

Building Teacherly Roles Together: An A/r/tographic Exploration of Agency in Constructivist Learning

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Given that learner agency in making meaning from subjective learning experiences is central to constructivism, how can teachers provide structure without diminishing that agency? This paper comprises an a/r/tographic analysis of a practice-based research project situated outside formal education, which shares the teacher's role across a community learning group. This group collectively chose and researched a new topic for each session, sharing this research in session and discussing the lesson this made. This model not only provides the basis for a consensual education, but also offers opportunity for empowerment through collectively taking ownership of learning, demonstrating that as engaged learners we can shape the structures through which we build learning agency. As education and culture shape each other, so learners emerge as critical citizens able to re/form community and culture for mutual benefit, open in turn to being re/formed by them.

Understanding learning as a creative process, this paper juxtaposes Gert Biesta's concept of creative practice as a dialogue with the world against the re-emergent concept of cultural democracy. Education re/produces cultural values; by not assuming control of learners' education for them – by not inhabiting the role of teacher – we do not diminish the space for new, emergent structures to be realised. This paper seeks to show that by performing the teacher's functions between us, we increase our intrinsic motivation for learning, also allowing for possibilities of new knowledge emerging. As will be shown, constructivism needs no singular teachers, only people to learn alongside and share the practice of learning with.

Keywords: A/r/tography, artistic practice, collaboration, community learning, constructivism, cultural/educational democracy, teacherly role

Disrupting the Role of 'Teacher'

The question of how to 'conduct' education is one that is unlikely to ever be conclusively answered. If, as Biesta argues, education is about the ongoing "formation of the person" (2015, 352), then how can any one teacher satisfy the various demands of all those invested (families, schools, employers, politicians, etc) in how any one person is, and continues to be, formed? Most of these investors would likely claim to be acting in the best interests of the learner, from their own perspective, yet despite the exponential amounts of research into learning theory conducted over the last century there are still categories of learners of all ages labelled as "non-smart", who are arguably being disenfranchised from their own ability to learn (Robinson 2008).

Perhaps the strongest attempts to address this disenfranchisement and affect change in education have come from

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educationists¹ in constructivist pedagogy. Constructivism suggests that through the experiential process of learning, learners construct subjective interpretations of an objective reality – learning is situated in the context of the learner and meaning is constructed anew by each person, each time it is learned (Armitage et al. 2016). The teacher, rather than delivering facts, instead suggests questions and supports learners in finding answers, thereby increasing learners' agency. They are charged with keeping learners' experiences educative and not what Dewey calls "mis-educative" (1938, 25) – meaning leading to erroneous conclusions. The structure provided by the teacher and educational infrastructure is looser and tailorable to learners' needs.

However, given teachers' inputs can only be from their own subjective situation, how can they be sure their questions are relevant for the learners, and do not compromise this growing agency – what Rancière calls 'stultification' (1991)? And, given that many adults are put off lifelong learning by negative experiences of formal education (Fryer 1997; Tight 1998; Hammond 2004), what is constructivism's effect on helping learners realise their potentials? As a recently qualified teacher who has struggled with how the educational 'production line' (Robinson 2008) is maintained, and has consequently moved to less formal learning, I have found that learners can be offered more control over their learning. More than just tailoring educational structure to learners' needs, learners can take ownership over deciding the structure of how they learn.

The arts in particular have evolved an 'avant-garde' of learner agency, of learners collaboratively and critically evaluating their own learning and acting to make it better, thereby also learning to improve the world they are in. Through such revolutionary institutions as Bauhaus² and Black Mountain College³, influential figures as Joseph Beuys⁴, and pivotal moments as the Hornsey sit-in⁵ and the cancelled Manifesta 6⁶, making learning happen is now recognised as a creative act itself⁷. Having experimented with supporting learners to lead their own education myself, it seems to me that learning in this way feels more meaningful to learners as they author their own progress. Might this 'meaningful feeling', framed appropriately, build intrinsic motivation to learn?

Following these inquiries into constructivist pedagogy in the lifelong learning sector, this paper explores the process of forming and participating in a flat-hierarchy community learning group called *Exwick Curiosity Club (ECC)*⁸ as an MA research project, in which a group of learners led their own learning. We collaboratively formed our learning

¹ The term educationist, meaning a specialist in the theory and methods of education, is used here as a blanket term for teacher, facilitator, coach, mentor, tutor, lecturer, trainer etc.

² The Bauhaus was an arts and design school in Germany between 1919-1933. Its philosophy and pedagogy is still influential today, in part due to its guiding beliefs that "Art ... in itself it cannot be taught" (Wingler 1981, 32) and that learning would take place through "Collaboration by the students in the work of the masters" (Wingler 1981, 32).

³ Black Mountain College (1933-1957) was not explicitly an arts school, but it did place arts centrally in learning. Following Dewey's progressivism, it was to be a school "run solely by its teachers, with genuine input from its students, who in turn would be free to create independent patterns of study" (Katz 2002, 16). All aspects of college life were part of the programme of education, including farming, construction and kitchen duties as well as philosophy, maths and languages. Students did not graduate until they asked to do so, and there were no grades.

