

# *REFLECTIVE ESSAY*

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*The art you practice and the art you teach.*

## Problem Purpose Statement

### Problem:

There is a tension between fostering structured learning outcomes and promoting an ethos fundamental to authentic creative development, a struggle symbolising a greater conflict in art education.

### Framing:

Teachers create experiences so students can learn by doing. According to Bruner (1961) theory is that students benefit most when they engage directly with the material through discovery and inquiry. This stance advocates for learning as an active experience rather than memorisation. Also focuses on how teaching methods encouraging students to participate and get support as they learn actively can help them understand and remember information better, leading to a profound and lasting effect on their education.

### Purpose:

In pursuing integrating transformational creativity principles with the structure of secondary art education, I am drawn to introspection on my pedagogical approach. Through the lens of theorists like Bruner (Bruner, 1961), Dewey (1916), and Csikszentmihalyi (1993), I am inspired to reconcile the rigorous objectives of the curriculum with the artistic invention. Reflecting on my teaching practice, I seek to develop a framework that meets educational standards and fosters a space for genuine creative exploration. Within this reflective process, I aim to identify and navigate the inherent tensions of nurturing individual artistry within the

constraints of educational structures, aspiring to align my methodologies more closely with the authenticity of personal art practices.

## Methodology:

Reflective practice is a continuous, dynamic process of examining, analysing, and evaluating one's actions and the context in which they occur to improve personal and professional effectiveness. It stems from scholars like Schön (1987), who identified the need for practitioners to become 'reflective practitioners' capable of thoughtfully considering their own experiences as a cornerstone for learning. And Brookfield (1995) advocacy for critical reflection and the Four Lenses of reflection. This introspective approach encourages educators, for example, to critically assess their teaching methodologies, intending better to understand their practice and its impact on student learning. It is an iterative process: one acts reflects on the action, learns from it, and then applies that learning to future actions (Schon, 1987). Brookfield (1995) who advocates that the objective of reflective educators is to expand their insight into their teaching practices through diverse perspectives, employing four distinct lenses as a strategy for deepening this critical reflection.

## Method:

In this task, I will explore the tension between being an artist-teacher and navigating the pedagogical balance between structured education and of *Flow* that Csikszentmihalyi (1993, p. 122) states "Flow is a state of complete immersion and focus in an activity" and creative expression within a classroom setting. The essay examines this intersection through the lens of artist and teacher. The need for an educational approach that encourages discovery learning further encapsulates the dynamic between art-making's spontaneous, instinctual nature. Creating a more methodical pedagogy that values critical reflection and hands-on

learning experiences. Through the perspective of an artist-teacher, the essay seeks to articulate a teaching philosophy wherein education mirrors art.

## Evaluation :

To gain insight into reflection, I will self-evaluate the outcomes of my reflections; I will employ Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice, assessing the effectiveness of my pedagogical strategies and their impact on student learning and creative development. And my own look at Brookfield (1995) four lenses that can be engaged by teachers in a process of critical reflection.

## Artist and Teacher

“Schools are intended to produce, through the application of formulas, formulaic human beings whose behaviour can be predicted and controlled”. (Gatto, 2017, p. 22). Reflecting on a quote that has resonated with me throughout my teaching experience as the message echoes the tension between fostering structured learning outcomes and promoting an ethos fundamental to authentic creative development, a struggle symbolising a greater conflict in art education.

I was last in a secondary school fifteen years ago so returning was both thrilling and daunting. The anticipation of creating art and imparting knowledge was great, yet the reality of meticulous planning and preparation caught me off guard. Before even taking a pencil in hand to conduct my first demonstration, I was swamped with the theoretical aspects of teaching—weeks spent in lectures and crafting hypothetical scenarios, all designed to prepare me for the classroom.

As a new teacher armed with my Unit of Learning (UOL), lesson plan, and a clear set of learning intentions and ideal success criteria, I confidently initiated my first lesson. However, as I introduced myself and set up for the demonstration, it became apparent that my carefully laid plans quickly unravelled. At the time, I had to adapt and teach 'on the fly.'

Upon reflecting afterwards, I grasped that this particular class's dynamics differed significantly from what I had anticipated in my plans. This experience reminded me that while preparation is key, being flexible and responsive to the students before me is equally vital in teaching. Schon (1987, p. 26) refers to this as 'thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome'.

As a teacher and artist, I recognise the tension between following a structured lesson plan and embracing creative exploration's fluidity. My experience within the classroom setting often follows a pattern: beginning with a greeting from behind the teacher's desk, followed by a PowerPoint presentation with the hope it will unfold the secrets of creating impactful art. This approach feels increasingly like a formula, echoing, Gatto (2017, p. 22), 'Schools are intended to produce, through the application of formulas, formulaic human beings whose behaviour can be predicted and controlled'. In this way, students become like cogs in a machine and are confined to a didactic method from which many disengage. Furthermore Gatto (2017, p. 18) writes, 'School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned'. This idea strikes a chord with my own experiences in education, strengthening my resolve to become a teacher and transform the school experience into a more positive and engaging one for students one that doesn't resemble a prison.

