Chapter 11
Connect, Transform, Learn: Achieving Visual Literacy in the Art Classroom

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Abstract The visual arts are dynamic, constantly undergoing change. As art educators continue to navigate the early twenty-first century, it is apparent that a revision of teaching practice to parallel rapid change is necessary if we are to successfully engage and empower students to communicate visually. The impact of rapidly advancing technology has necessitated a shift from more traditional teaching approaches based on theories of instructivism, cognitivism and behaviourism to a more learner-centred constructivist approach. Emergence of the contemporary knowledge economy has highlighted the strength of connectivism as an enabler between teachers, learners and beyond the classroom. Transformational learning can be realised when the art teacher uncovers a pedagogical paradigm that aligns learning experiences with the learner. Through a blend of traditional and technological practice, an authentic connection to students' own lives can be established. Highlighting outcomes of art students as evolving artists, this chapter investigates strategies that successfully develop visual literacies through authentic textual discourse and connected experience. Deep personal understanding is established, together with highly individual, yet rigorously informed, student perspectives.

Keywords Visual arts • Classroom practice • Transformation • Technology • Teaching and learning

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G. Barton (ed.), *Literacy in the Arts: Retheorising Learning and Teaching*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-04846-8_11, © Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2014

Introduction

Visual arts education has undergone continual historical revision, paralleling the world of art. A substantial shift occurred when early academic, mimetic and formalist deliveries gave way to periods of creative self-expression in the mid twentieth century. Postmodernist frameworks of the 1990s brought with them a move towards a conceptual focus to visual art program writing and classroom practice. Those who have been teaching for at least three decades will have been likely to witness art pedagogy aligning with each of the afore-mentioned historical models. Alongside diverse methods of curriculum delivery, as the world changes, students' engagement levels and ability to visually communicate also vary.

The dynamic nature of the visual arts signals a red flag to art educators. As technologies and artistic paradigms evolve, the need for an ongoing review of practice remains if our current art students' needs are to be met. Current debate positions many curriculum documents, including those from Australian and international education bodies, as having no set content, instead favouring professional freedom. Over time, a perceived shift in thinking to an alignment of curriculum experiences with creative practice is now clear. However, it seems that little has changed since 1964 when Joseph Burke divided art educators into two distinct groups – one focused on adult control, the other on individual freedom (p. 5).

The 2008 Australian national review of visual education (Davis, 2008), First we see, calls for 'visuacy' (visual language communication) to be a core skill central to problem solving, recommending a contrast to traditional teaching methods. In response, Alan Lee claims that art teachers "maintain (an) illusion" of a continuous and developmental curriculum and that "art class activities need to be fail-safe recipes that require little more than arbitrary or indifferent variations as the students' input" (2009, p. 224). Although a traditional, instructivist approach is undoubtedly still apparent in some visual art classrooms, Lee questions current educational authenticity, stating that the illusion is perpetuated by teachers treating students as "modern artists" (p. 227). Lee's comments and use of the outdated term 'modern' may be a direct consequence of the diverse pedagogical practices that still exist in our visual arts classrooms.

I argue that for the visual arts to be treated as academically rigorous, for it to effectively empower our art students, a timely revision of pedagogy is essential. Dichotomous relationships between theory and practice need to be dissolved. Assessment practices must value influence, critical engagement and creative process as well as product. Students need to be guided towards confidence in their abilities to position themselves in the world of contemporary art practice yet still remain cognizant of traditions of the past.

Findings of this narrative inquiry are drawn from an evaluation of current debate alongside a survey of student outcomes, informed by extensive classroom experience and personal artistic praxis. Examples of transformed learning through integral

use of technologies and global mindedness will be presented to provide pedagogical models and practical strategies that can be implemented in the visual arts classroom, regardless of degree of access to digital technology.

Transforming Teaching and Learning: A Disconnection

Current Context: The Secondary Visual Arts Classroom

An apparent disconnect exists between pedagogical practices found in many of today's visual arts classrooms and research that describes "requirements for promoting genuine student engagement (and) understanding" (McTighe & Brown, 2005, p. 235).

The disconnected art classroom employs a teacher-centred approach, is dependent on traditional, instructional teaching methods and adheres to a rigid program that allows little or no flexibility according to students' interests and situations. Characterised by self-proclaimed 'tried and true' teaching methods and 'time tested' curriculum documents, for the disconnected teacher, distinctions between art theory and practice remain evident and student learning can be classified as superficial. The unique learner, their individual learning style, and their reality as an individual embedded in social constructs, all characteristics now considered integral to the learning process, are not considered. When technology is employed in the disconnected classroom, it is as the focus of the lesson – the activity is about the technology rather than artistic process and potentialities. Technology is used as a substitute for more traditional media, limiting the scope of the task, rather than as an enabler for redefinition of the task and higher problem-based learning.

In contrast, a connected classroom prepares students for today's technologically focused, knowledge-based world where clear distinctions between the arts, industry and the everyday are no longer valid. A successful secondary art program is now one that encompasses a wide variety of art-making approaches, providing students with the opportunity to develop a critical and intensely personal view of self in relation to the world. Study of the visual arts allows for and encourages considerable crossing of traditional boundaries, both within the arts and other curriculum areas.

> … the Arts are organically connected, and not easily separable in some contexts, including much contemporary popular culture. (ACARA, 2010, p. 4)

Mirroring arts industry, visual arts programs can merge traditional art areas of drawing, painting, printmaking, design and sculpture with those of digital imaging, video and film, sound, light and installation, to encourage creative problem solving and individuality of approach to studio practice.

Experimentation and purposeful studio practice in a variety of expressive media, including digital, is integral to transformation in a twenty-first century classroom.

