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The practice educator as museum guide, art therapist or exhibition curator: A cross-disciplinary analysis of arts-based learning

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Abstract: The use of arts-based approaches in professional education in health and social care has gathered momentum in the last decade and their effectiveness has been well documented. There are helpful models in the education literature that begin to explain how these creative methods work in learning and practice, and that assert the significance of an emotional or affective level of learning. However, the process remains elusive, almost a 'given'. A more cross-disciplinary analysis of affective learning is needed to guide arts-based methods and more robust evaluation of their use in health and social care education and practice. This paper identifies different roles that can be taken by the practice educator with a review of those theoretical models of affective learning that underpin them to help understand how and why arts-based approaches are effective.

Keywords: arts-based; affective learning; professional education and practice; cross-disciplinary; creative methods.

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Introduction

The knowledge bases of health and social care education and training can be very limiting in developing professional practice because those professions are founded on theoretical frameworks from the natural sciences and the social sciences, both of which are seen as incomplete for the study of the total human condition (Rolfe, 2010). Warne and McAndrew (2010) argue further that teaching methods based on these traditionally espoused knowledge bases will tend towards the didactic and are likely to suppress reflection. They assert that arts-based approaches can provide new ways of promoting the reflexivity that is vital to practice in health and social care because they offer educators ways of conceptualising ideas and topics with their students in preparation for practice.

The last decade has seen an increase in borrowing methods from the arts and humanities that have the power to stimulate creative and intuitive learning needed for work with users of services (Warne and McAndrew, 2010). The effectiveness of these models is becoming well documented (Burgess and Laurence, 2007; Couchman et al., 2012) and two journals of professional practice in health and social care have recently devoted special issues to arts-based learning (*Social Work Education,* 2012*, Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning,* 2013*)*.

The Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011) actually suggested that professionals learned to draw as a resource in interviews with families. Like Munro (2011), recent UK social policy statements such as those from the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) have commented how, in social work and other professions the pendulum has swung too far towards an outcomes-driven managerial culture that does not prepare practitioners for decisions they will need to make, often in ambiguous situations (Dearnly et al., 2013):

> a defensive system that puts so much emphasis on procedures and recording that insufficient attention is given to developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families. (Munro, 2011: 6)

If current policies for practice are now about creating new ways of working, both in supportive relationships with service users and changing society's expectations, then the use of the creative arts in professional education does appear to counter-balance the over-emphasis on outcomes by enhancing reflection on the more emotional issues in people's lives.

The arts educationalist, Eisner (2002), argues that art develops a form of thinking that challenges current mechanistic and technical rationality and better helps the individual deal with ambiguities and uncertainties.

In the 1950s and 1960s Bloom et al. (1965) highlighted emotional or affective learning as distinct from knowledge and skills learning but the emphasis in professional education has still been dominated by knowledge and skills based outcomes. Education theorists have promoted reflection as ways of addressing feelings or affective learning as applied to practice (Brockbank and McGill, 2007; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Johns, 2009) and most curricula in health and social care have included reflective models like Schon's (2006), based on successive cycles of observation of practice to help access deeper, implicit learning. As the Munro review states:

> Analytic skills can be enhanced by formal teaching and reading. Intuitive skills are essentially derived from experience. Experience on its own, however, is not enough. It needs to be allied to reflection – time and attention given to mulling over the experience and learning from it. (Munro, 2011:122)

The main responsibility for reflection often falls to the practice educator, however, as illustrated by the learning outcomes published by the College of Social Work in the UK (The College of Social Work), and the process remains contested and elusive (Ixer, 2010). Terms like reflection and critical reflection are often used interchangeably and vary across professions (Fook and Gardner, 2013). We do need to understand better what arts-based approaches are capable of in aiding reflection (Warne and McAndrew, 2010). As Carpenter (2005) points out, we need to be clear about which approaches will influence attitudes and behaviour and will achieve real change in practice and in organizations.

