

Reimagining boundaries: transdisciplinary insights from Education, Counselling, and Fine Art

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Abstract

This paper presents three case studies of educators pioneering transdisciplinary project work within a UK College-Based Higher Education Institution, focusing on Education Studies, Counselling, and Fine Art. Through the CollaborArt Blackburn initiative, educators facilitated gallery visits, encounter spaces, and collaborative creation opportunities for students across these disciplines. These case studies highlight the educators' roles in fostering a transdisciplinary approach that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, emphasising experiential learning and collaborative engagement. The narratives illustrate the transformative impact of integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies, enriching both educators' and students' understanding and practice. The paper argues for the intrinsic value of educators' insights and expertise in initiating and sustaining transdisciplinary projects, encouraging peers to embrace innovative approaches in their pedagogical practices. This work contributes to the discourse on transdisciplinary education, advocating for its potential to create dynamic, inclusive, and holistic learning environments.

Key words: transdisciplinary; higher education; creative arts; pedagogy; collaboration.

Introduction

In the 2022/2023 academic year, a transformative project was conceived within a United Kingdom university centre, spanning three distinct disciplines—Education Studies, Fine Art, and Art Therapy/Counselling. This initiative emerged from impassioned peer-to-peer discussions among the creators, each recognising the diverse roles that art played in their professional lives. What unfolded was a visionary undertaking that began as shared concerns but evolved as transdisciplinary collaboration that provoked engagement and generated nuanced perspectives on the purpose and utilisation of art. Situated within a college-based higher education centre—a realm often relegated to the periphery of institutional prestige—our project sought to challenge this marginalisation. Stemming from our collective resistance to being labelled as practitioners in ‘less prestigious institutions’ (Greenbank, 2007) our previous endeavours included organising international working-class academic conferences, establishing a gallery for marginalised artists, and implementing art therapy projects in the community. This project emerged as a natural progression, aimed at validating our spaces as distinct, powerful, and indispensable. The three creators, each hailing from disparate academic realms, grapple with the intricacies of Education Studies, Fine Art, and Art Therapy/Counselling. Van Baalen et al.’s (2021, p.24) approach to transdisciplinary positions resonates throughout our exploration, emphasising an enhanced ‘vantage point’ that redefines our conceptualisations and positionalities in artistic and educational practices. This vantage point, rather than serving as a project catalyst, evolved organically during our initial discussions. The collaborative endeavour not only illuminated new ways of perceiving our roles but also prompted a fundamental shift in our understanding of learning, engagement, knowledge, and practice.

In essence, these case studies serve as foundational positioning statements, encapsulating the transformative journey of our project. They invite readers into the dynamic space where our collective perceptions were reshaped, demonstrating the profound impact of transcending disciplinary confines in pursuit of a more holistic and integrated understanding of art and its multifaceted implications. Some immediate familiarity is obvious in the ways these initial positions reflect deeper shared concerns, including class, marginalisation, and the necessary engagement with geographic place as perceived hurdle rather than solid foundation. Across each case study the themes of one bleed into the others: of ‘not knowing’ or pedagogies of imagination (Calvino, 1988); of being congruently incongruent, of extended minds (Paul, 2021); and problematised spaces

and working in other dimensions of Marcusean concepts or dream spaces (Marcuse, 1977). The transdisciplinary models emerged as necessity once we began to immerse ourselves in the flow of collective experience, where disciplinary certainty disappeared and a new transdisciplinary appreciation emerged.

A background to a transdisciplinary rationale

The emergence of transdisciplinary approaches represents a paradigm shift that challenges conventional perspectives on disciplinary boundaries. While not an entirely novel concept, it still carries an emergent quality, urging a departure from the entrenched emphasis on disciplinary purity. Unlike established approaches such as multi-disciplinary (Klein, 1990) and interdisciplinary (Repko, 2008), transdisciplinarity disrupts the barriers of each discipline, seeking to unify intellectual frameworks and methodologies.

Distinctively, transdisciplinarity transcends the mere integration of disciplines, actively fostering collaboration between researchers and non-academic stakeholders. Bernstein (2015) underscores its essential role in addressing 'wicked problems' that resist simplistic, single-discipline solutions. This often extends beyond the university confines, involving a broader engagement with the community and businesses, both inside and outside the academy (Bernstein, 2015).