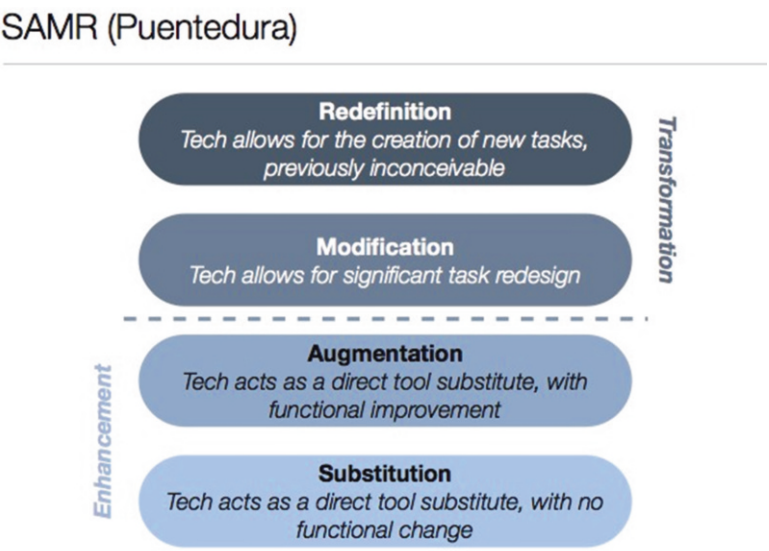

Fig. 11.1 Transformational teaching model – integrated technology (Puentedura, 2011)

Stimulating, challenging and relevant visual arts experiences allow students to develop to their fullest potential using an inquiring and integrative approach. Furthermore, information and communication technologies are essential tools for the research, development and resolution of visual artworks, connecting students with knowledge and skills necessary for success in a highly competitive and technologically rich future. Ruben Puentedura's acclaimed SAMR Model (Fig. 11.1) provides a useful scaffold for transformational learning through integration of technology (2011, p. 5).

Core elements of an effective art program encompass a range of modalities to support and enhance visual literacy acquisition. An introduction to and application of art and design concepts; integrated criticism and analysis; exposure to and practice with a diverse range of studio media and techniques to develop skills and working processes; and understanding of the relation of art to social, cultural and historical contexts are all essential. Studio work fosters practical exploration and artistic production while research journals or equivalent demonstrate independent critical research and analysis across cultures, reflecting global connectivity. A blend of all of these factors can provide the stage for complex investigations of meaningful concepts, engaging students in higher-order thinking processes and thereby preparing them for transition into university-level study and the creative industries. Significant partnerships with university and the broader creative community, such as gallery visits, artist talks, performances, demonstrations, workshops, residencies and curatorial collaborations, greatly enhance the evolution from a diversified to specialised approach to learning.

Transforming Teaching and Learning: A Connected Classroom Approach

What Is Transformational Teaching and Learning in the Visual Arts?

Transformational teaching repositions the teacher as connected, inviting a process of continuous review and reconstruction of curriculum and practice, to develop what art educators, Tourinho and Martins, refer to as a "nomadic consciousness" (2008, p. 66). As connected teachers, we need to model our practice through an embracing of uncertainty. Graeme Sullivan states:

> …'the uncertainty principle' which underlies curriculum research and development… reflects the reality of practice more adequately as it mirrors the contradictory nature of art, the pluralism of schools and society, and the capriciousness of learning. (1989, p. 225)

Aligning effective teaching to the role of a successful conductor, Donovan Walling refers to Zubin Mehta's ability to know "when not to conduct, when to get out of the musician's way" (2001, p. 4). Furthering this analogy, Erica McWilliam refers to the teacher taking on the role of "meddler in the middle" (2005, p. 11), a facilitative rather than directorial role. The art teacher who is prepared to be a risk taker, to embrace a lack of certainty, to abandon notions of a single truth, and to accept the role of learner in the classroom, as well as that of teacher, can enable effective learning for students, fostering critical awareness, collaboration, and complex problem solving.

Key literacies of reading, writing, listening and speaking through the decoding of and response to texts are explicitly valued and clearly addressed in a well-structured, learner-centred, connectivist curriculum design and delivery. Traditional literacy skills are extended in the transformational visual arts curriculum to include critical thinking, semiotic literacy and those described by noteworthy curriculum designer, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, as essential for the twenty-first century: digital literacy, media literacy and global literacy (Demski, 2012). Critical classroom dialogue sanctions students to articulate and address social, political and cultural issues that impact our everyday lives.

Therefore, a connected approach to teaching and learning would involve connecting: (a) student to life; (b) teacher to student; and (c) art to literate practice. A connected teacher creates and develops self-motivation, heightened self-esteem and healthy, productive relationships through a challenging, relevant, rigorous and digitally rich curriculum that values traditional knowledge, skills and processes. Every student can learn and has the potential to succeed, regardless of gender, recognised ability level, social barriers and preconceptions. To connect to and enrich students' experiences makes learning real and meaningful to every individual.

Placing emphasis back onto the learner as the dominant consideration in meaning construction opposes earlier interactive and transactive models of literacy education, where emphasis is placed on the text, suggesting that a shift in perspective is necessary

to place the 'self' at the centre of literate understanding (Moje, Dillon & O'Brien, 2000, p. 167). Furthermore, focusing learning onto the learner promotes creative potential and allows each individual to make unique decisions about the path to follow in the resolution of tasks. However, constructivist learning remains instrumental to effective and connected art pedagogy. Meaningful learning occurs when learners are engaged with activities that allow them to actively construct their own meaning, building on their own experiences and those of others. Moreover, transformational learning occurs in the visual arts when the learner develops a deep epistemic awareness of their own identity, and of the world around them, the meanings it carries and the part they play in it. An ability to actively make meaning through action and reaction is pivotal, pointing to a more interactive view of literacy.

A visual arts curriculum that transcends a traditional delivery of art skills and knowledge to focus on the individual learner strengthens the students' ability to solve complex real-life problems and builds confidence and life skills through deep connection with relevant, contemporary issues and experiences. Therefore, a model promoting a conceptual approach to learning blended with acquisition of traditional and new art skills allows knowledge and processes to be located through highly relevant concepts and themes. As every student brings a unique perspective to learning – distinctive experiences, abilities, interests and interactions – the collaborative sharing of these enriches learning. To connect the students' learning with not only a relevant and engaging curriculum, but also an integral use of technologies, fosters a strong sense of community and shared productivity.

Open-ended, inquiry-based learning experiences develop independent thinking, where the student becomes responsible for their own learning; the focus shifts from teacher to learner.