As academics on university courses for practice educators in health and social care in London we too have been exploring a variety of arts-based approaches, with students and with service users. At the same time we have been referring to a range of theoretical models across a range of academic disciplines, to better understand why and how these approaches are effective (Hafford-Letchfield, et al., 2008;. Hafford-Letchfield, et al., 2010; Leonard, et al., 2011; Hafford-Letchfield, et al., 2012; Hafford-Letchfield, 2012). In this paper, we have distinguished between the 'know-how' and the 'know-why' of different approaches (Dewdney and Ride, 2006): 'know-how' is a simple, operational review of examples of arts-based methods in the literature; 'know-why' is where we review different concepts of affective

learning that help us to understand better how the methods work. The discussion of the examples is organized around three distinct roles that the practice educator can take with arts-based approaches, each of which can be informed by concepts across a range of disciplines: the practice educator as museum guide; the practice educator as art therapist; the practice educator as exhibition curator.

The practice educator as museum guide

Local or regional centres of excellence that stage exhibitions of contemporary art around themes of health and social care can be discovered through the press and online searching, so visits can be arranged as sources of inspiration for educators and students. Such exhibitions often provide educational materials and supporting talks to be incorporated into teaching sessions. The London based Wellcome Collection is an example of an organization that sponsors contemporary art, with a mission to communicate issues of life and health sciences, and is an excellent website resource (Wellcome Collection).

An exemplar of the museum guide role is a day that we run on developing creative curricula as part of our university practice educator course, starting with a visit to the 'Living and Dying' gallery at the British Museum in London, the centerpiece of which is the 'Cradle to Grave' art installation (British Museum). The installation comprises a lifetime of prescribed drugs knitted into two lengths of fabric in a case the length of the gallery. These, together with milestone documents, photos and personal objects, illustrate the medical and social stories of one woman and one man. The stated aim of the visit to the gallery was to: 'come and explore something that you might not do usually or build on your enjoyment of visiting museums' to apply to their role as professional educator. Students were asked to write down what attracted and interested them; to comment particularly on feelings and associations and to identify how displays like these could be used as learning and teaching tools.

Displays like this can give new insights, a way of reflecting on and empathizing with the experience of service users, and participants often comment that they plan to repeat the visit with their own student learners. Spencer (2012) has used a similar approach with a group of clinical social workers, qualified as psychotherapists, visiting art galleries. 'Works of

art may articulate bodily and affective experience that is often out of our awareness.' she suggests, through sessions of reflection on the experience (Spencer, 2012: 778). She draws on psychodynamic theory to liken the process to the concept of 'potential space': 'the area of psychological experience located between fantasy and reality and between one's inner and external worlds (Spencer, 2012: 779).

Contemporary art, and installation art in particular, lends itself well to exploration on many levels because viewers can often walk around and interact with the artwork. This kind of total immersion, engaging different sensory channels, is described by Bishop (2005), like Spencer (2012), as an experience of physical embodiment that facilitates affective learning. Eisner (2002) argues that art should be at the core of all education because when students view images or are involved in creativity through a variety of media their thinking is developed in subtle and complex ways. He expands this concept in biological terms to say that, from birth and throughout adulthood, we are biologically designed to experience the environment through our sensory system that is in turn an extension of our nervous system and consciousness.

This echoes ideas found in other disciplines. The neuroscientist Damasio (2004), for example refers to philosophers since Spinoza who have considered concepts of affect. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) proposed that the arts were the prime channel for communicating emotional or affective issues, acting directly on the nervous system. Emotional reactions, they argued, were transformed to sensory experience, a kind of embodiment of the experience. Damasio (2004) and another neuroscientist, Ramachandran (2003), believe that science can now demonstrate the affective drives proposed in philosophy, where the body's emotional responses are mapped in the brain. Visual culture researchers Schirato and Webb (2004) summarise:

> we aren't just the sum of the electrical impulses in our brain; and we aren't just the sum of everything our culture says people ought to be. Rather, we are beings who live in bodies and who have emotional lives which affect our sense of the world – what we see, how we see it and what it means to us. (Schirato and Webb, 2004:40)

The role of practice educator as museum guide can apply, of course, to other arts such as novels, poems, films that learners are introduced to as a means of prompting discussion and reflection. Morris (2010)

describes the use of viewing feature films relevant to a theme, such as 'About a Boy' or 'Trainspotting', to develop empathy for the experiences of people using services. Gold (2012) advocates poetry in professional education and practice to 'highlight clients' experiences, explore ethics and professionalism, and illuminate practice tensions.' (Gold, 2012:756). Novels such as 'Things Fall Apart' and 'Death of a Salesman' have been used as case studies to echo real life experiences of leadership in health and social care (Hafford-Letchfield and Harper, 2013). The case studies provide safe scenarios for students to reflect on moral challenges in leadership. Graphic novels like Bobby Baker's diary drawings of an episode of mental illness (Baker, 2010) communicate experiences powerfully because they are visual and encourage creative thinking beyond text and talk (Eisner, 2002). The Graphic Medicine website (Graphic Medicine) has created a valuable compilation of graphic texts relevant to health and social care.

