

Portrait of an art class: redistributing power in the classroom

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Abstract

Tony Delany was one of eight teachers at Barnwell School who are now graduates of the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning. His project built on previous work by Jackie Johnson but was distinctive in that it tackled fundamental questions of choice and control in the classroom. It was also distinctive in that it drew on Tony's background as an artist and used metaphors and analogies from the world of the visual arts as analytical tools. The article provides a glimpse of this work.

I began with some trepidation, aware of my need to develop the skills of the researcher in order to invest my project with validity and meaning. I familiarised myself with the tools and terminology of action research and planned accordingly. However, when I began to write, I felt uncomfortable, as though I was writing in a language other than my own. In my search for a more authentic voice, I found *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann-Davis, 1997) which opened my eyes to an approach more in keeping with my intentions.

...‘portraiture,’ the term I use for a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences. With it, I seek to combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor.

(Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997:3)

As an artist and teacher of art, I found that I could use the idea of portraiture as an instrument of research and development focused on my own classroom practice. I began by producing initial sketches to try to capture the essence of what teaching and learning looks like in my classroom. I then worked on these to develop a set of more detailed drawings focusing on the central themes of flexibility, diversity and choice; these informed the composition of the big picture, the vision, what teaching and learning could look like. But my sketches, drawings, colour trials and swatches were not resolved

into a finished painting: they form a multi-layered, mixed media assemblage; a collage which can only be the starting point for another portrait, reflecting the ever changing face of education.

Portraits are often representations of power and wealth. In the long tradition of portrait painting, it is almost exclusively representations of the rich and powerful, furnished with heavily moulded, gilded frames, which adorn the walls of museums, galleries and palaces. Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, is perhaps the archetypal expression of power, reinforced by the symbols of wealth, education, religious and political importance. In examining my classroom practice, I wanted to bring the distribution of power into focus and see it effectively used, held and distributed.

Initial sketches

Peep through any classroom window, anywhere. You are likely to see a picture familiar to most of us. At some time, in some place, someone has decided what classrooms should look like; an ideal has been formulated and that model mindlessly reproduced throughout the world of education. My concern as a teacher is not so much with what they look like, but with what takes place within. Physical appearance may have far reaching effects, but the classroom itself is actually no more than a frame.

My own classroom is much like any other art room in any other school. Big enough for thirty students; wooden tables, plastic chairs stained with paint and plaster of Paris; displays of students' work on the walls. A collection of sick house plants look their worst beneath a warm fluorescent glow; plastic trays and cardboard boxes contain animal skulls, sea shells and bits of a Hillman Imp for observational drawing. A drying rack holds the day's curling, unfinished still-life paintings and a metal shelving system supports a hundred tiny clay sculptures, like a surreal city, waiting their turn for the kiln. A padlocked cupboard houses stocks of poster paint, pastels, knives and a confiscated phone. A small printing press sits on a plans chest containing stocks of drawing paper, students' work and the odd crisp packet. A spineless copy of *The Art Book* sits on top of a wonky bookshelf next to my desk which is a bombsight of paperwork, pieces of charcoal and stray homework assignments. I could go on, but you get the picture.

More telling is the positioning of furniture and equipment – the composition. Tables are arranged in groups rather than rows; my

desk is at the front of the room facing the student body. Though I don't very often sit there, it symbolises the balance of power in the classroom. It is bigger than students' desks and separate from them. However democratic in appearance, however visible the allusion, a hierarchical system is evidently in place. Changing the layout of the room would not install a democratic system nor create a 'learning community' (Watkins, 2005:5) any more than reframing a painting would transform it into a masterpiece. Recalling some typical classroom activities helped to identify more specifically the issues I wanted to address. The following analogies helped to identify what I wanted to change.

