What is wrong in how Art is taught in Higher Education in UK?

I have been supporting the Fine Art faculty at local university for the past one year. As soon as I joined the team I was alerted to certain problems faced by the staff. The common complaint amongst staff was about the lack of motivation, laziness and high level of disengagement that some students evidenced towards the academic process and expectations at HE level. This lack of motivation spiralled into lack of progression, poor results and failure for the students and therefore to frustration amongst staff. This problem seemed to be experienced by students at all levels. I was handed a list of students many who had failed their previous modules and some who were static in their practice. In order to understand the problems better and to tailor my own teaching practice, I compiled information from feedback from students on issues concerning them in the current teaching environment. 20 students from all three levels of different age bracket and those who skipped Foundation year, were asked for their opinion on 10 factors listed below that possibly impacted their learning.

Confusion regarding Learning Outcomes		
Lack of understanding/deciphering tutors input (verbal & written)		
Attempting to second guess tutors preferences		
Intimidated by Tutors during assessments (formative & summative)		
Sense of forward direction and honest feedback in tutorial		
Language used in written feedback		
Contact time with Tutors		
Design of studios (existing closed plan)		
Too much emphasis on certain mediums such as Drawing and Print		

From the information above, I have realised that though most students blamed external factors for impacting their learning, there were some who seemed to thrive in the same environment. Having gone through the art portfolios of participants in the survey, it became evident that most seemed to evidence work in a very fragmented format while some had evidence that was very defined and organised; many had fallen into A level practice of sticking superfluous elements (such as tickets for shows etc) in their sketch book while a few had selected evidences with annotations and reflections in their sketch books; Many seemed disorganised and missing important links between artwork produced while some had clear progression evident in their compilation of evidence. Due to the varied results from my survey and study of evidences from portfolios. I realised that many students esp the ones who had falied or got very low marks in previous modules, were getting rather good at reproducing information. They were attending workshops, talk, gallery shows but seemed to show no evidence of making all that information relevant to themselves and their art practice. Even the text in their personal statements seemed rather vacuous. I came to the conclusion that if plotted on a surface to deep learning spectrum, Atherton (2011), one would expect to see a crowd of dots more towards the surface learning end rather than the deep learning end.

During my observations of staff conducting tutorials, I became aware of a few factors such as the short 20 minute duration of tutorials, that it had to be student lead. The first 5 minutes there was silence as one waits for the other to trigger off the tutorial; the next 10 minutes goes into student introducing the tutor to latest work/works done and the last 5 minutes to get feedback/ask questions etc. Most students had no prepared questions. Feedback seemed rather rushed and session was concluded with no issues resolved. Tutorials were strictly timed as the staff needed to get around 7/8 tutorials for the day.

I observed how the staff conducted Rolling crits. This is when students are asked to install their latest work and their peers are asked to engage in critical dialogue about the work on display. A typical crit started off by a 15 minute duration per student; Students and staff study the work on display; silence for 5 minutes until the tutor asks for response from the rest of the group; greeted with silence, the tutor decides to ask questions and reluctantly some students respond with accolades for the work. There is no robust critical dialogue, leaving the student to continue to work at the same level.

There are more than 30 workshops available for students at BNU. Most of them are practical by nature such as print, mould making, screen printing, strectching canvas etc. There are also weekly timetabled workshops with tutors. I have noticed that none of the literature for these workshops have clear stated learning outcomes. For example activities such as OC conducted weekly, has the following instructions for students, "The task for Thursday is to create something just using two materials, one natural and one manmade. This work must be 'abstract' as I want the focus to be on how the two materials work with each other; their relationship. Working within these constraints you may think about relating this work to your studio practice, but this is not essential…". Practical workshops on Print and Drawing focus on teaching skills and encourage surface learning. There is no detailed statement or reiteration from tutors about how the skills/lessons learnt in the workshops should be used towards articulating/exploring conceptual concerns in the students art practice. It is therefore not a surprise that students attend workshops just to mark attendance and tutors profess disappointment at the lack of evidence of skills learnt from workshops in the students practice! I also noticed sitting through presentations by visiting artists and the tutors themselves, that there is no attempt made to link their successful practices with current issues that are of concern to the student audience. Students mired with creative blocks, unable to progress and frought with worries about failure were unable to relate to the talks. According to some students, most presentations were all about the successes (shows and exhibitions in famous galleries and prestigious appointments) and no mention of failure's! This only seemed to push the students further into their silos with a widening chasm between life within and after art school. The teaching methods constrained by limited contact time seemed rather traditional, tentative with the expectation from staff for students to be proactive and have self-initiative. The students in turn seemed apprehensive about saying or doing the wrong thing and due to a fear of failure seemed paralysed into either producing no work or very little work. Some even missed almost all activities including assessments set out in their timetable.