The practice educator as art therapist

The role of art therapist is what happens when the practice educator becomes involved in the creation rather than the transmission of art, either as a student or with users of services. The role is informed by explanatory theories from the professional education literature and elsewhere. There are many examples in the literature of how courses involve students in actual artistic activity, such as artwork, photography, writing, dance, drama, and films to stimulate the more holistic and affective experience for the student that Bloom et al. (1965) identified. The 'Drawing to Learn' series for different disciplines in higher education (Ridley and Rogers, 2010) helps to explain how drawing activities develop observation and make abstract ideas more tangible and communicable. Drawing is a method used by Huss (2012) to help social workers articulate stressful situations and devise coping strategies. McAndrew and Warne (2010) have used painting with students to facilitate reflection on practice. Hayes and Povey (2010) are art therapists who share their arts-based interventions with other professionals to work with people with dementia.

The knowledge base of art therapy is more closely allied to psychiatry and psychotherapy (McNiff, 1998) and, although many of its methods appear effective, there has been a tendency to accept them as a 'given', when they need to be made more accessible to critical analysis (Rolfe, 2010). As

Schon (2006) observed, there is often a mystification in the epistemology of a practice, as if the practitioner appears to say 'My kind of knowledge is indescribable' when, in fact, they 'exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice' that is knowledge (Schon, 1991, p.viii). It is a tacit knowledge that could be accessed through reflection.

Models from the professional education literature that define reflective learning as transformative learning (Brookfield, 1995; McAllister, 2010; Mezirow, 2000) are useful in helping to explain why arts based methods are effective in the process of affective learning. Mezirow's (2000) transformation theory attempts to identify and make accessible the underlying principles of how adults learn to change their frames of reference. Brookfield (1995) sees transformative learning as a focus on unexamined or taken-for-granted assumptions. McAllister (2010) describes the process as a profound and irreversible shift in the way that students think and feel about the world and their relationships within it. A fundamental change in their perspective occurs that can be a catalyst for change in the way they interact in their practice in future. McAllister (2010) further suggests that the effect of altered perception is powerful because it can raise awareness of social and political injustice and activate the learner to find solutions.

Cousin (2006) describes a similar model of learning, where the learner is effectively in a liminal state of mind while trying to master a concept and the learning is both affective and transformative. Such processes can transform the student's world-view forever and this is often very uncomfortable, not because the topic is difficult, but because long-held feelings or emotions are being challenged. During the process of change, the student may be in an unstable and liminal emotional state. The power of arts-based approaches in learning and teaching is almost entirely due to the fact that they are operating on this affective or emotional level, of course, and feelings and attitudes need to be challenged if the student is to become awakened to making a difference in their practice (Couchman et al., 2011). Fook and Gardner (2007) maintain that critical reflection can achieve this through 'unsettling individual assumptions to bring about social change.' (Fook and Gardner, 2007:16).

The practice educator as exhibition curator

The role of curator for the practice teacher means using an art exhibition

as a vehicle with students and service users to engage communities and educate them on social issues and promote action. In an example from Moxley et al. (2012), social work students supported older minority women who had experienced homelessness in representing those experiences through photographs, drawings and poems. The group collaborated with designers to produce a professional exhibition for the public and decision makers locally. Other examples include digital story telling (Lenette et al., 2013), performance (MENCAP, 2011) and film making (Morris et al., 2013) for distribution and dissemination in the wider community. As Moxley et al. (2012) claims, professionals can help to empower users of services by giving them the status of artists, telling their own stories of oppression.

