

Introduction

As an Honours student, I have been introduced to reflective writing and the notion of reflective journaling as a tool to evaluate and analyse my creative practice. I have found the structured, assessable reflection tasks undertaken in our Research Seminar unit an invaluable way to develop ideas, critically evaluate my work and communicate my ideas. I have appreciated the emphasis placed on using this reflective journal running in parallel with a personal, less structured type of writing. In particular, this critical reflection of studio methods has helped to shift my relationship to my practice, and I believe that I have become better prepared for reviews and for discussing my work. A better understanding of methods and concepts means that feedback sessions can be used constructively by directing the discussion towards the pertinent issues in the project. I have also found that my ability to articulate my research methodology became a lot clearer through the process of reflection.

There are a myriad of academic articles concerned with the theory behind journaling in art and design. I am interested in how this information can be used to inform undergraduates about the ways to narrow down a broad idea/concept into a focused research project that can sustain their interest. These articles provided succinct ways to put structured reflective journaling into action. As well as providing an explanation of the theory behind the concept, these texts often provided basic examples of ways to put reflective theory into practice; these methods seem easy to employ but require a certain amount of discipline from the practitioner in order to receive the full benefit.

In reflective practice theory, 'intuitive' decisions, or those that are 'not usually articulated, sometimes indescribable' play as equally an important role as those that are consciously made (Gray, 2004, p.23). These can be teased out and taken into account by reflecting on/into/for action.

In Shumack's *The Conversational Self*, he describes journaling as 'reflective internal talkback' using I, Me, You, and We as voices to negotiate and engage with ideas (2010). The purpose of the reflective conversation is to explore as many different viewpoints on the research as possible in order to generate new knowledge (Shumack, 2010). The three identifiable ways to go about the reflection process in a structured way are:

- (a) 'reflection-on-action' or retrospective reflection, which involves reviewing what one has done, usually in the midst of an action;

- (b) 'reflection-in-action', or re-thinking and reshaping the approach to the project during the action without interrupting it; and
- (c) 'reflection-on-practice' which involves the critique of the general attitudes and ideas relating to the design or art practice in order to discover new avenues for development.

These actions contribute to the development of appropriate studio research methodology to compliment the question or issue the art practitioner is attempting to address.

Additionally, these types of reflections can be employed at any level, as the depth of reflection depends on the art-practitioners' knowledge of what they are looking to achieve through their project. Undergraduates are already encouraged to make and keep a visual diary – some seem to have a propensity for it, but others use it very superficially. I believe that the latter would benefit a great deal from set reflection tasks.

Application at the Undergraduate Level

The introduction of reflection tasks at the undergraduate level, even as early as first year, could help to shift the perception of one's relationship to their art practice by directing it towards students' personal backgrounds as a starting point. I suspect that this structured reflection does not come naturally to some students, therefore the earlier they are trained to work in this technique, the easier it will be to develop a personal relationship with their practice and to find ways to relate the project to a wider cultural context. A greater depth of analysis through reflection of materials and methods, influences, and theoretical concepts will result in a richer, more informed body of work. The question of originality will also be addressed through this reflection process, as innovation will come through experimentation and evaluation of what students choose to make and develop. I believe it would also bridge the gap between the third undergraduate year and Honours, which as it stands, is a huge leap in terms of understanding the theories and concepts behind the project.

As for painters, the constant questioning of materials and methods in relation to the painting process is a crucial subject for reflection. Painting is 'not only a collection of techniques (craft) and design principles (formalism); it is a language with material, technical, formal, and cognitive components.' (McDaniel & Robertson, 1999). Reflection on each these aspects will enable students wishing to further their research into this particular medium to develop meaning through perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about painting.

The question will inevitably arise over the primacy of paint in the student's art project. This cannot be attempted to be completely resolved without the consideration of every part of the painting process and how these contribute to the research. The role of reflection in painting can also help to address the issue of where it sits in relation to a wider cultural context.

To avoid grouping painting apart from other forms of art making, and to ensure originality and merit, each approach must attempt to address theories and concepts that arise in other creative mediums. The relationship between the material and the concepts must also be reflected upon to ensure that the overall approach matches the outcomes.

Upon reflection of the haptic or intuitive decisions made in painting, a practitioner can begin to recognize the contribution of everything learnt previously regarding methodology. Once this is identified it can be investigated further, for painters this may mean re-evaluating the use of mediums –oil/acrylic/wax/shellac/tempura/enamel etc. as well as what is added – mediums, pigments, drying agents, thickening mediums etc. These decisions can all contribute to the overall approach to the investigation. For example, if your practice is interested in experimentation with materials, you must be aware of what is traditionally available, as well as more unconventional mediums. If the practice has a more refined approach and the concept requires eliminating the many possibilities available with paint for a specific purpose then these should be systematically questioned to be sure that there is not a more effective way of going about the research.

It can be difficult to approach your own work with a critical eye and make decisive shifts in the direction of the project. This is partly due to the lack of emphasis placed on structured, systematic reflective journaling in undergraduate art school. This type of reflection addresses the level of integrity and sophistication when approaching a research project. Different levels of critical reflection could be integrated into the undergraduate degree so that they lead up to the skills needed for post-graduate research. For example, less of an emphasis should be placed on first year students narrowing down their research, but rather reflecting on the skills they learnt in each studio area and developing a simple motif or concept to follow throughout the year which holds their personal interest. This field of interest could be narrowed down towards Honours. Therefore, the type of reflection task would ideally be broader in first year, moving to more specific aspects of the work in Honours.

Bibliography

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