As a war artist, Stanley Spencer produced a series of friezes recording the process of building tramp steamers in a Clydeside shipyard: *Burners*, *Welders* and *Furnaces*. The figures of Glasgow's wartime shipbuilders are immortalised on a massive scale: cloth capped and tweed jacketed, each is engrossed in his particular stage of the process; each illuminated by the orange glow of a welding torch or the sparks from a furnace; stooping, laying, kneeling, contorted into tight spaces. The paintings are choreographed rather than composed into a tight-knit, entwined community of workers, each dancing to the same tune but moving in different ways. They have a common aim, but each has his personal contribution to make; each, his own unique value. In contrast, a photograph of Henry Ford's first production line shows regimented rows of automaton-like men bolting assemblies onto engine parts, passing them on to the next row for the next stage of the process. An automaton in a suit leans over shoulders, checking and correcting, passing and rejecting. I found characteristics of each of these scenarios in many of my lessons.

A typical lower school lesson tends to display more of the production line image than the industrious harmony of the shipyard. Students will be working on the same project, which may be the manufacture of a ceramic pot or the design and production of a movie poster. They will each be at a similar stage in the process: coiling, smoothing, lettering, painting. My mode of communication with them would often be an over-the-shoulder instruction, correction or affirmation. My students appear to enjoy most of their lessons, having opportunities to engage with a variety of processes on a broad range of topics, but the visual analogy of the production line is a little too close for comfort.

Older students, having opted for GCSE, are encouraged to develop according to individual strengths, personal interests and aptitudes. Differences are celebrated: one student might be in the process of silk screen printing, another making a collage; yet another analysing and writing a critical response to a Giger illustration. I might sit with individuals during lessons, spending time discussing their work with them, suggesting alternative solutions and ways of developing their investigations; artists and their work are discussed; we visit galleries and occasionally listen to Pink Floyd.

Neither scenario is exactly as I would want it to be: a polarity exists between what presents as behaviourist, control centred teaching in the lower school and social constructivism in the upper. I wanted to close the distance between the two by bringing a greater level of diversity, flexibility and choice into Key Stage 3 teaching by constructing a 'learning community' where learning is made meaningful and enhanced through community and reflection; through learning about learning – meta-learning – where students are aware of how they learn, and develop the capacity to transfer learning, to extend the generation of knowledge beyond the physical confines of the classroom (Watkins, 2005). It seemed to me that classrooms are in danger of operating as insular dictatorships within societies posing as democracies. I wanted my students to be 'empowered to make decisions and policies concerning themselves and their society' (MacBeath, 2004: 19). I recognised the opportunity to move towards these ideals through a recent Government initiative on Personalised Learning.

Personalised learning

Introduced by the Prime Minister in 2003, the Government encouraged schools to 'provide tailored programmes of learning to meet individual needs and aspirations' (Education and Skills Committee, 2002-2003). The report called for an imaginative approach in the way the National Curriculum is delivered and seemed to sow the seeds of the idea of personalised learning. David Miliband, Minister of State at the Department for Education and Skills, listed five key components: assessment for learning; a wide range of teaching techniques; curriculum choice – particularly at age 14 plus; organisation of the school; and links to agencies and services beyond the school (Miliband, 2004). My particular interest was captured by the idea of using a wider range of teaching techniques and by building choice into the curriculum. These factors

could be encapsulated into the terms: diversity, flexibility and choice.

Another growing concern was that my students tended to display a poor sense of themselves as learners. Historically, students in the school had low aspirations and I felt that this was due, in part at least, to two factors: the practice of ability grouping and the general belief that intelligence is a fixed entity. I felt that these were both barriers to learning which compounded the problems caused by over-prescriptive, formulaic approaches to teaching. I took inspiration from two projects: one was the *Learning Without Limits* project in which researchers and practitioners had collaborated to overcome the negative effects of ability labelling on self-perception and self-esteem that resulted in the disaffection of children in schools (Hart *et al.*, 2004). The other was one led by a colleague at Barnwell: Jackie Johnson had developed the use of Learning Preference Profiling to enable teachers to respond to the different ways in which students prefer to learn (Johnson, 2006).

I wanted to raise student's aspirations and reduce their level of dependency. I wanted to see if my students could develop a greater level of responsibility and ownership of their learning by allowing them to choose and plan what they studied. Perhaps their learning could be transformed through a more democratic process in the classroom.

