Arts-based learning in vocational education

Using arts-based approaches to enrich vocational pedagogy and didactics and to enhance professional competence and identity

Cecilie Meltzer and Eva Schwencke, Oslo Metropolitan University

Introduction

Values, norms and attitudes are in change in society today. The content and form of knowledge is changing and new competencies in education and working life are needed to adapt to and meet the needs of the globalised world of today and tomorrow (NOU, 2015:8, 2015). In the midst of this, our vocational pedagogy and didactics students are situated in the transition between the existing and something new. They have decided upon a career change, on re-educating themselves out of their former professions and, becoming journeymen into jobs as teachers in vocational education. They, in this transition, express ambiguity towards their present situation and describe feelings of loss, uncertainty and unpredictability about their professional identity. They also express doubt about their ability to master their future occupation. The same sense of unease is vocalised by students who are currently out of work or similarly between occupations.

Arts-based learning methods were introduced to business and organisation managers at the beginning of the 1990's as a new way to adapt to change and to increased unpredictability. This application of the arts and creative processes as learning tools was in response to the merging of two powerful forces - a rapidly accelerating rate of change in the workplace and increasing social network complexity in the global marketplace (Bauman, 2000, Buswick & Seifter, 2010, Drewes, Nielsen, Munk-Madsen, & Hartmann-Pedersen, 2010). Today these methods are recognised in parts of the business world and are used to support managers and employees in the development of workplaces and organisations (Darsø, 2004). The inherent potential of arts-based methodological approaches to meet this ambiguity is, however, still relatively unknown in the educational system.

This paper seeks to contribute to the closure of this gap by exemplifying how students in a vocational education program, used arts-based learning approaches to explore and reconnect with their professional identity. We will discuss not *if* but *how* arts-based learning methods can complement and enhance vocational pedagogy and

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didactics. Our research question therefore is: *How can arts-based approaches enrich vocational pedagogy and didactics and cultivate professional identity and competency?*

The first section of this paper outlines some of the guidelines for vocational pedagogy and didactics and for confluent pedagogy and shows how they relate to arts-based approaches. This is followed by a description of our methodical approach and the process of learning. We then provide examples and feedback from *a longitudinal painting project* implemented in three different study programs between 2009 and 2015 at the Department of Vocational Education at Oslo Metropolitan University (previously Oslo and Akershus University College). Based on student responses from these study programs, we explore how facilitating arts-based learning processes in vocational teacher education can involve and integrate work and art, rationality and emotions, social perspectives, personal development and elements of lifelong learning. We then, before concluding the paper, try to make sense of the data and share some considerations on the use of arts-based learning methods.

Some principles of vocational pedagogy and didactics

A number of educators from the Department of Vocational Teacher Education at OsloMet took part in the development of a set of methodological guidelines for vocational pedagogy and didactics (e.g. Haaland & Nilsen 2013; Hartviksen & Kversøy, 2018; Hiim, 2010; Inglar, 2015; Johnsen, 1984; Larsen & Schwencke, 2015). The learning principles were founded in Pragmatism (e.g. John Dewey, Donald Schön, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus), and Critical Theory (e.g. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Oskar Negt, Jurgen Habermas). This set of principles was based on experiential, experimental and exploratory learning processes in which the emphasis is on reflection. Participants were required to be active partakers in their learning processes learning through collaboration with peers, through integration between practice and theory and through using professional tasks and roles as interdisciplinary bases of learning. Values from Confluent pedagogics were a central reference point in this context.

Confluent pedagogics

Confluent pedagogics arose as a critique of conventional teaching and didactics and of the emphasis on rationality and predefined answers. The word confluence comes from Latin, meaning the place where two or more objects or shapes merge into a continuous shape, such as the point where two rivers meet. The overall focus of confluent learning was on meaningful experiences and individuals' discoveries and the use of these to enhance the outcomes of teaching, through linking the learner's cognitive (intellect, activity of the mind in

knowing) and affective experiences (feelings, emotions, attitudes and values) (Brown, Yeomans, & Grizzard, 1975).

