

## Creativity, Art and Learning: A Psycho-Social Exploration of Uncertainty

By Jean Carbine

Carabine, J. (2013). Creativity, Art and Learning: A Psycho-Social Exploration of Uncertainty. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 32(1), 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2013.01745.x>

### Page 2

- Supposed to help with the complicated processes of making art, how to learn to do one aspect of that
- Learning to work with not knowing and uncertainty
- Know little about the processes involved in the development of this capacity in artists
- Draws upon the experiences of the author as a learner → intense anxiety of the creative process ex. Anxiety of nothingness, anxiety, fear, failure, self loathing/the anxiety of not knowing and uncertainty etc
- Realized that they need to find a way to become more able to stay with these periods of anxiety if they were to produce work
- Summer 2008, began an experiment with themselves → aim was to stay with the uncertainty and not knowing, allow the experience, explore and play with it and being open to whatever transpired, no matter how unsettling, nonsensical or poor quality the work
- Helped them to develop a methodology that will help them to enable work reflectively with their anxieties/uncertainties, failures and not knowing of the artistic practice, that help contain and sustaining while working creatively
- Self reflexive approach, centered on self experiencing and bodily/experiential knowing
- “It takes the creative self and artistic practice as work in progress where the self and the creative practices, processes and products are the research. They constitute its methods and methodology and ways of knowing. It is an iterative and dynamic process between learning and knowing, trial and error, and intent and accident, wherein personal experience, making and practice, each inform and influence one and then the other.” (2)
- This project is always changing
- Experiencing, is a key component to research → requires being open to experiencing and staying with it, no matter if it is pleasurable, uncomfortable etc, → allowing it to become accessible, felt and knowable
- Practice: ongoing, repeated, as well as evolving physical and mental experiencing (also the process of thinking and making to final outcome)
- “Reflexivity requires locating the learning acquired through the experience of making into practice in ways that lead to self-knowledge and which inform that practice (Neelands 2006; Schön 1987)” (2)
- “It requires ongoing critique, continual self-reflection and scrutiny of practice through the development of a critical and an observing self.” (2)
- It privileges personal experience/draws on several documenting and recording forms → differs from being psychosocially informed
- This practice related, experiencing, learning, and knowing utilizes a variety of different approaches, both expressive and experimental → many of which are aspects of the

artistic practice itself such as painting, image making, drawing, performance and movement work, projection, poetry and free associative writing

- Centered on/comes out of the experience of practice/making
- Production of art → whether as object or as research in itself, detailed notes, descriptive, explorative, imaginative, and reflexive are also kept on practice, making, materials, thoughts, feelings, and experiences in sketch and art note books and reflexive journals
- Art making - explanation, development and exploration of experiences (2-3)

### Page 3

- “Experiential material - contextualized within a range of art-based psycho-social and educational literatures relating to artistic practice, personal experience, learning and creativity.” (3)
- Experiment - case study - experience as a higher education student - becoming an artist/dealing with creative uncertainty
- Importance of case studies as a way of learning → appeal to wider audience
- Wider potential of the case study → depends on the richness of its the material
- Vividly told story can make an important contribution to knowledge of how/why
- Linking this narrative case study to wider psycho-social, art and educational theoretical perspectives on creativity → learning/containment, the potential for wider applications of the material for thinking about learning experiences of students artists and the potential role of tutors in this is suggested
- Psycho-social framework that is broadly Keinian → British object relations tradition ie personal experience, the unconscious and the relationship between “inner” and “outer” worlds (including the material, social and cultural) is key
- Key belief that unconscious processes play an important role in what we do/our ability to learn from experience
- “Studying subjectivity, creative processes and human experiencing provide on way of accessing unconscious processes” (3)
- “In privileging unconscious processes the intention is not to ignore that creativity and art making also involve unconscious and deliberate processes, intentions, and decisions
- Fall somewhere in between - viewing creativity as a process that involves “unconscious and irrational and conscious and deliberate” aspects

### Artistic Practice, Creativity, and Learning from Experience

- Practitioners → often need to work with the unfamiliar → because - beyond the problematics of representation, artists work in knowledge zone of the not yet known, a field of indeterminacy that characterises creativity
- “We are called upon to do something new, to confront a no-man’s land with no-one to guide us. This is what existentialists call the anxiety of nothingness. To live in the future means a leap into the unknown, and requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent. (May 1975, 12)”

