Drawing thinking: Illustration as pedagogy

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Abstract

The idea of Illustration Pedagogy initially comes out of Transformative Learning Theory – a learning theory that challenges students to challenge their own assumptions – and utilizes ideas of drawing & writing, making & thinking in the learning journeys of our students from the first day that they arrive on the course. This article explores the way, as lecturers, we can approach the design and delivery of taught modules in ways that utilize the skills of student illustrators, developing their knowledge and understanding through critical writing practices realized through drawing and illustration. The projects referred to are across levels 4, 5 and 6 on the undergraduate BA(Hons) Illustration degree at Plymouth College of Art. Creative education by necessity requires a creative approach to pedagogy, and we have developed Illustration Pedagogy that uses the tools and contexts of illustration itself in the teaching and learning on the programme.

Keywords

Illustration Pedagogy
Transformative Learning
contextual studies
image and TEXT
drawing + writing
making + thinking
writing
education

What is Illustration Pedagogy?

This article explores the use of the term Illustration Pedagogy as a way of understanding where this sits as an educational proposition. Illustration Pedagogy comes out of the Transformative Learning framework of Jack Mezirow, a theory of learning in which a student's assumptions and perspectives are challenged through their own self-reflection and actualization. It places the emphasis on learners to constantly approach new ideas and concepts with an open mind, and to park their biases.

Transformative Learning has real potential as a method for getting students to open up their learning journey, but there are obvious difficulties inherent in its delivery that are critiqued in this overview. Developed in the late 1970s by the American educational theorist Jack Mezirow, Transformative Learning Theory finds its origins in the humanist and critical constructivist teachings of the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, in particular his

concept of *conscientization* – in which one becomes critically aware of oneself through reflection and action, so that through truth the world can be transformed – and the writings of the German Philosopher Jurgens Habermas.

Mezirow, like Freire, could best be described as both a humanist and a constructivist when it comes to educational theory. He adapted Freire's ideas for the need of oppressed peoples to see how their circumstances 'were in fact a product of that culture' (Jordan et al. 2008: 61) of the hegemonic powers of authority.
Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) highlighted the need for an education of *praxis* – theory, and practice – in which people learn to see a situation and then learn how to acquire the tools needed to change it. He wanted to remove passivity from learners, preferring to see the role of teacher and student as a democratic one in which both student and teacher engage in open, critical debate.

It is in this context that Mezirow formulated the ideas that became Transformative Learning. The theory is defined 'as the process by which we transform problematic frames of references […] sets of assumptions and expectations, to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow 2009: 92). Mezirow asserts that, according to Habermas, 'discourse leading to a consensus can establish the validity of a belief' (Mezirow 2009: 91). Hence our ideas and conclusions are tentative at best, always liable to change in light of others' points of view. Without this diversity of input, which is open to adaptation, we are forced 'to rely on tradition, an authority or force' (Mezirow 2009: 91) if we are to have any meaningful way of learning.

Put very simply, Transformative Learning is about learning to see differently.

For learners to participate and gain in discourse they must have access to 'accurate and complete information (Mezirow 2009: 92) and be free to make their own choices so that they might be better placed to develop their critical thinking free of cultural, social and economic bias. This will allow them to be 'able to understand, to weigh evidence and to assess arguments objectively' (Mezirow 2009: 92). In this way they are perhaps more aware of the context from where dominant ideas have come and can be better armed to address their own learned assumptions. Every act of learning then becomes a way of testing out new viewpoints and positions through open discourse. 'Transformations may be epochal – sudden major reorientations in habit of mind […] or cumulative, a progressive sequence of insight resulting in changes in point of view' (Mezirow 2009: 94)

Essentially, Transformative Learning moves students from being receptacles of knowledge into learning from consideration and critical inquiry in different points of view that challenge assumptions. This is where its critical constructivist heritage is most evident, as it challenges the learner to become more critically aware of the circumstances of the learner's environment and situation, seeking to teach the student not *what* to think, but to teach the student *how* to think. In effect, as with epochal learning, nothing is taken or given at face value, but is explored anew for what it is and what it might potentially be.

One might say that an important aspect of Transformative Learning – at least as far as our teaching in an arts context is concerned – is the simple pleasure of finding things out. As creative educators we want them to find out through making, using the tools of drawing and illustration to explore what it means to answer the questions that their developing critical inquiry is asking them. In this way drawing becomes the methodology for their transformation from student to co-educator in their own learning.

