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## Examining Practice in Secondary Visual Arts Education

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### Abstract

Teaching in secondary visual arts classrooms is complex and challenging work. While it is implicated in much research, the complexity of the lived experience of secondary visual arts teaching has rarely been the subject of sustained and synthesized research. In this paper, the potential of practice as a concept to examine and represent secondary visual arts teaching is investigated. A range of practice theories are first examined to identify common themes and principles. From this conceptual foundation, four theoretical principles are developed as a framework to consider the classroom-based complexities of secondary visual arts teaching. A methodological

design is then derived from this conceptual foundation. In conclusion, the potential of applying this practice-based framework to the study of secondary visual arts classrooms is considered in relation to empirical research undertaken with teachers as co-researchers.

In a national review of visual education in Australia, Diana Davis (2008, p. 57) noted the absence of existing knowledge about teaching practice in visual arts education, stating that “There are very few studies that have investigated the visual arts in an educational context, and even fewer that have explored visual arts classroom practice” (2008, p. 53). On the basis of an analysis of the three key international journals in the field, she then went on to say that “what happens in arts classrooms seems perhaps to be taken for granted” (2008, p. 57). Davis’s assertion is supported by her finding that less than 1% of articles published in the three peak journals in the field, in the period from 1997-2007, addressed issues of classroom teaching or learning.

In response to Davis’ assertions, I continued this examination and scrutinized books and articles published in the period 1997-2014. Notwithstanding a diversity of approaches and concerns, the analysis has indicated some continuing key focus points in art educational research. Research includes questions of the nature of art and art education (see for example Efland, 1996; Eisner, 2002; Feldman, 1996; Wilson, 2010; Gude, 2013); models and debates about curriculum development (see for example, Addison & Burgess, 2013; Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Kindler, 2003; Mayer, 2008; Rolling, 2010; Tavin, 2005), examinations of interdisciplinary approaches (see Bamford, 2006; Piscitelli, Renshaw, Dunn & Hawke, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Marshall, 2014; Russell-Bowie, 2013) and critical focus on international approaches to visual arts curriculum (see Bamford, 2006; Bresler, 2007). Typical of this body of research has been a broad focus that has argued the importance of the subject within the school curriculum.

Since Davis’ study there has been a clear growth of interest in: issues of community on a local and global level (see for example Keys 2008; Washington 2011; Lawton & LaPorte, 2013); critical questions of creativity (see Bastos 2010; Campbell & Simpson, 2012); teacher identity and experience (see Garvis and Pendergast, 2011; Addison & Burgess, 2013), and pre-service teacher education and transitions to teaching (see Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles & Gordon, 2013; Briggs & McHenry, 2013). There has also been continued debate about particular approaches in early childhood, primary and secondary contexts (see for example, Blandy, 2011; Klopper & Garvis, 2011). In addition, there have been a number of recent publications that have effectively responded to Davis’ concerns in addressing classroom contexts. These include publications by Burton and Hafeli (2012), Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morriss, and Sessions (2006), Marshall and D’Adarno (2011), and Hickman (2011).

The research noted has provided extensive information about the foundations of art education and the art classroom is clearly implicated, if not addressed, in much of the work. There has also been an increased engagement in issues of classroom teaching and learning. However, there has been a relatively limited focused engagement in the complexities of *how* art education occurs in classrooms on an everyday basis in relation to *who* teaches it. In addition, many of the studies have remained at the level of individual, small-scale initiatives that are not drawn together in an integrated or synthesized way, highlighting the potential for research that attempts to do this. In this environment a number of questions remain unanswered or only partially addressed, such as: How do visual arts teachers engage in teaching practice on an everyday basis? How do visual arts teachers work individually and collectively? How do they work conceptually? How do they teach in an embodied way? What is their relationship to materials? To what extent and when are their practices dynamic? How can both visible and invisible aspects of teaching practice be understood? Such questions provide fertile ground for further research to examine how teaching and learning occurs in visual arts classrooms. This work would add elaboration to existing bodies of knowledge in the spirit of developing a full and rich view of the complexities of art education.

In this paper I will explore how the concept of practice can be used to specifically investigate secondary visual arts teaching for the purposes of developing accounts of practice to inform both teaching and teacher education. To do this, I will first present a conceptual framework that draws on theories of practice and ideas about practice in relation to teaching. I will then propose four theoretical propositions that derive from this conceptual framework and apply the conceptual lens of practice to the specialist area of secondary visual arts education. From this foundation I will develop a methodological design for investigation of the four propositions. This methodological approach has been activated in research undertaken in an ongoing program of research. The focus throughout the paper will be on an establishing a theoretically informed, practice-based approach to the investigation of secondary visual arts teaching, with the purpose of building knowledge in relation to classroom practice and teacher perspectives.

