

Special

Knowledge Acquisition through Creative Conversations

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Abstract: *This paper considers creative conversations as a possible method of acquiring knowledge. The paper is partly based on the findings of a recent research project within art and design education in the UK. It uses critical reviews of practical coursework on a photography degree as an example for an educational setting in which creative conversations may take place. This enables me to, firstly, describe how students acquire knowledge through these kinds of conversations, and secondly, identify what type of knowledge may be gained. The aims of this paper are to highlight the benefits of creative conversations to students' learning and to point towards particular learning environments which best facilitate such conversations. The paper concludes with posing the question of whether creative conversation as a method of knowledge acquisition may be transferable to other subject areas than photography.*

Introduction

The concept of creative conversations was investigated and developed during the research for the project *Learning through Photography: Creativity as Concept and Process*. The project explored creativity within the context of photographic studies in higher education. Particular focus was given to the role of the creative process in enabling individuals to make connections between different forms of knowledge and skills acquired, and how this process is best facilitated within an educational setting. The fieldwork was carried out on a photography degree at a 1992 university in the UK between 2006 and 2008. A total of twenty students, five alumni and six tutors participated in semi-structured discussion groups. These aimed to identify participants' interpretations of creativity in the context of the course, in particular, how creativity works within the learning of photography and how it is manifested in the curriculum. In addition to the group discussions, four taught sessions were observed, focusing on the physical learning environment, the range of teaching methods, and social interactions between students and tutors and students and their peers within the learning space.

One particular session I observed, was the critical review of practical coursework (Figure 1). Critical reviews are common practice within art and design education and students are introduced to these types of sessions at the beginning of their course.



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Figure 1. Example of a critical review with photography students.

During these sessions students have opportunities to see each other's work, test out whether their images communicate intended meanings, and to discuss their work in the wider context of historical and contemporary photographic practice. The aim of each review is for students to reflect on their work, engage with that of their peers, and to offer and accept critical feedback on the work.

Creative Conversations

Charles Leadbeater launched the concept of creative conversations in his online draft for the book *We Think: Mass Innovation, not Mass Production* (Leadbeater, 2007). He explained:

Creative conversations are like a shared exploration the results of which cannot be guaranteed in advance... Each participant must give something of themselves in a way that encourages the other to reciprocate (ibid).

Whilst writing his book, Leadbeater decided to publish his first draft online, set up a wiki and invite the public to contribute and comment on the document. By adopting this method of working, he underlined the overall argument presented in the book, which promotes collaboration and conversation as a way of developing new ideas and products. The outcomes of Leadbeater's newly adopted approach to writing were unpredictable and open to unexpected contributions and comments, therefore resulting in a book different to the one initially anticipated by the author.

Leadbeater used the term 'creative conversations' mainly in relation to major scientific discoveries and product developments that have changed the way in which we conduct our lives. He also used the concept in relation to the way in which organisations in our society

may function, and problems might be addressed and discussed amongst teams of colleagues or peers. With this in mind, the concept of creative conversations seems worthy of exploration within educational settings, particularly considering Norman Jackson's view on the purpose of higher education:

Higher education is a place where we try to understand the world in all its rich complexity and glorious detail, but it is also a place where we prepare students for a lifetime of working with their own complex issues and problems (Jackson, Oliver, Shaw and Wisdom, 2006, p 6).

In that sense, a creative conversation may provide a platform for developing a questioning mind through making connections between two different worlds; one as experienced by the student and the other as perceived by the student through an engagement with the world in which they live.

Discussing ideas, methods of working and issues raised through artworks as well as talking about students' coursework, in particular that of a practical nature, are common practices in the learning and teaching of art and design subjects (Dineen, 2006). My own research has confirmed that these discussions are recognised as valuable contributions to students' critical and creative development and enhance students' knowledge of their subject area. In that sense, these discussions could be described as creative conversations of which the outcome depends on the investment made by all participants. New understandings and knowledge can be developed through active engagement with each contributor's comments and responses.

Creative Conversations in Critical Reviews

Critical reviews, as described here, offer an ideal learning environment for developing creative conversations. These types of conversations go beyond the mere reflection on a photograph or a method of working; they encourage students to discover and learn through dialogue and debate. Unlike the process of reflection, which could be described as an internal individual process, creative conversations are a collective, external exploration of images, processes of production and contexts within which photographs are viewed. As observed by one student who participated in my research:

... if I start to speak and share my idea with other people...I don't think it is about copying other people's ideas, it is kind of this interaction which enriches my way of thinking.

In other words, it is the social exchange of ideas between students and tutors during, for example, critical reviews that play a role in expanding students' minds, thus enabling them to acquire new knowledge and understandings about photography. This knowledge may comprise technical skills of the medium such as camera functions, lighting, analogue and digital processes as well as conceptual and theoretical understandings of photographic techniques in relation to the production of images and their location in a broad cultural framework. Students who participated in my research have confirmed the importance of engaging in these debates as a way of gaining a deeper understanding about their photographic practice:

The most important thing is to discuss at the end of each lesson what people have done, just put it [the work] up and talk about it... That ongoing discussion makes you analyse and justify what you are doing.

In that sense, talking about photographs contributes to the process of students becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) whose practice develops through a critical engagement with the creative process of image making.

