

A place where learning happens, pedagogy and a construct: studio

When you work in learning and teaching, it's bread and butter to discuss pedagogy over coffee at least once a week (maybe that should be scone and butter then), but when you work in learning and teaching in an art college, that conversation usually confuses the hell out of people. But really it shouldn't. There isn't anything super mysterious about the way teaching happens in most art subjects, you've just probably never heard it named this way.

So what is studio?

I suppose the first thing that comes to mind when people hear the term studio, especially in relation to art and design, is the physical place. Which is absolutely correct. The studio is the place where learning happens, where students work, socialize, support each other and where their tutor provides feedback to help them improve.

It dates way back, in fact historically, we can go back to the Middle Ages and the term Atelier. This was the term used to describe the situation of the workshop or studio of a professional artist where the one master or principle artist worked together with a number of students or apprentices to create fine art.

“Ok Eli that’s simple enough, we all know this.”

Well yup, but the confusion happens when we start to talk about studio as pedagogy, as a method for teaching. That’s usually where the coffee conversation starts to dry up.

The physical studio may look different in different disciplines

But why a pedagogy?

A signature pedagogy is “the classroom moments reflecting the discipline’s way of thinking, knowing, doing and feeling” (Motley et al., 2016:224). For art & design teaching, studio is the signature pedagogy in use. They are epistemological and ontological but for art practitioners, they are also axiological. Artists, as we heard about in the atelier model, haven’t just learned about a subject, they live the life of that subject matter. The philosophy of what it is to be an artist is embedded into teaching. Artists value collaborative and cooperative ways of working. They learn from each other. This is an integral part of teaching in art and design, the teaching of tacit and explicit knowledge through modelling practice. The tutor doesn’t just embody the practice in a physical sense, but the insider language and culture used and developed amongst practitioners. If you like, we could use the simple terminology of preparing the student for actual life as an artist as opposed to teaching them about it.

Expression is never solely of one art alone. That is, when we practice an art, such as glassblowing, we express more than

the practice of glassblowing itself: we express an entire history of learned corporeal knowledges. (O'Connor, 2007: 113).

I suppose this is a good point to mention that although we are talking in general terms about studio teaching, it's good to remember that throughout the entirety of art and design, there are also discipline-specific practices.

Setting wicked problems

One great example of modelling practise is the setting of wicked problems. Design studio teaching forms around project briefs and problem setting, usually problems that are grounded in the realities of professional practice. The tutor sets a project brief which usually has an ill-defined problem that the students need to address, the answer the students seek may change as the student grapples with solving the problem. The students work on these projects in the studio, both alone, but with their classmate working on their solutions around them, and collaboratively with their classmates as a peer learning and support network. Throughout their time working on the project, tutors will provide feedback and guidance. At various points throughout the year, the students will present their work to the tutors, professional practitioners and their classmates for "critique (crit) sessions" intended to stimulate reflection on and discovery of their learning through reviews and student questioning.

So just a quick hurl around the concept of studio, it is such an amazingly interesting and intricate concept that I could easily write all day but maybe for the purpose of a wee blog post, this is enough. Feel free to come grab a coffee with me and chat more though.

O'Connor E, (2007) The centripetal force of expression: Drawing embodied histories into glassblowing. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3(3): 113–134.

Motley P, Chick NL and Hipchen E, (2016) A conversation about critique as a signature pedagogy in the Arts and Humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16(3): 223–228.