⁴ Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) was a German artist operating across a wide range of media. He is well known for his philosophy of 'Jeder Mensch ein Künstler' (every person is an artist). He co-founded the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (1972-1988) in Germany, an uncertified institute which encouraged both the development of creativity and interdisciplinarity, and the ability of art to influence social and political norms (Museum Arte Util 2021).

⁵ In 1968 students at the Hornsey College of Art occupied the campus in protest over changes to the curricula, preventing teaching from happening and demanding new, student-centred ways of structuring course content (Tickner 2008; Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art 1969). This was one of the first truly learner-led interventions in the modern avant-garde of artist/learner-led learning here alluded to.

⁶ 2006's Manifesta 6 was to be based around the idea of 'exhibition as school', but was ultimately cancelled owing to political difficulties. It nevertheless arguably provided a catalyst for popularising the 'pedagogical turn' of the 2000s (Bishop 2012; Thorne 2017); co-curator Anton Vidokle collaboratively staged a different iteration of his Manifesta project in Berlin, under the name *unitednationsplaza* (2006-7). Vidokle helped develop this theme through his concern at the lack of critical public engagement with the arts, negating both their potential impact and the validity of the artist's role in creating it; and recognition of schools' potential to counter this apathy, yet in practice – owing to systems which limit critical thinking, and promote following instruction (Ilich 1971) – they often perpetuate the problem (Vidokle and Rosler 2008). Vidokle suggested that if exhibition and school were combined, '...perhaps a new, radically open temporary school could be a viable alternative to exhibitions of contemporary art and could recuperate the agency of art by creating and educating a new public' (Vidokle and Rosler 2008).

⁷ The continuation of this avant-garde can be found in projects such as Open School East, AltMFA, School of the Damned and many more; a wide variety of examples can be found in Thorne's *School: A Recent History of Self-Organised Education* (2017).

⁸ Introduced more fully on page 69.

structure: we would choose the topic for each session together, research the topic between sessions and share our research in session, with time to discuss the ‘lesson’ these formed⁹. We tested our ability to learn for ourselves, to build our own motivation, ability and agency for learning.

Designing a Practice of Co-Learning

Evolving from explorations of the function of the ‘teacherly role’, the major part of this project tested the need for an external teacher in group learning. We (the group) explored taking, or rather sharing, ownership of the learning process and constructing our own learning through experiences we would co/author, to foreground the building of desire to learn and of learning agency. The core hypothesis was that if, as learners, we are not led by experts and are therefore not limited by pre-existing knowledge, we can make situated, potentially new understandings, which will also build our own motivation to learn for ourselves.

This study developed as part of an artistic practice, at times both individual and collaborative, which takes education as its medium, and a/r/tography as its methodology, which Springgay, Irwin and Wilson Kind describe as an “understanding of arts-based research enacted as living inquiry” (2005, 899)¹⁰. The ‘a’, ‘r’ and ‘t’ of a/r/tography signify ‘artist’, ‘researcher’ and ‘teacher’, and the slashes (‘/’) between signify the spaces between these roles, as well as hinting at slippages and multiplicities of meanings (Springgay, Irwin and Wilson Kind, 2005). As a methodology which deals with both art and text (‘art/text’), it also draws on the space between; it is more than the presentation of this paper or of any artistic outcomes, or indeed how it is perceived in any one instance or medium. Instead, it focusses on multiple concepts or “renderings”, a term “intentionally borrowed from artistic discourse, [as] it emphasizes the process of invention and its pivotal role in the creation of new knowledge” (LeBlanc and Irwin 2019, 3)¹¹.

‘Artist’, ‘researcher’ and ‘teacher’ all imply a practice of doing, asking questions and sharing, and so a/r/tography is itself also a practice of doing, enacted both individually and collaboratively over time. As living inquiry, a/r/tography is “similar to an understanding of action research that does not follow a prescribed plan or method” (Irwin 2008, 3), but rather commits to an ongoing reflective/reflexive practice which emerges through activity. Being emergent rather than fixed, it represents a *becoming*. A/r/tography focusses on disrupting traditional power balances in educational relationships, as a point of ethics – the research inquiry is based within a community of equals, and performed through a collaborative, dialogic process (La Jevic and Springgay 2008; see also Biesta 2017; Ellsworth 2005). La Jevic and Springgay also argue that it “develops the relationship between embodiment and ethics as a being-with... suggest[ing] that participating in a network of relations lends itself to gestures of nonviolence” (2008, 68). This ‘being-with’ develops a relational meaning-making, where all participants actively and consciously engage in making the research, critiquing it and constructively acting on this critique, and supporting each other through their/our attempts to build understanding, all of which in turn builds trust and empathy. As may be evident, a/r/tography resists easy definition, and so I did not bring this methodology to the group in these terms. It was

⁹ These terms used throughout this document as follows:

‘Structure’ refers to the frameworks (timings within sessions, how the group proceeded over the run of sessions, spoken and unspoken social conventions, processes by which we attempted to share the role of teacher) which gave shape and definition to our processes of learning. ‘Session’ refers to the scheduled period of time in which we met. ‘Lesson’ refers to the thematic content of a learning session.

¹⁰ For an introduction to a/r/tography which is both accessible and with depth, see Springgay, Irwin and Wilson Kind’s 2005 *A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text*, which is referenced here.