George Isaac Brown, a pioneer of Confluent pedagogics, acknowledged the need for a humanisation of learning processes, his belief being that thinking should not be separated from feeling and sensing. He founded the Confluent education program at Berkley, University of California in the 1970s. This educational program represented a holistic alternative in education and was profoundly influenced by his background as a professional musician and poet and his training as a Gestalt therapist.

Brown (1971) proposed that 'the healthy integration of the cognitive domain with the affective domain through the techniques of confluent education includes ways to learn one's personal existential responsibility' (p. 192). He also advocated the individual's need to do something 'personally meaningful in a major area of his life, that he is exercising creativity, no matter how humble its manifestations, and that he is not a part of a machine but a human being' (ibid, p. 193). Brown (1965, 1968, 1969, 1970) draws on his background as a professional artist in several of his articles, exemplifying how creative learning approaches can be used to enhance creativity and increase self-awareness.

Arts-based learning

Arts-based learning, and the linking of emotions and sensations to cognitive understanding, closely relate to confluent pedagogy. These learning methods, all founded on experiential, experimental and exploratory learning processes, also correspond with the principles of vocational pedagogy and didactics. The purpose of arts-based learning approaches is not to create art nor to educate new artists. It is to renew academic subjects and develop the competencies needed in education and working life. The act of making and, through this, the exploration of tacit knowledge may open and reveal perceived challenges and possibilities (Meltzer, 2015; Scharmer, 2010; Schön, 2011).

Bamford (2006, 2012) addresses the development of subject-specific competences when distinguishing between education in the arts and education through the arts. Education in the arts means training in disciplines such as visual art, music, drama and crafts. Learning through the arts is the use of art and creative expression as a pedagogical tool in different academic subjects (Bamford, 2012). Austring and Sørensen (2010) deepen this perspective by describing how participation in artistic processes can be included in the development of interdisciplinary competencies. They emphasise how the use of arts-based learning methods in education can

foster life-skills; competencies reflecting professional and personal development, cultivation of character and citizenship, locally and globally.

The courses and their participants

We describe, in this paper, the results from a painting project in three different study programs, these being 4 part-time courses in Creative Communication (CC), 30 stp., 1 tailor-made course in CC, 15 stp., and 3 sequences in a three-year bachelor's degree program, 180 stp. in Design and Crafts (DC).

These programs are all block-study courses and include 3 to 8 gatherings per year on campus, each lasting between 3 to 5 days. Close collaboration between higher education and working life is, furthermore, an integral part of the course profile. The students conducted development or teaching projects between campus meetings at suitable workplaces or work placement in schools. The students were aged between 30 and 65 and came from different vocational backgrounds.

The painting project continued throughout the CC courses. The DC students, however, participated in this painting project during their second year on campus. Common to all of the courses was, however, that painting sessions took place at each gathering, a total of 6 to 8 sessions over 1 or 2 semesters. Each painting session lasted 20 to 60 minutes.

CC, continuing education program (30 stp.)

Both authors were responsible for the development and implementation of the CC course. Thirty-four students, divided into four different groups, completed course CC between 2009 and 2012. They had different occupational backgrounds and work experiences. Some were employed as teachers in schools or as managers, supervisors or advisors in companies providing services to people outside the job market. A few were self-employed artists. Others were unemployed or out of work and were taking the course as part of their retraining for working life.

CC, tailor-made course (15 stp.)

In 2012, eleven managers, engineers and researchers from a major construction company took part in a tailor-made CC course. They felt a need to develop their creativity to strengthen the quality of their work. They also wanted to learn new teaching methods to motivate their internal training courses participants.

The bachelor study program in Design and Crafts (180 stp.)

The Design and Crafts (DC) vocational teacher education students had been previously trained, for example, as hairdressers, flower decorators, tailors or jewellers. Between 2012 and 2015 approximately 100 second year students in three different units took part in arts-based learning methods as part of their ordinary coursework. These students were, like many of the participants in the CC 30 spt. course, changing career and were now training to be teachers in vocational education.

Essential frameworks to enhance subjectivity through creative work

A common theme for many of the students was their experience of loss of or uncertainty around their professional identity. We, to meet these ambiguous feelings, initiated *a longitudinal painting project* that ran throughout a year on campus. The painting project was designed to give them space to express and reflect upon their experiences, learning and thoughts from their days on campus and their developmental projects in workplaces or work placement at schools. All students also took part in other short time arts-based approaches. These sessions could refer to related themes or be used to expand their awareness and familiarity with arts-based methods as a whole.