 In January 2012, I was asked to get involved in the teaching process through tutorials, rolling crits, workshops and presentations. To summarise from my observations above, I listed the main problems in the existing teaching strategies were that there no **link** between learning activity and learning outcome; the **Curriculum** was designed with teacher-centric rather than student-centric; **Fragmented** disconnected multi-pronged teaching activites; lack of clear **communication** between tutors and students and **fear of failure**/embarrassment. I decided to design and adapt my teaching methods and use techniques to address some of the issues mentioned above. To address the first problem, I used Biggs (1999:1) Constructive Alignment approach whereby learning activities are clearly **linked** and aligned to intended learning outcomes of the course. If the end target is clearly set and identified, then the means to get there can be facilitated and assessment can be based on how successfully students reached the target! At the start of the race, the end target has to identified and with students firmly on the running track, tutors can run alongside the track offering advice and guidance as and when required. The high end learners make it under their own steam the final few meters to the end. When **curriculum** is designed from the students perspective and learning outcomes are made accessible for the students, one starts to put into practice the second facet of Biggs (1999:1) Constructive Alignment theory. Biggs talks about teachers creating a learning environment that is positive, encouraging and supportive that ignites an urge within the students to take charge and construct their own learning. Ownership of their art

practice is the first step towards achieving progression and deep learning. According to Fox (1983:159) it is certain kinds of activities and expectations of tutors that is the key influence on the type of learning that the student adapts. Student A adapts his learning when he is in a boring one hours lecture where the speaker maybe evangelising about their own art journey, to participating in a sculpture workshop where he is more physically engaged. Student B learns better with a gallery tour rather than in a group crit. It is therefore important that teaching strategies must be delivered through multiple activities inorder to accommodate the different styles and approaches of student learning. The danger is when the multiple activities appear as distant and fragmented with no common learning objective linking them. Biggs (1999:3) suggests that synthesizing the **fragmented** multi-pronged activities and integrating it within the students practice, can help create an active environment and encourage high-level learning. In order to achieve this alignment, certain times in the year needs to be reserved for on the timetable to extrapolate the macro learning objectives to students and emphasise that all learning activities are linked togather and achieve fruition within the students art practice. **Communication** is the key to a good relationship between the sudent and the tutor. If the tutor at all times gives honest feedback about strengths and weaknesses in their work, it has a positive 'feed-forward' impact on the students art practice (Nicol, Macfarlane-Dick 2004:3). Feedback during tutorials should include **corrective**advice and list 'action points', (Nicol, Macfarlane-Dick 2004:10) which in turn helps set achievement milestones. Feedback either verbal or written has to enhance self-esteem in students which in turn would aid in realising their potential and personal growth (Maslow 1954:1). Students responsibility is to ensure that the feedback given to them needs to be turned into action with no delay inorder to gain progression. The **fear of failure** has been a common problem amongst all 3 levels of FA students at Bucks. Many students have stated that they feared the embarrassment at their shortcomings and limitations, feeling of vulnerability of being exposed in front of their peers and loosing the tutors trust and support. According to Haber (2013), 'it may be the fear itself and not the difficulty of the task that prevents the student from achieving his or her academic goals'. As a teacher it is therefore important according to Haber (2013), to encourage the student to remove himself from unhelpful social comparisons and instead compare himself from his previous self and not with his peers! It is significant that the student is made to realise that 'his' voice, impulses, emotions, thoughts and opinions should be the main informants into his art practice. Maslow in his studies on the theory of self-actualisation speaks of a person's ability to integrate his inside self to what he is trying to do in the outside world (Maslow 1968: 139). One of my main teaching objectives is to try and achieve this integration to reduce fear and increase spontaneity and self-expression.

Being creative, can it be really be taught? Theorists like Elkin raise doubts about teaching visual arts like traditional subjects such as Maths. According to Elkin, how can teaching that involves structure, deliberate intention and conscious motive initiate and direct the intuitive, imaginative and unconscious that goes into being creative? (Elkin, 2001). It is no surprise therefore teaching art at HE is very complex. As a tutor, one is nurturing the student to have a personal view of the world; to become skillful with different materials and to apply those skills to create an art object. Critical thinking and analysis have to be inculcated throughout the HE duration so that eventually art students transform to independent competent artists. Teachers face the challenge of synthesizing Fox's 'shaping, travel and growing' theories and to arrive at an amalgamated version to put into practice (Fox 1983). Tutors are also walking a fine line whereby they are facilitating learning but not making decisions for students in their art practice. As there is a grey area between facilitating and self-initiated reflective learning, there is a risk that the student can become rudderless and unable to progress.