¹¹ Springgay, Irwin and Wilson Kind (2005), among others, offer the following as renderings intrinsic to a/r/tography: Contiguity, Living Inquiry, Metaphor/Metonymy, Openings, Reverberations and Excess. While I have not overtly referenced all of these renderings, they are nevertheless embedded throughout this study. A/r/tography, to me, is less a prescribed methodical way of doing things than a philosophy of practice; my understanding is that it is made anew in every situation according to the particularities of the a/r/tographer and the context, which makes it a natural fit for this study.

instead woven through the invitations and initial premise, and into the foundations of the group which we built together, as detailed later.

Irwin et al also note that “challenges are inevitable in an a/r/tographic inquiry ... a/r/tographers recognize the need to pay attention to tangents, to interruptions, and to unsettling conversations” (2006, 75). This has been key to my methodology; this project emerged from my own ambivalence about wanting to be a teacher, and following similar tensions between conflicting forces has offered insights into education and community which have reflexively guided this project. As a teacher, I value my practices of reflection, both in and after the moment, and to record these I wrote blogs following each session and was interviewed by a critical friend at key points. These field notes, combined with documentation from group sessions and participant egress interviews, form the basis of an a/r/tographic rendering which seeks to explore this project’s complexities from an embodied perspective, and to represent my own construction of understanding in dialogue with this project and its participants.

This project’s aims started with a question about how a group of learners could self-organise without a figure of authority (teacher, facilitator etc) in charge. As it was my MA project, I unavoidably held some authority, which I strived to remove (as detailed later). It also aimed to build ‘creative confidence’, which by understanding learning as a creative act grew into ‘learning confidence’. Another aim was to test the sustainability of this model, although it did not run for many sessions, it would be interesting to see if and how it could run without the authority I brought (through the MA). Other participants voiced motivations of curiosity, desire to learn (or to reconnect with learning), and to meet new people.

Exwick Curiosity Club

From these principles, the concept of a collaborative community learning group emerged. ECC became a site for practical research whereby I could test my hypotheses using educational and a/r/tographic methodologies. It was constructed around building a community in which all come as equals, drawing influence from another model of shared teaching and learning – *School* (Todd et al. 2017-ongoing)¹². Crucially, as there was no singular teacher, we would share the role between us, supporting each other in learning and collectively providing such guidance as we were able to together.

To gather a group of participants of diverse backgrounds and expertises, two introductory sessions were advertised in local community hubs across Exwick, in a local newsletter (delivered to every house in the parish) and on social media platforms. My hope was to create a broad base of knowledge and interest to begin our collaborative learning from, and that our shared curiosity would bring us all together as peers¹³.

The introductory sessions offered the skeleton concept (that we would share research and discuss it) to a group of around thirty, which provoked lengthy discussion about peer support and the need for teachers (as detailed later). Eight of us met again for a second introductory session, in which each aspect of the initial idea as it emerged from the first session was discussed by this smaller group, and shaped into something relevant for each of us and by which we could proceed. Our collaboratively decided structure was as follows. Sessions would be up to two hours long (as represented in Figure 1), and we would run six of them. Each session’s topic would be one none of us knew much about, to prevent anyone with prior knowledge from dominating the lesson, and each topic would be drawn

¹² School is a UK-based learner-led educational project (Todd et al. 2017-ongoing). Several acquaintances formed a co-learning programme where, over several months, each delivered a ‘curriculum’ of hour-long lessons in a topic they chose, which was “not their trade” (Todd 2018).

¹³ As my intended role was to be an equal co-participant, I aimed to form the group out of a larger community of which I was already a part. This project aspired to support participants’ learning and creative abilities, but in hoping to reach those who were not already confident in these skills I tried not to overtly pitch it in those terms. After much deliberation, I chose to define the invitation by the area in which I live, which was less reliant on people expressing interests in any given topics. This was precisely to avoid making it subject specific and to keep the invitation as open as possible.

at random from anonymous suggestions which anyone could veto. Before the next session, we would each separately research different areas of the topic, to create a five to ten minute presentation on our area, thereby creating a lesson between us which we would subsequently discuss, reflecting on convergences, contradictions, gaps, and the overall 'feel' of the lesson. No experts would tell us what to learn or how to apply it, other than resources we chose, and no singular teacher would manipulate our experiences. All decisions were made communally, and each community member had equal opportunity for ownership over the learning process.