Mireille Fauchon and Rachel Gannon proposed a manifesto of Illustration Pedagogy, stating that 'a subject as dynamic as illustration requires suitably dynamic strategies through which to analyse it. What we do intend is to provide a framework for investigation' (2018: 219). They, like ourselves, have identified that Illustration Pedagogy challenges students to keep developing their knowledge in ever more complicated scenarios to contextualize illustration through practicing its methods.

We very much wanted the illustration degree here to celebrate what value we can be as illustrators commentating on and engaging in and with the world, to make the students see writing not as something additional or removed from their work – e.g. the theory element they have to do because it is a degree – but rather as something in which they can explicate their ideas and prejudices and beliefs, described through image and text.

Before he died in November 2017, Paul Bowman (illustrator/educator) delivered a manifesto entitled Educate Agitate Abdicate that was a rallying call to the Illustration profession to apply their skills to the communication of what is both wrong and right with the world: 'The issue is not: What is illustration? It is: What use is it? What good can it do? Ultimately: What use are we?' (Bowman 2017: n.pag.)

In response we then asked the same questions of our own programme and of ourselves as educators – to explore 'what use are we' as we work alongside the next generation of Illustration professionals. The intention was to better understand what our programme needs to achieve with/for its students. Do we want to turn out students capable of 'making stuff', or do we also want them to be able to reflect on what it *means* to 'make stuff'?

Any Illustration programme would want to explore, develop and celebrate the illustrator's talent in being able to convey complex ideas and narratives with visuals that are thought-provoking and accessible. We are tasked with challenging our students, expanding their critical and creative experience, supporting them to develop and refine their visual language while introducing them to the rigors of academic research and the 'realities' of professional practice.

Illustration students should think like illustrators from the moment they start their undergraduate journey. Borrowing from Yuval Noah Harari's 4Cs (Harari 2018) if we want our students to always be communicating ideas critically, creatively and collaboratively then we should deliver the same. It has become commonplace for us to communicate to each other using our shared visual language, whether that is an induction week timetable of activity communicated through a drawn zine or a deadline check sheet that is illustrated rather than written as a list.
Drawing and other forms of creative image-making are explored through active learning experiences.

Drawing + writing
Exploring the process of critical writing and sketching

At a higher education institution, students do have to do things in an academic way. There are reasons for the conventions. But the academic part here is the way they do it. Reference correctly. Use in-text citations to back up their language, and no one in academia can legitimately complain they are not following convention. So, in-text citations have to be there and the bibliography has to be perfectly presented. But the words, the cadence, the nuances, the rhythms, the poetics, the structures, these are all for them to shape and make do with as they please.
When it comes to academic writing, we approach this by asking our students to avoid what Steven Pinker calls academic gobbledygook (Pinker 2014); they are not here to write for an elitist few, but to write for everyone. To be inclusive. That does not mean dumbing down. It means reaching out, creatively, through critical thinking, collaboratively, to those who perhaps have not had the benefit of an education that solicits language that can only be consumed by those in the know. Academic writing does not have to be some old fashioned, old boys club with secret handshakes and hidden codes: it can be a way of telling the world your story, without the need to inveigle, obfuscate or deceive.
A 'good' student is as at ease reading heavy academic tomes as they are reading magazine articles and watching vlogs. A 'good' student is the student who can translate these source materials into the everyday language of everyday people without losing

anything in the translation. This means they have to read (and watch) and read (and watch) widely. Sorry, not sorry. They will have to suffer the slings and arrows and outrageous misfortunes of citing authors who only know how to write in gobbledygook because their livelihood and tenure depend upon it.

We ask the student to consider what works best: writing that ends up in an academic journal that only a few can decipher and even fewer can access behind paywalls or writing that could equally sit in that same journal as it could on a blog post that could be devoured by the entire world. The first might be so good that it could set the academic world on fire; the second, however, could be so good that it could also change the actual world itself.
As a way of reflecting on the content of the lecture series that run across levels 4 and 5, we require students to create a critical portfolio of drawing and writing, which feeds into the essays that they submit at the end of the module. The drawing that exists within these journals is down to the individual student; it can be anything from a complex diagram to freeform doodles. Whilst some journals show evidence of conceptual illustrations of complex themes, others have characters drawn to support the student's navigation of the lecture series as a kind of narrator informing the reader what is being explored.

