

Brennan, Vega ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6655-1157> (2024) Asking difficult questions in perilous times: early career teachers, art practice and the questioning stance. In: Peace | iJADE Conference 2024, 7-9 November 2024, Liverpool Hope University, UK. (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/8544/>

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

provided that

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
 - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing insight@cumbria.ac.uk.

iJade article 2

2500-3000 words

Asking difficult questions in perilous times: early career teachers, art practice and the questioning stance

‘And you may ask yourself ‘Well, how did I get here?’’

In the early hours of this Wednesday morning, UK time, the world became a more dangerous place. The war in Gaza is expanding outwards. The war in Ukraine has been going on for 2 years and 8 months, or 10 years if you count the annexation of Crimea. And we continue to fail to address human-induced climate change.

Reductionist dichotomies will not get us out of this mess. ‘Well, how did I get here?’, indeed.

There are a few ideas that I wish to start with, and will return to throughout this presentation:

- Peace is an action, not a destination
- Asking good questions is fundamental to understanding
- Art teachers and their students are uniquely capable, through their various acts of inquiry, reflection and creation, of working to create peace

So where does art and art education fit into this? Is it a distraction, a sticking plaster or even worse, an irrelevance, to be ditched for learning how to survive in a post-apocalyptic dystopia? I would argue art education is an essential, powerful and transformative tool for peace. It is essential because, unlike any other subject in schools, it allows us to examine the issues that affect us all from a multitude of perspectives. Furthermore, synthesis, the very act of making art, moves this dialogue forward.

I would like to consider 3 of the Guiding Principles for Transformative Education from UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development (2024).

- Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity
- Instilling an ethic of care, compassion and solidarity
- Promoting the co-creation of knowledge (Art)

I welcome all the guiding principles but these spoke to me in that they are at the heart of my teaching practice. There are four sections to this presentation and for each, I will end with hopefully some useful strategies for questioning.

1. Assumptions are dangerous – “So, where are you *really* from?”

(The image on the screen is a pair of prints that I made of my mother from a photograph taken when she was about eight in Hong Kong. The two prints mirror each other and are made from two individual wooden blocks.)

My background is complex. As a Chinese-Portuguese-Spanish woman born in Australia to migrants of the Hong Kong post-war diaspora, I am more than a little wary of shortcuts, labels, categories and stereotypes. My roots are not located in one place but draw from many soils. I have had to negotiate assumptions all my life and continue to do so. It is frankly exhausting having to find a way to answer the ‘So where are you from?’ question in a way that doesn’t offend the questioner, and doesn’t make what could be the start of a nice connection antagonistic.

There is another term for assumptions about identity, sexuality, race, gender, class, education, disability/ability and that is bias, be it conscious or unconscious. When we make assumptions, we take shortcuts to ideas about identity that make it easier for us to make snap decisions and take sides. And in art teaching, that isn’t helpful.

As an art teacher, an artist, teacher of artists and a teacher of art teachers, I have had to ask honest and difficult questions of myself and of my teaching throughout my career and I ask my trainee teachers to do the same:

- Am I being respectful?
- Am I really listening?
- Have I already made a judgement and am I just asking the question to confirm that judgement? And why am I doing that?
- How do I move myself and the situation forward?

Through exploring and reflecting on their identity and values as they move into the role of teachers, my trainees have learnt some hard lessons. By opening up about their personal

experience of neurodiversity, class prejudice, non-whiteness and LGBTQI+ identities, they have enabled their cohort to reach a greater understanding of those issues. Fostering a culture of mutual respect, openness and listening has made them stronger teachers. Some have been able to use their lived experiences to create meaningful connections with their students in schools.

Strategies for addressing bias in Initial Teacher Training:

1. Role-model inquiry and self-reflection
2. Establish a community of sharing and mutual respect
3. Encourage and support discussions based on personal experiences and if those diverse experiences aren't present among your group, bring in authentic voices
4. And do not be complacent

2. The art classroom as art studio/space of inquiry

(The image on the screen is a photograph taken in my art classroom when I was doing the Masters in Fine Art and Education at Northumbria. There are students of different ages stood on desks.)

In my introduction, I stated that:

Art teachers and their students are uniquely capable, through their various acts of inquiry, reflection and creation, of working to create peace

The social constructivist model of education that sees learning created through the interactions between teacher and pupils, within the whole school and with the wider

community, can progress the discourse of peace with its emphasis on the collective construction of meaning.