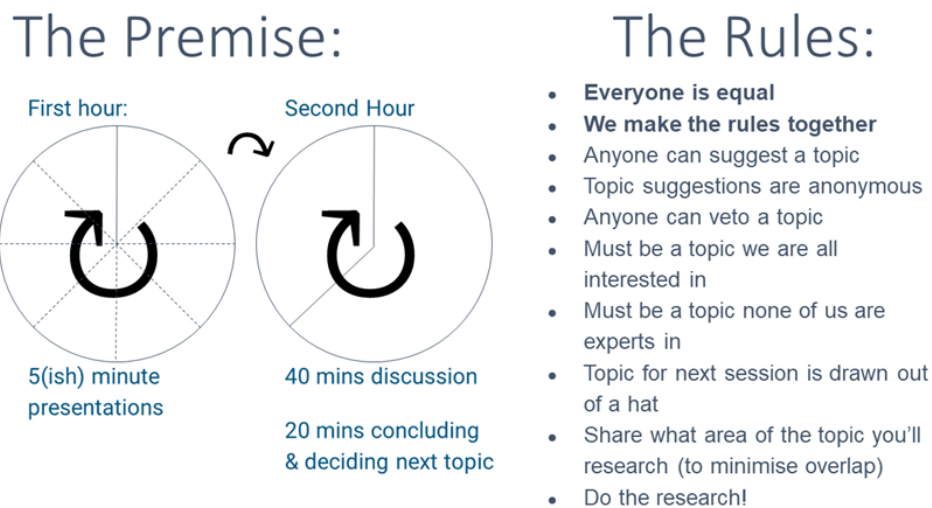


Figure 1: Collaboratively decided structure for running ECC.

Source: generated by the author

Throughout these sessions, I offered both my reflections on the practice of the group and my process of reflection back to the group. I began by 'timekeeping' for the first three sessions, establishing structure according to the principles we created together, but subsequently others took on the role. Initially we met in rented community spaces, but later met in each other's homes as trust and familiarity grew. We established that decisions should be made by those present at the time, and that we should not be bound by what we had done before (if it had not worked).

As became evident, there are contradictions to being the sole organiser within a flat hierarchy. I immediately faced a complication: I was inviting people into this project as its initiator. This unavoidably created implicit assumptions of power, which I attempted to open out through the two introductory sessions. All participants were made aware from their first interaction that this was an MA research project and were asked for consent to be included in this study. I spoke openly about these dissonances between initiating and participating, and while I took on administrative duties to make sure the project continued smoothly, I only took actions agreed by the group. The duality of my roles underscores the ethics central to this project, echoing the tenseness of the space between teaching and learning.

Each lesson was recorded, and all willing participants underwent interactive interviews (following Mitropolitski 2013) at the end of the project to share understandings about what had happened. With more time and experience this document could have been collaboratively written. However, given this was my first attempt at co-creation in

the public realm – and the time pressures of the MA – I have tried to incorporate the participants' views (as expressed at sessions and in interview) into this rendering of the project.

The A/r/tographic Practice of *Curiosity Club*

Negotiating Agendas

Our collaboratively made learning framework, both emergent and adaptable, represented and reinforced our individual and collective agency as learners. Our aim was to provide an entry into the chosen topic and support each other in understanding some of its basics. The need for this structure, however, was made clear by the first introductory session. I only offered a suggestion of how these sessions might run, open to being adapted for whoever attended; no topics were mentioned. In the discussion which developed in this first session, some attendees were adamant that any learning would be better if supported by an expert in the chosen topic, not to teach but to coach. This led me to an ethical conflict.

A fundamental part of this project was in non-expert learning – allowing for the potential of new knowledge to be made, rather than following a pre-existing path to something already known – and so I asserted that I would like us to at least try the model as proposed, to see if it held value, and if it did not we could try other things. I had been determined to not impose myself (as the teacher-authority), to make it as co-built as possible between all who wanted to attend. Here was a valuable learning point for me: finding the threshold between being as open as possible to all participants' ideas and defining a concept or theme to attract those participants: to make it clear what they are participating in, or co-building. In making this clear offer, however, I set myself apart. This was my idea which others were invited to participate in, unavoidably making me the initiating author/ity. One participant confirmed this at egress interview, saying, *"it didn't come across as [authority]. But everybody knows what you're doing and why you're doing it. [We were] conscious of the fact only you know what you need to get out of it... [Were] we doing the right thing for you, for your MA?"* At every step hereafter, I did my best to question any assumed authority given to or taken by me, as author; to be mindful of my role as an equal learner, and (as a trained facilitator) to help arbitrate group issues and decisions. It was a continual task, and sometimes I achieved it less successfully than others. Recognising my own flaws, I value these occasions as holding greater potential for learning, which allowed me to openly learn within a group of co-learners.

Another point of incongruity came after the second introductory meeting, when one participant emailed me to say that they would not be attending further sessions. They wrote that, while they were curious about the project, they were not sure that was a healthy reason to attend; they sensed a lot of agendas; and they imagined an odd combination of thinly researched 'facts', intensely felt debate, and difficult group dynamics without a specialist presence facilitating when things get 'tetchy'¹⁴. I was grateful for this email, as it voiced concerns I myself had and gave me perspective on them, and also because the participant, exercising their learning agency, had recognised that this opportunity was not for them.

It underscored that, for me, all teaching comes with agendas – whether conscious or not, direct or indirect, from investors in education and through choices about curriculum, teaching/learning styles, environment, peer group, etc¹⁵. One tenet of *ECC*, in fact, is about promoting learner's agendas above teacher's agendas. An inherent problem within constructivist theory (as outlined above) is that any interference from a teacher in a learner's subjective process of learning potentially reduces the learner's agency in learning for themselves. The problem this participant

¹⁴ From email conversation with Participant Nine.

¹⁵ See Wilson (2018) for examples of the different kinds of curriculum (which in her definition includes learning experiences) and the biases they might bring, or the effects they might have on other biases.

outlined, however, was asking how would we reconcile the diverse agendas of all participants? Would the group find each other's agendas supportive or antagonistic, and which would serve us better?