I designed an intervention for a Year 9 class which allowed students to choose their own topic, based either on suggested starting points or their own ideas. They would work in self-selected groups consisting of a complementary mix of learning preferences. Groups would pool their various strengths and plan the project themselves within the framework of National Curriculum guidelines. I would keep a journal – my sketchbook – conduct some interviews with students and ask a colleague to carry out a video observation.

From working drawing to moving picture

When I reported on the project in my MEd thesis (Delany, 2006), I drew on my journal entries (my sketchbook), interviews and conversations with participating students, and video footage taken on the last day of the project. My report was in two parts: first, *the working drawing*, told in narrative form, and second, *the moving picture*, a dramatisation based on what was filmed during the final lesson. I now present a condensed version of that report.

The working drawing

Friday morning, period two, 9SP arrive in fragmented droves. They are taught in ability based bands and sets for other subjects and therefore come from different parts of the school at slightly different times. Synchronising this transition from one lesson to the next is a science not yet mastered. Five or six arrive before I have dismissed my Year 8 class: Wayne and Rob, Terry, Jane and Laura, form a bunch at the open door of the classroom. Wayne outstretches arms and legs between doorposts to ensure his place at the front of the queue. Holding others back he calls in to me *“Oy sir. Are we early or are you late?”* I look at my watch and check the time on the computer. *“You’re early Wayne. Stand aside now. Don’t block the doorway.”* Two Year 8 students are fighting at the sink. I catch sight of another hiding his palette under clean ones. I deal with them and field another barracking from Wayne. *“Come on Sir. I wanna get on with me green man. You ‘aven’t lost it ‘ave ya?”*

I dismiss Year 8 by which time half of 9SP are at the classroom door. Due to the staggered arrival of the class it is not my practice to line them up outside. *“Right, in you come. You need planners and books. Wayne, can you give the masks out? You know where they are don’t you?”* Wayne would find it impossible to come into a lesson, sit down, take out books and pens and wait to be told what to do. Identified as having both kinaesthetic and interpersonal learning preferences, he needs to move around, he needs to be relating to people. Without this information he is misunderstood. He presents as undisciplined, uncooperative and at times, rude. The art room therefore offers some kind of respite for him, though at times I find his attitude challenging. Others turn up in twos and threes. *“Come on folks. Glue, paint, brushes. Rob, you’ve got enough there to paint the school hall. Kelly, you’re not using that brush for glue are you.”* Gradually, they settle. As they become quiet I draw their attention to a few points and start to call a register. I am interrupted by Steven. Invariably the last to arrive, his noisy, animated entrance, half way through my introduction to the lesson irritates me. He seems genuinely puzzled that I should challenge his behaviour. I feel myself being drawn into a childish and pointless argument over where he should sit and why. *“Alright Steven. That’s enough. Outside. Once I’ve got the lesson started, you can come back and we’ll sort this problem out.”* His jaw drops. Throwing open his arms in despair, he leaves the room backwards at an obstructively slow pace asking why? And what had he done? And why was it always him? And why was I (me) so stressed? *“Put your gum in the bin as you go past.”* A handful of easily led students are amused but

most have had their lessons interrupted by Steven too often. They show their disapproval. I feel a sense of failure at resorting to removing Steven from the room so early in the lesson but nevertheless continue with the register. I note that Richard is back after an extended absence. I am glad. He is a stabilising influence on his small peer group. Some of the girls sit shivering in scarves and coats and tell me that it is always cold in my room. Jane and Laura have forgotten their books, again. They insist that I have lost them, again. I give them paper rather than enter into a protracted argument. I spend a few minutes with Steven discussing his behaviour and my expectations. He comes back into the class with a more appropriate attitude – for a time.

The moving picture

A live performance featuring the students of 9SP and their teachers

THE CAST

CLAYVILLE	Amy, Gary, Chloe, Danielle and Sophie
PERSONALITY SHOP	Alice and Jo
HEDGEHOGS	Tara, Kelly, Emma, Rob and Wayne
RENAISSANCE MEN	Richard, Malcolm, Neil and Luke
DRAGONS	Stewart, Will, James, Alex, Terry and Steven
SELF IMAGE	Laura and Jane
INTERVIEWER I	Jackie Johnson (JJ)
INTERVIEWER II	Tony Delany (TD)

It is the final lesson in the project. My colleague, Jackie Johnson, is due to observe. Having pioneered the use of learning preferences in the school. She has agreed to act as critical friend. I hadn't told the class they were to be filmed. I wanted the production to be as raw as possible.

