control over the authoritative teaching position, as I felt due to my educational background and professional accomplishments I had a degree of mastery of these curricular elements. Then when I was challenged to extend my teaching beyond the familiar practice I had known, feelings of doubt over artistic competency grew and I questioned whether I could surmount the expectations of pupils or curriculum standards. This external issue with professional identity focused on feelings of professional ineptitude and uncertainty regarding whether my artistic practice was broad enough to cater to educational needs in the secondary classroom.

My internal reflections on the situation were inherently immediate to the situation I found discomfort in. Schön writes that a pitfall of reflection-in-action is that thought and action become 'fused together in the conventional wisdom, they have become a myth that reinforces the ever-present tendency to mystify the art of practice' (Schön, 1991 , p.278). My process for reflection at the point of discomfort reinforced my feelings of discomfort and rationised feelings of uncertainty regarding practice. I saw the discomfort as being inherently wrong and a testament to the chasm between my practice as an educator and artist. In Lev Vygotsky's *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (1978) he defines the key theoretical framework of the Zone of Proximal Development as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The ZPD iterates a development from the stagnant social identity to the individual learner who has moved beyond the constraints of external actors, through the assistance of a more informed other.

Discomfort is often a factor of the development seen in the ZPD, and my application of reflection within this feeling of inadequacy was not informed by understandings of the ZPD; instead it

was a catatonic immobility in professional identity. This can be related to the writings of Brookfield who notes that 'the only way a deeply ingrained perspective on experience is challenged is if some external event jerks us out of our comfort zone, some little bomb of dissonance shatters our habitual rationales for doing the self-destructive things we do' (Brookfield, 2017, p.40). I was existing in a self deprecating spiral of self-doubt and negative professional identification and as such I couldn't see the potential the situation afforded me to yield a reflective practice that would allow me to reflect-on-action and implement changes that lead to a sense of comfort. Jordan (2015) identified that 'when the art teacher's art practice is interrupted or suppressed, often through the demands of the classroom, the artist within the teacher can be conflicted in fulfilling the interrelationship between the personal and professional identities' (Jordan, 2015, p.143). Within this experience the disconnect between the dualistic identities materialised in a stagnation of identity development and an isolated viewpoint of practice.

In responding to the discomfort felt, I've sought an expansion of what I had assumed to be my art practice. Before and during my initial time acting as an art educator, I would have imagined or identified my practice as being fixed and closed focusing solely on site specific large scale ceramic sculpture. This practice identification was rooted in my educational experiences and the professional attainment of exhibiting my work amongst other sculptural work. As such the materiality of paint or charcoal or print media felt alien to my practice and I had a certain sensitivity to producing work for educational purposes within these mediums. This was compounded by external demands of student expectations, assumed technical deficiency and curriculum demands even though I couldn't verbalise the experiences that caused this.

Prior to joining my educational course I completed a group interview where the question of the most suitable word to describe what a teacher should be was posed to the group. My answer was that the art teacher should be adaptable regarding the needs of the students and their educational environment. Upon reflection it seems that I often held an unattainable idealised viewpoint of the arts educator creating an identity of the teacher as an 'other' to me. My view of my own practice was inherently incongruent with my own expectations of what an arts educator should be. I still hold the viewpoint that adaptability is a foremost quality for arts educators to hold, however I've found my own approach to adaptability consists of not an idealised educator who can execute every media, instead it's been the broadening of perspective to meet discomfort where it exists in the classroom.

The discomfort has manifested itself as means for professional growth and to broaden my pedagogy through accepting discomfort as part of the professional identity growing pains. Discomfort exists in education not as a fixed deterrent, but instead as a continuum of professional growth. Relating back to Vygotsky's ZPD, the discomfort relays that in addressing my feelings towards my practice, the previously assumed and rigid understanding has been challenged and replaced with a

knowledge that practice is a holistic entity that cannot remain an exclusionary implement to contain growth.

In Marcel Duchamp's *The Creative Act* (1957) he outlines art creation as being dualistic with 'the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity' (Duchamp and Dachy, 1994). For Duchamp the role of art creation as necessitated for the artist is antagonistically coupled with a generational observation or gaze that compounds the work as art. This understanding of artist entity references not material confines of medium or practice, focusing instead on the idea that generational attainment persists.