> An important goal for [art] teachers is to move their students towards independent learning through a gradual move from the teacher directing learning to a point at which the students take responsibility for their own learning process. (Education Queensland, 2010)

The connected teacher transforms the classroom as an environment that celebrates diverse thinking and meaningful textual discourse, as opposed to the production-line approach suggested by Lee that, regrettably, still remains in use in some art classrooms today (Lee, 2009, p. 224). In a connected art classroom, a supportive culture of gradually evolving independence is facilitated (Fig. 11.2).

Focusing learning on related issues provides genuine starting points that enable independent knowledge construction and authorship, offering potential solutions to current questions and concerns; individual opinions are highly valued when they are supported by informed research and articulated justification. Critical self-reflection is crucial to an understanding of knowledge process and an ability to apply discrimination in evaluation of self and others. Journal documentation allows students to record their approach to the development of ideas and solutions to complex problems, actively engaging in the learning process, recording their findings and making knowledgeable judgments informed by critical reference to established artists' work and ideas or events of local, national and global significance.

International art educator, Rachel Mason (2008), points out that recognition of and respect for multiple global identities is now as important as individual cultural

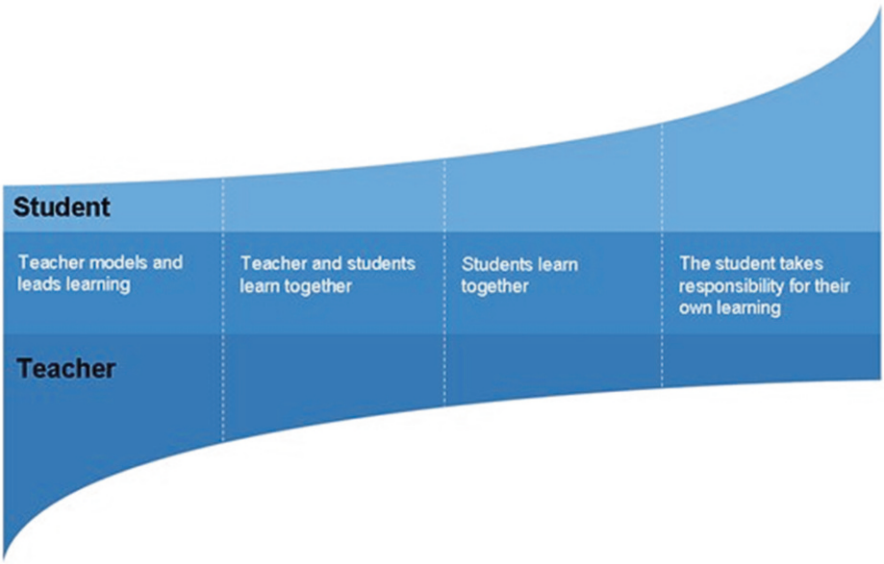

Fig. 11.2 © The State of Queensland 2013. Adapted from Figure 1.1 *A structure for successful instruction diagram from Better learning through structured teaching: a framework for the gradual release of responsibility* by Fisher, D and Frey, N (2006). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), p. 4. (Reproduced with permission from the Department of Education, Training and Employment, the State of Queensland 2013)

identity for the student of art. She also states, "personal, social and cultural identities are inextricably intertwined" (2008, p. 104). As teachers foster a respect for diversity and concern for social justice, made accessible by our broader global reach, students discover a personal identity enriched by interaction with and understanding of others. In keeping with Sullivan, a connected curriculum must embrace diversity of social and cultural context, "engender[ing] the critical skills necessary to enact change" (1989, p. 234).

With precise goals and clear purpose, but also with uncertain solutions and a willingness to accept the serendipitous and conjecture, art teachers can more convincingly position the visual arts student as an informed and imaginative producer and consumer of art – one who is expressively fluent in the creation, communication and articulated interpretation of complex visual information.

What About Technology?

Technology is increasingly assimilated into our everyday lives. The impact of interactive and social media brings with it new media and modes of communication applicable to our classrooms. Innovative integration of technology and tradition

places the teacher at the cutting edge of art teaching practice, becoming a conduit for students to realities of creative industry and visual art practice. Cary states:

> …to visualize and enact a critical arts pedagogy, we must recognize the value of relating art education as practiced in today's schools to the art world as it exists in today's postmodern culture. A critical arts pedagogy seeks engagement with both past and present art worlds. (1998, p.337)

In the Literate Futures Report for Queensland Schools (Luke & Freebody, 2000, p. 9), literacy is defined as "flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with… texts of traditional and new communication technologies via spoken, print, and multimedia". Assimilating new and existing technologies such as smart phones, GPS devices, digital drawing tools, tablets, video games and virtual worlds into the art classroom can bridge the gap between students' lives and the school. Online spaces provide individuals with structure and choice, progressing self-paced learning, meaningful discussion, shared reflection and the formulation of collective knowledge.

Reinforcing ideas of connection between learners and learning is the work by Stephen Billett on personal epistemologies. Billett (2009) proposes that the process of experience gives rise to conceptual, procedural and dispositional knowledge, stating that "all learning is experiential, [comprising] individual learning and remaking of cultural practices…essentially, the self emerges through social interactions and experiences" (2009, p. 2), together with the historical and cultural contributions they provide. According to Billett:

> experiencing is central to both individuals' learning and the remaking (and transformation) of culture. It comprises a process of personal negotiation of meaning and knowledge making as mediated by the contributions of the social and physical world. (2009, p. 30)

Therefore, a seamless assimilation of old and new allows students to effectively research, imaginatively develop and sophisticatedly resolve contemporary artworks that, importantly, retain connection to conventions of the past.

The Transformed Visual Arts Classroom: A Survey

Through alignment of learning experiences with the learner, an art classroom transforms into a dynamic learning community: one which facilitates participation, integration, investigation, experimentation, inquiry, questioning, exploration, ambiguity, challenge, acceptance, diversity, open-mindedness, risk taking, connectivity, collaboration, interaction, engagement and confidence.

Supporting ideas of dynamic learning environments and transformational learning practices, the Learning by design project actively engages learners as knowledge producers, and transforms the teachers' role as designers of hybrid learning environments. Through the project, education researchers Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis reportedly:

> build… into curriculum the idea that not every learner will bring the same lifeworld experiences and interests to learning, and creat(e) pedagogical scaffolds which do not

> assume that every learner has to be on the same page at the same time. [They] also introduce the idea of multimodality, in which learners move between written, oral, visual, audio, tactile, gestural and spatial modes of meaning-making. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012)

In keeping with constructivist learning theory, transformational learning places students at the centre, as "active agents…rather than as passive receptacles into which one plugs stimuli, digital or other-wise, to produce pre-specified outputs" (Moje et al., 2000, p. 167).

