Detoxing University Through Creative Engagement

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Abstract This chapter outlines a philosophy of higher education practice that includes emphasis on using creativity to engage students, both in and outside of formal classes, to improve wellbeing. In an age of increasing discourse preoccupied with division and difference, individuals' feelings of isolation and loneliness, increased student debt, lack of job opportunities and societal destabilisation, there is urgent need for a philosophy of 'togetherness'. In developing this ideal of coming together, the benefits to mental health and wellbeing are many. Further, the way we conduct research in the academy is something to consider more carefully too. The choice of our research methodologies may not be as benign as we might think and can shift perceptions and distort values over time. The past decade has revealed an unhealthy preoccupation with measurement and performance rankings which has been pervasive amongst the neoliberalist higher education sector. However, lived experience, feelings and creative endeavour resist numerical reduction. Running alongside this issue has been growing calls across those working in wellbeing and education to increase usage of art-based approaches in understanding and evidencing the benefits of expressive art practice. To these ends, this chapter offers hope in how creative activity might bring about essential change to combat a corporate hardening that has in recent times ruthlessly hijacked the love of learning and indeed the love of enabling others. Reporting on an initiative where artistic processes have been used as an antidote to the 'toxic university', the chapter explores what we can do to bring about positive change for both students and staff.

Keywords Creative engagement · Mental health · Creativity

> Only by being suspended aloft, by dangling my mind in the heavens and mingling my rare thought with the ethereal air, could I ever achieve strict scientific accuracy in my survey of the vast empyrean. Had I pursued my inquiries from down there on the ground, my data would be worthless. The earth, you see, pulls down the delicate essence of thought to its own gross level. –ARISTOPHANES, *the Clouds.*

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Introduction

The year is 423BC at the City Dionysia, an important festival in Athens during the spring. The audience sit watching a new play, *The Clouds* by the playwright Aristophanes (1973). The audience laugh and mock the characters as the play ridicules the absurdities of the Sophists' school of higher education. The play traces the journey of Strepsiades, a once rich but not so bright countryman of advanced years, who has found himself deeply in debt through the extravagant tastes of his trendy son, Pheidippides. The 'bank of mum and dad' is now emptied and in ruin. Seeking a solution, Strepsiades hears of the benefits of a powerful new method of argument taught by the Sophists (at some financial cost), making successful litigation possible through the clever use of words and thought. Lured by the prospect that education of this type would provide dividends for his life circumstances, he enters the 'Phrontisterion' or 'The Thinkery' of Socrates, known to be the 'best' of the teachers, with the aim to learn how to outsmart his creditors and avoid paying his debts. Not so incidentally, Socrates is presented in *The Clouds* as a petty thief and a fraud. However, Strepsiades subsequently joins the 'life-changing' school, but he is soon considered too old and stupid to benefit by the lessons. He then sends his son Pheidippides in his place, hoping he might make a more promising student. As hoped, Pheidippides proves to be a successful pupil of 'new thinking'. However, in an ironic twist, Pheidippides becomes so adept at this new method of argument that in a show of intellectual prowess, he physically beats his father and demonstrates that he is justified by all the laws, divine and human, in the right of what he is doing to his father. The play concludes with the old Strepsiades realising the immorality of this type of 'progressive' education, and he revengefully sets fire to the Phrontisterion, burning the wretched place to the ground.

Fast-forward almost 2,500 years and we reflect on the poignancy of the issues in Aristophanes' play, contemplating the state of our own neoliberalist higher education system and how the commercial nature of the 'education business' is serving society today. Students are being encouraged in unprecedented numbers to enrol in degree programmes with the lure of financial gain in the world of work, arguably resulting in a growing loss of interest in an education embedded in the classics, philosophy, history, arts and humanities. We find ourselves in a situation where a deep intellectual education in what makes us human and indeed civil, has given way to a rhetoric of 'better' jobs, greater wealth and university as a somehow driver of future enterprise. However, perhaps ironically, this rapidly changing higher education sector is now struggling to maintain its once prestigious position. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic pressure, social change agendas and ready access to information and technical application via digital technology, the value of higher education is becoming somewhat challenged. Whilst there is still an expectation that more and more young people should at least possess an entry-level degree, this norm is coming under increasing question in relation to value for money, skills shortages and real-world need. Aristophanes through his play *The Clouds* intends us to see the Thinkery as ridiculous and not a place in which we should place our faith—indeed the satire

provokes us to question the very drivers of why we might seek to engage in higher education in the first place.

