

The art you practice and the art you teach

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1.0 Introduction

Alan Thornton proposes “two primary concepts of art teachers”

Concept 1: An artist teacher is an individual who practices making art and teaching art and who is dedicated to both activities as a practitioner. Concept 2: A teacher of art is an individual dedicated to the artistic development of students who does not necessarily practice as an artist (Thornton 2011, p.34).

Throughout this reflection, I will discuss why I identify with the first concept, an artist teacher. My art practice informs my teaching, themes are based on my connection to the land, investigating sense of place and forming an identity. The end product, sculptural elements, experimental drawing or investigation into primary sources all stem from installations I have exhibited. Development education has enriched my teacher, artist interactions as I can embed social justice aspects from my practice into my teaching.

“Negotiating a new identity that integrates the teacher self or persona with an artist self is not a straightforward or always comfortable process” (Hall, 2010, p.107). This statement is unpacked throughout the text. In section 1, I discuss how my childhood artist identity informed my decision to become a teacher. The decision to study Fine Art and Education separately is outlined. The question of whether or not I sold out when I applied to the Professional Masters of Education is answered, with emphasis on the art world’s perspective on education. How the classroom replaced the gallery is discussed. In section 2, I compare and contrast, the art practice and the art I teach. Focusing on how my work influenced the teacher I am becoming and the projects I teach. Section 3, delves further into my teaching practice and the learning environment I create.

1.2 The childhood artist

Pablo Picasso says, “Every child is an artist, the problem is staying an artist when you grow up” (Dulgheru, 2017, p.75). Hatfield, Montana and Deffenbaugh (2006, p.45) discuss the “childhood artist identity”. Our childhoods can influence our identity as an artist because

when we create work, we investigate the world in a childlike manner by exploring, observing and learning as we play with materials. I believe my artist teacher identity started to develop from the age of 5.

As a child I was fascinated by teaching. This interest fed into playtime; where I would pretend, I was teaching a class. Since there was no one my age around where we lived and I grew up on a farm, the cows naturally became my students and the cattle shed my first classroom. Anytime I was out of earshot I would speak, dare I say educate the cows. Their willingness to listen to my words of wisdom, as they chewed their cud is where it all started. I took the game very seriously and had even made my own roll call book. The connection to the farm and identity exploration continued and became a source of inspiration for my artist and teacher practice.

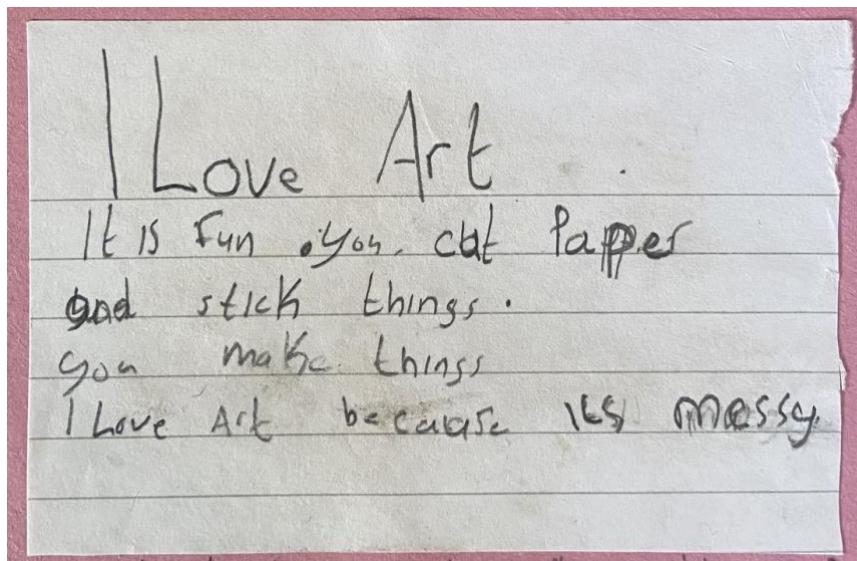


Figure 1: First artist statement, 2006, aged 8.