(I have adopted the convention of using italics for dialogue and Roman type for the commentary).

Wayne (From the landing) *Can we come in yet Sir?*

The players arrive, as usual in staggered droves, but quietly and orderly. There is an eagerness to begin work. Everyone knows exactly what they should be doing and where everything is. All six groups have reached varying levels of independence, responsibility, ownership. They have become self-directed, like the players in a well-rehearsed production. Students move around the room at will, some to get equipment needed for their work, some to discuss projects with other groups. There is an atmosphere of purpose, enjoyment and accomplishment. I am able to move from group to group and spend time in much the same way I would with key stage four students – my function in the room is much more that of teacher and facilitator than controller and taskmaster.

TD *Won't be a minute Wayne – you're early again. Let me get rid of this lot.*

Wayne *Gotta finish our penguins today init Sir.*

He's swinging from the door frame. Year 8 leave before the landing becomes too congested. Wayne doesn't wait to be invited in. He knows where his work is and is eager to get on with it. He puts an apron on, over his coat – it is a non-uniform day. Others follow and move straight to their tables.

(Jackie has set up camera and started to film the Dragons).

JJ *So how did you decide what you were doing then?*

Stewart (Not looking up – continues to work on his dragon painting).
We just came up with the idea.

JJ *So what, you could just do anything you liked?*

Stewart *Well yeah. We wanted to do dragons so we came up with this. But we had a few ideas go wrong first.*

JJ *Who's we? How did you decide who would work with you.*
(Wayne has joined the group – he is hovering just off camera).

Wayne *It's based on our learning preferences.*

(Camera pans to Wayne who is not a member of this group)

We all had to have different learning preferences like.

Stewart *Yeah. So we could all use our strengths. Like I'm Visual.*

Wayne *Yeah. And I'm Interpersonal. I like working in groups.*

(His voice is drowned by laughter).

Camera pans to renaissance men. They have loaded photographs from digital camera to computer and projected them on to interactive whiteboard. An almost life-size image of Neil posing as St. Thomas has created an amusing diversion. A group of boys take on a similar pose and make irreverent speculations on the meaning of the upward pointing index finger. Laughter subsides without intervention. Students return to their work.

JJ *So Neil. Tell me about your project. What gave you the idea for this?*

Neil (Still flushed and smirking – the image is still on screen).
Well it was Richard's idea. He's interested in the history of art and computers.

JJ *What about you? Are you interested in computers and art history?*

Neil. *Yeah. But we don't know as much as Richard. But he hasn't been here so we've had to find out for ourselves anyway.*

JJ *In what sense have you had to find out for yourselves?*

Malcolm *Richard knows a lot about computers, especially graphics packages and stuff. And we didn't really know what Renaissance was and who the artists were. So we had to do some research. Sir helped. But we had to do most of it ourselves.*

JJ *So what do you think you've learned by working in this way?*

Neil *We learned about photography and perceptive.*

TD *Perspective*

Neil *Yeah. That word. How to get things the same size and stuff.*

TD *Scale. Proportion.*

Neil *I knew that.*

Malcolm *We would have just tried to take one big photo but we couldn't get it all in.*

Neil *We couldn't get back far enough and people on the edge were distorted. We wanted to do it like Da Vinci would do it if he was alive.*

JJ *So do you think you did?*

Malcolm *Well, we think he would have used modern technology, but without Richard, we couldn't use the computer to put it all together. So we cut each figure out with scissors.*

JJ *So what about using your learning preferences – Neil, you're Intrapersonal aren't you? How did you use that in a group situation?*

Neil *Don't know really. I just think about stuff. Like it was my idea to cut the figures out by hand. And Malcolm's. He's logical.*

JJ *So have you achieved what you set out to?*

Malcolm *(Slightly hesitant).
Yeah. We haven't finished. But that's because we didn't plan it properly to start with. It was quite a while before we really got started. And Richard wasn't here so we had to improvise.*

JJ *So if you did it again what would you do different?*

Malcolm *Spend more time planning.*

(Looks at Neil. They both laugh).