Before we present our results from the painting project, we want to highlight the three central initiatives that we used to facilitate arts-based processes. These three measures require distinct facilitation if they are to develop students' subjectivity and enable awareness of professional identity and reflection.

We alternated between encouraging ideas and supporting autonomy, which we achieved through *implementing creative constraints* for the tasks they were to perform (Ibbotson and Darsø, 2008). We provided *free time and space* to delve into creative expression, to enhance the students' reflexivity. We also aimed to strengthen their tolerance and understanding of the confusing feelings that arose during the painting process. *Knowledge and self-experience of the phases of creative work* could be helpful in this, as these phases are similar to the stages one can encounter in any developmental work (Meltzer, 2015).

In the following we present how we used these methodological approaches as part of our teaching.

1. Using creative constraints to explore their professional identity

According to Ibbotson and Darsø (2008) creativity is a boundary phenomenon, something that occurs 'where resistance is encountered, where things collide, where the awkward or unexpected or hilarious appears' (p. 554).

The students were, at the start of the painting project, given constraints to establish a clearer distinction between different thematic fields. It can be challenging to stand in front of a blank canvas not knowing what to do or where to start. Having some frames could therefore help them get started.

Each painting in this project was to contain three specific symbols; *a tree* as an expression of self, *a human body* to convey their professional identity and *a building* as an image of their existing or desired workplace. These images were chosen because of their relationship to the archetypical meaning of the symbols: the tree signifying how 'the self can come into existence' (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 128), the body, portraying our 'life drama', how we appear and present ourselves in the world (p. 722) and the building, representing the workplace and our professional home, a place with 'multivalenced potentialities' (p. 556).

The students were, apart from these constraints, free to express themselves as they wished and free to choose styles, colours or shapes. As the work progressed, they were, however, encouraged to experiment and try out different approaches and methodologies. If they felt they were stuck in the painting process or if something felt wrong, then they had the freedom to make radical changes such as covering the canvas with paint and starting all over again.

CC course students alternated between three canvases, using one for each symbol. For the tailor-made workplace CC course and the DC study we, however, changed the setting and tried out a new angle. The students now were to paint all three symbols on the same canvas.

2. Providing free time and space for creative expression

According to Storr (1988) 'creative people may or may not need the peace of being physically alone'. He continues by suggesting that the ability to be alone in the presence of others may be relevant 'to those who are capable of intense concentration and preoccupation with their inner processes even when surrounded by other people' (p. 26). Class size at OsloMet ranged from 6 to 36 participants. We, therefore, asked for silence during the painting sessions to facilitate a sense of free space and the opportunity to concentrate on their inner processes. We also restricted students' use of external stimuli such as music and mobile phones and urged them to focus inwardly and pay attention to their sensed reactions.

The students at all the gatherings shared and reflected their experiences from the painting processes in pairs. This sharing was intended to create a sense of trust and coherence between the participants, and to prevent the work being perceived as random and fragmented. The one who had created the work was, in these dialogues, always

the one that 'owned' the truth. Another central issue was to avoid evaluating the painting's artistic or aesthetic value, as this might enhance the internal critique and performance anxiety of the students. The students were, instead, encouraged to ask open questions and to investigate and explore how their paintings reflected themselves. This brought an awareness of resources and possibilities, both personally and professionally, during the course.

3. Exploring different phases in creative work

They were also encouraged to write down and describe how the evolving paintings could reflect and give insights into ongoing processes in their lives. These reflections were essential in developing an understanding of the different phases in creative processes, and how this type of work might lead to familiar as well as tacit knowledge. The reflections were also about reaching a deeper understanding of their own and others' expressions and emotional processes, and about preparing them so that they could implement and handle similar processes in schools or workplaces.

A joint presentation was given at the end of each painting session. The group walked together from one painting to the next, viewing the newly painted additions and sharing the titles of their work and related feelings. The purpose of this was to provide an opportunity to partake and observe each other's expressions and progress, again without interpretation, evaluation or judgement. After this they photographed their paintings and entered log notes for the process. These logbooks and photos, and the accompanying titles and feelings, were used at the very end of the project as sources for reflection, this perhaps leading them to realise something they had not been aware of or seen before.