The pressure to academise has not been without its problems, and the mental health of those involved has raised growing concern (Carter & Goldie, 2018; Prior, 2018; Erickson et al., 2020). The politics of what has been labelled the 'toxic university' (Smyth, 2017) is complex. However, Carter and Goldie, 2018: 6) underline the responsibility of universities to respond to wellbeing issues evident in Australia and beyond: 'With universities having a duty of care to their staff, there is scope for a better understanding of potential enablers of mental health in higher education settings'. This chapter, within its limited scope, aims to address some of the highlighted issues in relation to higher education wellbeing and importantly, propose how artistic and creative engagement initiatives may provide an effective antidote to the pressures of the 'toxic university'. Described later in the chapter is an original mindfulness project working with university students and staff alike, highlighting growing understanding of how as academics we may become enablers in our practice and to contribute more widely and effectively to improving wellbeing within contemporary higher education.

A Discourse of Dissonance

To more fully appreciate the current mental health concerns within higher education, it is necessary to briefly contextualise the fragmentary times in which this situation exists. 'The fundamental big issue in current discussion is that increasingly, universities are being corporatised and economised' (Prior, 2018: 129) into what is now known as neoliberalist higher education. Further, the sector is currently immersed in a fractious period in history where identity politics has gained significant traction and has also taken its place within the wider community propelled by the mass media. Although well-intentioned, many of these political agendas are creating a discourse of dissonance and fracturing of collective community. Narratives are driven by profiling individual characteristics such as race and gender to promote the concepts of 'equality and diversity', and in the UK, 'widening participation' also—a political initiative to put more people from what is being termed as 'under-represented groups' into higher education. In the UK, many of the narratives and agendas are framed by legislated 'protected characteristics' which include age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity. However, the public debates which have subsequently ensued challenge the definitions of identities with some resistance to accept fixed definitions altogether as in the case of 'gender fluidity'. Further to these agendas has been a resurgence in civil unrest in response to actual and perceived social or racial injustice.

Undoubtedly many educationalists are influenced by academic trends seen in poststructuralism, all the other *isms* and the work of French philosopher and political activist Michel Foucault (1978). Critical theorists have considerably influenced formal education for almost 100 years, with the most notable being Carl Marx (1818—1883). These critical theorists all aim to critique and change established social order. Paulo Freire is generally credited as the first to apply critical theory in learning and teaching with his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which in itself was influenced heavily by Marxist ideology. Amongst many challenging ideas, Freire argues that pedagogy should treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge—although this concept has been slow to gain discernible traction.

A great deal of contemporary research and scholarship has also been framed by Marxism and critical theory, whether or not the authors of contemporary work realise it or not. These approaches in education have resulted in the proliferation of discourses of dissonance, difference and individual identity. Arguably this rise in individualism has perhaps unintentionally worked in adverse proportion to the value of community and collective community service. In Australia and the UK, for example, traditional places of belonging such as churches, service or social clubs and sporting/hobbyist clubs currently do not enjoy the same levels of community engagement as they once did. Diminishing cohesive social structures are also played out in our universities where student (and staff) experience of campus life has greatly diminished. Even pre-pandemic, the time spent on campus was noticeably diminishing and a physical scholarly community, as we once knew, evaporating. In relation to the corporatised modern university, I have previously written:

> With the rise in individualism, neoliberalism and consumerism, the student has been repositioned, quite uncomfortably, as a 'customer' replete with customer satisfaction surveys, entitlement and a 'value for money' ethos. This shift in mindset moves the student away from asking 'why is it so' to questions of 'what for', 'when' and 'how much' (Prior, 2018: 130).