Students who are up to this challenge go ahead and write beautifully, write clearly, write visually and make themselves heard (Figure 1).

Drawing + thinking
In recent years we have identified a reluctance from students to read and think about academic texts. Where students rely heavily on surface-level content for their references, such as non-academic blogs, vlogs and YouTube, deeper-level thinking can be limited, which is an issue that needs to be confronted.
Each year we introduce at least two Context Quakes, which are standalone extended inquiries and explorations of ways of seeing their ideas in practice. For example, with the Walter Benjamin Comic Book, students have three days to read, digest, deconstruct and reinterpret Benjamin's *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, explicating the main ideas and concepts through cutting up the text, illustrating concepts and rearranging all of this into new forms that are relevant to present-day creative practice (Figure 2).

By demystifying Benjamin's seminal text, we have found that students are able to relate to it in the context of their own practice, and through drawing + thinking they are able to articulate their thoughts about a given text in ways that come more naturally to them as learners. We are interested in whether active, experiential learning helps them to

remember, recall, digest and synthesize ideas in a more cohesive manner. We are less interested in them understanding the original essay as a historical text and more interested in how that text is understood in the context of its relationship to Instagram, to zines and to the Internet as a platform for their ideas. The Walter Benjamin Comic Book is a tool for reflecting on ideas, rather than a repetition of facts and notions. It matters little that the Benjamin they reveal is often as much construct of their own ideas as he is of the historical theorist working away on his index cards, as this is part of the contextualizing of histories we ask them to consider, where truths are always up for revision and where narratives are very much related to fluctuating attitudes and paradigms. Some students recreate Benjamin to suit their needs in their zines: as philanderer, as coffee addict, as superhero. We like to feel that Benjamin himself – the man who cataloged the world through fragments – would approve.

Drawing + thinking + making

At the start of level 6 we ask the students to give a presentation showing consolidation of their thinking, and to act as sign-off for the final writing phase of their dissertations. We recently decided to shift from verbal to drawn presentation of research so far – to fit in with the new pedagogy that we were developing – acknowledging the way students had built on skills and knowledge developed at levels 4 and 5.

The format for the Little Poster festival is based on an Illustration Pedagogy take on what is essentially an academic poster. But we want the student to think about approaching these posters as if they were a commission from a client, and to make them illustrational, instructional, visually exciting and academic. They had to simultaneously present their posters to the rest of the cohort and ambulate the space, questioning methodologies, discussing research questions and offering recommendations for new avenues of inquiry.

This performative addition to the idea of the presentation opened it up into a much more discursive proposition, and one in which those students who are usually terrified of standing in front of their peers talking to a Powerpoint instead found themselves talking and listening in a room buzzing with creative responses to research inquiries. They could instantly see how their peers' ideas connected and resonated with their own. As tutors we were able to see peer discussion, critical thinking and communication happening on a scale that the more sterile presentations had stymied.

We now get students to make a poster that shows how their drawing and thinking is arriving at a new place. Figure 3 shows the students illustrating their dissertation propositions, thinking through drawing.

Drawing + thinking + writing + making

One of the key issues that we face with the artefact option is the sense that it can be seen as vague when it comes to assessment. We needed a way to lock it down and make it clear what the parameters for assessing work were for staff to give the student a clear idea of how to achieve success. The answer was found in a place we all – as educators and learners – have found ourselves using: Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning.

This taxonomy unpacks for the educator a way of measuring learning objectives and achievements in a broad but specific model. For both the educator and the learner, there is an inclusive aspect as the model is open and scalable. In the revised version, the taxonomy culminates in analysing, evaluating and creating; these are, in essence, what we had in mind when we came up with the artefact option; it is just that we did not have the language for it at the time. Providing staff and students with this as a starting point, it becomes more focused on what we want to achieve.

Using Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwolh 2001) as a measure, the students are able to utilize their core creativity to explore new ways of making their work. Fitting within the framework of creative research as practice, a successful artefact is one in which the student enters new territory and finds that his or her practice has been changed irrevocably going forward. Figure 4 shows an example artefact in which the student has unpacked ideas of mental health and well-being – and dreams associated with the medication they were taking at the time – through the panels of a quilt, relating their thinking to a making methodology. The quilt connects to a tradition of therapy and familial memory sharing; it distinctively 'writes' through drawing. Other artefact examples have included a 'quiet' book as a way of exploring how an illustrator can create a sensory learning experience for autistic children; a banner for a school of creative education that is the culmination of workshops and conversations with the children who were to be the first intake at the school when it opened; and a bookwork in which the student used collage to capture their infra-ordinary experiences of closing the curtains at the same time every evening for six months.