### **Theorising Practice**

Theorists view practice as fundamental to an understanding of life and society and as a medium through which humans relate (Schatzki, 1996). It is acknowledged as a complex concept that brings together a range of seemingly disparate work. As van Manen (2007) has stated,

...practice refers to our ongoing and immediate involvement in our everyday worldly concerns...the mutual relations between practice and thought appear extremely complex and subtle. (p. 15)

In examining the concept of practice there is an expanse of literature to draw on. This body of work variously represents a range of approaches, drawing on post-humanist, post-structural, post-Cartesian and Aristotelian frameworks. While the differences in these positions are important and should not be underplayed, in this examination I wish to identify commonalities in themes and principles that illustrate the potential of the concept of practice. In particular, the power of the concept to traverse traditional oppositions is examined to illustrate its ability to deal with the complexity of teaching.

### ***Practice as Bringing Together Mind, Body and Spirit***

Common to all definitions of practice is a focus on human activity in relation to a ‘doing (ness)’ that Green (2009) observes as encompassing activity, experience, and context as layerings and unfoldings that dynamically change. While the doing (ness) of practice that Green refers to is often thought of in opposition to theory, in reality practice brings together both bodily and mental activity (Reckwitz, 2002). In referring to practice as ‘sayings’ and ‘doings,’ Schatzki (1996) acknowledges that practice is expressed through action but that the action itself is generated by thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and beliefs that exist intellectually and emotionally. Thus theory is seen as embedded in practice and as being used for practice, challenging the traditional Cartesian mind/body dualism and suggesting that it is through practice that the mind and the body are joined (Reckwitz, 2002). Acknowledging the connection between mind and body further highlights practice as performance, with the enactment of performance representing the nexus between doings and sayings (Warde, 2005, p. 134).

In exploring the phenomenology of practice, van Manen (2007, p. 20) talks about practice as involving a different way of knowing the world, indicating “Whereas theory ‘thinks’ the world, practice ‘grasps’ the world—it grasps the world pathically.” In this sense pathic is considered in relation to a phenomenological view of pathic as mood, sensibility, and a felt sense of being in the world. As van Manen goes on to outline, the foregrounding of practice as pathic recognises that practice involves a sense of the body, a personal presence, relational perceptiveness, sensitivity and sensibility, a tact for knowing what to do and say, thoughtful routines and other aspects of knowledge that are in part pre-reflective and pre-linguistic. Such aspects are sensed and felt but are often not probed, thought about, or talked about explicitly. Acknowledging practice as pathic recognizes the importance of the body in connection with the mind and as connected to the spirit.

### ***Practice as Encompassing the Contextual, the Material and the Relational***

Practice is embodied, is expressed through the body, is related to the materiality of context and is carried in and realised through the action of embodied performance in relation to others

and to other-ness. It exists in the relations between mind, body and action, with the body enabling and constraining the possibilities of action (Schatzki, 1996). Possibilities of action are further mediated by the particularities of time and place in terms of environments, circumstances, and resources. Recognition of practice as shaped, in part, by material and physical circumstances, simultaneously shifts focus away from the individual and ideas of practice as determined by knowledge. Instead it suggests that practice is extra-individual (Kemmis, 2009), and needs to be considered as fundamentally social and relational. This is emphasized by Schwandt (2005, p. 327) in his observation that practice is “always other-regarding” and by Kemmis (2009) in his assertion that practice is ‘sayings,’ ‘doings,’ and ‘relatings.’

### ***Practice as Living Tradition, as Habit and as Emerging over Time***

Practice involves a membership in fields in which there exists an authority of practice. Those who engage in practice are part of a larger social practice and are disciplined, to some extent, by the history of practice and the evolution of practice within particular fields. The tradition provides a way of seeing and a way of doing, at both a tacit and explicit level. Within the traditions of practice there are also characteristic routines and regularities. In this way practice is “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). Thus the practitioner attends to practice, although practice pre-exists and co-exists and exists in the future. In action, the practitioner develops a relationship to practice that engages their agency, in relation to the broader tradition.

While practice can be habitual and institutionalized in this way, it is also simultaneously emergent, open to possibilities, adaptive, and responsive to change. Importantly, the existence of these emergent qualities within living traditions provides constrained opportunities for action. Schatzki (1996) refers to this situation as involving existential possibilities, which are a range of possible options, or practical ways forward. Similarly, Bourdieu (2005) talks of human behaviour as being open and diverse, but within limits.

