Affect and Informal Learning Through Adaptation of Workplace Practice

👤 **Jay Derrick**, Senior Lecturer, UCL Institute of Education, UK

✉ j.derrick@ucl.ac.uk

👤 **Tanya Harris**, Arts and Culture Educational Consultant, UK

✉ tanyahar@yahoo.com

Summary

A study of the work of freelance creative practitioners exemplifies how adaptations to practice, forced by the pandemic, has produced significant informal learning. The paper reflects on Epstein's (this issue) four modes of "affect" in the context of informal education, suggesting some different interpretations.

Keywords

Learning
Teaching
Meaning-Making
Contingency and Adaptation
Creative Practice

Work is an important context for lifelong learning. Much learning is informal, but nevertheless makes a significant contribution to personal and professional development over time. In workplaces, social relations, and the arrangement, affordances and limitations of the physical environment for productivity, problem-solving and learning are salient. This contrasts with formal contexts for learning, which tend to foreground official, explicit aspects of curriculum, obscuring features that are tacit, affective and contingent. Each of Epstein's (this issue) four forms of affect are reviewed in the light of evidence from a qualitative study of adaptations made by freelance creative practitioners to work practices, forced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Derrick & Harris, 2020).

The SOLO project

The East End of London is a base for many self-employed and sole-trader artists and craftworkers, whose work has been particularly disrupted by COVID-19. They are examples of "passionate workers" (McRobbie, 2016), typically concerned about the quality of their work, contributing to the community's quality of life, and earning income. McRobbie (2002) sees these attributes and precarity of employment as features of a rapidly changing Creative Industries sector. This group plays a role in the uniqueness of the area, and in its developing economy. SOLO: Surviving or Thriving? was a research project funded by UCL's Listen and Respond programme. The aim of the project was to explore the pandemic's impacts on self-employed creative practitioners based in Hackney, and specific changes made to their work in response to the crisis. Extended Zoom interviews with six practising artists enabled them to reflect on their experiences and feelings during the lockdown, focusing on what they learned and changes they made to work. The three artists whose interviews are referenced in this paper are briefly profiled:

VH runs Hackney Shed, an inclusive Theatre Company for children and young people. Lockdown in March 2020 meant the closure of almost every project and activity they were engaged in, including fully rehearsed theatre productions which were just about to start performing to audiences. VH

and her staff, in consultation with some young participants, designed a range of new activities which could take place entirely online. One highlight was a YouTube soap-opera. "We tried doing something different, an online soap opera, which in hindsight was way more work than we anticipated. It's called Corona-nation Street."[1]

PB, a community worker and gigging musician, drew homeless people he saw while on his daily exercise. His jobs had dried up, but he saw this as giving him time for visual art: "It's changed my work. I've just been super creative. I didn't for one moment feel that it was affecting me in a negative way." He made collages with his drawings, using photographs of the skyscrapers lining the streets and framing the rough sleepers, and then taught himself to add music to his images learning to use composition apps he downloaded onto his phone. He published them on Instagram. Expressing his feelings about the plight of the homeless, he discovered, like VH, capacities he didn't realise he had: "I spent an entire day in bed with a pair of headphones on and my massive chunky sausage fingers, trying to write music on an iPhone – that was a revelation, of my level of OCD capabilities."

CS, a photojournalist whose work ceased abruptly, had a chance to talk to his neighbours for the first time while exercising on his street during lockdown: "This is the first time as a community and worldwide, we experienced something like this, and obviously that affects the way we interact and the way we do things." He began to feel it was important to act as a witness to events impacting on the very diverse people living on his street. He started taking pictures of his neighbours, inviting them to tell their stories. Encouraged by the responses he received, his serendipitous project gradually became public art via Instagram, leading to an international exhibition and a book: "I'm particularly proud of the way in which it became a community hub; a way for neighbours to connect and get to know each other."

Intensities of encounter

The experience of COVID-19 has created what Deleuze and Guattari (1968) term intensive encounters. These generate first confusion, then thought, and a process of constructing an account which fits reality. These kinds of intensive encounters provide a way of describing the work of artists and educators, before and after lockdown. The pandemic, while creating difficult challenges, provided new materials and conditions for work, through which the artists were able to produce new kinds of intensive encounters. For CS, this grew directly out of new and richer encounters with his neighbours; for VH, highly pressured team-working was required to redesign their project, requiring new modes of rehearsal and performance: "It was a huge learning curve, because none of us know how to do video editing. We're downloading software and just trying to learn how to do it – it's not in any of our skill sets."