The intangible benefits of transdisciplinarity, as highlighted by van Baalen et al. (2021, p.25), include 'co-creation, richer conceptions of knowledge, and more-than-rational aspects'. In the context of our case studies, we observed the immediate advantages of this expansive approach. Factors such as exposure, regional location, and notably, social class, which are often overlooked, gained visibility and significance in our practice, student cohorts, and personal reflections.

Across our case studies, a fundamental realisation emerged. As educators and academics, engaging in transdisciplinary spaces provided a unique vantage point for self-reflection—an indispensable stage in our practice. The case studies presented herein not only form the foundation of our project but also signify the broader importance of educators in any collaborative endeavour. They serve as a testament to the necessity of transcending disciplinary boundaries, acknowledging the multifaceted elements that

contribute to the richness of educational projects. Our exploration of transdisciplinarity serves as a call to educators to recognise and embrace the transformative potential of collaborative, boundary-defying approaches in their own practices.

Methodology

The focus of our study was on the ways we each encountered art and what we could learn from each other. These encounters were part of a wider research project, CollaborArt Blackburn as a participatory action research approach that had a primary purpose – that of action. The research itself was always bound up in the action, an entwining of people (participants), purposes and encounters we hoped would uncover new practices and experiences. Across the range of these action-based encounters we had over 85 students and 15 academic staff involved. These three case studies were a small part of the whole, but integral to our broader understanding. Each of the case study authors acted as representatives for their disciplines and helped reveal transformative processes and outcomes that emerged from our collaboration. The case studies serve as a microcosm of the larger project, offering insights into the unique contributions and perspectives of each discipline – Education Studies, Fine Art, and Art Therapy/Counselling. By examining these narratives, we aimed to illuminate the complex interplay of art, education, and therapy within a transdisciplinary framework, demonstrating how these fields can intersect and inform each other to foster a richer understanding of art's role in academic and community settings.

Case studies as methodology allow for an analysis of complex, contemporary situations with a focus on 'how' and 'why' questions of intent (Yin, 2018). This is the focus of these transdisciplinary encounters throughout and these questions are significant in that they do not prioritise one discipline or perspective over another.

Analysis

The necessity of our distinct voices also brings a challenge to unified voice within the paper as a whole. We appreciated this as a concern but also understood it as a feature of the paper; collective case studies make possible a representation of our diversity and

distinct perspectives, as well as our collaborative coming together. At the analytical stage we sought a 'coming through' of sentient points that defined our experiences. As case studies, third person is acceptable yet we sought at every stage to include the first-person narrative to better express our experiences of the project. It was through discussion and reflection at the authoring stages we encountered our shared experiences as well as our clashes. This involves student voices to further enrich the discussion. In the second case study, the artist discusses the challenges of academic writing and submissions to journals as something alien to their practice as artist and lecturer. This was something we were concerned with from the beginning. The work had to be accessible to all of those involved, academic and non-academic. Transdisciplinary work has to be accessible to all involved, and make possible an engagement with new spaces, audiences and participants. This was fundamental to our work, and a case study approach allowed us to share our experiences while remaining open to changes. The argument we make in this methodology is that transdisciplinary exploration cannot be both transformative and recognisably the same and instead must recognise that anyone involved must be prepared to adapt their practices, be open to change and include that openness across all their approaches. Analysis has been a series of discussions, communal reflections on what we wrote and how this was understood by each of us. Later reviews brought in other perspectives, anonymous reviews and additional layers of discussion. There was a main author, and their analysis had the additional layer of responsibility around ensuring that what we present meets existing academic expectations, while remaining open to new eyes, and alternate worldviews. In this sense the dialogic and transdisciplinarity were understood to be opportunities to involve as many as possible in these developmental stages of production. The case studies that follow indicate the initial responses, first shared with each other and then later discussed with students involved.