Analysing our results and organising our findings

Analysis data is derived from students' journals, their reflective writing and their final evaluations at the end of the year from courses held between 2009 and 2015. Student responses have been analysed and categorised based on what appeared to be the most obvious consequences of this specific project. We found four different perspectives in their feedbacks that we focus on. (1) The act of making and the experience of gestic knowledge. (2) The sense of free space and feel of flow. (3) The use of projective techniques to understand the tacit knowledge in the paintings and (4) How one through these processes could reach an understanding of essence. We refer to, when outlining our results, Ingold's (2013) concepts of making and gestic knowledge, Taylor and Ladkin's (2009) suggested processes in arts-based learning methods, Dewey's (1938) ideas of experience in

education, Schön's (2011) thoughts on knowing and reflecting in and on action, and Csikszentmihalyi (1997) theories on flow.

Results

We will highlight answers to the following four questions: 1. How did the act of making enhance their awareness of gestic knowledge? 2. How did involvement in arts-based processes facilitate a sense of free space? 3. How did the paintings help clarify the connection between working life, everyday life, personal growth, professional identity and cultivation of the character? 4. How did this long-term painting process lead to new understandings and insights?

We begin by presenting some of the challenges the students encountered at the beginning of the project.

Initial challenges

The motivation for the participants taking part in the course differed. The CC students applied to the course to learn more about arts-based approaches to learning. The DC students were offered the painting sessions as a part of their coursework. DC students encountered a way of learning that was very different from what they were used to or expected. This affected their attitude to and motivation to participate in this project.

Some DC students expressed feelings of stress and confusion, despite the project and its theoretical foundation being presented at the very start of the course. Engaging in an ongoing painting project throughout an entire school year was a new experience to them. They questioned the use of the learning methods and the objective of the painting project. They equally struggled to understand the task, the constraints given and questioned the transference value of this learning approach. The DC students were accustomed to being required to produce expected answers and correct outcomes. They therefore described experiencing performance anxiety and shared their uncertainty and fear of misunderstanding the task or doing something wrong. They also expressed a general resistance to painting and expressed being uncertain whether they had something to show, what to paint or where to begin.

Many of the DC students found it difficult not to compare, comment on or evaluate their own or others' paintings. Their lack of painting skills furthermore enlarged their internal critiques, and the feeling of vulnerability and insecurity if they sensed that their paintings were being evaluated for their artistic or aesthetic

value. Others felt powerless and were worried about others interpreting and understanding who they were, by studying their expressions or through their sharing, felt that the other students came too close to them.

Many, and very understandably, initially expressed that they experienced this approach to learning as being demanding, as placing them outside of their comfort zone, as leading them to lose their usual sense of mastery and of needing courage to be creative. This first initial lack of enthusiasm was more prominent in the first group of DC students. These students, through sharing their experiences from the painting project with upcoming students, however seemed to pave the way for a keener anticipation to this way of working in later groups.

1. How did the act of making enhance their awareness of gestic knowledge?

Ingold (2013) describes the concept of art as an ongoing subjective process that can contribute to inner change. He points to the concept of making in the creative process; doing and designing something to achieve change and development. According to Taylor & Ladkin (2009), the 'making of art can foster a deeper experience of personal presence and connection' (p.56). Dewey (1934) conveys how working with art can represent an arena in which struggle and conflict can be enjoyed and can give meaning, because the experiences occur within a closed circuit of energy. The acts, episodes and occurrences that take place in a work of art, melt and fuse into a unity. They, even so, do not disappear or lose their character as they do so, as 'every work of art follows the plan of, and pattern of, a complete experience, rendering it more intensely and concentratedly felt' (Dewey, 1934, p.54).

Ingold (2013) also explains how creative work gives access to *gestic knowledge*, the hands expressing the connection between being and emotions. This represents the essence of 'being-feeling-telling'. This silent question-response relationship between the craftsman and the material, in which the intention of any action is to provide feedback from the material, may help the craftsman in achieving his goal. 'The Humanity of the Hand' describes how the hand is an extension of the brain, and not a separate controlled and obedient instrument; 'your hands are your head, and your head is your hands' (pp. 111-116). He argues that creating something activates a dialogue between the creator and the material used. This expertise represents a bodily awareness that has not been voiced, but which is present in the performance of the task (Nielsen, 2010 in Schwencke, 2017). The challenge is to be attentive and notice the response.