The Role of Technology in My Classroom

Technologies are a significant part of our students' everyday discourse – their social interaction, entertainment and communication. Many of today's students are 'switched off' by traditional teaching methods and application of learning theories that, although appropriate in the past, are no longer applicable.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Marc Prensky warned us, in his writings about change in the way students learn, that "we need to reconsider both our methodology and our content" if we are to engage the contemporary "digital native" students (Prensky, 2001, p. 3). As a topic for significant debate, Prensky's notion of the digital native had a profound impact on my teaching at the time, and the way that I related to the students in front of me. Rather than offering a rigid approach to follow, Prensky confirmed that the technologically rich, constructivist methodology which I had already begun to use with my students was indeed headed in the right direction (Fig. 11.3).

Bringing digital technology into my art classroom since 1995, ideas of a digital division between student and teacher clarified the reasons for some of the successes and connections occurring, when many teachers around me were sharing their frustration with today's youth and their lack of ability to focus on the tasks they offered. Prensky (2005) also states that "it's not relevance that's lacking for this generation, it's engagement" (p. 3). Despite ongoing debate around the language and connotations of the digital immigrant/digital native model, it remains clear that to effectively engage our students we need to embrace the technologies they use as part of daily life and present our curricula in ways that are familiar to them.

Integration of technology in arts education quickly developed into an ongoing personal passion, becoming a powerful catalyst for change, and leading directly, over time, to the shared vision of my colleagues to prioritise embedded use of technology into curriculum and pedagogy. Technologically deficient arts departments have consequently been transformed into powerful learning communities, featuring multimedia labs and connected learners who are routinely engaging in exciting and relevant technology-rich activities.

Endeavouring to keep up with technological trends, I have continued to revise my curriculum planning to parallel change and thereby effectively engage my students. Transformational tasks ask students to not consider the hardware/software as stand-alone art-making tools, but treat them as devices to be used as integral to the

Fig. 11.3 Slide extracted from ICT conference/workshop presentations – based on writings of Marc Prensky, Images used under licence from Hemera Photo Objects (Hobdell, 2007, p. 3)

whole art-making process. At any point in the research, development, production or presentation of artworks, technology will be available to be selected by the student, ranging in complexity from scanning of drawings and digital photographic image capture to digital manipulation, animation, video projection, game design, virtual worlds and game play as part of installed works, or creation of a soundscape as an adjunct to visual imagery.

Underlying the integral use of technology in my classroom is the belief that my students come to me with an innate understanding of digital media, presenting the potential to explore and use new media without the expectation for me to always be the 'expert'. This approach encourages the learner to take on the role of teacher/mentor, and acknowledges the knowledge and skills that they may bring to the classroom space. Solving of open-ended problems allows us to discover solutions together, with peer support – a valued and essential part of the classroom dynamics. Despite a high degree of experience with creative software, I discovered a long time ago that my ability to let the students know that I can learn from them and, more importantly, that I am excited to tap into their knowledge and invite them to share it, is a powerful and productive strategy. If a teacher attempts to control every step of student learning, the lesson will fail to engage learners. An ability to allow creative freedom, exploration and application of prior knowledge is crucial if the students' true potential is to be unleashed.

In setting the context for learning, I ensure that tasks not only involve the setting and solution of complex problems, but also allow student direction in the resolution of the task. In doing so, I allow them to select relevant technologies and combinations of traditional and new media and modes of communication to produce individual and creative outcomes. All students start with a common broad concept or problem to solve. They research the concept, critically appraise the work of other artists using available technologies and texts, independently decide on a focus for study, develop ideas and solutions to the problem through experimentation and in-depth investigation of the topic, explore media and technical application, and finally resolve and critically evaluate the work. The result is that no two students have ever produced similar outcomes and most have chosen to either use digital media as an integral element of the work or utilise technology in the development of it.

As a powerful engagement and motivational tool, computers become a significant link between teacher and learner: a vital element of all classrooms of today. The learner is involved in a saturated world of technological advancement beyond the classroom doors. Access to technology is no longer an issue if we accept the personal devices available to the students every day. Computers are their means of communication; therefore the integral use of technology within our everyday classroom makes learning engaging, real and connected.

The Transformational Visual Arts Task

According to Tourinho and Martins, "…(art) pedagogy is a cultural practice that can only be understood through questioning history, politics, power and culture" (Tourinho & Martins, 2008, p. 64). If the art teacher delivers a static curriculum that fails to consider time and place as integral elements of both art consumption and production, an ability to embed inherent cultural considerations is not realised. It is clear that the role of art education must be aligned to the functions of contemporary art, as well as art of the past, in order to generate critical discourse and multiple perspectives informed by interpretation and experience.

The critical visual arts task is one built on an understanding of visual arts literacy as a fluency acquired through visual expression and symbolic communication. Interpretation and application of semiotic language and visual metaphor through textual analysis are acute processes for meaningful creative expression. To avoid mass-produced outcomes, tasks must allow students to negotiate an individual focus for their own work. Artistic individuality is enacted where connections are made that allow students to apply art concepts and visual language, experienced in the work of others, to their own practice. Deep understanding empowers the student to respond critically – to develop an individual conceptual focus, to knowledgably select and apply media and techniques and to create unique, purposefully communicative artworks.

Individual outcomes of learning in response to open-ended tasks can be a challenging concept, requiring high levels of classroom management and monitoring

of progress to ensure program objectives are met. As individual student focuses are generated, the teacher must take on the role of facilitator of learning rather than as singular expert. The revised role positions the teacher as a guide to diverse, simultaneous learning, unique to each student. Spontaneous decision-making and research capabilities are necessary, as it is impossible to always be pre-prepared with media, equipment and appropriate reference materials. Once established, however, a well-structured and supportive, student-centred approach built on a foundation of individual monitoring, critical classroom dialogue, conceptual art knowledge and essential skill building elicits erudite student decision making and outcomes.