Eisner (2002) argues that the arts, more than any other subject, enables people to use their aesthetic understanding to use a multitude of frames to interpret the world.

- The creation of art requires us to look within ourselves
- The creation of art requires us to observe closely, and be aware of how we observe
- The creation of art requires us to explore materials and processes in an open-ended way
- The creation of art requires us to look at connections, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the art that we see, and the art that we make
- The creation of art requires us to reflect, synthesise and re-create that understanding into making something new

In practice, what does that mean?

One of my trainees wanted to know how to talk to their KS3 pupils about Gaza. They felt they had a duty to help pupils understand the conflict as they believed the media often portrayed Israel as the aggrieved state. I suggested that they talk to colleagues, for example, in History and RE, as well as Heads of Year for appropriate guidance and resources. This developed into a unit of work delivered with the support of the Humanities department, based on a visit to a mosque. Pupils produced work that looked at contemporary Palestinian artists, and explored how faith influenced the production of

artwork. The use of resources such as BBC Newsbeat videos about Israel/Gaza provided a balanced context for the artists' work. The paintings made by the pupils were then displayed in the mosque they had visited.

The pupils at my trainee's school learned about the context of a complex crisis through authentic experiences and discussions, supported by the school and the local community. And importantly, the very process of making the work became a meditation on respect for faith and diverse perspectives. That the work was then returned to be displayed in the mosque added an extra layer of meaning to the work, and created a greater understanding and sympathy between the school and the wider faith community.

Art becomes a springboard.

Inquiry-based learning or student-led learning has taken a bashing in recent times with the previous government's emphasis on a knowledge-based curriculum. One of the main criticisms of inquiry-based learning is: 'how can the students know what they don't know?' In other words, if a student doesn't know a thing (for example, how Anni Alber's Jewish heritage, gender-biased teaching at Bauhaus and experience of Nazi repression affected her artistic practice), then how can they expand their awareness of it? In that model, the authority of the teacher defines the boundaries of knowledge and is in turn limited by their own knowledge and expectations of what is to be learnt.

However, wouldn't it be much better to flip that and explore how we as teachers, help our students to know what they don't know? That even if we, as teachers, don't know the

answer, that the journey of exploration is a shared one? And that the courage to ask questions is a good start in itself?

The questioning stance in this context is one of humility, honesty and respect for the learner voice. It is radical because it gets to the root of what learning should be: empowerment and growth.

I am wary of rigid question schema such as writing frames for eliciting answers about works of art. For example, the pyramid of Bloom's Taxonomy imposes a hierarchy of questioning that structures access to the work, initially through objective observation and later through formalised judgements. In writing frames, there is no space for poetry, creativity or the imagination as responses are usually required to be literate, with correct spelling and punctuation, using technical, specialist language which can act as a barrier. There is often no invitation to a visual or material response.

Strategies for asking questions in the classroom:

- Keep your questions fresh
- Reach outwards and inwards
- Look for connections
- Enjoy surprises and challenges
- Build opportunities for all learner voices to be heard and valued

3. Transformation – the artist-teacher identity

Each year I thoroughly enjoy meeting my new cohort of trainees and seeing them progress from artists, graphic designers, ceramicists, photographers and sound artists to confident art teachers in the classroom.

This process of transformation is punishingly hard, and comes at great emotional, mental and physical cost. However, it is ultimately a magical transformation.

So what changes?

1. They begin as a collection of individuals with their own areas of expertise, hangups, misconceptions of self, needs, strengths and interests, to being a group of people who enjoy each other's company, share and learn from each other.
2. They start by critiquing the experiences that they had in schools, both good and bad, to unpicking current teaching from a range of lenses and then rebuilding teaching on their own terms to make it better
3. They start to see how their experience of their personal differences become the basis of empathy and understanding that enable them to truly connect with pupils.
4. They go from expecting state schools to have artist-quality resources to being complete scavengers of all kinds of materials including vegetables for natural pigments.
5. They start the year scared and full of expectations and end the year a little less scared and but still full of expectations.

6. And each year I learn a bit more about teaching and become a little more hopeful about the state of art teaching for the future.

The one thing that I don't want them to step away from is the absolute necessity of making art, seriously, and with purpose.

To quote Anni Albers (1937):

...most important to one's own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one's whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.

Making art is not a panacea. I'm not overly fond of the description of art as a sort of salve for troubled minds and restless hands. The last thing art should be is safe, and at the very least it should allow us to see part of ourselves in a new way.