With this in mind, my new teaching methods incorporated the above recommended theoretical approaches as well as the personal theories as defined by Fox (1983). **Individual tutorials** underpinned by shaping and growing theories Fox (1983). The duration is extended from 20 minutes to one hour. Inorder for me to give critical feedback, it is inportant that I study their

personal statement and understand their explorations done thus far. Learning outcomes for the relevant level is clarified and extraploated. The sessions are diagnostic and characterised by probing questions on the intentions of the student and the transferance of that intention into a art object. There is a critical dialogue around the art object/s, about its integrity to the original artist intentions. The students is given feedback from the viewer's perspective. The feedback is frank and honest about the problems as well as successes of the creative process and the art object. Constructive and corrective suggestions are made in an attempt to shift and progress their practice. I give advice for referencing their work to contemporary artists inorder to locate themselves in the art world. Follow on tutorial is agreed in 2 weeks and give them my email, facebook and skype details for any further clarifications.

Presentations : I was invited to present my work to the students as I am a practising contemporary artist with a good exhibition history. I decided to use this as a teaching opportunity and used my personal art journey as a case study. I was aware that my presentation had to be relevant to a mixed level audience including some students from Foundation. I did this by a physical installation of my work for to students to experience the work and through a power point presentation. The Power Point presentation commenced with a slide that listed some the curent issues faced by the students. This was done to ensure to the students that the ensuing presentation is very much relevant to them. There were slides with failed as well as successful work thereby demonstrating that failure is a prerequisite for success. I hoped to transfer some lessons learnt by me to the students and also prove to them that as a teacher I could be their expert guide as I have been on the same journey. Fox's transfer and travelling theories of teaching were good reference points for a successful delivery of the lecture (Fox 1983).

Workshops: As most students were specialising in Drawing or Painting or Print, it was initially a challenge to get some interest in Video and Sound workshops. But due to the previous successful presentation, 10 students signed up for the workshop. I used this opportunity to transfer my video and sound editing knowledge to the students. The lesson plan was structured with clear outline of learning outcomes. The workshop was about recording video and sound on mobile phones and methods to edit the resulting media. This was a very inclusive accessible workshop and I received very good feedback on lessons learnt.

Outcomes

I received full support from the staff and had the freedom to structure my teaching strategies as I deemed. Despite being rather unconventional in my methods and students initially reluctant to accept advice and suggestions from me, within a couple of weeks, I was inundated by tutorial requests from students at all levels, including MA. My presentations were attended by all levels including Foundation Art and Design, BA Graphic and Spatial Design. More students have signed up for my workshops and are proactive in seeking me out to get editing problems sorted.

The tutorials have resulted in students especially ones that have failed their previous modules and were starting to be more productive. Bi-weekly tutorials have ensured that there is consistency in the support these students received. Tasks set during tutorials were acted on and resulted in varied output of work. Due to discussion and dialogue about the work produced, a reflective initiative was inculcated within the students. Staff started appreciating the increased production of work as there was more to discuss during their respective tutorials. Rolling Crits resulted in robust critical dialogue with constructive criticism which enabled students to undertake new enquiries into their art practice. There was marked improvement in the confidence of students especially ones experimenting with new media such as video and sound. I was invited by the staff to be part of and contribute towards assessment and grades awarded to students.

Conclusion: Despite my first year of teaching at HE level starting off rather tentatively, I feel very positive about the outcome of my teaching modules. I have been receiving positive testimonials (Appendix 7) from students through emails. Most students who have been receiving guidance from me, have made remarkable improvement in their art practice. They have made significant shifts in their respective enquiries and confidently take ownership of their work. This in turn has resulted in good assessments when previously they were more apologetic and defensive about their efforts. Student A who failed his previous module had a rich display of work for assessment and has achieved 50% in the last module. During assessments all the works that were displayed showed a common thread that bound all the work togather. Personal statements and proposals were more defined and demonstrated a reflective engagement by the student. The final degree show was charaterised by not just Drawings, Print and Paintings but by video and sound as well.

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