1.2 Educating the artist

“The identity of the artist in society is ambiguous and shifting so that individuals who construct themselves as artists do so in a climate of change and continuous challenge” (Thornton, 2005, p.167). Throughout my studies, I was repeatedly told that in order to make art you have to be uncomfortable and flexible, especially as the future is unknown. I am

aware, attending art college is a privilege but much like the participants from Hatfield, Montana and Deffenbaugh (2006, p.45) study I have “always been an artist”. It was my calling, not a decision I made. After the leaving cert, I attended an ‘Advanced Portfolio Preparation’ course in Gorey School of Art. That year was vital for my development as an artist and my interest in education. The college was attached to a secondary school, during that year I worked as a teaching assistant (See Figure 2). I gained confidence as an artist and I confirmed I wanted to be an educator.



Figure 2: Teaching assistant at Gorey Community School, 3rd year student working, 2016.

The decision to study Fine Art and education separately was strategic. I received an offer for the Bachelors in Education and Fine Art programme, which I had intended to study. Until I received an advanced entry offer for Fine Art, Sculpture and Expanded Practice. It was a simple decision to make, for a couple of reasons. Each practice deserved time to grow and develop. It was important to me that I formed a strong artists identity before entering education. As Thornton (2005, p.167) says “Teachers of art, particularly in the secondary and tertiary sectors, will usually have developed an identity as an artist or art specialist of one kind or another before embarking on a career in teaching”. Also, logistically it was the best

decision. The BA in Education is 4 years. Whereas, if I went direct entry into second year and then straight into the PME that would also be 4 years. In September of 2017, I started my journey towards becoming an artist teacher.

1.3 Selling out by applying to the Professional Master's in Education

My aim was to join the PME programme once I graduated from Fine Art. Which meant I applied for the masters during my final year. My decision was not met by enthusiasm from peers or lectures at this time. Fine Art lectures, pitch education as a loss of artist identity and made it seem like I was failing my art practice by choosing education. "There is a common perception that teaching is no more than a safety net for those who cannot find employment in other fields or professions" (Thornton, 2005, p.168). They pitched education as a selling out and that I would benefit more by doing the MFA.

Many artists look down on the art education field because it does not prioritize the development of a personal, professional body of artwork and an exhibition schedule, and there is a persistent stereotype of the teacher as someone who teaches because he or she is "not good enough" to be a full-time artist (Zwirn, 2006, p.167).

Education was always the goal I was working towards, but I do not intend to lose my artist identity to fulfil it. One person can sustain more than one identity. Instead of losing my identity I viewed it as gaining my true identity of being a teacher. I confidently now identify as an Artist, Activist and Educator.

1.4 The classroom became my gallery

I do not see my artist and teacher practice as separate identities. I maintain the dual identity because I "create situations where they are simultaneously validated" (Hatfield, Montana, Deffenbaugh, 2006, p. 44). I feel more like an artist when I am teaching and more like a teacher when I am exhibiting. The projects I deliver follow the same structure as how I create in my art practice. "Teaching is an aesthetic process: Artists-teachers manipulate classroom techniques, materials, and characteristics similar to the artist's manipulation of the elements

and principles of design” (Daichendt, 2009, p. 27). The primary sources that inspire the projects are found objects from the farm; these have been a part of past exhibitions. The visual aids are an extension of my practice. The themes I ground the projects in relate to identity, sense of place and the land, all feeding from my art practice. The gallery space was swapped for a classroom. The students replaced the gallery viewers. The end product is not a work of art I made but the works of art my students created. The overall goal is departing knowledge, the importance of art and the message that each student has a role to play in creating an equal world. The classroom is now my gallery. The aim of my work is to raise awareness, highlight inequalities and question tradition. Exchanging the gallery space for a classroom allows me to bring my work straight to the target audience. Through art I can now educate the students that sit in front of me on social issues. I am able to encourage them to become social warriors, by giving them the tools they need to progress forward and change the world. I now deal with the source not an audience.

2.0 Artist Teacher identity

What does artist teacher mean? “The concept of artist teacher acknowledges the duality of the teacher within the contemporary art and design classroom as both art and design practitioner and educator” (Page, Adams, Hyde, 2011 p.277). There is an array of opinions on what makes a good artist teacher and a debate around where the weighting of the identity should lie, the artist or teacher? Hickman (2010, p.3) quotes Miller’s term the double helix as “the way in which the personal and professional components of my life overlap, mutually influence, mutually inform and are inextricably tied”. The identities are symbiotic. Thornton (2005, p.166) reported “that in order to be an effective artist teacher it is helpful to be a reflective practitioner”.