The final point, about 'intense debate' without a 'specialist presence', reveals an interesting complexity of the flat-hierarchy model. As an educational professional, I – as equal learner/member – can bring experience in facilitation to the group, as any member could bring theirs. However, as a group built around a common interest – learning – and which strives to equalise authority through democracy/consensus, my hope was that the group would naturally manage its dynamics itself.

Just as Rancière (1991) argues, one does not need subject knowledge in order to facilitate learning in that subject, so a way forward lies in what Ellsworth calls "the experience of the learning self" (2005, 2). As education continues to form the person, so the self in the act of learning is formed and re-formed through this experience as it lets go of previous assumptions and makes new ones¹⁶. We do not see everything the same as before. Understanding learning as making/remaking knowledge anew *in situ*, we also re/make ourselves anew. This experience of re/making can itself offer learning *about* our learning, and so previous learning – and our previous learning selves – can shape our future learning. The more we learn, the better we can frame our learning and build coherent narratives. Framing learning with and for learners is part of the constructivist teacher's role, so if our previous selves can help frame our learning, they can also be considered our teachers – teachers who cannot compromise our agency. There is a danger, however, of confirmation bias, which this group aimed to moderate by being collaborative, as explored in the next section.

Crowd-Sourcing Self-Improvement

The topic for our first session was suitably arbitrary: the Japanese tea ceremony. One important aspect of the Japanese Tea Ceremony is the location - it usually takes place in specially designed tea houses, situated in meditative gardens. The experience of going through the garden to the tea house helps leave the outside world behind, and for all to attend the ceremony as equals. In sourcing our first venue, I looked for somewhere with similar qualities. The place I found was back from the road, behind a tall gate, the path then winding through bushes and gardens to the meeting room. This venue helped us enter a space for learning, apart from the world outside - a safe space created through a structure built together, between individuals who wanted to learn, who were becoming a community.

We entered our self-devised ceremony for learning to understand our own abilities and limitations within this context, and how we might build something beyond them, together. I offered reflections throughout, asking why we were doing what we did, and if it worked for those present. I believe this consideration of/for those attending helped maintain our safe space but, perhaps more fundamentally, we all openly and freely decided to start this journey without knowing what would happen.

This ceremonial aspect of the Tea Ceremony foregrounded the balance between structured and unstructured learning. What is revered in the Ceremony is the intense mindfulness about the precision, necessity, and innate perfection of every small and individual action. Few can perform it flawlessly, although perhaps what is beautiful about the performance is the inevitable imperfections which occur. These nuances mean every host performs it differently, revealing and celebrating their humanity. Our co-built peer-learning structure likewise needed allowances for our imperfections as we learned how to make a lesson, mindful of one's own abilities and limitations and an appreciation of the same in others.

¹⁶ See Winnicott's notion of 'transitional space' (1971); also Rajchman's interpretation of the Deleuzian theory of rhizomatic opportunity, which leads "...to a mad zone of indetermination and experimentation from which new connections may emerge" (Rajchman 2000, 9).

In this session there were a variety of presenting styles, including emotive feedback on findings, scientific research into botany, evocative storytelling, an account of research methods, and a practical metaphor (see Figure 2). Following the schedule, we had decided on (Figure 1), we gave our presentations before each sharing our first - uninterrupted - impressions of the 'lesson' we had made, followed by further discussion. We talked around the areas presented on and tried to fill in a few gaps, but the overall feeling was of only scratching the surface. My initial worry was that the lesson had not been full enough (compared to more formally taught lessons), but through discussing this with the group we decided that, in fact, a good lesson should leave you wanting to know more and inspire further learning. Participants reflected in-session that *"education is about spurring an individual to inquire, and to inquire further"*; *"I have learned something and now I want to learn more"*; *"it's good that we want to know more... that we have more questions than the ones we had in the beginning"*¹⁷. As it met these terms, it substantiated the argument for learner agency.



Figure 2: Participant presentation from session one.
Source: generated by the author

Subsequent sessions covered (in order): consciousness; the history of Exwick; evolution; local myths; and the Charter for Compassion. For me, these each provided useful ways to think about how the group was developing and how to encourage reflection here. Consciousness in many ways contrasted strongly with the first session and allowed us to explore how the mind constructs continuity and meaning from experience, and how this enables us to come up with values.

There is a resonance here too: while learner ownership of the learning process might increase motivation, the value of what is being learned still needs considering. As Dewey (whose work underpins constructivism) said, letting students learn according to their own desires without method or aim is "really stupid" (1984, 59). This is a key issue in the debate between structure and agency. In traditional, more structured models, learning is typically assessed by the teacher as the subject expert. As an alternative, I am drawing from Biesta's conceptualisation of a learning practice which builds learners' confidence to judge the value of learning for themselves (2017). In it, the 'teacher' (a role here closer to a 'more knowledgeable other', or 'more capable peer', from Vygotsky, 1978) models for the

¹⁷ As said by Participants Seven, One and Three in session one.

learner their own process of making value judgements, to show both what is valuable and how to judge this. The learner not only learns to learn for themselves, but also learns to judge the value of their learning, applying a kind of self-validation.