It was evident that experiencing gestic sensuality surprised the students. They were astonished how they, through their hands, clearly noticed the natural responses within themselves. Several students described a steady shift between a predetermined plan and being spontaneous. They became marvelling observers of their processes when the let go. Some shared how their hands and bodies took command; that new symbols appeared, and

shapes and colours emerged by 'themselves'. Others expressed surprise, conveying how 'the paintbrush took charge and made the decisions' or that 'the red line suddenly began to stretch upwards'. One student wrote the following:

> *Each time I painted, it was automatic. I never doubted for a second how to paint or where to begin. This surprised me. I didn't spend time wondering or planning how the image should be painted.*

The recurring painting sessions, which included the allocation of time to inward listening, opened the students to new sensuous experiences and the possibility of being beware of their own needs. Many students were courageous and challenged their performance anxiety by painting with their least dominant hand. By doing so, they found that their non-dominant hand displayed a more intuitive and spontaneous approach and supported their need for less control and more play in the process (Capacchione, 1991). One student, alternating between her left and right hand, expressed the following: 'I painted with both my right and left hand and found two parts of myself that worked differently, complementing each other. My movements were therefore more dynamic, and the contours appeared controlled and uncontrolled'.

It was clear that a number of students, over time, experienced a shift in attitude to the painting sessions, marvelling how their hands 'knew' the way and what to do in the act of making, which was often in contrast to their preconceived expectations.

2. How did involvement in arts-based processes facilitate a sense of free space?

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), past thinkers could only realise their potential if they had *free time* to devote themselves to self-development through learning, to the arts and political activity. Free spaces are also characterised as being a situation that is potentially free from the experienced influence of power (Larsen & Schwencke, 2015; Schwencke, 2017). Free time and free space is, however, in our society today too often occupied with work, chores and mind chatter that limit our experience of having opportunities. Aesthetic experiences and arts-based learning methods therefore represent a counterpart, enabling experiences of free expression and space to open development processes and strengthen the sense of subjectivity both at work and in leisure time (Darsø & Meltzer, 2019).

One intention of the long-term painting project was the facilitation of recurring experiences of free space and flow. We allocate space and time in our courses to the process of making and being creative and to reflect in and on the action (Schön, 2011). Allocating this time gave the students the opportunity to explore, make new

experiences, and feel passion and joy. We see our students and our own personal and professional learning process as being a continuous spiral in which ‘the learning from one cycle stimulates the beginning of a new cycle etc. and thereby providing us with a process that allows us to reconstruct our knowledge and skills in light of new experiences’ (Dewey, 1933, cited in Slesser, Morago, Bruce, & Macmillan, 2006).

A number of students described this process, in which there are no familiar frames and clearly defined goals, as a move into unknown terrain and found working without clear outlines or resolutions of what is right or wrong and good or bad, to be both liberating and demanding. Many discovered that the combination of constraints, structure and a freedom from the requirement to achieve specific results, gradually opened them to more exploratory processes. They also established an inner focus and enjoyed the collective silence during the painting sessions. One shared her experiences as follows:

> With people around me all the time, this way of working gives my head the opportunity to ‘disconnect’ - something that feels good. I feel more secure in myself, better equipped to go beyond the given frames and more willing to move out of my comfort zone.

The students found that a sense of internal freedom gradually emerged out of these painting processes and led to change. They explored how different colours brought forth new effects and they expressed their surprise at the way their paintings ‘talked’ to them. One found that she gained more energy by using particular colours: ‘I chose to paint in orange. Later, I thought that this choice might reflect my need for more energy to stay in the process. Toward the end of the session, I rediscovered the pleasure of painting’.

Some students also explored and experimented with how they could alter the painting’s composition by doing things differently, such as turning the canvas upside down. For some, this was a conscious choice, others experiencing this as unintentional.