I would suggest that these reflections could be described as forms of social or collaborative reflection and resemble Leadbeater's idea of creative conversations. Students discuss ideas, methods of working and photographs with tutors and amongst peer groups and have the opportunity to reflect on the development of their ideas as well as processes related to the production of their photographic work and that of their peers. This is the space where 'each participant must give something of themselves in a way that encourages the other to reciprocate' (Leadbeater, 2007), and where students develop new knowledge collaboratively - through asking questions, analysing and justifying their creative practice, and learn to give and receive constructive criticism. Students' contributions may be of an experiential, factual, emotional or personal nature in these conversations, adding several dimensions to the knowledge shared and gained from each other. All of this knowledge may assist students in developing different aspects of their creative practice, nurturing their learning process and their ideas, thus enabling them to acquire further knowledge relevant to their field of study. This knowledge is not taken solely from textbooks, but partially developed from students' experiences and the exchange of these experiences with their peers.

The Learning Environment

Creative conversations do not happen in any learning environment. Students need encouragement and facilitation to build up their confidence and feel comfortable enough in their environment. Only when supportive structures are set up and tutors assume the role of facilitator, discussions take place, students are more likely to be open to new ideas and thought processes and are prepared to take risks and make mistakes. From this type of learning environment, creative conversations can emerge and students' knowledge base can be expanded upon.

During the critical review described in this paper, for example, students were presented with a structure of a learning environment which they could either use as a safe foundation to work within, or for breaking out of the constraints to explore alternative routes to develop ideas and practices creatively. As mentioned before, students are introduced to the structure of critical reviews at the very beginning of their course, so this way of presenting and sharing photographic work is familiar to them. The size of a group is important for students to actively engage in critical reviews. Research has shown that a medium size group (15-24 students) works best (Jaques, 1984). Such an environment provides opportunities for students to question the material presented, including comments offered by peers and tutors, and students are less likely to make mistakes. These forms of engagement enhance students' ability of critical thinking as well as playing with their ideas, both of which are attributes that encourage creative conversations.

My own research confirmed that the combination of the factors described here creates a safe foundation for students to present work within, share their ideas and offer constructive criticism to each other. This was reflected in the ways in which the students and the tutor interacted with each other, the depth of discussions individuals were involved in and the amount of personal information, relating to the work produced, students revealed. Students took risks by opening up to each other, and by way of this hoped to gain valuable feedback for their work:

Crits [jargon for critical reviews] were one of the things that I found most valuable, ...without that input from other people, and without that kind of encouragement, or without other people's eye and just saying 'I don't understand that, I think that

is too obvious, I don't think that picture works... (comment by alumni who participated in my research).

Students gained new knowledge about photography, discovered new ways of working within the medium, and expanded upon their understandings of photography as a visual language:

...also I found with the crits it sometimes sparked off another idea, another way, it sort of fed you, it fed your creativity. And you know, when we were in our groups with people from all walks of life and we would see things in a very different way and have different experiences (comment by alumni who participated in my research).

In that sense, the practice students embark upon on this photography course acts as a vehicle through which creative conversations can be initiated and knowledge can be acquired.

Creative Conversations Beyond Photography

This paper has highlighted the key factors for enabling creative conversations in critical reviews on a photography degree. The learner, subject related knowledge, photographic images and the physical and social structures of the learning environment are central to encourage these types of conversations. The challenge is how creative conversations can be initiated in disciplines other than those producing photographs or any other artefacts. Can creative conversation start by presenting abstract ideas, theories or formulas?

During the workshop 'The University in the Knowledge Society' at Beijing Normal University in China (1-3 July 2009), I encouraged students and professors to explore these questions by firstly, engaging in a creative conversation themselves, and secondly, reflect as a group on their experiences during these conversations. I asked participants to think about a photograph that means something to them and to exchange this photograph 'verbally' with the person next to them, without showing the actual photograph. During this exchange, the emphasis was on finding out how much we can discover about an, to us, unknown object in dialogue with the person who knows the object. Participants were encouraged to ask open questions that led to answers other than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. After five minutes of conversations in pairs, participants shared the knowledge they gained with the rest of the group. Participants agreed that they had learnt about different aspects of the objects discussed, including information such as when and where the photograph was taken, the relationship between the people captured in the photograph, the historical, personal or social or relevance of the photograph discussed. In summary, the knowledge gained was mainly of an experiential, emotional, factual and personal nature.

On reflection, participants felt that for having a meaningful creative conversation it was important to have some prior knowledge about the subject / object they were discussing. If this was not possible, it would help, in the case of photography, to have some basic understanding of how the medium could be applied as a tool for communicating ideas and meaning. In this way, participants would gain a deeper knowledge and understanding from the creative conversation than without having any foundation. Participants' opinions were divided about whether a creative conversation requires a tangible object such as a photograph as a starting point or whether the conversation could also be initiated through an abstract idea or theory.

In conclusion, the session highlighted the effectiveness of creative conversation as a method of knowledge acquisition, yet it also identified that further research is required to establish

whether this method is transferable to disciplines other than those producing photographs or any other artefacts.

Note: The research for the project *Learning through Photography: Creativity as Concept and Process* adopted the code of research practice of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) and gained written consent from all participants.

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