So, with Bloom's taxonomy as the starting point, we consider the following:

Understanding: the student explains ideas and concepts through the artefact and shows how the artefact discusses ideas and concepts of theory. For example, the quilt explains these things through various connections to psychology, psychoanalysis, waveforms and other scientific models. It taps into the auditory signals of distress and makes them visual (evoking visual semiotics); the quilt talks about signs and semiotics as a medium for displaying folklore, family history and personal insight, and situates all of these within other historic materialities of craft, art and design.

Applying: through the act of drawing/creating, the student discusses theory explored through an artefact as a means of interpreting theory. The quilt talks about fear, anxiety and sensory issues all interpreted through visual means.

Analysing: through practice-led theory the student uses his or her creativity to analyse the question at hand. The quilt in itself is not necessarily analytical, but unpacked through the writing that frames the artefact through analysis – appraising, comparing, criticizing, questioning and examining in relation to other creative works. It is placed within the contexts of artists and makers such as Grayson Perry's, especially his banners and textiles that talk about community, society and psychology; it quietly suggests Tracy Emin's installations that use visual language to unpick difficult, often unspoken materials, and in this way the student has been able to bring an analysis into the artefact.

For the student thinking about choosing the artefact option we then ask a series of questions:

> Can they produce a new way of seeing, doing, being and/or understanding through the process and outcome of their artefact?
> Can they defend/justify and position their artefact to a robust standard?
> Can they compare, contrast, distinguish and question something through the making and writing, creating and defending your position/argument?

When assessing the artefact, we look at the following: whether the student has created a new product/concept or understanding through the artefact and to what level of success, whether the student has been able to justify/defend their inquiry through the artefact *and* writing. The expectation is that it has been taken forward into their practice, and we ask whether the student has been able to distinguish between this work and already existing work, and whether they successfully tested out concepts, making explicit all implicit ideas to clearly articulate their intentions and outcomes.
The artefact is not for everyone. It is, by its nature, a more complex, reflexive approach to inquiry. The student must be a consummate maker and a critical thinker, and for this reason we still allow more traditional methods of essay and written inquiry for these research projects. But for those students willing to take risks, the artefact option allows them the necessary space to push themselves and explore new areas of theory through practice.

Conclusion

Starting from a position of 'draw everything' – whether that be their assignment brief, their essay ideas, their propositions – we have created an atmosphere where the

students are never not illustrating, illustration as a culture, transcribing through illustrating what they see, hear and experience. This is the route to artistic intensity, and creative authenticity.

Critical thinking helps the students going forward into their careers after university. Whether their career path takes them into an in-house studio environment, or into independent practice, or into teaching or continued education, the skills that they develop through our unique take on pedagogy give them the ability to apply things that they have directly experienced into real-world situations.
This extension of the principles of Transformative Learning prepares the student for the complexities of working in the creative industries, and arms them with the critical skills needed for them to adapt their abilities to cope with an ever-changing creative landscape. As educators we have a responsibility to empower our students with the skills and knowledge not just to get their first job, but to make them critically astute enough to adapt to every change in the job market that might come their way.

Through drawing + writing, making + thinking, we are challenging the existing orthodoxy of the supremacy of the word in the understanding of critical debate. Illustrators have more and more entered the fray as commentators intent on engaging in the big debates of the day, using words and images to speak the language of a world increasingly made of signs and spectacle.

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Mel Brown MA is senior lecturer and assistant head of school (Design + Communication) at Plymouth College of Art; her current research interests explore play and the role of curiosity in creative learning. As an image-maker she is obsessed with discarded books, abandoned photographs and seemingly random pieces of ephemera, playfully transforming the use, meaning and interpretation of the things that she finds.

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List of illustrations

Figure 1: Details from a critical portfolio, 2018 (Photographer: Mel Brown).
Figure 2: The Walter Benjamin Comic Book, 2018, mixed media display at Plymouth College of Art (Photographer: Mel Brown).
Figure 3: The Little Poster Festival Submissions, 2018, mixed media exhibition at Plymouth College of Art (Photographer: Mel Brown).
Figure 4: The artefact, 2018, printed and embroidered textiles on display at Plymouth College of Art (photographer: Mel Brown).