Artistic production has many parallels with the organization of learning: both require an exercise in editing to get the key issues across (Eisner, 2002). Cousin (2006) expands her theory of learning concepts at a liminal level to stress that key concepts need first to be identified and simplified in any subject in order to communicate them. The key concepts help to unlock the door to the subject so the student can fully enter and engage with the ideas. It follows that it is vital for learning to be organised around these key concepts. The concepts are like metaphors that allow the learner to make interconnections and make sense of the topic, using their everyday skills. Gallagher and McKie (2010) for example, introduce an understanding of metaphors in poetry and literature so that students 'can develop the ability to see more clearly the salient aspect of a practice situation.' Tedam (2013) incorporates African proverbs, in her teaching to a diverse student group, to provide another lens on the meaning of social work practice.

In the arts, Ramachandran (2003), like Cousin (2006), identifies metaphors as a characteristic of communication. 'What artists, poets and novelists all have in common …' says Ramachandran (2003):

> … is their skill at forming metaphors, linking seemingly unrelated concepts in the brain. (Ramachandran, 2003:83)

The skill of making connections between metaphors, therefore, is one of the characteristics of the brain that Ramachandran (2003) identifies as important in making sense of the environment that the individual is engaged or embodied in. He noted that the brain seems to respond to puzzles and learning is stronger because the brain will work hard to make connections. Simplification of concepts is another characteristic of the brain identified by Ramachandran (2003). This has implications for the choice of

metaphors or concepts in a creative approach to communicating a topic, in order to engage the brain of the learner and leave room for interconnections to consolidate learning: incongruous elements that cannot be made sense of could create interference.

Conclusions

This paper has argued for a cross-disciplinary approach to understanding how arts based approaches can be effective in learning and teaching for health and social care professionals and how in turn they can be applied in curriculum design. Theoretical models from other disciplines offer an explanation for how the arts work beyond the scope of the professional education literature that is largely based on theories and methods from the social sciences. Models of affective learning from disciplines as far apart as philosophy and neuroscience bring us closer to understanding what has been an elusive process so that it can be applied to practice education. They help us see how engagement or embodiment with the artistic experience connects to a more sensory level of learning. Three different roles that the practice educator can play have been distinguished (museum guide, art therapist, exhibition curator), each informed by different theories, and, it could be argued, offering different degrees of embodiment or immersion in the creative activity.

Activities need to be organised around simplified, key concepts, allowing the student to reflect and make their own connections, and then these need to be unpacked and articulated in reflective sessions with the practice teacher. Learning can be transformative because, during the reflection process, feelings and attitudes are open to challenge and can motivate action for change in a way that is not possible with didactic methods of teaching and learning. Providing such opportunities to be challenged are essential in health and social care education, where practitioners need to be active in defending the rights and freedoms of service users and achieving social and political change, and could be extremely powerful if used in teaching different professions together.

More rigorous research and evaluation of arts based approaches in health and social care professional education is now needed, however, and theories from the arts and humanities that underpin arts based approaches can contribute new insights not available from the sciences that tend towards

positivism (Barrett and Bolt, 2007). The inclusion of more intuitive methods is particularly important in analyzing the reflective process in practice education. Philips et al. (2012) comments on the trend towards using the creative arts in education that is now influencing an interdisciplinary approach to researching the use of those approaches and there are now more examples of this in the literature. Foster (2012), for example, describes the use of poetry as a social research method in a project with families with pre-school children in a disadvantaged area of North West England.

Other disciplines can enrich the methodology as well as the knowledge base of health and social care, therefore. As Carpenter (2005) points out, the problem of the lack of effectiveness of learning and teaching approaches is common to all health and social care professions and he emphasizes the need for more rigorous evaluation of teaching and learning methods to provide evidence of what is effective.

The last two decades have seen more crossing of boundaries between disciplines, to overcome what have come to be seen by researchers as the limitations of the methods of their own discipline. An emergent body of researchers in visual methods, for instance, (Banks, 2003; Gauntlett, 2007; Pink, 2007) have developed methods that help to resolve some of the polarization that has occurred between the epistemologies of science, social science, the arts and humanities (Rolfe, 2010) and to show that rigorous research is also possible in arts based approaches (van Leeuwen and Carey, 2001; Sullivan, 2005; Holly and Smith, 2008; Reavey, 2011).

Pink (2007) has pointed out that a sharing of concepts and methods between the disciplines can only be fruitful and, along with others, is prompting a sharing of qualitative research methods with social sciences to develop new creative approaches. In turn, it is argued (Pink, 2007), social sciences can gain from methods in the arts and humanities that employ a reflective process like Schon's (2006).

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