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Thinking through Practice: Enhancing 'maker-cultures' through material culture research and creative-arts-based pedagogy

Practice-oriented approaches to learning and teaching in higher education have a unique capacity to provide students with distinctive, authentic and generative learning opportunities. This paper demonstrates how 'thinking through practice', promotes students' curiosity and empathy by engaging with artisanal work, whilst cultivating the higher order critical and flexible thinking skills they require for productive engagements in the creative and performing arts. Demonstrated through a unique community of creative practice, the paper provides insight into the embodied 'thinking' and creative 'practice' which lies at the core of the pedagogy and the inherent student learning experiences provided at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), Sydney Australia. Educational theorist Robyn Tudor (2005) notes: "Creativity is a dynamic cultural mechanism that supports human life and learning in an uncertain world" (p.20). Situating the artisan-maker at the core of learning, the paper examines 'thinking-making' through 'education-crafting'.

Using pedagogy that places the artisan-maker at the fore, the paper outlines NIDA's approach to material culture and creative arts pedagogies through its Sensate Studio (Master of Fine Arts Common Subject); a learning framework which uses 'lived experience' learning (Kolb 2015) and experimental creative practice to examine the six senses through practice-oriented research, cognitive biology and cultural theory. As Robyn Tudor (2005) notes; "creative modes of learning deal not so much with 'what is' but with 'what-might-be' using rhetorical questions such as 'What if?' and 'Why not?'" (p.9). Maker-culture is reinforced in the Sensate Studio by arts-based learning strategies in which embodied practice, skills acquisition and knowledge are developed by 'doing' and 'becoming' (Dewey 1934). Artefact narratives and object biographies are created as responses to sensual stimulation. Designed and crafted by students, artefacts are then analysed revealing their multiple meanings, through make, manufacture, drawing, surface, texture, materiality, colour, gesture and form. Cultural theorist Celeste Olalquiaga (1999) states that, "...objects bear the imprint of the hands that gave them birth" (p. 17). Material culture research methodologies are used to underpin artefact analysis; aesthetic and artisanal qualities which connect artefacts to the time and place of their origin, make and use, and are deeply connected through their economic histories, to notions of maker identity and reputation (Laird 2013). By thinking through their practice in the Sensate Studio students develop a shared language which connects their discipline expertise with that of their industry-peers, and in doing so, prepares students for professional engagements as 'makers' and cultural leaders of the future.

"Key educational elements for students in arts-based training are those relating to the intersection of academic knowledge and professional discipline-focused knowledge, underpinned by interdisciplinary collaboration, and engagement with creativity and the senses" (Ramburuth and Laird 2017). The paper is underpinned by arts-based education and cultural theory, ranging from Dewey's (1934) philosophies of practical activity, Merleau-Ponty's (1960) refutation of the mind-body dichotomy, Schon's (1983) reflective practice and learning by doing, Martin Heidegger's (1962) emotional and creative 'being-in-the-world' (p.195), and O'Loughlin's (1997) embodiment as a foundation for a creative-arts-based education. Evidence of artefacts and filmic outcomes are provided in the presentation.