Michel D. Day writing in artist *Artist-Teacher: A Problematic Model for Art Education* (1986) notes that 'the basic problem with the artist-teacher model in secondary schools, ... , centres on incompatibilities between the artist agenda and the teachers responsibilities to pupils (Day, 1986, p.39). In comparison to Duchamp's harmoniously coupled viewpoint of artist-spectator, Day presents that the agency of artist practice transgresses on the educational driven roles of the teacher. The border role of an artist educator presents challenges to the identity, with the confinements or curriculum and professional practice necessitating boundaries that can seem incompatible with values of practice.

Josef Winter argues from the perspective of teaching as an art form in the context of art education in the classroom that 'succinct preparations are insufficient, because the teacher becomes dependent on specific outcome and response from the pupils – a response which correlates to the preparations (Winter, 2023, p.146). This correlates with my feelings towards the adaptations I've made to the practice of teaching. In times of discomfort relating to media exploration in the classroom, I've sought to be able to manage the outputs or expectation, to visualise that what students are creating is enough to visualise my own proficiency to external viewers.

Brookfield (2017) offers four 'lenses for critical reflection' those being student eyes, colleagues perceptions, self experience and theory. Honing in on students' eyes, Brookfield writes that 'in order to make good decisions about the ways we organize learning, construct assignments, sequence instruction, and apply specific classroom protocols we need to know what's going on in students' heads' (Brookfield, 2017, p.62). The centrality of experiential learning, through the use of material, techniques and process new to the students, remains an integral motivation for the pursuit of an arts education and must be foremost in educators minds.

Max Van Manen writing in *On the Epistemology of Reflective Practice* (1995) focuses on Dewey's earlier perspective on the nature of reflection and the sequential steps for this arguing that 'a proper sequencing of such reflective steps make up reflective experience which in turn can lead to analysis and evaluation, and then to further reflective action (Van Manen, 1995, p.33). Reflective practice has been implemented in my classroom as a qualitative methodology from which I can work towards becoming a responsive teacher. Moving from Schön ideas of reflection-in-action to

reflection-on-action I've found a sense of comfort in knowing that a broader experience of practice exists where before it did not.

In the past when I've been focused on the exclusionary singular medium specific practice, I've reflected on the discomfort to investigate the broader sense of practice that facilitates comfort in being an artist-educator. Solo taxonomy has been implemented throughout this reflective practice to focus how my singular experiences as a practitioner can be further developed and connected to issues that affect other practitioners. The issues of student expectation, curricular demands and technical constraints have been assessed and have led me towards learnings that facilitate broader contexts for art education.

Furthermore the autoethnographic approach to this assignment has facilitated a grounder learning experience. Autoethnography is defined as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis 2004, Holman Jones 2005 cited by Ellis 2005 et.al). One of the key elements I brought towards my reflective practice approach is the co-creation of narrative of study from discussions with students and colleagues. In discursive conversations with the more experienced colleagues, I developed an acknowledged understanding of how discomfort manifests in the classroom and how it's an experience related to growth. When talking to students I developed an understanding of their response to new materials and how challenging them through experiential learning can inform my own practice boundaries. This actualised in the classroom experience of a greater sense of comfort in teaching materials beyond my practice.

In conclusion, discomfort in teaching art practice within the classroom has led to an internal reflection of practice. Focusing on expanding the narrowing viewpoint of practice, I've found a broadened perspective of materiality in a both professional and personal context. The acceptance of a more intersectional practice and the artist-educator identity has resulted in a developed approach to education, focusing a greater perspective on experiencing new materials and authentically responding to them. Through reflection I've come to new pedagogical enquiries and a process motivated by experimentation and artistic understanding.

Solo taxonomy has been and remains a key framing of my reflection focusing on moving from the unistructural experience of the feeling of discomfort to finally the extended abstract that iterates that my discomfort is a connection and habit of professional growth and identity development. This experience of practice broadening and the process that has driven this is applicable to all artists-educators. In conversations with fellow student-teachers we've shared and identified experiences of external pressure or expectation that are viewpoints of skill limitation compounds. In seeing the discomfort not as a response to the challenge of identity or assumption of inadequacy, but instead as a mechanism for personal change we can harbour a greater sense of control and experimentation in both our practices and classroom.

I'd encourage new art-educators to share their experiences with the sense of discomfort in practice and to create a space in which the discomfort can be addressed, altered and adhered to visions of growth and development. This area of enquiry also could manifest itself in continuing professional development workshops or broader educational conversations to address the often internalised struggle of identity expectation. In viewing myself as an artist educator I've moved from the view of what I lack or don't possess instead I've moved towards celebrating the universality of practice, the continuum to find something that I can draw back towards myself.