One can become oblivious to things around you or the passage of time when completely caught up in activities. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) defined this experience as *flow*; an intermediate place between arousal and control, in which higher skills are learned and developed by moving beyond their comfort zone. According to May (1994), this absorption frees a person's unconscious mind and releases a creative imagination. Winnicott (1971) emphasised the role of play in our everyday life and described how children create *a potential space* where creativity can blossom. He also uses the term *transitional space* to indicate this 'intermediate area', the area of

human experience where experience transpires, and change can occur. This space, one in which possibilities can be explored, can be compared to the experience of flow when involved in creative processes.

The students shared, in the classroom, how they rediscovered tranquillity and how they, despite the pressure of university and work, felt that the free space to paint enabled them to be more detached. They felt more at ease during these processes with their expression, were able to turn inwards and were pleased that they could. They described their experiences of flow as feeling like 'time stood still' and of 'communicating with themselves'.

These sessions were different from what they were used to. Many, however, expressed thinking about their painting in the periods between the campus meetings. They found that the opportunity to be creative and delve into the painting process counterbalanced the unpredictability and fractures they experienced in their ordinary working life. Several shared how they longed for this free space and to express themselves creatively, and how they looked forward to immersing themselves again in their paintings.

3. How did the paintings help clarify the connection between working life, everyday life, personal growth, professional identity and cultivation of character?

Known and unfamiliar parts of artefacts or objects are used in arts-based approaches, as physical symbolic analogues of given topics or perceived challenges. According to Jung, von Franz, Henderson, Jacobi, and Jadde (1964), everything can have a symbolic meaning if it unlocks something more than that which is visible and immediate. These symbols can open associations, so reminding us of something familiar and something unknown (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010).

Taylor and Ladkin (2009) describe *projective techniques* as a way of seeking out the embodied knowing in an object. Using an artefact as a subconscious expression of the theme in question can therefore provide the distance and detachment needed to explore and discuss 'emotionally charged issues' (p. 65). Unrecognised or hidden feelings and thoughts may likewise be seen and identified, and perceived challenges and problems can be solved without risk. Here, 'the output of artistic endeavours allows the participants to reveal inner thoughts and feelings that may not be accessible through more conventional developmental modes' (p. 56).

It was clear from reading the students' logbooks that they, when viewing their paintings, found common features in the three different symbols and in how they perceived themselves, their professional identity and their workplace. They saw parallels between what they expressed in their painting and how they felt, and they discovered how their symbols illuminated previously hidden fragments of self and so facilitated self-reflection.

Some reflected on the need to focus attention on their professional identity, finding it to be a way to visualise their competencies. They witnessed how the different stages of the painting process reflected their evolving sense of self and professional identity, through this understanding the need to distinguish between personal and professional life. In their feedback, however, there was a clear distinction between those who had an established workplace relation, and those who were outside working life or were in the process of changing jobs.

The consequence of having a firm professional footing in working life was particularly evident for the tailor-made CC 15 stp. course participants. Most of these participants, at the first gathering, painted all three symbols on their canvases with no particular preference. The DC students, however, were unsure of their working identity and started by painting the tree (themselves). It in general took a long time before a human body (their working identity) or a building (their workplace) appeared in their paintings. They were uncertain what the future would bring, of whether they would be able to get a job and whether the decision to pursue further education was right. A number of these students described in the early stages of the painting project their sense of uncertainty when referring to their present and future professional identity. One student explained her experiences in this way:

> The painting illustrates how this sense of ambiguity is present in all parts of my life. I am so hesitant when it comes to the choices I have made. I don't want to work as a hairdresser anymore, and I am unsure of my future as a teacher…… At present, my lack of working identity makes it difficult to paint symbols of my professional identity and workplace.

According to Taylor and Ladkin (2009), arts-based methods may 'enable participants to apprehend *the essence* of a concept, a situation, or tacit knowledge in a particular way, revealing depths and connections that are more propositional and linear developmental orientations cannot' (p. 56). Finding key aspects or this essence are personally felt and sensed experiences of a theme rather than answers arrived at 'through an abstract, intellectual theorization' (p. 66). This process of seeking to reach our tacit knowledge by personifying, verbalising and reflecting on what is seen in the artefact or bodily expression, combines the mind and the external world (Dispenza, 2014; Gendlin, 2003; Levine, 2010;).