Education Studies and Art Brut - Peter Shukie

Within a corridor where every room looked similar, desks in rows, teachers at the front, screens displaying relevant and well-designed content, all edged off from the carpeted, strip lit and uniform corridor, lay one anomalous room. In this room, the desks had been gathered into one Pangaeian mass, every atomised desk space lost and part of a single dominating space. On this surface a huge cloth for protection and on top of that piles of

paint, brushes, glues, water containers, make-shift and readymade palettes. Toward the edges and spreading inwards, canvases and boards being developed and shaped, coloured, images taking shape, abstractions losing shape, refusing shape and challenging any call to it. Each creator worked at their own pace, often talking with others, then dipping away into silence and focus, reappearing as if from the depths of a lake, looking around for eyes to connect with. On the screen classical jazz played out, a reminder of an artist that they had each seen a week or so before on a guided tour of another city with headphones and African cultural

Image 1. Education students in Art Brut session (photo from Peter Shukie, 2022).



resonance guiding their stroll. The noise of the room not raucous nor louder than discussions elsewhere, but notably distinct from everything else around it. Here, the claiming of the room for purposes it evades most weeks felt different, attracted visitors passing by, looking in, stopping to view, to comment. It was the location of this studio that made it distinct. There are several purpose-built studios two floors higher, this is an educational building not unfamiliar to artists and to creative spaces. But not here, not on one of the academic lecture floors. Difference coming because these are not artists and we are not artists by course focus or profession. This is BA (hons) Education Studies, and this is a module on alternative education. This session is one of Art Brut as pedagogy. It is alongside other sessions around psychogeography, of film and representation, it includes thoughts on identity and shaping selves through race, class, gender, place and age. What this session always brings is that question, of the reasoning around us not being artists, what this means, what is so unusual – if momentarily attractive to passing lecturers from Law, Business, Psychology. We immersed ourselves in the questions of what makes these acts so distinct, and what art might be for.

The emphasis for Education Studies students is to ask this question *not* as a cognitive expression of understanding to pass an exam or turn abstraction into concrete knowing. It is an experiential awareness of the alternative ways of coming to know, approaching education through means other than instruction or brain-based information. An extended mind approach (Paul, 2021) to how we come to know asks that we open ourselves to appreciate senses and experiences, including those of being outside strict guidance and

clear pathways of achievement. Marcuse (1977, p.72) considered that 'art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality'. Through Art Brut as pedagogy this becomes a focus of action within the sessions, of encounter and experience rather than theoretical consideration, of abstraction as life represented through text.

Image 2. Peter Shukie interrupts Art Brut session (photo from Peter Shukie, 2022).



Of course, much of the course prior to and surrounding the alternative education module does require significant exposure to these traditional pedagogies. It is through the inclusion of these alternative experiential elements, and art as a key to wider experiences and encounters, that we add an element of education too often absent; that element of imagination.

Calvino (1988, p.113) reflects on a pedagogy of imagination as an antidote, a solution to our being, 'in danger of losing a basic human faculty; the power to bring visions into focus with our eyes closed, to cause colors and shapes to spring forth from an array of black characters on a white page, to think through images'. The pedagogy of the imagination Calvino (1988, p.113) proposes is a development of those faculties that allow the 'control of inner vision...[that] allow images to crystallize into forms that are distinct, memorable, autonomous'. Such a pedagogy would address that routinely overlooked aspect of education that exists beyond cognitive understanding, what Paul calls 'neurocentric bias' (2021, p.4). Through development of experiential encounters, specifically through imagination, Greene (1995, p.3) suggests we might, 'break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions'.

In Education Studies we have taken the term Art Brut and redefined it as pedagogy. The root of this term comes from Jean Dubuffet and his exploration of the work of outsider artists, the unschooled creators of works in paint, sculpture, collage and mosaic. Art Brut is translated roughly as 'raw art' and allows for an encountering of the productive space as one of creation and contemplation. The act and the experience combined to generate a form of knowing that is beyond abstraction via text alone. Our practice is one of

establishing a studio but not replicating any form of art class (Shukie, 2020, p.111). Within the CollaborArt project the emphasis was on establishing what alignment this approach might have in areas other than that of pedagogy and education. To explore the potentialities of art as pedagogy and to do this with multiple and diverse others. Our involvement in the project emerged as a desire to know more about how others used art and where we fitted, if we fitted at all, and what we could learn from others.

What was always evident in these sessions has been frequent initial reluctance to engage – that art and the engagement with it was somehow for other people. One Education Studies student described how, ‘I thought I would hate this, it’s not what I do...but I loved it and want to do more but I know it’s something for another lot, all snobby and pretentious, not really me, but I did right get into it’. The focus on art as belonging to others is something that repeats, and is part of what must be overcome if we are to do more, to engage and create more.

