Keeping Up Appearances: The Sincere Fiction of Creative Autonomy in Art and Design Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two grounded narratives that form part my recent ethnographic study of creativity in art and design education. The investigation was culturally situated in the final year of schooling in an art and design classroom. It focused on how the students and their teacher navigated the making of temporal and digital works for the high stakes New South Wales (NSW) Visual Arts Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination. Framed by Bourdieu’s concepts of the habitus and symbolic capital, the narratives reveal how self and collective misrecognition works towards shoring up the originality of the works, while contributing to the recognition that all desire.

INTRODUCTION

In the ethnographic study that this paper draws from, I identified a set of substantive features that concern the reality of creative practice as an interconnected network of institutional agreements (Thomas, 2009). While these features were far from exhaustive, I explained that creativity could not be explicitly taught or learned, nor could it be spontaneously expressed. I considered how creativity could be conceived of as a kind of apprenticeship, which ironically was overlooked. Creativity was revealed as a dialectical collaboration between students and their art and design teacher. The teacher applied a ‘politic application of know how’ of great importance to the students’ performances and the aesthetics of the artefacts they made (Brown, 1988: 26). Paradoxically, this facilitated the students in their realisation of authentic expression. It was shown that creativity involved the use of wily ploys and crafty tricks on the part of the teacher. The necessary ambiguity of the teacher’s actions was needed for the redemption of good in the classroom and in the assessment of the temporal and digital works that were produced but it existed within the possibilities afforded within the realities of the constraints of the educational system (Thomas, 2008).

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

In my search for a sociology of creativity, I turned to Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of the habitus, symbolic capital and misrecognition entailed within his theory of practice (1997).

While Bourdieu’s theories had been used extensively in art and educational research, there were few, if any, studies of creativity in art and design education, until this study, that had capitalised on his concept of misrecognition in the transmission of concepts and ideas in the development of high school students’ practical reasoning.

Bourdieu explains the habitus as a critical social competency composed of structuring dispositions that are a product of history and acquired and enacted as a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 66). The habitus is full of illusio or ‘investment’ which is not reducible to ordinary experience (p. 66). Symbolic capital is explained as a primary currency of cultural exchange in a social and symbolic economy (contrary to a material or explicitly economic economy) and extends to all goods worthy of exchange (Bourdieu, 1997: 113). Transactions of symbolic capital, while highly sought after and recognised for their potential to exert an actual or exploitative force in a social practice, are dependent on their being misrecognised as explicit capital. In other words, social agents in these economies maintain a subjective and collectively inscribed self-deception and misrecognition that prevents the economy from being grasped and declared as one. Maintenance of a symbolic economy is dependent upon keeping up appearances, sincere fictions, good faith, honourable conduct, practical euphemisms, denial, appearing to refuse the law of self interest and a trust and complicity among its members (Bourdieu, 1998: 98). Bourdieu explains that it is not a matter of strictly obeying the rules but rather giving visible signs that attempts are being made to respect the rules, while all the while knowing that they will be transgressed at some point (p. 98).

Bourdieu’s theoretical framework was demonstrably relevant to the practice of creativity in art and design education insofar as the habitus of classrooms could be likened to symbolic economies. As such, it was found that classrooms became the sites for transactions of ‘creative’ capital between art and design teachers and their students.

II. DESIGN AND METHODS

The design made use of multiple approaches to uncover what was recognised and misrecognised in creative transactions. Fieldwork involved the collection of data from
observations and unstructured and structured interviews with an expert art and design teacher (Ericsson and Charness, 1984), known in the study under the pseudonym of ‘Mr Porteous’ and his Year 12 class, some of whom are referred to below. A digital video recorder was used to capture actions, events, material culture, the artworks and students’ diaries and the verbal and non-verbal language used. Results were developed from transcripts of the data using a form of semantic analysis augmented by the digital video records. Semantic analysis is based on Spradley’s relational theory of meaning (Spradley, 1979, 1980). The method involved selecting episodes from verbatim transcripts of observations and unstructured interviews. Words or short phrases were systematically recorded on separate index cards (Carroll and Brown, 1998). Each of these was analysed to uncover the semantic relationship, the force of the utterance and its propositional content. These relational concepts assisted in decoding the meanings of symbols used within the culture of the classroom. Cards were reconstructed into emergent domains under the guidance of their shared local meanings. Documentary evidence from the digital video records, and a further analysis of the observations, unstructured and structured interviews and descriptions of events contributed to the triangulation and the mutual reinforcement of the results (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002).