This modelling is a social activity, a sharing of practices, undertaken over time with learning happening in both directions. Given that learning happens through experience, all social interactions hold potential for one (or more) party to act as a 'more knowledgeable other' (consciously or unconsciously)¹⁸. We have all experienced learning and continue to learn through experience. Through this experience, we must all have built tacit but perhaps unacknowledged understanding of judging the value of our learning, as the conclusions we have drawn from previous experiences are tested in new experiences and either confirmed or contradicted. If we can share our experiences and, collaboratively drawing on them, collectively agree on the value of something learned together, I propose that we could establish a 'crowd-sourced' equivalent of teacherly validation.

Arbitrating tensions and developing criticality

The session on the history of Exwick gave us a chance to explore the area we were based in - and in fact brought questions about who undertakes (historical) research and why. I contacted a member of a local history group, who suggested places to undertake new historical research but explicitly refused to share their own findings. This project is fundamentally social, and I had hoped to talk to someone who could help me learn something about where we lived - I explained that my main interest was in education, and a little information about the learning group, but they said they would only give help to a person, not a concept¹⁹. This, apparently, was knowledge I had not earned the right to learn, reflecting what Patel terms a coloniality of knowledge - using access to knowledge to assert the superiority of those who claim its ownership. Reflecting on my own position, I argue that everyone should have the choice to learn as they choose, rather than have it dictated to them - thus being able to take control of their learning, making their own meaning as embodied, situated knowledge.

Our fourth topic, evolution, was a serendipitous response to these ideas of where we, our knowledge, and our understanding of learning have come from. It allowed us to challenge what we had already done and to think about what might come next - both in wider contexts of life, culture, and humanity, and in terms of the learning group as a shared practice. Much like the practice of drawing, our learning practice was iteratively self-improving. Drawing remains essential in arts education as a physical process of actively interrogating the world and representing it as the drawer sees it, then returning to the world to check the assumptions made in that representation, adjusting the drawing to rectify inaccuracies, and repeating this process. In our practice, we interrogated our topic and shared our representations, evaluating them against our worlds and evolving circumstances, leading us to return to the world to check our assumptions against it. Biesta calls this process a "dialogue with the world" (2017, 38), and it is the active embodiment of critical thinking - checking our own assumptions, identifying inconsistencies and making corrections without being diminished by them, and continuing to make corrections as our understandings gain depth. Sharing these strengthening practices amongst peers offers a chance for our personal practices to become collectivised, as we each learn from the others' corrections.

Local myths, the fifth topic, also allowed us to explore how we make meaning, and how learning is reflective of culture. Myths themselves are a form of folk (or cultural) pedagogy. They hold lessons within themselves, and the narratives these lessons sit in often bring out embodied or relational emphases which accentuate the learning. In a way, this too was learning about learning. It also took on a personal aspect - through discussing witches and heroes, we discovered that one attendee was at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp protesting against nuclear

¹⁸ Also see Dewey (1938).

¹⁹ From a personal email.

weapons, and where the idea of a ‘witchy woman’ was reclaimed as a positive character. Another attendee told us *“those women were my heroes”*²⁰, thus demonstrating how happenings pass into legend and the power of stories, how we can change them, and how they change us. Narratives are important both in learning and, more broadly, in life; much as constructivism says learning is made by building on experience, we understand those experiences through our narrative of experience.

Again, this session provided contrasts with the final one. The Charter for Compassion returned us to the idea of formal structures for action, resonating with the Japanese Tea Ceremony session. The Charter is designed to be an inter-faith (and no faith) document which encourages thoughtful action around the ‘golden rule’ - do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you – which appears in many religious doctrines (Charter for Compassion, 2017; The On Being Project, 2019). There is also an online archive of compassionate actions which people have performed in its name.

In discussing critical pedagogy (as a way of conducting education which encourages critical thinking and practices), Hope suggests that, in cultural contexts, the “position from which critical pedagogy occurs should ... also be the subject of critique” (2011, 48), to avoid reinforcing the system being critiqued (i.e., learners only being critical when told to be critical). Applying the same lens to the Charter for Compassion, which members of our group described variously as *“a wonderful idea”*, *“overwhelming”*, *“naïve”*, and *“a modern take on religion”*²¹, in our session it inspired polarised views, including both deep-seated mistrust and inexorable support. Part of its critique was aimed at the divides between religions, by advocating unity around a single, universal tenet. However, perhaps by using familiar religious tenets (including a text describing living compassionately, a twelve-step guide to becoming compassionate, and an archive of people doing compassionate things), it did not escape its own critique – at least in our context – but rather perpetuated issues associated with organised religion. For ECC, self-reflexive critique was embedded in the initiation of the project, with opportunities for the community to critique the invitation and to act upon it; and yet we were all products of the educational system which this project implicitly critiques, and perhaps were therefore (not unlike the Charter) unable to collectively create enough distance to escape or even fully discern the fullness of this critique.