### **Visual Arts Teaching as a Particular Professional Practice**

The ideas about practice that have been discussed thus far provide a productive integrative framework for thinking about the complexity of any professional practice. Applying this lens to the particular area of teaching, allows for examination of the exchanges and interactivity of teachers and students within the classroom environment.

Teaching is a particular professional practice that is learned and developed through initial teacher education and professional learning. In recent years, initial teacher education has been

observed to be increasingly reliant on knowledge-based approaches. These approaches have focused on theoretical aspects of teaching in ways that have often been disconnected from the skill-based practice of teaching (Reid, 2011). In this context the question of what happens in classrooms and *how* teaching occurs is often left to professional experience placements in schools. Generally, student teachers have few opportunities to engage with practice examples or to *practise* teaching, prior to in-school professional experience placements. Given that professional experience placements are often the subject of formal assessment this experience becomes high-stakes learning with a focus on teaching as the assessed product.

In acknowledgement of this situation there is growing advocacy in teacher education for a shift from a focus on knowledge to a focus on practice (Grossman et al., 2008; Grossman et al., 2009; Ball & Forzani, 2009; Reid, 2011). As Ball and Forzani (2009: 503) note, this requires a move from a focus "on what teachers know to a greater focus on *what teachers do.*" Importantly such a shift requires clear understandings of what teachers do in their everyday work, yet also values the importance of theory in relation to practice. Such understandings can be developed from research that investigates teaching in its complexity across subject areas. Research further requires subject specific investigations that address the relative absence of formal knowledge about how the work of teaching differs from one subject to the next (Grossman & MacDonald, 2008).

Considering the conceptual framework of practice in relation to visual arts teaching as a specialist area of teaching practice allows for the development of theoretical propositions for thinking about teaching practice that can be examined in subject-specific research. I argue that the theoretical propositions I have developed and will present in the next part of this paper achieves this purpose in drawing connections between practice theory and lived experience in the specialist teaching area of visual arts. They have been developed as a result of reflection on my personal experience as a visual arts teacher, while also drawing on literature in art education and empirical research undertaken with teachers currently working in the field (Mathewson Mitchell, 2014; 2013a; 2013b). The propositions are not seen as absolutes or as definitive outlines of practice. Rather they operate as beginning points. Questions of their validity are being investigated through ongoing research and will be reported on in future publications. Likewise, while at a simple level the propositions may seem self-evident and logical, their investigation as a framework for research enables detailed investigation of how they play out in the context of visual arts classrooms on an everyday basis. The propositions thus provide a means of dissecting the everyday and often taken for granted assumptions about teaching. The broad research questions being examined in the program of research the propositions are being applied to are: What are the classroom practices of visual arts teachers? How does teaching occur in secondary visual arts classrooms? What is involved in *doing*

teaching in this context? Four propositions have been developed and each will be outlined in further detail.

The first proposition is: (1) Secondary visual arts teaching involves core practices that are discernible across instances. International research has been investigating the existence of core practices (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009) or high-leverage practices (Ball, Sleep, Boerst & Bass, 2009) in teaching. This body of research acknowledges that there are a set of essential, common practices involved in teaching that can be taught and can be learned as part of the tradition of teaching and teacher education. Core practices are described by Grossman et al. (2009: 277) as practices that: (a) occur with high frequency in teaching; (b) novices can enact in classrooms across different curricula or instructional approaches; (c) novices can begin to master; (d) allow novices to learn more about students and about teaching; (e) preserve the integrity and complexity of teaching; and (f) are research-based and have the potential to improve student achievement. As objects of knowledge and action core practices can be identified, observed, interrogated, practised, talked about and developed in relation to established knowledge and traditions and in relation to competence and skills. While the research cited is looking at teaching generally, it is proposed that visual arts teaching has a distinctive set of core practices related to the nature of the discipline of art and the distinctiveness of visual arts learning environments. The nature of these differences has been speculated on by authors such as Hickman (2001; 2011). Research to specifically identify the core practices of visual arts teaching and explore qualitative differences would be of benefit to developing understandings of teaching and learning in visual arts.