Fine Art – Jamie Holman

This project and the concept of transdisciplinary work appealed and repelled me at the same time. Although embedded in academia as lecturer and programme leader there is something about Art as discipline that feels at a distance. There was a sense of it being *in* but not *of* the academy and that we do things differently in our studios than happens in lecture spaces. In our initial discussions as project leaders, I felt an anxiety that never occurs in my practice, while also being excited by the possibilities of speaking to these different audiences. From the beginning it always felt like an adventure.

Some of the experiences we had between us were familiar. The sense of being overlooked in college-based higher education, this often class-based division was part of my experiences, the students and colleagues in Fine Art. It is part of our delivery, our course identity and the DNA of our work that we realise place as significant, as fundamental. Our sense of often being left behind is not something we have generated ourselves. The town we work in is reported to have the ‘lowest engagement in art and culture in the country’ (Romer, 2018.) It is where we all begin from, as students, artists and citizens in the hierarchy of culture, as originators and as consumers.

We have not taken this lying down and we have made massive changes to show this was always a wrong image of the town and its people while also ensuring more is done. This vacuum of engagement, of seeing and experiencing is predicated with a sense of 'Not Knowing'. This is not the pedagogy of Barthele's (1997, p.12) 'not knowing' however, in which 'not knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention'. Instead we are often left feeling we know nothing about art itself, and this leaves staff and students less likely to participate in arts and culture. The project was an opportunity to do something about this and to respond to affective concerns of confidence and to demonstrate their knowledge and growing expertise. Staff and students are active, they work in studios and several exhibit locally in our own gallery. What the project brought was an opportunity to not only share this but also learn from others around that fundamental question of what art is for. In the years before the CollaborArt project, Arts Council England made Blackburn a Priority Place (Arts Council England, 2022) for funding and have recently established four new National Portfolio Organisations (NPO), with a combined investment of over £2 million, confirmed for the next three years.

This is exciting but what remained was the question of how students who have limited experiences of art galleries and of the plurality of culture believe that 'the tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again' (Fisher, 2009). It was exciting to speak on my own work in Liverpool and Blackburn, but what was more powerful was seeing these new faces not only from Fine Art but from other disciplines I never get to speak to, and that Fine Art students never get to speak to. It revealed new dimensions to all our practices and the buzz in the venues was something I will not forget. The purpose of bringing together these three distinct courses, was to interrogate the potential of what has been, and what may yet be possible. Students relate to this and it was incredible to see Fine Art students working with others from Education to create a conference presentation which was not ostensibly about their art, but that embedded their work and showed it to another audience in a different way. It was clear that 'not knowing' became a strength, we all had layers of knowledge and layers of no-knowledge, and we filled the gaps in each other. We grew increasingly comfortable that

Image 3. Jamie Holman at CollaborArt Liverpool (photo from Peter Shukie, 2022).



we could see there may be times agreement was not necessary, we could stop and see the differences between us. We have created spaces and practices that would not be possible within a single discipline and for me that this is what education can achieve when we loosen the ties of our own disciplines just a little.

Art Therapy and Counselling – St John Small

Counselling and Art Psychotherapy in the UK are two distinctly related yet widely separated fields; despite sharing psychological and theoretical foundations, they differ vastly in regulation, responsibility and practice. Yet both fields can and do make space for art, creation and interpretation, whether that be spoken, written, created through materials or embodied in the felt sense.

Counselling students are already trained in a contradictory world of academia, personal development and intangible, spiritual relational being. Students are taught to challenge their very sense of self, provided with guidance after guidance outlining not only the skills and theory they are required to learn, but also personal qualities they should endeavour to weave into the very fabric of their being, whilst perversely being encouraged to be their authentic, congruent selves. Counselling training is the epitome of 'be yourself – as long as you are what I tell you to be'. In the midst of theory, professionalism and authenticity, counselling and art therapy trainees alike strive to find balance – to be colourful yet unassuming, boundaried yet accessible, congruently incongruent in their battle for professional humanness.

When we first explored the idea of bringing Counselling, Fine Art and Education together, the perceived inaccessibility of museums and exhibits felt gnawingly familiar. Counselling students at Blackburn College often express a strong feeling of being unwelcomed into the therapeutic world, of being 'too poor, too rough, too working class' (Counselling Student) to ever find a place in the academic world of privileged white male theorists, armed with big words and tweed suits. Many of our Counselling students come late in life, fearful of education, often being the first in their families to brave the daunting world of higher education, and art for them holds a similar power, a whisper of 'you are beneath me' (Counselling Student).