This is why reflecting is so essential. We devise and test new actions to investigate fresh observations, check our preliminary comprehension, or confirm our devised strategies for

improving the situation (Schon, 1987). I hope to learn from all my experiences within education and I feel that this is done through reflection.

## Reflection

Over time, reflection has led me to believe that lessons don't need to be constrained to this rigid structure; instead, they can organically emerge. Admittedly, overseeing a diverse classroom of 20 or more students, each at a different stage of their artistic journey, presents its challenges. From an artist-teacher's perspective, looking at Brookfield's (1995) advocacy for critical reflection resonates with me. The artist-teacher uses this reflection to refine their "authentic voice," akin to their artistic signature, and uphold the value of their teaching practice (Brookfield, 1995).

Through continuous, critical reflection, I can adjust instructional approaches, ensuring that each student's creativity is nurtured within the class. Brookfield (1995) advocates that the objective of reflective educators is to expand their insight into their teaching practices through diverse perspectives, employing four distinct lenses as a strategy for deepening this critical reflection.

Table 1 illustrates how I adapted Brookfield's four lenses to examine my teaching. These lenses are instrumental in guiding self-reflection, seeking student feedback, engaging in peer assessment, and interacting with literature.

Brookfield's Four Lenses		
1	Personal Experience	Utilise my journey as an artist and educator to evaluate and enhance teaching methods critically.
2	Students' eyes	Leverage students' creative outputs and feedback to gain a different perspective on educational approaches.

3	Colleagues' Perceptions	Use insights from my peers in the artistic and educational communities to challenge and refine my teaching practice.
4	Theory and Research	Continuously connect and align my artistic philosophy and educational strategies with relevant theoretical frameworks to stay innovative and informed.

*Table 1 Personal Adaptation of Brookfield's Four Lenses*

According to Brookfield (1995, p. 48) “Viewing what we do through these different lenses helps us uncover when and how certain assumptions work.” In essence, Brookfield (1995) reflections empower artist-teachers to teach and create learning experiences that honour their work's value and dignity and their students' creative journeys.

## Finding Flow

Looking at Brookfield's (1995) lenses, specifically lens 4, ‘Theory and Research, it's essential for reflection to underpin ideas around the literature. This brings me to reflect on how the formulaic approached I was taking on were hindering students creativity. This brought me to looking at ways to foster that creativity. Csikszentmihalyi (1993, p. 122) states that "Flow is a state of complete immersion and focus in an activity, where one feels a sense of joy and fulfilment. It is often described as being "in the zone or lost in the moment". His description of Flow sums up my idea of creativity and how I've always felt the best way to create art is to enter this state of 'flow'. I've observed that the best classes occur when students are free to create from a place of personal interest. They uncover their "flow" within this autonomy - immersive engagement and creative fulfilment. Creating a 'flow' environment in the art classroom hinges on the delicate balance of structured guidance and personal creative freedom.

However, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) states that one must first set clear, attainable goals with immediate feedback opportunities to foster this. "Intense flow experiences may be relatively rare in everyday life, but almost everything—play and work, study and religious ritual—is able to produce them, provided the conditions are present" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 179).

In an art class, this could be setting objectives not just around the completion of artwork but around the exploration of a technique or the conveyance of emotion, with regular, constructive feedback that focuses on these aspects. This aligns with Thornton (2011) artists work by engaging with art concepts, creating personal narratives, and valuing their creativity. When students feel in control of their artistic process, their engagement deepens. Thornton (2011) also advocates for the importance of staff development and support for teachers in embracing their identities as artists can positively impact their teaching. This aligns with Brookfield (1995) lens three: Our colleagues' experiences. It is fundamental to have an open dialogue with peers and colleagues to reflect on my teaching and also as an artist creating work I need that outsider dialogue.

## Hands on Discovery

The theory of Discovery Learning intrigues me because it aligns with my experience as a learner with diverse needs. Specifically in art education, particularly for adolescents, Bruner's concepts of teaching for transfer have profound relevance (Bruner, 1961). He distinguished between "near transfer" and "far transfer" of learning, suggesting that the skills learned in one context, such as the precise observation required in drawing, can substantially affect a student's ability to engage in other cognitive processes. The implication for art education then becomes promoting perceptual skills not as an end but to broader intellectual development. Bruner (1961) shared viewpoint in the propositions put forward by Edwards (2013), who