The session’s polarisation came about partly because the religious angle gave attendees opportunity to express beliefs which had previously been inexpressible/irrelevant. The participant who suggested this topic, it emerged, knew a substantial amount about it, which broke one of our structures (about knowing little to nothing of the topic). Guessing their knowledge, I had previously vetoed it (although questioning myself as I did it) but trusted that - having brought my worry to the group’s attention - we would collectively self-regulate. However, in session, it emerged that others had not followed our structures by not undertaking thorough enough research to present informed opinions, which contributed to the polarisation. Talking to attendees individually about that session subsequently, most recognised its divisiveness but thought we found common ground and left on good terms: *“it wasn’t an argument, it was a debate...People were still listening to one another”*²².

A minority of participants, however, felt personally attacked. This caused me significant discomfort, because in leaving it to the group (and not repeating my concerns as a member of the group) I had also broken our structures. I let people undergo conflict to test a concept and provide interesting research. While these participants assured me they had dealt with it and moved on, there were consequences: *“I wouldn’t work with [this group] again at all. After the last session, I realized it stopped working that day for me”*²³. They have, however, started their own

²⁰ As said by Participant One in session five.

²¹ As said by Participants Six, Ten, One and Four respectively, taken either from a recording of the session or egress interviews.

²² From egress interview with Participant Eight.

²³ From egress interview with Participant Four.

learner-led group, which means at least that this project has not counterproductively reduced their learning agency, but the greater lesson was one on how to adequately prepare for the inevitable disagreements which are part of community. I have been taught a great deal about individuality, arbitrating debate, and de-escalating conflict in co-learning by both my peers and the actions of my previous self.

These tensions brought about an interesting point of reflection on our power of veto over topics which might have been controversial, uncomfortable, or inflammatory (such as politics or religion). This research would have benefitted from seeing how the group managed such a debate, as these topics resonate with the aim of this project to build criticality and agency as citizens. However, doing so in this context would have taken considerable trust in each other, which may or may not have existed before this session, but certainly for some did not afterwards. Bishop argues that a 'relational antagonism' would provide more "concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world" (2004, 79); however, a small group possibly has less space to accommodate conflict, and our unofficial (and largely unspoken) agreement to avoid it may have been about building and maintaining the social bonds necessary for the group to function rather than finding the most effective way to learn.

A Unifying Plurality

As a group, our equalisation by both lack-of-knowledge and intent-to-learn helped bind us as a community, providing a base to build on together. We each brought different prior experiences which guided our learning, giving us different frames for our learning. Sharing these frames both affirmed our individuality and built our collectivity. Paradoxically, we have been connected by what separates us: the individuality of human experience. All we know is that we each experience the world differently, but are united by an understanding that we each have similarly unique experiences. This commonality of individuality is key to this project's critique of education. The preponderance of assessments in formal/mainstream education diminishes less measurable areas such as artistic, civic, and moral development (Armitage et al. 2016). One model of education has not – and cannot – work for everyone, because of our individuality. As Kester argues, to assume otherwise is to impose an essentialising identity over community members, excluding those who do not fit (2004, 158). This is why community art practice, in order to be non-essentialising, becomes about disturbing "reliance on such [collective] forms of identification" (159); consequently, "self-reflexive critique emerges as the only legitimate form of knowledge" (159-160). The model here proposed is not intended to replace another, but to show our individuality requires a diversity of models.

Indeed, other models influenced this project, and are useful in trying to evaluate it. A key influence was *School* (described in footnote 12). Its participants already knew each other, simplifying the recruitment process (participation is invite-only, raising exclusivity issues) and bringing existing trust. As a recreational project it has no formal evaluation to draw on, however, tellingly, it is still running²⁴. Its initiator reflected that each lesson probably had more impact for its teacher than the learners (Todd 2018). This awareness, along with every participant being both teacher and learner, was key to forming of *ECC*. Learning something to teach it involves an act of interpretation, where you must understand both the form and spirit of the topic to relate it back in a different context.

Another useful model is *Enrol Yourself*, a "6-month peer-led learning accelerator" (Enrol Yourself, 2016). Much like this project, it was developed as a "creative and defiant response" to perceived inadequacies within the lifelong learning sector (Enrol Yourself 2020, 4). It has run several iterations, in which a group – comprising a host and participants – collaboratively facilitate the development of each other's own, individual projects, which is perhaps

²⁴ Coronavirus notwithstanding.

closer to *School* than *ECC*. Participation is not free. Participants use their skills to collectively create a curriculum of workshops they host for each other, including peer coaching and group crits. Previous participants, asked if they had applied peer-led principles in their life after this programme, largely replied that they had, directly or indirectly (*ibid*). Perhaps more significantly, the model continues to expand, as new and returning participants recognise its value.

Similarly, *ECC* provided an opportunity for us – as learners – to create our own education, in a way appropriate for us, on our own terms and through a process we co-authored. This project attempted to integrate ways of learning with a democratic-consensual process, thereby providing an ethical viewpoint on education. Cultural democracy is “a way of thinking and doing that reflects on one’s rights and responsibilities to produce and communicate one’s own critical culture through the production and communication of cultural acts” (Hope 2011, 176), thereby building “free[dom] to help determine the social agencies and arrangements by which we are (in part) determined” (Kelly 2016, 153)²⁵. This study’s practice has aimed to build an educational cultural democracy, providing opportunities for us, as citizens, to empower ourselves.