Transformed Outcomes

A Sample Collaborative Task: Justice

> …symbolic communication forms a connection between the artist's internal reality and the outside world that includes, significantly, the viewer's internal reality created by his or her experience of the artwork. (Tourinho & Martins, 2008, p. 64)

Central to my teaching practice is the immersion of my students in academically and culturally rich activities that promote higher-order thinking and the acquisition of deep knowledge. Justice was a challenging, collaborative activity completed in 2001 with a lower senior secondary visual art class. The group of 22 students was of mixed experience, some students having basic Photoshop or video editing skills, others completely new to the art classroom.

A theme of Justice was developed in response to the Australian Federal Court's Art of Delivering Justice Art Prize. Students were, over two school terms (half a year), engaged in a series of activities that generated individual outcomes using mixed media drawing, hand-rendered and digital logo design and animation. Local and national issues and iconic imagery were used as starting points. The Discovering Democracy series (Hirst, 1998), which was provided to all Australian public schools, was used as reference.

Stimuli for the artwork was provided by the Federal Court in the form of study guides and supporting video stories. Students researched Australia's history prior to and after colonisation, the role of the Federal Court and the justice system, and the meaning of native title, before being given documentation of an actual native title case. To enable a realistic knowledge, students affected chosen courtroom roles; they were required to prepare for and re-enact the case, without prior knowledge of the actual court's decision. As testimony to the powerful learning involved, the three student 'judges' delivered their verdict, a judgment equivalent to that of the real case.

With a deep understanding of the theme acquired throughout the year, in the third term, the class imagined ideas for a performance artwork based on the case. Elements of sound, lighting, projected video imagery and animation, body decoration and sets were to be used to create a performance that was to be videotaped and re-edited. As the project was to be presented to a number of public audiences,

students were placed in a curatorial position at all stages of the development and critique of the work; they were asked to consider the nature of their future audiences – real time, recordings and online – to ensure critical engagement and appropriateness of artistic content.

After a synopsis of the intended performance was agreed on, focusing on ideas of cultural collision and reconciliation, separate groups were established to design and produce the following:

- a 2D animation using stop-frame digital video techniques
- still image sequences using own digitally altered images for projection
- a soundtrack compiled from sub-licensed royalty-free music and sound
- a 'white' movement sequence
- a 'black' movement sequence
- sets/props
- costume, and
- lighting and sound.

Group members worked as individuals contributing to their own team, and were in constant liaison with the other teams to ensure a cohesive whole. The collaborative approach undertaken enables the students to acquire life skills that will ultimately be required outside the school context (Street, 1993), impacting on the literate development of each individual student. After the first filmed performance, a student-led critique session revealed some weaknesses, leading to a student decision to revisit these aspects and, effectively, do it all again. The outcome was an award-winning performance video supported by documentation of highly individual research, symbolic and conceptual development and individual decision making, demonstrating transformed learning through a fully collaborative task.

Justice was indeed a transformational learning experience for the group. Positioned as reflective practitioners, students learnt through immersive practice, informed by theory rather than led by it.

> The experience of the students in any reflective practicum is that they must plunge into the doing, and try to educate themselves before they know what it is they're trying to learn. The teachers cannot tell them. The teachers can say things to them but they cannot understand what's meant at that point. The way at which they come to be able to understand what's meant is by plunging into the doing – the designing, the teaching, the examination of their own learning – so as to have the kinds of experience from which they may then be able to make some sense of what it is that's being said. (Schön, 1987)

Early unknowns became surpassed by deep understanding of symbolic, narrative art form; research method; new media and performance context; and collaborative process in the development of a sophisticated understanding of a significant cultural and historical event, its outcomes and implications, and a heightened ability to communicate these. Students' confidence was greatly enhanced; their knowledge and understanding of the past, the justice system and current issues was widened. An ability to select and apply art media and techniques was effectively consolidated with creative decisions arrived at through rich discussion and problem solving. An ability to work with others and use technology was firmly established, and an

Fig. 11.4 Justice, Year 11 (2000) visual art collaboration, video performance – sound, light, performance, set construction (Image courtesy of artists)

understanding and tolerance of indigenous issues in many cases saw very positive change (Fig. 11.4).

As a real outcome, Justice was awarded the Best Queensland Entry and National Collaborative Winner of the Federal Court Art Prize in 2002, as well as a Highly Commended in the Queensland New Filmmakers Awards for a film with a reconciliation theme.

In completing the Justice task, students were able to make images and objects to interpret social and cultural issues, communicating a personal aesthetic by documenting sensory responses to developmental processes. By making and displaying the performance video, students were able to reflect a connected understanding of the functions and purposes of public and community art while justifying responses to synthesised research from a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Drawing on areas of history, citizenship and societies, the work also established a renewed appreciation of the role of art and its place in a contemporary world.

A notable outcome beyond the project was that students from the group handled their final year visual art studies with confidence and tenacity, generating diverse and sophisticated outcomes that built on their learning from Justice.

Individual Student Outcomes

Considering implications of symbolic communication, Richard Cary states that:

> …realisation that symbols can have different meanings in different contexts, that a symbol's meaning can change, and that meanings assigned to symbols may be less than absolute are crucial foundations for critical art pedagogy. (1998, p. 108)

The starting point for my final year secondary visual arts students introduces two concepts – The invisible made visible: semiotics and signs; and Visual storytelling: constructed realities. The concepts build on earlier learning of visual metaphor and meaning making, and through asking for a narrowed individual focus, position the student as constructor of knowledge and communicator of meaning.

Over the course of 7 years, the delivery of this task within the International Baccalaureate (IB) Visual Arts Diploma program has been continually adapted to align with current trends of artistic practice. Articulated through independent

Fig. 11.5 Jamin, Control, 2007, interactive game installation with acrylic painting (Image courtesy of artist)

student research, outcomes are informed by previously learnt skills and knowledge. The course culminates in a student-directed exhibition of each student's individual body of work presented. With approximately 200 students participating in the globally focused course to date, no replication of approaches or final works has been evident from year to year. Each student's collection of works has been unique. Most have undergone substantial change over time as higher degrees of visual literacy have been attained in each student's evolution of a personal aesthetic. A survey of student outcomes to demonstrate transformed learning and critical understanding follows.