Artists criticise and evaluate the work they make. Teachers reflect, adapt and differentiate their projects to meet different learner's needs. The teacher is focused on inclusivity which can only be achieved through reflection. Over the last 2 years, I called myself a (student) art teacher. I never felt like it conveyed the depths of my identity. From now on I identify as an artist teacher, I am a "person who makes art and teaches art" (Thornton, 2005, p.167).

2.1 Art practices influence on teaching practice

Gender equality is the foundation of my work, focusing on the gender imbalance in the agriculture setting in Ireland. Activism is the framework of my art practice. Martin, Hanson and Fontaine (2007, p.80) define activism "as everyday actions by individuals...that have the potential to foster social change". My practice questions the lack of recognition females receive in farming in Ireland. By investigating the patriarchal authority and marginalisation of women in a male-dominated, agricultural environment. The function of the video installations I create is to question why tradition is valued higher than equality.

As an artist, I am constantly questioning my identity. Just like the teenagers I teach; I question who I am. Throughout school placement, the projects I delivered were rooted in themes about self-discovery and celebration for who they are and their interests. For example, the theme Sense of Place stemmed from the 'Feline Farmer', (see figure 3) a video installation I created in 2018. The installation depicts me moving between the role of the artist and farmers daughter on my family's farm in Wexford.

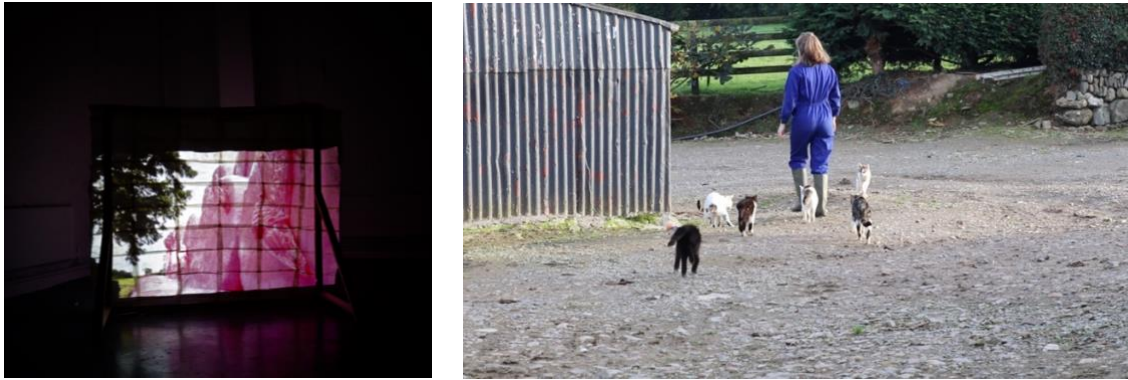


Figure 3: Feline Farmer. 2018, Video projection.

‘Small Female, Large Bales’ 2018 (see figure 4) is a comment on gender being a social construct. The short video shows me conquering stereotypes regarding strength and size by climbing a stack of bales wrapped in pink silage wrap. “Gender, like all social identities, is socially constructed” (Dr Zuleyka Zevallos, 2014). Schools are a source of social construction. From my research over the past several years I am aware “Pedagogical language and activities, playground games, uniforms, toilets, religious sacraments, textbooks and resources, extra-curricular sports and activities” (Neary, Cross, 2018, pp. 22) are gendered aspects of school life. Going forward I will create a classroom environment that does not feed into stereotypes, by showing them support studies who break the norm and introducing projects that allow the students to express themselves freely.



Figure 4: Small Female, Large Bales, 2018, video.

Following on from that. 'The Unconventional Shed' 2019 (see figure 5) is a video installation made for NCAD's Degree Show. The whitewashed structure was built around my petite body and reflects my height. Gendered roles were reversed, where I could work comfortably in the shed whereas my father and brother struggled. The colour pink featured as a way of dismantling stereotypes. My body acted as a tool for exploring beyond the barriers of gender roles. Over the last 2 years, I have focused on building a classroom that focuses on inclusion, representation and a positive learning environment. The students should not have to build their own shed so they can feel seen and be heard.