The lesson was due to end in twenty minutes. I had suggested at the start of the lesson that we display each group's work on one table towards the end of the lesson. We could discuss the project as a whole and review progress. Paints, glue and clay tools are cleared away. Several tables have been pushed together to form a large work surface onto which students arrange their work. There is much interest in what other students and groups have been doing. Students seem quite proud of their own work and keen to show what they have done. The tables are arranged in front of an interactive whiteboard. Wayne has prepared a Power Point presentation of his group's outcomes. He eagerly waits for an invitation to present to the whole group.

(Camera focuses on clay sculpture).

JJ *Whose work is this then?*

Sophie *That's ours. Clayville. It's a building, but kind of an abstract.*

(Wayne slides into frame)

JJ *Who's idea was this? Who are you working with?*

Sophie *There's five of us altogether. (She points to each in turn) Gary, Amy, Danielle and, where is she? Chloe.*

JJ *Tell us a bit more about it then.*

TD *Wayne. We'll come to you in a minute.*

(Wayne points at the interactive whiteboard, then, with both thumbs, at himself).

Sophie *We all wanted to make something with clay so we thought we could do a street. Our street. But we didn't get it finished.*

JJ *Why was that?*

Sophie *Well we couldn't just make it. We had to research it. Sir said we had to.*

Gary *We looked at architects and designed our own buildings but it started going wrong.*

JJ *So what went wrong and how did you put it right?*

Gary *Well it was all just collapsing like. But once Sir showed us how to do it, it went alright. I think it's much better now.*

(The group agree but there is an air of reservation in their voices).

Chloe *It's not exactly what we wanted to do. We wanted to do a street. But we had to do this research stuff.*

(Wayne can no longer contain himself).

Wayne *Well. If you look at the board, you'll see a polar bear and (click) a penguin. And that's our project.*

TD *How did you get from hedgehogs to polar bears?*

Emma *We started with hedgehogs but we couldn't do the spikes. So we made it into a polar bear.*

Wayne *And a penguin.*

JJ *How did you use your learning preferences on this project? What's your learning preference?*

Emma *Logical.*

JJ *And what did that mean for you and your group?*

Emma *I did the step by step drawings – how we were going to make it.*

Tara *Yeah but I'm musical. I don't know how that fits in.*

Wayne *(Waddling). It's a singing penguin.*

FADE

Reflections on learning capacity, power and agency

The picture I saw when I looked at the video recording, read my journal and discussed the changes I had made with my colleagues was more satisfying than I could have hoped for. I want now to give an impression of what I learnt and what we had achieved.

Many of my students come to the subject with preconceived ideas about art, what it is and their own abilities and aptitudes. A widespread opinion among students, and indeed society at large, is that *you can either do art or you can't*. Few people tend to recognise that the concepts, skills and techniques involved can be learned. Talent is thought of as pre-existing ability, something a person either has or does not have. My own view is that talent, rather than being expressed as fully developed ability, is present in the form of aptitude, potential, the capacity and enthusiasm to learn. Among my pre-inquiry observations were my students' low aspirations coupled with their high level of dependency on teacher input. Only exceptionally did students display a sense of their own capacity as learners. Throughout my project, students began to develop an awareness that abilities are neither inherent nor fixed. They became open to suggestion and began to see that obstacles could be overcome through process. This transformation of thinking was, I believe, due to the powerful effect of allowing the students to exercise choice in relation to both the process and content of their learning. This enhanced rather than diminished their sense of ownership and purposefulness, their human agency (Frost, 2006).

Choice as to content

At the beginning of the project, I asked each group for a brief description of their project on a planning form. This was fairly typical:

We are doing a street out of clay. We are having a house, pub, football pitch, park and shop.