### Page 4

- This requires a mental toughness, not just because the creation of art requires a mental toughness, not just because making art is highly demanding of a commitment to risk/a high tolerance of excitement, frustration and anxiety
- Art student → extensive uncertainty about their practice/about being an artist and being able to identify when a piece is done
- Could be concerned about being able to complete art that successfully meets the requirements of the course, what counts as art, as well as if their work constitutes as art
- Moments when it feels like nothing is happening (no ideas/nothing is being created) → learning entails uncertainty - it is a process where we do not know yet if we will be able to successfully achieve what had been set out to learn
- “Learning inevitably carries risk and potentially painful experiences such as frustration, failure and disappointment.” (4)
- May try to avoid uncertainty → desire for simple answers, which can make one angry and potentially give up
- “Making art may, at times, promote a “mental promiscuity by essentially defying conventional partitioning of reality into discreet, mutually exclusive mental compartments.” (4)
- High levels of stimulation → working with a lack of structure/getting lost in time → risk taking, indecision etc can be disorienting
- Surrender of the consciously planning/deliberate mind to the spontaneity of creativity
- “Making art involves unconscious as well as conscious processes that draw deeply on the artist’s inner experiencing and which require the artist to come face to face with the unknown in themselves” (4)
- Demanding process - involves deep experiencing/learning
- “...a rather rare phenomenon, since it requires the capacity to think for oneself, tolerating a passionate experience made up of hate, love and tremendous curiosity. Even when one succeeds in experiencing emotions passionately, there is still the need to wait until the mind can think about these experiences ‘without irritable reaching’ for symbols provided by others, and using these to understand the experience.” (4)
- Much knowledge for artistic practice is tacit → only acquired through practice (often clear what it is that has been learnt or how)
- Polanyi coined the term “tacit knowledge” to explain knowledge experientially
- “It is embodied knowledge or “skill” developed and applied through practice and experience and apprehended intuitively (Barrett 2007, 119)” (4)
- Artist → acquisition/ongoing development of technical skills/mastery of materials that require tacitly required
- Acceptance of one’s limitations/ that of their materials (do not impose will on the material → accidents)
- teaching/learning → transfer of practical knowledge and the experience of artmaking/the creative process, said to pass between tutor and student in ways that are difficult to identify
- Include learning through example/knowing through repeated practice, exploration and experimentation

## Page 5

- Avoidance of formal instruction → encourage the development of a distinct visual language/experiential and tacit nature of practical work - make the ability to articulate practical concepts/procedures difficult
- Process of transfer depends on non-textual info/“serves to naturalize... practices that escape verbalisation verbalization or codification’ → makes the process difficult to obtain
- Hard to discern what is known/what is learnt → requires a kind of knowing which has been mapped onto/into the body as a product of repeated practice/passionate experiencing, in ways that are ineffable
- Knowledge which is the embracement of every part ones sensual perception, experience rather than that of intellectual activity alone → artistic encounters which serve to reunite the body/mind in a way that it allows “experience” to become “knowledge”
- How can artists survive amongst uncertainty/risk or to cultivate a capacity to work within the realm of what is already known (tacit/experiential, and the difficult to articulate)
- This part is hardly addressed despite it being essential to the creative practice → something which is also gradually learnt
- Experiential knowing learnt from experience
- Exclusion of the mental/psychological capacities that are an essential part of the tacit knowing/vital to learning to be an artist
- “These mental capacities, which include being able to tolerate high levels of excitability, nothingness, chaos, uncertainty and not-knowing, are also, I suggest, passed between tutor and student as a form of tacit knowledge.” (5)
- Psychological processes - less visible, means they are less recognizable/difficult to codify/articulate
- Tutors essential part of introducing these non-technical aspects of knowing→ convey it in ways that are similar to tacit knowing (also difficult to identify)
- **Non technical knowledge - allow artist to work with uncertainty/not knowing**
- Experience = knowledge when it comes out of several physical, emotional, and conscious and unconscious sensations in making/producing art (can be thought about/reflected upon)
- “Learning from experience” → involves an awareness of emotional/sensory experiencing - key process through which thoughts/thinking become possible/become known and thought about
- Learn from experience - open to experiencing (not something that happens, but that which we choose to do)