Jamin

Jamin entered the secondary art classroom with limited visual art experience and very little confidence in his own artistic ability, but with a passion for video games. Early in the 2-year course, students were introduced to traditional and mixed-media drawing techniques, followed by rotoscoping, where digital drawings are taken from video stills and sequenced to produce fluid animated drawings. Techniques of machinima, in which games technologies are used to manipulate, direct and capture video footage that is later edited, were also investigated.

An increased confidence in his ability to combine traditional and digital techniques was evident. Using game-making technology, Jamin featured a digital image of himself as the avatar, or character, in the game-based installation, Control. The game he created was projected over a painted mountain surface with the viewer controlling the avatar's progress. Over the course of the game, as the viewer progresses through the levels, control is taken off them, a pertinent metaphor for Jamin's increased confidence with the IB program as a whole, and his increased control over his time (Fig. 11.5).

Control was selected by an international curator for exhibition in a professionally curated digital art exhibition showcasing innovative use of technology from around the world. On his arrival in the class, Jamin was very challenged by what he perceived as limited drawing ability and his confidence was minimal. Encouraged to integrate

his passions into his work, Jamin's final exhibition included drawing, conceptual digital imagery, games and animations, which were transformed outcomes made possible by application of his learning from an investigation of blending traditional and technological art forms.

Through exposure to diverse approaches, including unexpected art-making methods, Jamin found his 'fit' in the world of art. By bringing the literacies and skills he already had from his interest in gaming, integrating this with new knowledge and applying both to the concept of 'control' developed over the course of study, an increased 'literacy' in art production, expression and ideas was realised. Acquiring knowledge to take him beyond the classroom, Jamin has since entered an animation degree and regularly returns to the school to mentor current visual arts / film students.

Lorna

Lorna has an innate ability to draw and is comfortable with traditional materials such as watercolour. Over time she developed considerable skills in realist and expressive rendering, entering the senior art course with an excellent foundation in art making, but seeking something more. She was, however, unable to articulate what 'something more' actually was (Fig. 11.6).

Practical and theoretical investigation of symbolic codes of expression provided a turning point for Lorna. Extending her understanding of formal qualities of an artwork, research into abstraction, de-construction and abstract expression opened her eyes to the possibilities of moving beyond the literal into the conceptual and nonfigurative. Following personal exposure to spontaneous, collaborative sound production, Lorna completed an in-depth exploration of relational aesthetics and the conceptual performance works of John Cage. Investigating Cage's theories of indeterminacy, everydayness and role of the audience, Lorna analysed contemporary installation works by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Rafael Lozano, endeavouring to uncover the relevance of these theories to contemporary installation work.

Simultaneously and with increasing degrees of sophistication, she applied Cage's theories in her own work to "evoke a contemplation of spirituality in contemporary life" and "create a dialogue with the viewer". The following extract is taken directly from Lorna's final artist statement.

> My body of work seeks to evoke a contemplation of spirituality in contemporary life. It explores the dichotomy of spiritual collectiveness vs. individuality and the notion of form and colour as a manifestation of spirituality and energy. This is achieved through manipulation of the human body and the symbol of flesh as a vessel for spirituality. Metaphysical landscapes that evoke a contemplation of the non-physical are also created. My exploration into contemporary spirituality draws on the spiritual function of art across cultures and centuries, particularly indigenous Australian and African art and contemporary spiritual rituals.

The preceding extract is taken directly from Lorna's final artist statement (Fig. 11.7).

Fig. 11.6 Lorna, Portrait of a girl (detail) 2010, watercolour (Image courtesy of artist)

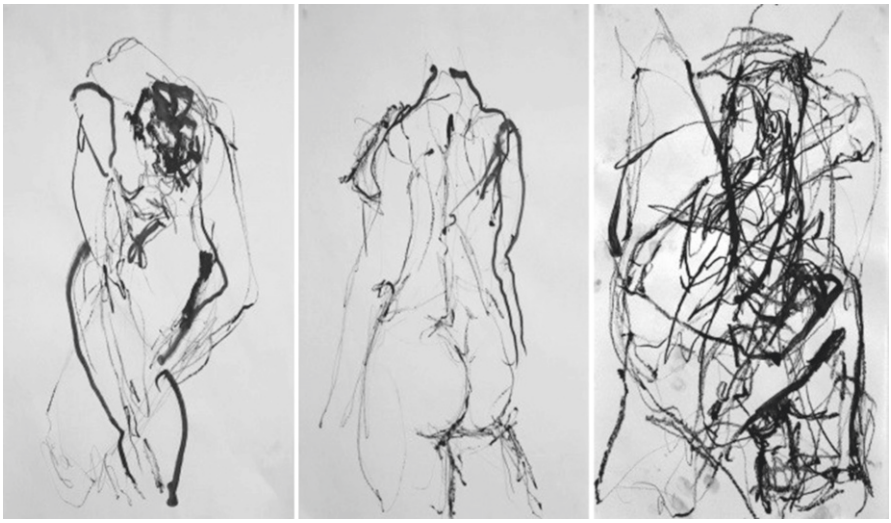

Fig. 11.7 Lorna, Variations, 2012, soluble graphite (Image courtesy of artist)

Fig. 11.8 Lorna, Primordial, 2012, mixed media on board in response to sound (Image courtesy of artist)

Lorna's research into spirituality and indigenous culture has been aesthetically supported by her study of a range of artists and art styles. She clearly demonstrates a synthesis of her findings when she continues with:

> As a painter, I strongly identify with the technical aesthetics and philosophies of Abstract Expressionism. This has evolved from earlier representational rendering of the human form. Artists informing my practice are Wassily Kandinsky who explored the idea that art could be a manifestation of spirituality or 'inner necessity'; Mark Rothko's approach to Reductionism and the power of materiality in evoking a spiritual sense; and the technical mastery of colour and space evident in Cy Twombly's paintings.

Lorna's study has generated a deep understanding of contemporary art practice, both her own and that of others. She has developed her technical knowledge and skills to transform her early work into a highly complex visual and auditory articulation of her chosen conceptual focus, never losing sight of her own identity as an evolving artist (Fig. 11.8).