Not only does this resonate with students' social and cultural profile, it suggested to me a low level of academic understanding and engagement with the subject. On the surface, this is not the objective of a student of art but that of a child seeking light-hearted recreational activity. I began to doubt the wisdom of the project as a whole and to worry that whilst students may be occupied on their respective projects, they might not be suitably challenged. However, I attempted to avoid rash judgements and took time to think about students' proposals. On reflection, I realised that this was a starting

point worthy of any great artist: art is not validated by the subject matter, nor by the artists' ability to articulate his or her ideas and intentions, but by the execution. Here was a child who wanted to represent her physical environment in some way. As such, she shared the motives of many artists, but she simply hadn't articulated her intentions in the most eloquent style. It occurred to me that I was anticipating the quality of her work based on her statement of intent. But if an artist such as Claude Monet were to jot his intentions in a notebook: *I will paint a pond with a bridge and lilies*, or Andy Warhol: *my next picture will be lots of cans of soup*, I would not be so prejudiced when anticipating outcomes. The work of these artists is familiar to most of us and its quality is not diminished by simplistic or inadequate descriptions. So I began to recognise the potential of each group's intentions, however simplistic the proposals seemed. I also became more fully aware of the level of scaffolding and support students would need in order to realise their own intentions.

Choice as to process

As students began to work together in groups, they took ownership of the physical space of the classroom and gradually began to direct their own programmes of learning. The teacher-student relationship was redefined. Much less of my time was taken up with controlling student behaviour. I had been concerned that I would not be able to divide my time effectively between the six groups. Initially, this was the case. In the early weeks of the project, much of my time was spent teaching students how to plan their topic and explaining the need to research and develop their ideas. The initial break with routine had caused some excitement, but in time the class underwent a process of settling and behaviour improved significantly.

Allowing students the opportunity to choose their topic removed the negatives often associated with compulsory study. In making their choices, they considered topics and tasks they were interested in and felt they had the capacity to manage. Building on this positive framework, students worked in self-selected groups, with those they wanted to be with. As individuals within groups, each member had a unique and personal contribution to make as shaped by his or her learning preference. All students knew their learning preferences. Since Jackie Johnson's project, it had become policy to profile this on entry at Year 7 (Johnson, 2006). Some students had collaborated on the homework any way, so grouping according to topic and interest did not present difficulties. Other groups contained more than one of each type of preference. I anticipated that this might

cause problems, for example too many Intrapersonal learners in one group could result in a severe breakdown in communication. But I decided to work with their choices. This arrangement promoted a certain kind of dialogue between students in groups. I identified parallels between my own observations and some that had been made in our school in a previous project.

Pupils developed the capacity to evaluate themselves as learners, became more committed to the learning process and developed empathy for each other which led to a dramatic effect on the classroom climate; behaviour was more positive and there was a discernible increase in the level of cohesion in the class.

(Frost and Roberts, 2004:12)

Though they had difficulty dividing tasks exactly according to learning preference, tasks and processes were discussed within that contextual framework.

With few exceptions, each student seemed confident of his or her position, or status within their group situation. My impression was that their security as members of a group was based on their degree of self-knowledge grounded in their awareness of their preferred learning style. This was not some piece of abstract information such as you've got brown eyes or you are allergic to cheese. It was information that carried weight and leverage in providing the student with agency, a solid base on which to build a structure.

Conclusion

In preparing for this project I reflected on a number of visual images. The most alarming for me was that of the Henry Ford production line: this provided me with an analogy for what I see as a mechanistic, formulaic approach to teaching and learning. Among my chief concerns was that my teaching had become routinised; that, within a results-driven hierarchical system, I had tended to focus on control at the expense of teaching and the process of learning; that my students were over-dependent on teacher-led activities. As Watkins (2005) suggests, teachers' agency is compromised when governments impose prescriptive measures; teachers become more controlling in response to the burden of accountability for pupil performance.

Through my project, I sought to erase this image and replace it with the communal glow of Stanley Spencer's shipyard murals. To some extent, I think I have succeeded. There is a sharp contrast between

my early scribbles and the eventual composition of a learning community. The most important idea I have put to the test is that young people have strong social values which can be capitalised on in the classroom. Learning is essentially a social activity in which learners need to express their own agency.

Through attempting to enable my students to articulate their own voices and develop a stronger sense of authorship in their learning I have been able to recover my own sense of authorship. I have discovered how to draw on my own intellectual resources and experience as tools in the process of inquiry and development work.

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