Betensky (1995) exemplifies how this can be reached by describing how a painting or work in clay can represent a micro expression of the theme in question. According to her, deep contact with the essence of an individual's created expression can be reached through a phenomenological approach. In this process, the artwork is shared and examined with a partner who has no predetermined opinion, seeking through this the inner experience that

guided the creator's hands. A closer examination of the artefact can shed new light and insight on old patterns of behaviour, open new encounters and support change.

Our students also often found that their actions in and the results of the sessions reflected experiences from their lives and work. A student exemplifies below how she, through this process, discovered the essence of her working identity:

> I initially felt that the images did not agree with my sense of self and my professional identity. However, I discovered, along the way, that my professional identity was part of me, not something that is separate and represents the sum of all my knowledge. I have found that my working identity is a part of me and embraces the tree (her sense of self).

One of the CC 30 stp. students, who worked as a supervisor within employment services, described how the painting made her aware of her professional identity and helped her to visualise her resources and her further development wishes. She found that parts of herself, which she previously perceived as weaknesses, represent assets at work. Another student, who was also employed, ended up painting wings on her body image. This act made her realise that she needed more freedom in her professional and everyday life. She discovered, through the painting process, new depths in her knowledge and found qualities and competencies far beyond her professional training and far beyond those which she could use in her workplace.

4. How did this long-term painting process lead to new understandings and insights?

Barnes (1998) advocated that involvement in creative processes and making concrete things can open new insights into existing problems and into established patterns of behaviour. However, according to May (1994), there is a need for courage to be able to create, as these processes challenge habitual patterns of behaviour and thought. Creating something new means letting go of control, enduring the unpredictable and not knowing how the process evolves or what the final solution or outcome might be. These processes involve feelings of resistance, despair, joy and surprise and so require a sense of trust (McNiff, 1998; Meltzer, 2015).

A number of students found it initially difficult and unfamiliar to express the thoughts and feelings they experienced in the painting process. They, however, gradually found that reflecting and talking about their sensed experiences with a fellow student was more manageable than they feared. Letting go of their dissatisfaction, they now conveyed how the longitudinal painting project gave meaning, and felt courage when entering unknown areas within themselves. They established a collective space in the classroom where they felt

sufficiently confident to share their experiences, despite the students finding their paintings far from perfect. Attention in sharing was focused on their emotions and frame of mind, and how different situations affected their mental state. Some experienced that the work triggered their emotions and made them cry, but that it was ok.

The students' verbal feedback and log notes showed how they used the painting work to experiment, discover and relate to new phenomena. In their reflection papers, they described how they were curious about how the processes evolved. They noticed the changes that took place and were surprised when they discovered new possibilities. They reflected on how recent incidents had an impact on their painted outcome, pointed out how their paintings changed when they added new elements and that they perceived these results as symbolic representations of their experiences and views, both at the university and from the practice field. They also shared how they felt before they started painting, and the thoughts and feelings that they experienced in the work process.

The repeated opportunity to reflect and study themselves from a meta-perspective added new understanding to their processes. The mutual sharing that took place at each gathering and at the very end of the project produced new insights and added extra dimensions to their painted expression.

Several students experienced, further into the painting process, the disappearance of their initial frustration. They sensed that their feelings, and the shapes and colours in the painting changed as time went by. Initiating developmental projects at a workplace or in teaching sessions at a school enhanced their self-confidence in their future professional roles. They now described pride, joy and increased confidence after finding the essence in their work. One of the participants at the CC course summarised this as follows: 'To me, the longitudinal painting was meaningful throughout the course. It represented a necessary and useful room for reflection and helped me find 'words' or 'images' that describe my journey'.

Students in all groups expressed, with time, feeling joy at regaining contact with their creativity and that this had awakened their desire to be more playful and creative in their personal and working life. They conveyed that this form of work had helped them to bring forth and express different emotions in a positive way. A number of students shared in-depth experiences from arts-based work in their exam papers. Later findings (unpublished) show that many continued to use these learning methods in the workplace or in their practice as teachers in vocational education.

Making sense of the results

We have, by seeking answers to our four questions, demonstrated the range of perspectives involved in arts-based learning processes. The results demonstrate how these approaches, which involve both affective and cognitive experiences, differ from conventional teaching and didactics.