Not only is learning being economised and commercialised but along with this is the increasing need for students to take employment, working long hours in order to cover escalating tuition and living costs. This shift has had a major effect in removing students from campuses. Further, as already acknowledged above, we are increasingly experiencing a fractious society littered with multiple polarising opinions being given prominence through both the mainstream media and social media. Undoubtedly this has a collective effect in pervading the social mindset and destabilises the young—a further stress on mental health. According to Carter and Goldie (2017) universities are well placed 'to support students' positive educational and social media experiences' (p. 78) and these authors call for 'academics to better design, develop and lead-manage inclusive and sustainable online teaching and learning environments conducive to students' digital identity, mental health and wellness' (p. 78). Undoubtedly the online space is taking over from the physical, and universities must respond accordingly.

Understanding Lived Experience in Higher Education

Mental health and wellbeing in higher education are at a critical point in history, as reflected in the need for this book as a whole. University staff are subjected to unprecedented pressure through the imposition of regulations, agendas, shrinking funding, responding to a raft of performance metrics, pressure to recruit, and particularly since COVID-19, to develop extensive online learning materials. As mentioned above, the overarching drivers come from an economised approach to higher education with increased numbers of universities aggressively competing against one another for student numbers. Increasingly the voice of the academic is diminished in an environment of brutal university administrations. This is born out in the lived experience of academics who perhaps once felt in control of their own destinies who no longer feel able to raise the issues that concern them most. The now widespread use (and arguably misuse) of audits and various statistical performance metrics and league tables that privilege certain kinds of knowing and judgement—which ironically decontextualise and simplify the very things they seek to measure. The weakness of statistically produced forms of knowledge is that it distracts from understanding the more vital lived experience and discourages individuals from noticing how such audit quantifications are inevitably generative (Espeland & Sauder, 2007), which do in time shift priorities and values.

By way of example to reflect the severity of concern, recent findings of a leaked report based on a staff survey from one UK university were made public, reporting high levels of staff unhappiness disclosing that '[m]any complain of unhealthy workloads and unreasonable hours. Some report bullying, discrimination and harassment' (Deacon, 2020: n.pag). It was reported that some of the most negative responses concerned staff not being able to take proper breaks and feeling they could not do their job properly without 'regularly working unreasonable hours'—a situation which can only have been further exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The case above does not seem an isolated experience by any means, which is further borne out in a recent research study that focuses on higher education staff members' perception of their working conditions, managerial practices and personal wellbeing. This project sought to build on the central premises of 'statactivist' approaches to knowledge development and activism to address what Lynch and Ivancheva (2015) describe as the failure of academics as individuals, and universities as corporate bodies, to challenge the spread of market values and new managerialism in higher education (Erickson et al., 2020). The research surveyed a total of 5,888 academic staff self-selected from 78 universities across the UK in 2017. The qualitative data collected reveal 'an acute situation of endemic bullying and harassment, chronic overwork, high levels of mental health problems, general health and wellbeing problems, and catastrophically high levels of demoralisation and dissatisfaction across the UK HE sector' and was grimly summed up by the report's authors that the sector is 'on the edge of potential disaster' (Erickson et al., 2020: 15).

The report identifies a range of issues such as the perception of misuse of student fees to embark on over-ambitious building works or 'vanity projects' leading to a

lack of funding for more basic aspects of university functioning. For example, one participant suggested:

> Senior Management at my university is appalling. In order to support a vanity project at my university staff are put under unbearable pressure. SM are driving staff to resign, take voluntary severance, or seek other posts because there is no support for research, or to deliver good quality teaching (p. 11).

The report also states that senior management at universities appears to be imposing a system more akin to a dictatorship enforcing compliance rather than critique, as the following study's participant articulately stated:

> People keep disappearing in a most macabre way. It is like living through Stalin's purges. I think this university is going to have a severe problem recruiting given the way it treats its existing faculty (p. 12).