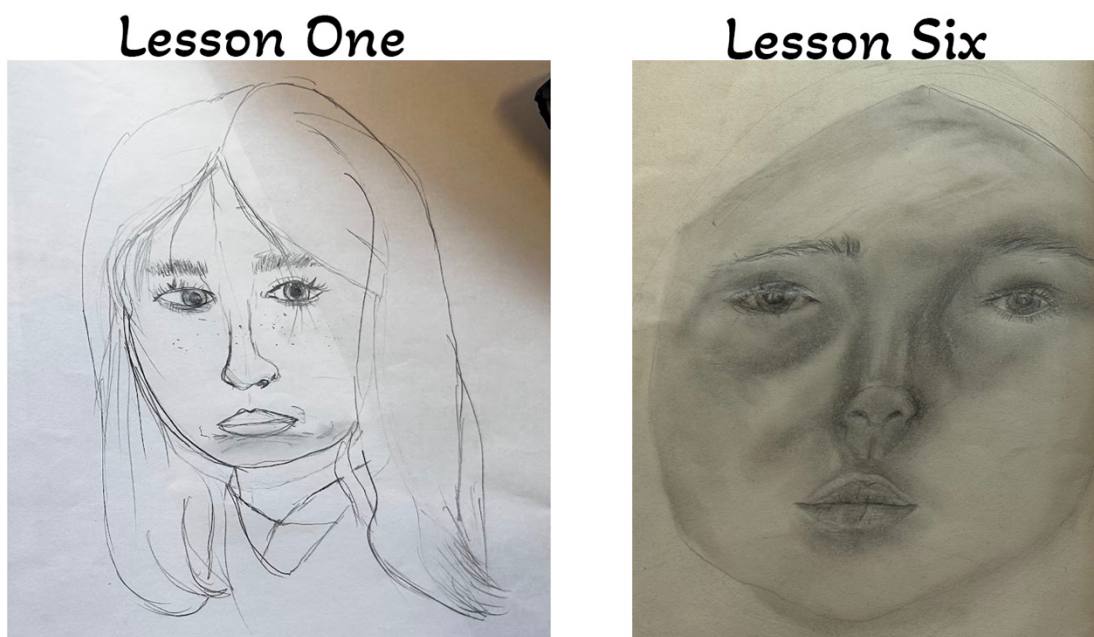
identified the component skills inherent to drawing, for example, the perception of edges, spaces, relationships, lights, shadows, and the gestalt. According to Edwards (2013) drawing cultivates a global skill akin to reading, where subskills amalgamate into a comprehensive cognitive ability that enriches general thinking and problem-solving capacities. In the classroom, drawing parallels from my artistic experiences, I value the importance of presenting information and emphasise facilitating students' independent discovery and interpretation of knowledge.

Furthermore, Edwards (2013) raised concerns regarding contemporary education's tendency towards extrinsic rewards rather than intrinsic learning, calling for evaluating how learning episodes are structured and how recognition and comprehension are rewarded. This links with Dewey's (1916) observation on cultivating intellectual attitudes and habits over information acquisition. Therefore my classroom becomes a model for discovery learning, where students are encouraged to engage with materials and delve into the cognitive processes of understanding and creating. This sums up how as an artist I create work and how I can transfer that knowledge to students by facilitating that experience for them. Reflecting on Bruner's discovery learning approach offers profound insights that resonate with both the facets of my teacher self and my work as an artist.

## Theoretical framework in action.

In a challenging teaching scenario, I encountered a classroom of disengaged 2<sup>nd</sup> Year students with low confidence in their drawing abilities. Many believed they couldn't draw because they had no choice but to take art as a subject. Drawing inspiration from Edwards' belief that anyone can learn to draw, I designed a UOL on portraiture. After having the students create self-portraits without initial teaching in lesson one, I used this work to assess their starting

points. By incorporating discovery learning and demonstrations, I witnessed a remarkable transformation over six lessons. A student who initially doubted their abilities produced a successful portrait, showcasing their growth and boosting their confidence see Figure 1. I witnessed these students specifically the student in Figure 1 enter Csikszentmihalyi, (1993) 'flow'. This experience highlighted the power of effective teaching methods and their impact on student learning and self-belief.



*Figure 1 Example of students progression.*

## Conclusion

In order to model these attitudes, promote cooperation among pupils, and ultimately achieve the learning goals set out for each lesson, fostering an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect is crucial. Demonstrating that I am open to constructive criticism and feedback from my students; I should let them know that they can express their views and feelings and that I am always willing to listen. Moreover, I will demonstrate a willingness to accept differences of

opinion, even if I disagree with them, respecting their right to form independent judgements. This will allow me to ensure that my pupils are not just adhering to the rules for the sake of it but instead are open to engaging critically with the topics under discussion and forming their thoughts and perspectives.

Drawing from the educational theories of Dewey (1910) and Bruner (1960), coupled with the practical insight from Edwards (2013), it becomes clear that the cultivation of a discerning, inquiry-based mindset through art not only hones perceptual skills but also prepares students for complex problem-solving and reasoning across diverse areas of knowledge. Hence, the art classroom could be a suitable environment for nurturing intellectual virtues that extend far beyond the ability to create aesthetically pleasing works.

I circle back to Gatto with a reimagined sentiment: “Schools can be designed to nurture individuality and creativity, providing diverse experiences that foster independent thought and unpredictability in human behaviour.” This is the philosophy with which I eagerly approach my future in teaching.

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