## Page 6

- Experience to become knowledge - not guaranteed or automatic (can be effected for different reasons) (5-6)
- This can result in anxiety about learning and growing from experience, before one is ready or because feelings of frustration that emerge from not knowing/waiting for meaning to emerge are too powerful, resulting in quicker solutions being sought out
- Learn from experience - wait for experience to emerge/think about that experience

- Containment of experience for thinking to be possible - this can be understood as the ability to bear difficult/overwhelming feelings such as helplessness, panic, confusion, failure, uncertainty, “letting go”, fear, loss, nothingness, and despair
- Originally developed by Melanie Klein (1946) → infants limited capacity to bear anxiety - projected onto the mother, which the mother would respond to/relieves, thus making the baby’s internal world more manageable
- Bion - “acting as a container” adds to it the role of the “thinker” - demonstrates, feelings can be reflected upon
- A parent can care/worry as well as think/clarify different feelings
- Infant - internalizes not just a container for feelings but that a mind can hold onto thoughts
- Emotional experience - transformed into thought/process for containing emotional states
- Similar way - art tutor - be with a student’s frustrations and anxieties → wait until meaning emerges - reflective and thoughtful about a student’s work
- Student then internalizes a containing and thinking artistic mind

### **Artistic Practice, Creativity and Learning from Experience II**

- College - experiment freely - without pressure
- Began experimenting within the context of “letting go” and being in a state of not-knowing and uncertainty → about their work - previously brought up deep anxieties and feelings of self doubt
- Encouraged in their new approach to practice a methodology adopted by John Keats - advocated developing in a state of “Negative Capability” - quality achieved when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason
- New very little about this at the time → initially using it without understanding to help them deal with the anxieties of producing new work
- Trying to open up allow something diff/unknown to work in response to the feedback from the tutors - realize that they weren’t realizing their potential
- Experiment with themselves in an attempt to take more risks with their work - hope of informing/developing their practice

### **Page 7**

- At this time in the summer studio - lots of work emerged → some of it was familiar/known to them, less familiar work, made use of use of studio space to build upon previous experiments
- From this, an area of unknown began to emerge - “crudely” drawn figurative work → initially found this kind of work unsettling - saw them as badly drawn → saw them as so bad that they felt them risable
- Up until this time - their work had always been abstract/spatial/geometric/linear - never considered themselves to be a figurative artists interested in the human form - believed that they could not draw or paint in this way
- Anxious about what that could reveal about them - didn’t understand what was compelling them to do this work

- Tried to stay with it/resisted looking for answers too soon
- Doubts about the figurative work peaked - kept returning to known areas of their work, such as large scale 2d spatial drawings
- Realized they returned to work that was known to them/work and ways of working that felt safe → places where they knew they could be successful
- Returning to this work - felt they were potentially avoiding something more significant about them and their art that they unconsciously wanted to make
- Didn't want to ditch the known areas of their practice fully
- Soon began developing some expertise in drawing/using ink
- Figurative work grew in scale/scope ie small sketches to larger pieces of ink/gouache-paper based works of naked bodies
- Allowed the figures to emerge and allowed them to morph into whatever came to mind - not thinking about what they were doing too much
- Produced several unusual themes and compositions in their drawings
- These works were prompted by personal and deep emotional experiences → came to know them as a form of drawing through association, from experience/memory
- Late August/the encouragement of their tutor they decide to clear their summer studio space of all their work, except the figurative and to stay with not knowing (hoping that some answers might come - understand why they were doing this work)
- Last half of 2008 and into 2009, continued to experiment with images/ composition, materials and media
- Throughout this period, they recorded and reflected on their experiences of making art, the breakthroughs, developments, shifts and failures, the moments of not knowing. The uncertainties about their work, about being an artist
- Noticed the rhythm to their creative processes/practice to recognize what made them anxious or difficult to work
- The way that anxiety crowded their mind → making it impossible to think or just be
- Noticed how they sought to avoid staying with not-knowing, what strategies - counteract anxieties - how they avoided, walked away, distracted himself
- More anxious - more likely to stay with what was known to them/what felt safe
- Came to notice that these experiences were just as important/necessary to their creative process as the moment of letting go, doing and making (7-8)

## Page 8

- Apparently empty moments were - rich opportunities of reveries → began thinking about what made it possible to stay with anxiety/experiment, to let go and be creative
- Became more familiar with the instances where they were less anxious → moments of experiencing the pleasures with working with certain materials/making along with the moments of letting go and feelings of freedom → what these felt like and what made them possible
- These experiences could be used to support themselves in parallel coe-existence with the moments where they faced anxiety → through this make anxiety, frustration, fear more tolerable