The same research report also finds that a toxic environment under this 'new management' ethos often results in a range of health and wellbeing issues for staff such as anxiety disorder (e.g. struggling to sleep and breathe), difficultly to 'switch off' from work due to modern working contexts and technologies, factors which have previously been identified by Sonnentag and Bayer (2005). In addition to the allocation of resources and change at work resulting in negative wellbeing impacts for staff, others in the same report highlighted how this 'links to the ever-increasing silencing of academics' (Erickson et al., 2020: 13).

Sadly, for most people working in higher education, none of the above would be the least bit surprising and does not actually need this research to illuminate the issues evidenced in their own lived experience. However, what the research usefully provides is a sense of scale and that academics might take some solace that these issues are not entirely peculiar to their institution alone. Clearly, there seems little external will being currently exerted, either by governments or universities themselves, to combat the systemic failures of the neoliberalist university system. This may, in part, be because the very drivers that have caused these calamities have in fact become so deeply engrained in popularist and political rhetoric that there seems no immediate way out. Yet if there is hope, it resides within the academy itself to take action and turn to new ways of appraising and conducting research, moving away from the clouding bias of performance metrics in attempting to provide a closer understanding of the lived experience therein. Understanding personal experience may indeed be more of an art than a science.

Finding Alternative Ways of Knowing

Part of the conundrum resides in the situation that education research has tended to privilege social science-based inquiry in an attempt to qualify and quantify 'data', yet as an educationalist myself, I know how difficult it is to pin down and measure knowledge and knowledge construction. The unease of not complying with a belief in

being able to measure everything has shoehorned many educationalists into thinking that empirical research has to be accompanied by narrow definitions of data and that data be subjected to some type of statistical measurement in order to demonstrate validity. Whilst I do not wish to advocate that these approaches are not without merit for answering certain questions where this methodology might be appropriate, however, I wish to highlight the particular deficiency in applying this to creative acts and various types of knowing. Consequently, the positioning of art-based research to investigate questions of practice has tended to be marginalised in the field of education. Curiously this situation exists despite the poignant and influential writings of John Dewey in 1934 who considerably advanced educational thought from the twentieth century. Dewey clearly identified the benefits of artistic engagement and addressed the essential qualities of art. This is particularly evidenced in his highly distinguished book *Art as Experience* ([1934] 2004) in which he expressed the central idea that art functions as experience itself, which justifies the broadening in the understanding of 'empirical' to mean 'observable'. Indeed, the word 'empirical' comes directly from the Greek and Latin. The term derives from the Latin *empiricus,* which is derived from the Greek *empeirikos* ('experienced') and earlier to the verb *peiran,* meaning 'to try, attempt or experiment'.

Dewey places great value on the actual processes of inquiry: looking and finding meaning. He highly values the various components of artistry that involves hard to pin-down qualities such as intuition, impulse, invocation and spontaneity—all concepts valued in today's push to become 'innovative', 'clever', 'personalised' and progress the 'pace of change'. Some current commentators have gone so far as to claim that these trends present 'critical challenges for the sector but also tremendous opportunities for those who understand the changes under way and how to convert them into positive momentum for their institution' (Spies, 2019: n.pag). The idea of another way of knowing might seem complex and may even be new to some, yet in 1934 Dewey understood precisely that these are found in the entwined and embodied nature of meaning contained within the aesthetic medium:

> As long as 'meaning' is a matter of association and suggestion, it falls apart from the qualities of the sensuous medium and form is disturbed. Sense qualities are the carriers of meanings, not as vehicles carry goods but as a mother carries a baby when the baby is part of her own organism. Works of art, like words, are literally pregnant with meaning Dewey ([1934] 2005: 122–23).

In making these distinctions, Shaun McNiff (2018), arguably the father of art-based research, makes the position clear in how artistic research differs from other research methodologies. He also points to the current distortion of research approaches within the applied arts that have not served artists particularly well:

> The common tendency since the beginning of applied arts research has been to examine art-related questions and issues through the methods, concepts and languages of psychology and social science, resulting in the general use of art as 'data' or raw material for a very different academic discipline. Many assume that this is what we are doing when we talk about art-based research. I define art-based research as the use of artistic expression by the researcher, either alone or with others, as a primary mode of inquiry (p. xi).