> Portrait of Forty-Five and One is a culmination of the painting techniques I have learnt throughout the course and demonstrates the visceral qualities of paint. Corporeus merges painting techniques and digital video manipulation to create encompassing sensory experience. I am constantly challenged to adapt and explore the mediums I use to translate and explore my conceptual questions. Exploitation of the visceral qualities of oil painting combined with an investigation of media, including audio-visual and drawing, form a body of work that provides a multi-faceted exploration of the spiritual (Figs. 11.9 and 11.10).

Fig. 11.9 Lorna, Corporeus, video incorporating captured footage, oil paint animation, digital animation (Image courtesy of artist)

Fig. 11.10 Lorna, Portrait of forty-five and one, 2012, oil on canvas 150 × 150 cm (Image courtesy of artist)

Anna

Anna began the visual arts course with an impressive history, exhibiting paintings inspired by her family's indigenous heritage and her father's use of traditional iconography. She was a confident mark maker, already formulating her own stylistic approach to traditional aboriginal painting. Initially, Anna was unsure of accepting any influence from outside her chosen style, but remained open to investigation of other art-making techniques and styles.

Encouraged to keep sight of her roots, Anna progressed through the course, broadening her understanding of contemporary practice and developing her ability to marry the familiar with unfamiliar modes of expression. She explored contemporary indigenous art as well as a variety of artworks from other cultures,

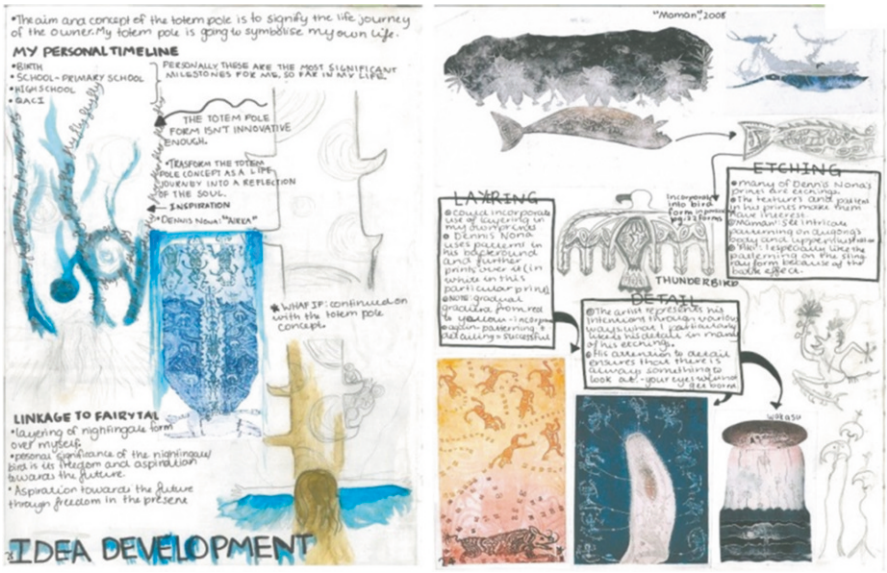

Fig. 11.11 Anna, research pages from the visual journal (Image courtesy of artist)

undergoing extensive research into the significance of ceremony, time and place in Australian aboriginal art.

Excerpts from Anna's visual journal demonstrate her connected learning, depicting the development of ideas for a totemic print work (Fig. 11.11).

Anna chooses to explore the work of contemporary indigenous artist Dennis Nona, who references symbolism and the rich patterned surfaces of traditional aboriginal painting in his print-based artworks. She applies her developing understanding of tradition and contemporary practice to advance her own ideas for a hybrid print work, in which she combines different printmaking techniques in a single cross-media graphic work to communicate her indigenous history and transition from tradition into a contemporary world (Fig. 11.12).

Anna's later resolution of a narrative, digital image series addresses consequences of global warming on indigenous island environments. The work demonstrates her engagement with significant global issues, communicating her thoughts from cultural and environmental perspectives. Her choice of new media positions the materiality of the work as a significant factor, indicative of the analytical nature of her decisions (Fig. 11.13).

Aaron

Aaron, like Jamin, was a fervent gamer before commencing the senior visual arts course. He had a history of drawing, but was excited to learn that use of video games could be a legitimate art-making process. His final folio incorporated a wide

Fig. 11.12 Anna, 2010, hybrid print artwork (Image courtesy of artist)

Fig. 11.13 Anna, Submergence, 2010, digitally manipulated image series (Image courtesy of artist)

range of works, taking inspiration from techniques of drawing, printmaking, painting, photography and new media.

Becoming an expert in techniques of machinima, Aaron shared his newly acquired skills and knowledge to mentor others. Classmates sought his guidance to push their own work to higher levels. Teachers of other subject areas, including science and business, requested that Aaron be able to share his expertise in their classrooms to better engage their students. He presented at a number of education