My identities as an artist and teacher are inextricable and mutually empowering. It has taken a while to get to this stage, and it is an ongoing challenge to balance the two roles. My art practice explores printmaking as a medium for creating opportunities for interaction and play. I create ephemera to question value and make work that sits between making as performance, instructional art and art as social practice.

The image on the screen is a letterpress project that is still happening. It is a stack of letterpress printed artistic licences that the participant is invited to fill in and keep. I keep the left hand-side with the reason they took it. Each year, my trainees are invited to take as many of these as they want for themselves, friends, family and colleagues. I shall leave the licences here for you to take one if you wish.

Daichendt (2010) states that artist-teachers occupy a privileged position in comparison to 'just art teachers'. I would argue that being an artist-teacher is a harder position to maintain than one of just simply being a teacher or an artist and because of that ongoing challenge, it creates unique opportunities to move art and art education forward.

One of my trainees, a feminist textile artist, observed that the boys in her placement school were using misogynistic terms to refer to fellow classmates and teachers, without necessarily being aware that they were using the same language as influencers such as Andrew Tate. My trainee got permission from her school's senior leadership team to present a series of assemblies to help pupils understand how damaging throwaway sexist comments were for the whole community. She also delivered training to staff on misogyny. Her voice was strengthened through her investment in her art practice and her teaching became an extension of the values she expresses through her making.

By situating themselves as artists, artist-teachers ask the same questions of themselves that they ask of their students.

By engaging with the serious practice of making work, they participate in the wider art world and understand what that responsibility means.

They then bring that understanding back into the classroom

Their role as art teachers enables them to ground their practice in an understanding of the journey that children embark on and they recognise art practice in the widest sense.

They ensure the ongoing validity of their teaching practice through making art.

4. The 'outward turn'

The image on the screen shows two of my current trainees presenting their own teaching resources looking at Karen McLean's *Stitching Souls* installation in the Walker Art Gallery. The work memorialises the 130 enslaved people who were thrown overboard from the slaving ship, the *Zong*, to profit from an insurance claim and save drinking water.

In the last section I quoted from Anni Albers and I wish to highlight the term 'excitement' which is an interesting one to use in the context of peace. As I stated in my introduction, I consider peace to be an action, not a destination. At its most dangerous definition, peace is a compromise where people are asked to move on, forget past wrongs and passively and gratefully live in the now. However, for me, peace should not be a point of stasis, but something to be worked at and on, through the process of questioning, reflection and making. We should be looking backwards, forwards, inwards and outwards and to co-create a shared future. Excitement about making art generates this movement.

In Richard Sennett's beautifully thoughtful manifesto against inequality, *Respect* (2004), he calls for the 'outward turn' which moves from centring the questioner to reach out to the wider world. I would add that the very act of creating art is an externalisation and an

extension of our physical bodies. This is the power to make. It is a gift that we should not take lightly. The gift is not a simple proficiency or skill but the time that we invest in the conceptualisation and the making and presentation of the work. It is a gift from us as makers to the world, as an expression of hope and the continuing outward flow of care and compassion.

In *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde (1983) he talks about the transformative power of gifts both for the giver and the receiver: 'We can feel the proffered future' (p.50).

Throughout this paper, I have argued that art teachers should be reflective practitioners of their craft.

To return to the Guiding principles, art education should be

- Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity
- Instilling an ethic of care, compassion and solidarity
- Promoting the co-creation of knowledge (Art)

The most interesting art is art that asks more questions than it answers.

Thank you.

Albers, A. (1937) 'Work with Material', *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, quoted in Allen, F. (2011) *Education*. London: Whitechapel Gallery.

Albers, A.

Daichendt, G.J. (2010) *Artist Teacher : A Philosophy for Creating and Teaching*. Bristol: Intellect.

Cannell, K. (2023)

Eisner, E.W. (1991) *The enlightened eye : qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York, N.Y: Oxford.

Eisner, E.W. (2002) *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind*. New Haven: Yale.

Hyde, L. (2007) *The gift : how the creative spirit transforms the world*. New ed. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Morris, N. (2024)

Sennett, R. (2004) *Respect : the formation of character in a world of inequality*. London: Penguin.

Talking Heads. (1980) 'Once in a Lifetime', *Remain in the Light* [CD]. US: Sire.

UNESCO. (2024) *Peace education in the 21st century: an essential strategy for building lasting peace*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388330>

(Accessed: 18 June 2024).