The complexity within artistic research is a result of artists calling upon multiple ways of knowing which are embedded *in* and *through* practice. Broadening understanding within the academy to recognise that knowledge within artistic practice becomes embodied and highly connected to both the form and the artefact. *The result of artistic expression is the artefact*. Responding to artworks of any type can also be through the artistic mode and not exclusively through the written word. For example, a response to a painting might be through movement or a piece of music through drawing. There are many artforms that resist the reduction of practice to words. Even those artforms that do use words such as poetry, song or drama, words are chosen for particular aesthetic effect. McNiff (2018) pertinently asks:

> *If we advocate for art as a way of knowing that engages realms inaccessible to linear and logical thought, then why is it that we do not use it as a primary mode of inquiry when researching how the arts might enhance human experience?* (p. xi, original emphasis).

What we indeed learn from artistic research is that it does not need to be quantified or qualified according to data sets. Art does not need additional 'data' to prove itself—the *art* is what we use to provide evidence. Moreover, art is actually empirical as it is verifiable through observation and experience (Prior, 2020). Artistic research extends beyond theory or pure logic alone and takes us to feelings (key for mental health), through what we term 'aesthetics'. Art and art processes are felt and are entirely observable, and therefore undeniably researchable by nature. Mitchell Kossak (2012), an active art-based researcher in the area of expressive therapies, supports the view by asserting: 'in art-based research, the phenomenological experience is represented through the creative act itself' (p. 22). Dewey ([1934] 2005) summarises that the potential limits in aesthetics are determined experientially and by what the artists make of it in practice. He states that: 'the *medium* of expression is neither subjective nor objective but is an experience in which they are integrated in a *new* object' (p. 299, original emphasis).

By finding these alternative ways of knowing, we can shift the dialectic away from a metrics-based approach to one that is engaged more directly with the whole person and the creative self. We can allow for person-centred generative understanding to inform what we know. There is tremendous potential for student engagement in creative acts and the employment of art-based research can help realign education and offers a way of thoughtful knowing through creative practice.

Art Heals

McNiff (2004) advocates for art's traditional healing function as a force for transformation, contemplation and an opportunity for solace or communal participation in group work. This healing quality for the mind offers significant opportunity in contemporary higher education where we are witnessing growing concerns for both students and the staff within them.

Returning to antiquity as this chapter began, the therapeutic benefits of creative activity have a long history stemming from the Ancient world itself. I recall that whilst on a trip to Greece in 2008 to speak at a conference of drama educators, I took time to explore the country beyond Athens itself. Indeed, I was brought face-to-face with the origins of arts for health in Epidurus, and upon reflection of my experience wrote:

> I was reminded of the long-standing acknowledgement of the therapeutic value of the arts. The sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus is a spiritual place visited by the ancient Greeks in order to pay tribute to Asclepius (the god of medicine and healing in ancient Greek mythology) and to ask the gods for remedies for their physical ailments. Epidaurus was built around the third century BC and it is adorned with a multitude of buildings, most famous of which is the ancient acoustic marvel the 'Theatre of Epidaurus'. Epidaurus was a healing centre as well as a cultural centre—the two purposes closely entwined in ancient times (Prior, 2010: 3).

Whilst standing in this ancient healing place I realised quite powerfully that these art-based healing traditions had an integrated function and that this was precisely why applying art forms to health offers great potential for wellbeing. However, over time the world lost sight of this vital connection, and chemical treatments for emotional and psychological states became de rigueur within health care. A disassociation between human activity and wellbeing became an accepted societal norm. However, since the early 2000s there has been growing academic and community reinterest in the use of art—all artforms—for health and wellbeing benefits. During this period, I founded the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* with Intellect Publishers in 2010 in order to capture and evidence work within the field. Now in its second decade, the Journal has been committed to serving the greater arts in health community around the world, 'publishing some of the most ground-breaking research and indicators of what is happening in the field today' (Kossak, 2018: 3). Through the efforts of many like-minds, the profile has been raised internationally of the benefits of creative and expressive activity. Interest in this work was stirred at the highest levels of government with the House of Lords in the British Parliament instituting an All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017). The inquiry concluded that the arts play a vital aspect in the health and wellbeing of communities across the spectrum and that resources spent on art-based projects would help relieve pressure on the National Health Service (NHS) and build a more cohesive society.