### **Artistic Practice, Creativity and Learning from Experience III**

- Difficult to put that experience of knowing into words → accurate to describe it as the moment of becoming conscious of an accumulated experiential knowledge, working with paint acquired over a period of time as done through practice and experimentation, it is also something else
- All the practicing, all the experimenting → become embodied as a tacit knowing about how to work with paint, experientially and silently understood but difficult to articulate → also linked to developing, a deepening more mature artistic practice and relationship to the creative process
- Shift from “You’ve got it” to knowing “I’ve got it” → owning/embracing of the moment of the process of coming into being/practicing as an artist
- Knew that they could paint and trust that /work with it - knowing that they could continue to learn, but more importantly that they had developed a capacity to work/stay with anxieties/uncertainties of the artistic process
- Now easily accept failure, work with uncontrollable aspects of the medium/be open to accidents and the unexpected occurrences/follow the painting to come into being (become more manageable → gained through experience of their ongoing artistic practice)
- Important factors for staying in a state of not knowing and uncertainty → suspension of a desire to know (wanting to know), through being told how to paint/what to do → find own way to paint/express themselves, learn from experience of working with the materials (8-9)

### **Page 9**

- Requires being open to what emerges/remaining open to not being concerned with the outcome
- About letting of of desire → desire for a specific outcome and allowing failure
- Achieving this means suspending judgment/being able to accept the potential chaos, mess, ugliness, incoherence, disorder, crudity of what might emerge
- Learning to trust what is initially produced, may be later successfully transfigured/transformed Just as likely it may not
- failure/learning to accept loss - productive part of the process
- Learning to deal with uncertainty of the creative process/being an artist - two factors were key - the safety of the known, and space
- An important source for them and self containment - process of returning to the safety of the known, areas and way sof working with when the anxieties of the creative processes became too overwhelming → return to the two dimensional spatial drawings
- Other key factor - space - physical as well as mental space - could become a potential space
- Physical space - studio → work in where, experimentation, risk,, research and exploration were alongside a mental space that enables a creativity/play → potential space for facilitating the environment, just like that which was offered by the fine art course

- Also has to be a calm, inner/eternal space where they can work in a inhabited/uninterrupted without being over-looked, able to be escape and produce work that is tentative and uncertain - place where it is safe to “let go: → requires patience, being prepared to wait, to say with frustration and allow the period of the apparent nothingness as well as allowing time for thought, an imagination and play
- Also about being able to trust the process.capacity to know ourselves through learning from experience ex. Educational setting, tutors potentially provide a safe bounded space - students can freely explore their creativity
- Studio space/course itself allows students to experiment/produce work that is messy, playful, provisional and constructive, within the constraints of the actual physical space/educational structure of the course
- Not just letting go → instead students are encouraged/helped reflect on the work that they are producing - the methods being used and on their intentions, encouraged to think about what they produce, the experiences of making and the learning and the creative processes, rather than producing quick solutions and ready answers, enables the learner to internalize a thinking person
- Tutors - reassure students that ideas/understanding will come
- Advocate experimentation/exploration, emphasize learning from experience
- Encouraged to stay with/trust the process - trust that they will develop, your own visual language → told that the only way to do that is to learn from experience
- Tutors - reassure students that feelings of uncertainty are normal for most, along with the most experienced artists → tutors contain anxieties about being an artist/give something back to students in a more manageable form, or they hold the anxiety until until students are ready/able to handle it for themselves
- Link between uncertainty, art, containment through thinking/capacity for negative capability → can be made with the help of Meltzer → who says of “Negative capability that it is the capacity to wait for later confirmation. We are dealing with a basic function in the formulation of the self which is created through passionate experience through uncertainty, through the capacity to wait for later confirmation. We are dealing with a basic function in the formulation of self which is created through passionate experience through uncertainty, through the capacity to think for oneself.”

## Page 10

- Capacity for containment is key to achieving (and maintaining) a facility for negative capability and for remaining open to creativity.
- Transition from “You’ve got it” to “I’ve got it” → to longer to achieve than that flash of realization suggests
- Ongoing, gradual, multilayered process (for them it began that summer of 2008 but they said it was likely that had began long before
- Gain more experience/develop greater familiarity with the materials/knowledge through “learning from experience” → capacity for negative capability will grow