III. MAKING DEVIATIONS FROM CANONICAL ACCOUNTS OF CREATIVITY INTELLIGIBLE

Bruner says “the function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical pattern of culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 49-50). In the case of this study, the narratives as presented below, enable deviations from those more widely accepted narratives of creativity including those that stem from theories of the creative imagination and genius (Kant [C18th], 1976), the creative personality (Torrance, 1974), an objective process (Wallas [1926], 1973), problem solving (Ecker, 1966), or a form of creative control (Tomas, 1979), to be made intelligible. These narratives are grounded in sequences of events extracted from the empirical detail of the results and digital records that have been interwoven with Bourdieu’s theories as explained above. Verbatim references are drawn from the results.

IV. GROUNDED NARRATIVES

A. A Win-Win Situation: Juliette and Mr Porteous

In this grounded narrative Mr Porteous seeks to broker the expertise of a member of his own family that confirms his personal commitment to Juliette and her evolving large scale illuminated digital images.

Juliette’s lightboxes need be wired up so that her digital images can be illuminated, similar in effect to the illuminated photographs of the contemporary photographer Jeff Wall. Mr Porteous and Juliette are discussing the placement of the lights in the lightboxes and the cost of laminex and timber – different materials she will need to buy. Calculating that she will do this, Mr Porteous in return offers her the loan of two fluorescent lights. These are well suited to the size of the planned lightboxes and the illumination of the works and act as a reassuring gesture on his part.

Unexpectedly, Mr Porteous does not stop there. There is more that he can do to bring about the effect that he desires which he predicts Juliette will want. Besides, while Juliette needs to accept his offer, the obligation that he is prepared to place himself under on her behalf requires little practically from her. ‘I’ll get [name] to wire them up… he is an electrician… so you’re lucky there’, he says, in a lighthearted enticement. Juliette is delighted. She had thought that her work was complete but this allure offers more. Feeling great warmth towards him, she senses her standing amongst the group.

Mr Porteous calculates the effects. ‘So there’s a nice strategy there… lightboxes’. The opportunity cannot be overlooked. Mindful of the scarcity of similar types of works in the HSC, he recognises the possibility that her work will increase in value and be distinguished from others. This move would be recognised by Juliette, his other students and potentially the HSC examiners. Mr Porteous can make this happen through his contacts. This builds on a trust that he and his students share implicitly while all desire that such confidences will be rewarded (Bourdieu, 2000: 192).

His actions are also honourable in the light of HSC examination rules, which he can employ in his defense if critics might suspect his motives. Qualified tradespeople are required to carry out electrical work on the students’ artworks with documentation recorded in their diaries. It would be irresponsible if he were to act otherwise. In this way he can advantage the work, brought about by his ability to broker the services of others, raise the stakes in what Juliette will produce, keep her costs down and play by the rules. And they both want it.

Later, knowing what Juliette finally achieves with her large digital works, Mr Porteous hints at how he has brokered these opportunities. He comments ‘from this video aspect to suddenly a digital… it just wasn’t working’. But he is unable to declare what he does explicitly.

B. The Use of Humour: Lydia and Mr Porteous

In this grounded narrative Mr Porteous uses humour and his physical presence to encourage Lydia in how she proceeds in using the Photoshop program, with which she is unfamiliar. Lydia needs to recognise her obligations to Mr Porteous for an ongoing exchange to be possible.

Lydia is unfamiliar with the Photoshop program and yet she knows she is expected to use it to manipulate her black and white close up images that are about her identity. The process of manipulating the image with Photoshop is familiar to a number of other students in the class including Antonia, Juliette and Edwina. These students are using the program and the advantages that accrue accord with Mr Porteous’s view that the manipulated image has a greater interest than a plain photograph.

Looking at one of her images on the screen, Lydia is not sure of what to do. She uses her time to try this and that but does not get very far. Previously she sought the assistance of Edwina who was well versed in the program and she had shown Lydia one or two things that appeared to be quite beneficial. It was certainly more than Lydia knew herself.
Lydia realises that time is running out although she is not altogether interested in what she has to do.

Now Mr Porteous crouches beside her. His assurance is undeniable as he points to the screen and talks to her through how to proceed. Secretly, his physical presence is enjoyed. Lydia is seated above him on her chair, while he is lower, appearing to be more submissive – although nothing is said of it. Both enjoy the frisson. Theirs is a relationship of banter and humour, underpinned by good will, despite the fact that both know that Lydia is easily sidetracked. Lydia knows Mr Porteous is clever. He seems to be able to get her to do things that she would not do by herself or for other teachers. This is not by any explicit exertion but by his being prepared to string her along and she delights in his attention. It is even worth her while to feign a disinterest. Through this tactic she can engage him sometimes more than she may be able to otherwise. And it has to be said that there are benefits.