Epstein (this issue) equates the concept of intensity of encounter with "direct and authentic contact", pointing to the dramatically increased reliance on digital applications for sustaining formal education during the pandemic, and the impossibility of meeting face-to-face. He argues "the performativity embedded in remote learning technologies is a questionable substitute for the interpersonal interactions that comprise typical classroom activity." VH suggests the picture is more nuanced. The online activities she and her staff hurriedly developed afforded new kinds of educational encounters for both facilitators and users. These are not inauthentic or less "intense". Unexpected benefits for her users emerged: in a real sense distance was abolished for children who lived too far away to participate in person. The soap opera format they adopted was not compromised by irregular attendance, as a standard theatre production would have been: "We have a handful of young people that got rehoused and they were too far away. But once we started delivering online, they were able to start coming again. They were members that we'd lost that were able to then join us again because the distance wasn't an issue."

This suggests that equating online with pejorative senses of remote in relation to learning may simply reinforce the inequalities reproduced by the formal and static institutional structures of education systems; the "intensity of learning encounters" is no longer necessarily a function of physical distance: "Learning can be online but it can't be remote – learning happens in your head and your body" (Harrison, 2020).

Meaning-making and assemblages

Meaning-making is not confined to formal educational contexts but takes place as part of and through all human activity – as a central element of Arendt's (1958) concept of Vita Activa. The products of meaning-making are referred to by Deleuze & Guattari (1987) as "assemblages", continually created anew, through processes of "coding", "stratifying", and "territorialising". Work consists of continuous individual and collective meaning-making which entails direct engagement with the physical world, through which new assemblages are brought into being. Insofar as learning and meaning-making are coterminous, the pandemic created conditions in which the practitioners in the study were thrown into a curve of intensive learning and meaning-making, regarding their own capacities and aspects of their specialist practices. VH gained a new understanding of the potential and resilience of her organisation – co-constructed with funders, trustees, colleagues and young clients. The participants in the soap-opera project collaboratively created new meanings in relation to production and performance, demonstrating capacity for hard work and resilience in the face of a crisis. CS contributed to the creation of new modes of communication, recognition and identity for his

neighbours and himself, extending their potential for the creation of new meanings and assemblages. PB sees the pandemic as a reminder of the danger of hubris: "Ask anyone who had somebody die of AIDS in the eighties. Something not human comes along and wipes out this arrogant belief that we're in control of a system."

Contingency

Contingency meant that a rapid period of learning was suddenly imperative for VH and her team: they learned about the design of new modes of performance, online teaching and learning with young students with special needs, and how to use digital video conferencing software. The lockdown forced new conditions on both VH and SC. In different ways within circumstances which simultaneously provided new constraints and opportunities, each shaped their work. PB on the other hand deliberately cultivates both contingency and agility to enrich his work: "Sometimes you need to stop drawing the figure that you know, and just scrawl, lose your skill a bit – give it freshness. You won't lose the stuff you've learned, you'll find some new avenue for it. It's a survival strategy. You put your ideas in a suitcase, and if you have to leave suddenly, you can reopen that suitcase and there's your culture and there's your ideas. If you can't put it in a suitcase, it's not a very good idea."

Conclusion

The phenomenological view of workplace practice supported by this study suggests that the contingent aspects of any situation are always simultaneously both inhibiting and enabling, and these effects are "entangled" (Derrick, 2020). In this view, work consists of collective manipulation, exploitation and management of these entanglements, through the process of which practice is shaped and practitioners are developed, for better or worse. This dynamic view, put into the spotlight by the disruptive experience of the pandemic, offers an alternative account not just of artists' practice, but of the complex and adaptive work of educators, whatever setting they are working in, suggesting that, to some extent, we are all teachers. This counters the idea that teachers are merely conduits for the "delivery" of pre-packaged curricula to students thirsty for the "acquisition" of knowledge (Sfard, 1998), suggesting rather that, like creative sector practitioners, their role is to design and facilitate participatory schemas for intensive encounters and meaning-making.

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Endnotes

1. This refers humorously to a long-running British TV soap opera called Coronation Street