I was invited to the House of Lords to be part of the advisory group to discuss implementation strategies of the report, and for my part was able to advise on the need for higher education to take a greater lead in developing programmes of study and to include increased awareness amongst educators, trainee physicians and healthcare workers. However, against this backdrop of positive activity, as mentioned earlier, we have witnessed growing social problems of increased isolation and loneliness as traditional notions of cohesive community breakdown in favour of pluralist, diverse and individualist ideologies. Arguably these conditions have been exponentially exacerbated with the rise in digital technology and the complex stressors this creates for people and the most vulnerable in society (Prior, 2018). Yamamoto and Kushin (2014) suggest that 'engaging in polarised online environments, or being the recipient

of criticism could have negative effects on self-image as well as impeding actuali-sation of intrinsic and extrinsic awards' (p. 434). The online world that is now an embedded part of many peoples' existence, especially the young, and the many issues this raises, will continue to become something of an interest to researchers. What needs to be foremost in educators' minds is what we can do to harness the conditions under which we can improve students as whole beings and how we can counter the negative and isolating effects of technology. In short, we must realise that art heals.

Art-Based 'Togetherness' for Wellbeing

All of us can be creators of art (of all art forms) and use this as a vehicle for bringing people together—ideally in person, but otherwise via video conferencing where necessary. The context prompting the urgent need for 'togetherness' is the growing numbers of under-18s who are suffering from anxiety, depression, eating disorders and other conditions. In addition, tragically, more are self-harming and attempting suicide. School stress, social media, troubled family life and pressures to 'succeed' are among the key reasons behind this rise, popularly reported. Consequently, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) is struggling to cope with the growing increase in young people needing psychological and psychiatric support. Globally, mental health is also a priority for the health agenda (WHO, 2017). Staff and students of universities are not exempt from the growing mental health issues experienced across society and as illustrated above.

An example of a novel project my colleagues and I introduced into one UK university gives some insights into how the use of art can offer a mindful approach to addressing the stressors of personal and academic life and brings both staff and students together. The project aimed to demonstrate one way in which universities can take seriously the mental health of their staff and students and the role that art can play in providing plausible answers in realigning the culture of contemporary higher education. The intention of this project was to jointly pay attention to the wellbeing of staff and students. I have previously argued that we are far too focussed on behavioural well-doing with an array of political and social agendas and not suffi-ciently focussed on experiential wellbeing (Prior, 2018). The project focussed on offering preventative measures through the use of art to facilitate experiential oppor-tunities for 'togetherness' (Prior, 2018) and the desire to realign higher education through acknowledging the fundamental importance of 'communitas'—defined as 'inspired fellowship' (Turner, 2012) to enable and enhance human, personal, spiritual and social wellbeing.

The title of the project was 'pARTicipate: take a break with art'. As an important aside, the project paused due to the lockdown measures first introduced to combat COVID-19 in March 2020. However, this initial reporting over the first several months of the project gives a sense of a proactive exemplar initiative suitable for higher education. The project piloted a weekly lunchtime series of art-led participative workshops using art as a vehicle for promoting mindful wellbeing. The workshops

attracted small groups of up to 10 participants at a time and lasted around one hour each, taking place within several campus locations such as a communal meeting area and the main library at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. The workshops were open to any person regardless of ability and were intended to explore the effect of using participative art-based activities in the promotion of mental wellbeing. All art materials were supplied free-of-charge to the participants, with the most popular media being paper, sharpies/markers and pastels. The modality of the art form is not as important as the thoughtful, purposeful way it responds to and works in tandem with the needs of the participants.