These exchanges give Mr Porteous a chance to amuse Lydia and to showcase his skills with someone who is responsive. Wondering why a command is not accepted by the computer he asks ‘what did Edwina do?’ appearing to be absolutely direct with the Lydia but at the same time obliquely warning her of the dangers of seeking the assistance of her classmates rather than him. Lydia replies that ‘she doubled clicked something’, pretending not to have wanted the attention and siding with Mr Porteous.

He replies that Edwina had put part of the image on the wrong layer and through a rapid succession of clicks sorts out the difficulty. Mr Porteous is confident in his own assessment and is relieved that they can proceed. Lydia replies, in an effort to appease her own guilt, ‘she (Edwina) wasn’t meant to do anything’, in anticipation that her angling will return her to Mr Porteous’s favour. He euphemises his criticism using a cheeky tone to counter the force of his warning ‘oh well, you will let her do things’. Mr Porteous has her recognise his meaning and future intentions while underplaying the force of his chiding and institutional authority.

Mr Porteous leads her through different steps of using the program, disguising the urgency of his intentions. ‘Oh no, do, do, do, go to magic wand OK. Click on the white area’, he says, giving her the attention she desires as if it were the only thing to do. He is attentive, although the time is costly, but he recognises the benefits of his investment in Lydia’s performance. This he hopes will be noticed in the visual and aesthetic values of the work and how her future audience of HSC examiners will assess it. Claiming a legitimate imposition in believing himself, and having others believe, that he has no interest outside of hers. She in return obliges him, doing what he asks of her, calculating that what he proposes is in her best interests and worth her while.

And yet Lydia does not want to show too much gratitude. Attempting to shift his focus, she dramatises her current state of hunger, intending to distract Mr Porteous. But he, in return, humours her. Then he shifts his angle and encourages her to come in to the studio at other times to finish her other graphic works. When she indicates that she will do this, he praises her in his comments ‘excellent’, as if a radical breakthrough has been made that is worthy of celebration. He builds her up, then switches the effect to have her plunge into working on her digital images more.

Mr Porteous asks about whether Lydia has made the alterations that he has previously asked of her. She confides that the images that she had attempted to position have been unsuccessful. Mr Porteous toys with her, knowing that the chase will draw her in. ‘Tell them’ he says, anticipating her future audience with the HSC markers, ‘to hold them up in front of the light’. Both giggle. This contributes to the atmosphere of enchantment. Mr Porteous wittily pushes on, remarking ‘go to the edit and c-c-c-copy’. ‘Brilliant’ he says, overplaying her action as if it were a masterstroke and then he leads her on again in how she will overlay her images. Mr Porteous knows that the best way for Lydia to do what he asks of her is through an inverted demand that appeals to her and has the right effect but is not noticed as such.

V. Discussion

In these narratives, creativity is revealed as a necessarily contradictory social practice which is rich in contextual meaning. In the first narrative, Mr Porteous is motivated by the desire to broker and invest in the rearrangement of possibilities through actions that enhance the creative capital of Juliette’s artworks. This desire works to defy what might otherwise be predicted. Mr Porteous’ actions present as the uncalculated added bonus that cause the creative potential of his students’ artworks to escalate at certain points which he later downplays in order to genuflect to the fiction of creative autonomy and thus, Juliette gets the credit for what she does. In the second narrative, Mr Porteous is motivated by the desire to exercise his legitimate authority, while lending protection to Lydia for her lack of practical know how. His actions license Lydia’s future directions which, in turn, she remakes as her own, while shoring up her confidence in what she takes on. At the same time, Mr Porteous incrementally assumes the authoring of Lydia’s work while she becomes increasingly reliant on him. Nevertheless, this transformation occurs in the incremental adjustments that are made which are forgotten over time. The atmosphere, as characterised in the transactions of creative capital between the teacher and his students, is one of open secretiveness – everyone knows but doesn’t want to know that everyone knows what goes on (Bourdieu, 1998: 96).

VI. Conclusion

As a consequence of the findings of this study, art and design education and the broader fields of art, design and education are in a better position to understand how classrooms and other sites committed to the production of creative outcomes function as symbolic economies, which misrecognise the economic ends to which they are orientated. Within these denied economies, learning to be creative, by necessity, entails the acquisition of social competencies that involve social tact and reciprocity amongst its protagonists. These social competencies are well suited to the acquisition of scarce resources in the search for creativity. The classroom becomes a site of struggle, rather than a consensual space, where rare resources of the creative habitus are materially and symbolically negotiated, distributed and desired.
REFERENCES