Conclusions

This project was started to better understand the teacher’s role. I have come to understand that this role is purely relational, it only exists alongside - and in service of – learners. As Biesta says, “what ultimately matters in teaching is the freedom of the student” (2017, 118). Whilst there is still a role for the teacher – indeed, a demand for it even, made explicit in our sessions²⁶ – it does not involve imposing it from above, unwilling by or unbeknownst to learners. If we are to aim for educational democracy in adult and community learning, as teachers – or perhaps educationists – we must uphold the right of learners to be interested in what they are interested in, to support their learning by learning alongside them, and find ways to collaboratively position it in relevant worldly contexts to benefit us all. Truly, the ultimate ‘point of learning’ (if such a thing can be distilled), for me, is to learn how to learn better – whether learning alone or with others, in a formal situation or ‘in the wild’.

Returning to the central hypothesis²⁷, we largely undertook learning on our own terms, without being led in-session by subject experts. Where we did not, our structure did not hold, and the possibility of miseducation arose. As to whether we made ‘new’ knowledge, without consulting subject experts it is not easy to say, although I suspect we did not. However, the knowledge we each made was new for us, and more alive because we had made it ourselves. This is arguably more relevant in terms of building our own learning motivation and agency; for some participants *ECC* did help build this, and yet for others it was less clear. It undoubtedly says something that the group did not continue without my involvement, however I suggest that this is a reflection on the pressures which came with the MA, at least in part. Some participants have continued to lead their own learning in their own way, which is perhaps a more fitting legacy for this project²⁸. Other participants have moved onto new groups and projects which fill their curious-active needs, which is another kind of reinforcement of the embedded theory here. Much as *ECC* is learner-

²⁵ For a recent discussion of cultural democracy, see François Matarasso’s *A Restless Art* (2019). For further detail, and its conceptual origins, see Kelly (2016) and The Shelton Trust (1986).

²⁶ “We need a such thing as teachers, or a leader. No matter what, whether it’s education, or whether it’s in employment, you will always need somebody at the helm”. From egress interview with Participant 6.

²⁷ As stated, this project was designed and delivered for an MA; its evaluation as such was primarily an evaluation of my practice, of my attempts to understand how I could initiate and maintain a collaborative art/education practice. Through rewriting this, my MA thesis, for a journal, I have gained distance and perspective enough to start considering the project on its own terms. For evaluating it thusly, I found we had not set explicit evaluation points; as such I have tried to reverse engineer our initial aims for the project itself outside of the MA, as much as we set them out in setting up and enacting the practice of the learning group.

²⁸ One participant, as mentioned, has started their own learner-led group, while another has continued their local historical research to write for a local newsletter.

led, it will not be for everyone; no model can be²⁹. Nevertheless, it has offered us opportunities to learn about how we learn, which we all carry forward into future learning and life as our future selves look back on our present selves to learn the lessons, we have to teach them³⁰.

It has become evident that this project, for me, was my own learner-led, non-authorial and meaningful programme of constructivist teacher (self-)education. I stated a topic I wanted to learn about (the relationship of teaching to learning), called for peers who were also interested in it to form a peer study group, and we set about learning in our own ways, each bringing our different tools and perspectives to build a complex and multi-faceted rendering of who a teacher is and what they do. As a teacher undergoing training myself, I relearnt how to learn in the context I was in, sharing this process with others as we supported each other in our learning. As the initiator, I started this process, but where it went thereafter was determined by the community's conscious and subconscious impulses and actions. I helped facilitate the process; this is who I am, as a community member, and in avoiding it I would avoid being part of the community. And yet, I cannot say this model could run without someone in this role.

Perhaps the best way educationists can support learning is to genuinely undergo the process alongside learners; to be open about how we learn; to live within the criticality, the excitement and the confusion of traversing the unknown to make our own embodied meaning; and to make mistakes along the way, modelling how to deal with them and learn from them. Perhaps what has been at the heart of this project is to offer this modelling with a non-authorial generosity, for those who wish to take it. However, to instruct or 'signpost', to lead away from failure, or to otherwise steer experience will diminish the learner's agency and opportunity for taking ownership of individual learning power.

Learning becomes meaningful when, as learners, we are free to make our own meaning, and this 'meaningful feeling' reinforces the value of what is learnt. By co-building our own structures within which we exercise our learning agency, we not only re/structure our way of understanding the world, but also our understanding of, and stakes in, our learning environment. Education (and consequently culture) is reshaped by those in the midst of it, those for whom it is undertaken, to meet the needs of the learner in the moment and to allow them to define their own values through it.

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²⁹ This model, for us, found affinity with philosophical/historical topics; we may not have accommodated other topics (e.g. practical) so easily. We joined the group voluntarily, and so had some degree of comfort with learning itself. Accordingly, we were perhaps not a fair trial of this model's ability to build an 'intrinsic motivation' to learn.

³⁰ Participants have stated: "It has very much changed my [relationship to learning]. And it's made me want to learn, and it's shown me different ways of learning"; "I've had the courage to do it [run my own learning group], partly because of coming along to the Curiosity Club"; "I took some confidence from it"; "I just might be more determined - so, instead of accepting something, I will now go away and check it out". From egress interviews with Participants Six, Four, Three and Eight.

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