The second proposition is: (2) Secondary visual arts teaching practice is dynamic and adapts to particular relational and material circumstances. While core practices may be evident and can be focused on, there is also a practical logic (Bourdieu, 1977), evident at an individual level but also discernible as a shared aspect of practice that occurs when the logic of practice is adapted in a dynamic way to particular circumstances. The dynamic nature of practice is evident when teachers make decisions and exercise professional judgment regarding the application and adaptation of skills and knowledge to take into account a range of factors including context, activity and experience. Of particular importance to the dynamic and emergent nature of such teaching practice is its relation to others- and other-ness. While such dynamism is arguably a feature of all teaching practice, the relational nature of teaching is further amplified in the area of visual arts teaching. The social nature of visual arts teaching practice involves a process of being with others, a process of becoming for both teachers and students, and a process of becoming- other, as teachers and students take on multiple viewpoints and develop approaches, processes and products that reflect deep thinking and engagement with the world as a source of ideas. In addition, for visual arts teachers, teaching

practice is responsive to both the classroom environment and the art world and the materiality of its existence, adapting to the particular other-ness of context. The physical space of the classroom, and the resources used to create and interpret artworks, have a material existence that are vitally important to the teaching and learning process mediating the relationships between teachers and students.

The third proposition is: (3) Secondary visual arts teaching practice involves an embodied, pathic knowledge in relation to self and other. The adaptation of practice is related to the body and its sense of being. The teaching body is implicated in practice and it is in and through the teaching body that practice is expressed and known (Reid & Mathewson Mitchell, 2015). Again this is potentially particularly the case in visual arts education, where teachers are engaging with artworks and with students in the creation of artworks and their interpretation. Art teachers tend to be active in this relationship, moving around the classroom, working with materials, demonstrating, conversing individually and in groups with students and managing the active space of the classroom. Importantly while aspects of this performative practice are observable, much of the knowledge informing practice also remains at a tacit level, embodied in practice. It is socially situated, adaptive to material conditions and responsive to others, and other-ness. The body also references pathic qualities that are relational and other-regarding and of particular importance to visual arts teaching. Visual arts teachers constantly consider the feeling, mood, motivation, and interest of learners in relation to activity, experience, and context. This often occurs through the reading of body movement and language, in concert with other factors such as what is said, and what is not said, rather than through explicit articulation. In addition, visual arts teachers engage in activities designed to connect learners to pathic qualities in the development of artworks, in engagement with, and interpretation of, artworks and in the explanation of artworks.

The final proposition is that: (4) Knowing and understanding secondary visual arts teaching practice requires opportunities to investigate, articulate, and represent practice. There are significant questions surrounding the degree to which the dynamic, embodied, relational, and pathic nature of secondary visual arts teaching practice can be engaged with and known. Research has shown that while the knowledge that teachers hold is extensive, it is not generally articulated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Hamilton, 2004; Loughran, 2006). In addition, it is acknowledged that teachers have extensive tacit knowledge in the sense of knowing more than they can say (Polyani, 1958, Schon, 1983) and knowledge being embedded in what they do (Schon, 1983). Consequently, the idea of knowing teaching practice is proposed as being reliant on opportunities to investigate, articulate practice and represent practice, giving voice and form to both the visible and invisible aspects of that practice. As noted previously, given the dearth of research on classroom practice in visual arts education, there have been few such research-based



opportunities available (Davies, 2008). In the busy lives of teachers, such opportunities are also rarely available in schools. If they do occur, they tend to be text-based and structured within institutional frameworks that direct attention to specific externally valued areas of priority or in the case of Australia, externally imposed teaching standards (AITSL, 2011).

### **A Methodological Approach to Researching Visual Arts Teaching Practice**

The fourth proposition leads to questions about how the theoretical propositions might be investigated through research. How do we come to know practice if it is mind, body and spirit, individual and collective, simultaneously visible and invisible, routinized, yet also artful and dynamic and at the same time embodied and material? Such questions raise issues related to the relations between the researcher and the researched and the nature of research focused on teaching practice.

In addressing these questions and developing a methodological approach, I propose research that includes the practitioner voice. I more specifically propose collaborative research with university-based researchers and teachers working as co-researchers engaged in inquiry about practice and co-authoring outputs that narrate the research. I further argue for a framework of emergence in which all perspectives can be valued and exploratory approaches can be activated.

In the past, practice has tended to be viewed from a spectator standpoint, with practitioners seen as objects, and knowledge and action seen as being able to be objectified. However, in calling for the inclusion of the practitioner voice, Reid and Green (2009) suggest that it is the practitioner who is deeply implicated and invested in practice who provides an insider perspective on practice. In specifically recommending collaborative research between teachers and university-based researchers, Reid and Green (2009) suggest the benefit of action research and co-authorship of research into practice, by practitioners, for practice. Co-authorship provides the opportunity for researchers and teachers to enter each other's worlds and take on each other's perspectives, providing the basis of a dialectical relationship that privileges dual voices. Higgs and Titchen (2001) and Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999, 2004, 2009) similarly observe collaborative inquiry as providing a framework that supports the authentic representation of practice as experienced by practitioners. Kincheloe (2012) further advances the importance of teachers in this relationship arguing that teachers need to create their own research as a way to challenge the narrow ways that knowledge is conceptualised in education. Rather than being informants, or supporters of research, he asserts that they must take lead roles as teacher-researchers.