Figure 5: The Unconventional Shed, 2019, NCAD Degree Show, video installation

3.0 The art I teach

The art classroom is a space in which all students can freely express their feelings and ideas through different mediums such as paint, photography, sculpture, or digital films. By offering this environment, art teachers could be a great support for students with different backgrounds (Hsieh, 2016, p.131).

Inclusion, diversity and equality are important aspects of my art practice that has shaped how I teach. My classroom is a creative, supportive environment where each student feels safe, seen and heard. Encouraging the students voice in engagement in class, focusing on co-curation and delivery has helped my students develop as confident artists. I am mindful that students are bullied or marginalised for their gender, race and sexuality and want my art class to be a safe space for them to investigate and express who they are without the fear of being

judged (Hsieh, 2016). Throughout each Unit of Learning, I include artists that are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, creators from all around the world and from designers from different backgrounds. Since art history books are full of white men and do not represent reality, it is up to me, the teacher, to show students that anyone can be an artist regardless of their background, for example Nick Cave's (see figure 6) sound suits that "serve as an alien second skin that obscures race, gender, and class, allowing viewers to look without bias towards the wearer's identity" (Art21).



Figure 6: Artspace Editors. (2017). 4 Reasons to Collect Nick Cave's Soundsuit Serie. URL = https://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/conversation-piece/4-reasons-to-collect-nick-caves-soundsuit-photographs-54724

“Social justice education seeks to engage learners in a critical analysis of injustice by encouraging them to create works of art that imagine new realities and shift social interactions” (Dewhurst, 2014). It is my job as an artist teacher to educate the students on social justice issues like gender equality and to encourage them to become activists. Using Development Education as a way of reimagining the curriculum and as a “an educational process that supports the learner to critically engage with local and global development issues with a view to acting for a more equal, just and sustainable world” (Hogan, 2018, p.3). During the Change Lab my group connected to 2 Sustainable Development Goals we

investigated, gender equality (goal 5) and life on land (goal 15). ‘Our Habitat’, was an Ecofeminist project I delivered to 5th year students at Glenart College this year, in response to my groups Change Lab project ‘Will You Walk With Us’. “Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that sees environmentalism, and the relationship between women and the earth, as foundational to its analysis and practice” (Zein, Setiawan, 2017, p.1). Through sustainable interventions the students investigated social justice issues and questioned their role in creating a more equal world.



Figure 7: ‘Our Habitat’, 2020 Ecofeminist accordion book, by 5th years students at Glenart College.

Bloom’s Taxonomy and Bruner’s Discovery Learning, inform my teaching practice and create a constructivist methodology focused around student engagement and exploration. Bloom’s taxonomy allows me to guide the students from reality to abstraction through lower order and progressing to higher order questioning or engagement.

The taxonomy was formulated on principles that learning proceeds from concrete knowledge to abstract values, from dependent to independent thinking, from taken-for-granted facts to increased consciousness, and from the denotative to the connotative (Hamblen, 1984, p. 42).

Ranging from basic concepts, where the students say what they see, to them examining a work of art by focusing on comparing and contrasting, to finally stage create where they construct their own artefact (Hamblen, 1984). Bruner’s discovery learning works in tangent with this as the

students engage with materials and conduct experiments, which helps them move from Bloom's lower order up to higher order.

Discovery learning is an inquiry-based, constructivist learning theory that takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts... students interact with the world by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments (Learning Theories).

Using questioning to drive each lesson allowed the students to get involved in the class delivery. When teaching moved online, exploration learning became more important for student's development as lessons became more self-directed.

Conclusion

The Professional Master of Education in the National College of Art and Design

aims to enable art and design graduates develop as professional educators, through the application of their own art and design practices... The PME facilitates the personal, social, intellectual and practical growth of students, preparing them for professional careers as teachers and fostering the necessary skills and dispositions of research, analysis, evaluation and critique to enable them to become reflective practitioners (NCAD).

Through Visual Arts for the Classroom modules and the Change Lab, we learned how to combine our art practice and teaching practice together to create a dual identity. Reflecting on the relationship between the art I make and the art I teach, has resulted in me changing my identity from art teacher to artist teacher. My art practice shapes how I teach, resulting in a pedagogy that emphasised social justice issues and creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Art is a mode of expression and exploration. It has made my voice louder and my thoughts stronger and I hope to do the same for my students in the future.

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