In researching this project, the key question was: 'What evidence emerges from a voluntary project using art-making for wellbeing amongst university staff and students?' The team principally employed an established art-based methodology where art itself provides the evidence (McNiff, 1998, 2013, 2018; Kossak, 2012; Prior, 2017, 2020) and was intended to be supported by reflective interviews from a sample of participants. Informal early responses by the participants were noted, such as:

> *This is relaxing.*
>
> *I've got an assignment due, but this is clearing my mind.*
>
> *I don't think I'm a good drawer, but I know I'm having fun.*
>
> *I'm going to schedule my lunchbreak for this time each week…it's so therapeutic.*
>
> *I like drawing with others. There's no competition but I like seeing what others do.*
>
> *I'm so busy but this feels like time well-spent.*
>
> *It's been years since I did any art…I've missed it…I feel good.*
>
> *This is really de-stressing me. Thanks guys.*
>
> *Enjoying the chats.*

However, the strongest evidence of effectiveness is not in what people said but in what was *observable*, or in research terms, 'empirical'. The mindful focus and creative flow exhibited by the participants were entirely observable and represented in the creative works themselves (Fig. 1). The artworks allow for greater transparency of tacit knowledge—knowledge that is richly embedded by experience but not necessarily something readily communicable in words. My earlier research on actors and those who train them demonstrates that 'knowledge is generated through direct, personal and experientially derived meaning' (Prior, 2012: 193). This view values the importance of knowledge that is incrementally gained through the act of doing and being. The artworks hold true as the evidence of engagement and of the expression created in and through the artistic/expressive process. Overall, the initial results of the project indicate the positive effect on the participants in taking time out to create in mindful ways. Whilst this approach is certainly not new, what was novel is that we applied this to a higher education setting and brought staff and students together for mindful wellbeing.

Fig. 1 'pARTicipate: take a break with art' 2020

Conclusion

The chapter has reflected upon the situation of the past decade or more that has revealed an unhealthy preoccupation with measurement and performance rankings which has been pervasive amongst the neoliberalist higher education sector. Undeniably higher education has changed from places where pace could be slowed in order to consider, read in depth, research at a careful pace, spend unhurried time with colleagues or students and allow oneself to be fully immersed in scholarship and academic development. These once-valued conditions have given way to the fast pace of life propelled by digital technology and the commercialisation of universities. A toxic culture driven by measurement and ranking has shifted emphasis from what it is that academics do, to how well they measure-up against artificially derived determinants. The lived experience has become pressurised for both staff and students alike.

However, lived experience, feelings, creative endeavour and in fact 'being human' all resist numerical reduction. Those of us working in wellbeing and education see

the steady deterioration of the mental health of those who work and study within it. Greater inclusivity of artistic/expressive opportunities for staff and students offers real potential to enhance the on-campus experience. By adopting creative research methodologies that resist narrow scientised definitions of 'evidence', the field has potential to move away from the dehumanising effects playing out across the higher education sector. Art-based inquiry, therefore, includes affective, sensory, creative, observational and intuitional ways of knowing. In addition, the use of experimentation, risk-taking, discovery and meaning-making are all important attributes to research through the process of making art and contemplating feelings. Armed with the knowledge of artistic research methodology, educators at all levels can meaningfully embed art-based activity and research processes into learning and teaching and thus give greater confidence in artistic research and its results. To these ends, this chapter offers hope in how creative activity might bring about essential change to combat a corporate hardening that has in recent times ruthlessly hijacked the love of learning and indeed the love of enabling others. Predominantly, 'good mental health is essential for students to achieve their potential' (Carter et al., 2017: 18).

To return to 423BC and Aristophanes' *The Clouds* (1973), it is pertinent to remember that the character of Strepsiades, who early in the play puts his own self-interest ahead of all else and his neighbours whom he owes considerable sums of money (and had promised to repay them) by seeking an education in order to argue his way out of repaying those debts. Then there is the son, Pheidippides, who armed with his newly found cleverness physically beats his father and argues that he is fully justified in his actions by all the laws, divine and human. What defence is there against the son who wants to beat his parents when using the same system of 'education'? If there is to be a healthier future in higher education, then maybe we need to learn from the truisms of antiquity and get our heads out of the clouds and reconsider our education systems. We certainly must pause, as the pandemic made us do, and re-evaluate our priorities for promoting greater mental wellbeing in happier and healthier places.

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