Drawing on these ideas, it is proposed that a methodological framework that involves collaborative inquiry and facilitates the involvement of practitioners as researchers is

appropriate to research that seeks to examine visual arts teaching using the conceptual lens of practice. Such an approach might then lead to teachers becoming independent researchers, leading research in schools in the ways Kincheloe suggests.

The collaborative nature of such research further requires an emergent framework, such as that proposed by Somerville (2007), to allow for change and flexibility to reflect the inclusion of a range of views and interests. Somerville's theory of postmodern emergence allows for a space of unknowing and unfolding in which all co-researchers can contribute and all perspectives are valued. It further recognizes that becoming-other involves bodies in relation to other bodies and recognizes the messiness of becoming-other through research engagement. Such an approach allows for inquiry to adapt to the changing needs of practitioners and to develop and respond as appropriate and in dynamic ways. It further allows for inquiry to novice teacher-researchers to learn about the process of research through the doing of research.

Participatory action research is a method that is congruent with the approach described thus far. It is an inquiry-based method that enables teachers to conduct research about practice for the development of practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013). As it is integrated into daily work, it places different demands on teachers than traditional research methods, while allowing the research to focus on everyday action and change. Implemented in a collaborative environment, action research allows for the critical sharing of research questions and outcomes with a focus on practical application. Specific research questions of interest to teachers can emerge flexibly out of practice, while the broader scope of the research can examine practice at the level of the four propositions. In addition, the methods, data, and interpretations can be approached flexibly as a result of knowledge, understandings, and experiences during the research process.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to further develop discussion about visual arts teaching practice. It has established the importance of looking at classroom-based teaching practice to address the gap between knowing *about* teaching at a theoretical level and knowing *how* teaching is enacted at the classroom level. Such information potentially informs teacher education at the level of the pre-service teacher while also potentially contributing to in-service professional development for teachers, thus informing the development of the broader field.

In this paper I have explored how the concept of practice can be used to specifically investigate secondary visual arts teaching for the purposes of developing accounts of practice. I presented a conceptual framework drawing on the integrative nature of the concept of

practice. I then developed four theoretical propositions that applied the conceptual framework to the particular area of secondary visual arts teaching. While it was acknowledged that visual arts teaching has some commonalities with teaching in other subject areas, it was also argued that it is qualitatively different. The propositions provide a starting point for further investigation through empirical research to support, negate, or alter this hypothesis. Following this outline, I have developed a methodological approach that draws on approaches that are congruent with the theoretical framework and appropriate to investigating the four propositions. This approach proposes collaborative research involving participatory action research, implemented within a framework of emergence. The focus throughout the paper has been on establishing a practice-based approach to the investigation of secondary visual arts teaching.

From this foundation, further research has been conducted and is continuing to test the validity of the propositions developed (Mathewson Mitchell, 2015, 2014, 2013a). This research is looking at instances of practice in a range of classrooms. Those instances of practice are being investigated as part of collaborative research that engages teachers in participatory action research that involves rigorous collaborative investigation, articulation, and representation of practice to further inform practice. The methodological design further draws on aspects of postmodern emergence to include and value the perspective of teachers and to enable the research to evolve in response to practice. As such the foundation of the research is conceptualized as researching practice, with practitioners, for practice.

The ultimate aim of this approach is to address the gap between *knowing* about teaching and *doing* teaching, in ways that inform the art education field, the education field, and teacher education. It further aims to illustrate the complexity of what visual arts teachers do on a daily basis in a way that not only acknowledges the importance of this work, but goes further to celebrate those contributions. I would assert that it is through such illustrations that the value and importance of art education can be most comprehensively demonstrated.

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### **About the Author**

Donna Mathewson Mitchell is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Arts at Australian Catholic University (ACU) and is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer with the Research Institute for Professional Practice and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Stuart University (CSU). Donna's background is in secondary visual arts teaching and her PhD focused on creating foundations for cultural practice in the secondary school years. Her current research focuses on visual arts teaching practice, teacher education, and teaching and learning in public spaces.



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