We firstly found that challenging participants unaccustomed to being creative, to be creative required them to find the courage and confidence that they needed to move out of their comfort zone. Trust in each other and respect for one's own and other's expressions was vital in the exploration of their creative ideas and impulses. When trust and respect were in place, then the opportunity to focus on their paintings became a positive experience. Our experience was that initial resistance and ambiguity to creative work can change if enough time is given to establishing a sense of freedom from an internal and external critic of what might be seen as being right or wrong.

The second main point was that the students became aware of how working with creative processes could give a sense of free space. They discovered that the act of making could provide the opportunities that this space can give, could help them to find the courage to let their hands steer the process and could give them access to gestic as well as tacit knowledge. They also found ways of working which allowed them to find a balance between the given constraints and their need for freedom. A central issue in this was to what extent this creative, open space, free of control, was a prerequisite for their professional and personal development.

Thirdly, they discovered how the use of specific symbols in their paintings enabled them to see possible connections and coherence between working life, everyday life and personal development. They saw how these processes, their initial perceived resistance and their need for perfection correlated with previous education or workplace experiences. They similarly saw how experiences had a transfer value to understanding reluctant pupils or employees in their future working life. Participation in the painting project had reinforced their sense of self and helped them reconnect with their personal and professional identity. They rediscovered the value of their professional background and came to value their skills as journeymen, competencies they now looked on with pride.

The final point is that we found that we were able to combine elements of art, rationality and surroundings in the longitudinal painting processes. The participants discovered new aspects of themselves during the recurring sessions, developed their professional competencies and enhanced their courage to create and to trust the process

and find alternatives. Marvelling, reflecting and being curious about sensed and embodied experiences and feelings opened deeper understandings and insights, that in turn led to development and change. Boundaries were broken and new perspectives, opportunities and resources were found. It was crucial in this process to integrate practical action with reflection and reason, individually and in collaboration with others.

We will, before concluding, point out some issues that are vital when facilitating arts-based processes.

Considerations

We have many years of experience with arts-based learning approaches, and we practise in our teaching what we preach. As arts-based action research practitioners, our knowledge is based on our knowing-in-action, our reflection-in-action and our reflection-on-action (Schön, 2011). We use arts-based methods to connect hands, heart and head, addressing gestic knowledge and tacit knowledge with rationality and social perspectives (Betensky, 1995; Ingold, 2013).

Our results indicate the need for teachers to be attentive to their understanding and appreciation of the courage displayed by students when letting go of pre-planned ideas and trusting the process as it evolves. Educators in training programs that use these approaches therefore need to have, (1) personal experience with the arts-based techniques and learning methods they use in teaching, and (2) have the opportunity in their workplace or in their organisation for personal growth and to reflect on their professional role as teachers or instructors.

A further important issue is that these learning approaches, in which artefacts are made and which involve creative processes, may open subconscious parts of the mind and reactivate demanding life experiences. If students experience themes as being particularly vulnerable, then it is essential that they are recommended to seek professional assistance outside campus for further processing.

Conclusion

This article discusses how arts-based learning methods can enrich and expand vocational pedagogy and didactics and thus cultivate professional identity and competency in working life and in vocational teacher education. We have shown how arts-based learning approaches, through combining art, rationality and environment, enabled the participants to discover new aspects of themselves, develop their professional competencies and find the courage to create and find alternatives. They experienced how they developed new knowledge, both professional and personal, through being observant, sensing their bodies, their thoughts and feelings. The combination of arts-

based learning methods and developmental work at a workplace or school, also enabled them to see the connection between working life, everyday life and personal development.

We have emphasised the role of arts-based learning processes in developing vocational competencies in reclaiming the role of art in enhancing professionalism. Our experiences have been that arts-based learning methods closely relate to confluent pedagogics and are highly relevant to some of the core elements of vocational pedagogy and didactics. We found, having tried out different types of arts-based learning methods in vocational studies and vocational teacher education, that these processes can strengthen the link between working life, professional identity, personal development and cultivation of character.

Arts-based learning approaches can also enhance professional and personal competencies and the ability to see oneself in relation to others and society as a whole. These qualities can be of great importance in finding oneself as a vocational and professional practitioner in one's present and future working life.

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