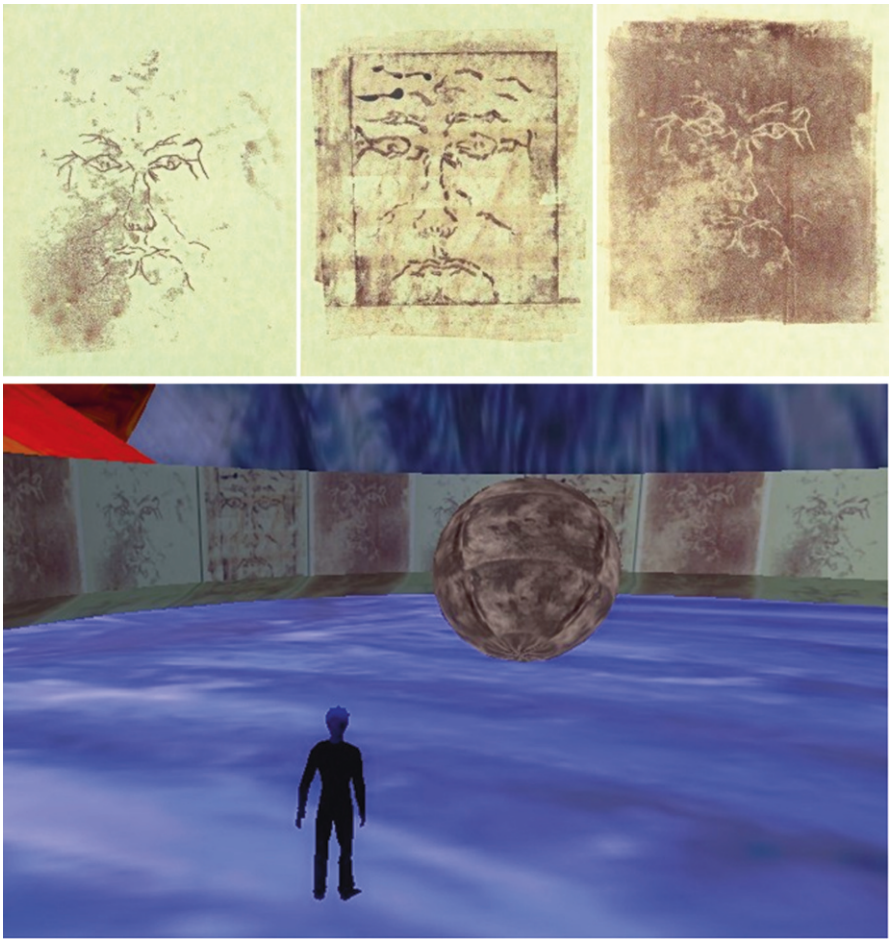

Fig. 11.14 Aaron, Splitting edge (*top*) recontextualised in interactive virtual world (*bottom*), 2011 (Image courtesy of artist)

conferences addressing primary, secondary and tertiary educators to give a student perspective on games in learning.

With an innate curiosity and inventiveness, over time, Aaron discovered through introduction to and exploration of virtual worlds that he could take his traditional works into virtual spaces, altering them to recontextualise the original works. In doing so, Aaron invited his audience to explore his world: drawings and prints had become virtual sculptural forms to be entered and explored by participants. Invited by a university to facilitate workshops for secondary students and primary/secondary teachers, Aaron successfully developed and delivered a well-received 2-week program in which participants made films using machinima techniques in Second Life (Figs. 11.14 and 11.15).

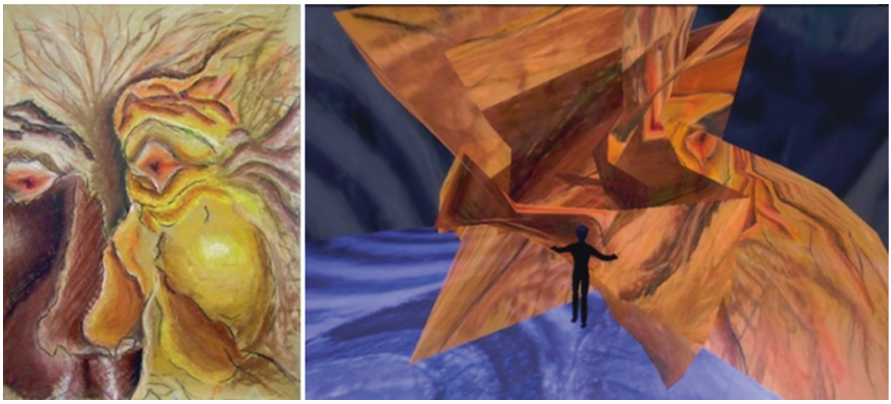

Fig. 11.15 Aaron, Vehemence (*left*) recontextualised in interactive virtual world (*right*), 2011 (Image courtesy of artist)

In a 2010 article on twenty-first century art education, Lilly Lu states, "the best way to learn about cutting edge technology is not to read and hear about it but actually to use and experience it". Lu encourages art teachers to become aware of the potential of using innovative technology to design successful learning experiences, to effectively "engage students in a meaningful way in a virtual age" (2010, p. 24).

Each student developed in different ways: Jamin realised that he had artistic skills despite coming into this practice with little confidence – by drawing on what he knew he achieved results; Lorna was aware of the need of 'finding something more'– her feeling on not being entirely challenged in her previous school led her to want to be challenged and confronted so that her literate skills in art expanded; Anna found a balance between traditional and contemporary approaches to art production by drawing on her own distinct cultural needs and was able to relate this to real-world issues; and Aaron was opened up to the opportunity of being a mentor to others by sharing his skills and ideas, which in turn impacted on his own practice – he was able to connect actual with virtual. For all of these students the 'connectivity' of their practice, albeit in varied ways, enabled transformative learning and empowered them through their own personal artistic journeys.

Conclusion

Each of the student outcomes featured in this chapter have been created by senior secondary visual arts students in response to complex problems based on communication of cultural and personal ideas. Through a developed understanding of symbolic expression and constructed meaning, each of the students has applied a highly personal lens to image making, yet articulated a connectedness to the world around them. In order to achieve differentiated learning and individualised results, transformational teaching and learning has occurred.

Teaching strategies that employ authentic combinations of traditional and new media can successfully develop visual literacies when combined with critical textual discourse and connected experience. To encourage and enable transformative practice for students, significant shifts in my own pedagogical practice have been undertaken over an extensive time period. In doing so, I have been prepared to:

- reflect on the curriculum I deliver to objectively evaluate and revise it;
- abandon the notion of a single truth to reveal potentialities of new art-making techniques and processes;
- seek inspiration from my own art practice and influence from the world of art, past and present, passionately sharing these with my students;
- model an approach that positions theory and practice as highly integrated elements of art praxis;
- combine the old with the new to ensure a contemporary, highly conceptual approach that is still in touch with traditions of the past;
- integrate innovative technological practices;
- value the place of culture, society and history in art, using the real issues that are generated from them as starting points to enable critical dialogue and deep learning to occur;
- engage my students through meaningful textual discourse and connection to their own lives;
- allow students to follow their own artistic directions, building on a foundation of acquired literacies to make critical decisions about their own work
- share my approaches to arts pedagogy and to learn from others, including the students around me.

An immediate shift in teaching practice is perhaps possible but unquestionably challenging. Instead, a gradual change in classroom practice is preferable as it will eventuate in authentic engagement and challenge for our contemporary youth – a transformed and connected learning. In doing so, deep personal understanding can be established, together with highly individual, yet rigorously informed, student perspectives.

Implications for the future of visual arts education are clear. In a complex era of continual change, we must remain open to revision of art pedagogy and acceptance of innovative technology if we are to ensure that learning moves beyond the superficial; that we embrace difference to meet the evolving, diverse literacy needs of the contemporary, visual arts student.

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