Image 4. Stjohn Small at CollaborArt Blackburn (photo from Peter Shukie, 2022).



Amongst a world of heavy literature, heated debates and practical skills, Counselling trainees are also required to explore the self, to engage in personal reflection and growth. Often, this is where space for art lies, though it may rarely be named as such. Students entering a room to find their PowerPoints and books have been replaced by paper masks, glitter, ribbon and clay either respond with childlike

glee or adolescent grumbling. They leap at materials, grabbing coloured pens and scissors with eagerness, or they hang back, awkward and reluctant. They hold their handiwork up excitedly, hungry for recognition, or they cover it with shielding arms, avoiding eye contact lest they be seized upon, offered up for judgement and inevitable criticism of their hesitant creations. No activity brings out the inner child quicker than artistic self-reflection. Adult learners, yet this is a room of children, whose experience of art making is to receive praise, glory, ridicule or shame from an all-powerful grown-up. Present, yet not present, art making 'can have the quality of dreaming whilst wide awake' (Liebmann, 1990, p.48).

Summary of the case studies

Despite the inherent complexities within each discipline, a realisation emerged during our visits to the Tate North—our individualised perceptions dissolved, and collaborative discussions thrived. The artificial boundaries imposed by disciplinary distinctions became inconspicuous, and our engagements centred on our shared humanity. In the crucible of these interactions, the project unfolded organically. As programme leaders, we consciously abandoned rigid disciplinary boundaries, fostering a holistic appreciation for art, creativity, and collaborative engagement. The resulting case studies provide an introspective lens into our journey, revealing the nascent stages of discovering a transdisciplinary space beyond our immediate areas of focus. These narratives serve as vantage points, offering insight into the paradigm shift we underwent as practitioners.

Subsequent actions

The project was a successful series of encounters in terms of engagement yet the more exciting elements of project success is often what follows when they are complete. We anticipated that transdisciplinary work might reveal 'co-creation, richer conceptions of knowledge, and more-than-rational aspects' (van Baalen et al., 2021, p.25). This has been evident and through CollaborArt Blackburn several exciting developments have occurred. Peter Shukie worked with artist Jamie Holman to create a written piece for an exhibition in London (Holman, 2024) published as a pamphlet to accompany the work. St John exhibited in the Festival of Making collaboration with a gallery of LGBTQ+ art in the town centre that had contributions across disciplines and outside them. Several students from the PGCE programme and Education Studies also exhibited and for all this was a first time showing of work at an exhibition. Fine Art and PGCE students collaborated with Peter Shukie to create a presentation for an international conference at Lancaster University around Psychogeography. The project featured prominently but as a catalyst for what followed, not only as a reflection of student experiences. Beyond this, there are friendships and plans for subsequent joint visits that recognise not all valuable work is publishable, nor should that be the sole intention. There was an excitement and new confidence in our work, as lecturers and as students, in sharing our ideas with others.

Conclusion

The emphasis of this paper grew in resonance the more we remembered those initial meetings, read these case studies over and reflected on what occurred in the project encounters. What resonated was the lack of any real disciplinary boundaries and the realisation of how much we shared as educators and students. Much of what we do beyond these creative encounters is still specialised, but the transdisciplinary aspect of this project generated new ways of seeing our practice. Transdisciplinary positions must be able to alter the core concerns of each of those involved. These cannot be predetermined and do require a deeper reflection around what our practice means to us, and to others prepared to engage in this approach to their work. Clark and Button (2011) propose transdisciplinary models as the only way educators and institutions can reverse destructive planet-death practices. They describe how, 'it is intrinsically important for institutions of higher education to break down the walls that divide disciplines so that students leave these institutions with the skills to collaborate and build consensus if these complex nature-human connections are to be healed' (Clark and Button, 2011, p.51). This is evident, not only as the ability of shared expertise amplifies usefulness and purposefulness. Through the facilitation of porous boundaries, we escape the damaging claustrophobia of disciplinary myopic practice. In place of that, we can generate dynamic spaces of synergy and creative collaboration that exceed what any single-focus discipline can achieve.

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