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Transgression and New Media in the Study of Art

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Abstract

This paper explores the effects of transgression in teaching caused by the operation of new media. Adapting Bell Hook's argument on 'teaching to transgress' that articulates the necessity of freedom for the learning experience, the paper proceeds to critically examine such 'transgressive freedom' with the agency of new media in art education. It argues that while such transgression is well aligned with the freedom of independent thinking and criticality inherent to the radicality of learning art, such freedom in learning also permits the pedagogical intrusion of new media through the utilization of technology by students in a classroom. Having this as the foundation, the paper sets out to critically examine new media as a new form of radicality—one that not only perpetuates the radicality of art by breaching the distinction between learner and teacher but also begs for a reconfiguration of the discrepancy between human and non-human in education.

Keywords Radical pedagogy; Technology; Participation; Transgression; Art education; New Media

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Introduction

This article is written in an unconventional manner as it does not abide by the conventions of writing an academic text, or in this case, a journal article. It is important to point out this discrepancy early on, as the text pursues a particular methodology of writing that is considered inadmissible for academic discourse, especially in the Malaysian context (Bakar, 2018). The reason for the possible exclusion comes from the impression that objectivity substantiates clarity if self-referencing (via the use of 'I' and other first-person words) is avoided when writing an academic text. Crucially, this impression, or, as one could argue, 'a system of belief', is built on a rhetoric that asserts any academic writing is akin to a 'scientific writing' –an output of scientific research in which the world is studied in an empirical manner as an objectified, externalized other that is waiting to be discovered through the gathering of evidence as conceived by our sensorial means (Spernes & Afdal, 2021). To put it differently, an act of assembling and disseminating knowledge through publication, especially through formal channels such as this credible Journal of Creative Multimedia by a renowned higher learning institution in Malaysia is inevitably bound by rules in which 'research' is defined nationally (Abidin et al., 2017). Consequently, every aspect of research is strictly guarded and measured in ways that are dictated by scientific methodology, whereby any deviation from the objectified standards of presenting and conceiving research is deemed unacceptable and even dishonourably personal at times.

It is precisely from this dishonourable position that this paper is written. A condition substantiated by the context of the academic management framework that impinges upon any deviation from an objectified presentation of knowledge and harshly rejects any other methods of articulating that derive from the speculative and contemplative formation of knowledge. Knowing or discovering the world through contemplation or critical reflection is indeed a breeding ground for other forms of knowledge pursuit, especially for academics in the arts. This does not mean a researcher pursuing scientific methods does not contemplate. On the contrary, what is being suggested here is to fold back the contemplation as a crucial ingredient in attaining certain insight on the scaffolding of knowledge accusation, subsequently being critical towards the way in which knowledge is formed (Sitharan, 2020). In particular, this paper is written by an artist who pursues knowledge through artistic research and emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging the subjectivity involved in the acquisition of knowledge as defined by Julian Klein - "*Artistic experience is particularly dependent on and inseparable from the underlying goings-on. Artistic experience is an active, constructive and aesthetic process in which mode and substance are inseparably fused. This differentiates artistic experience from other implicit knowledge, which is generally able to be considered and described separately from its acquisition*" (Klein, 2017). Crucially, in this article, subjectivity is used as a methodology to articulate certain conditions in which

embodied experience validates intellectual endeavours in terms of the existential situation of an educator.

What is being implored here is to argue for the legitimacy of bodily encounter (as acceptable evidence) as a means of knowledge production, especially by using the physical, embodied expression (of a subject) as traction to present certain arguments, critiques, and even insight into the ways in which humans operate in the world. Such practice or technique is not new, for it has been used before in contemporary art, and rightly so for the author to apply a similar approach as it *"becomes a way of understanding works of art and literature that integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory"* (Fournier, 2021). This enables an aberrated engagement with theory that sustains the blurring of the boundary between the political and the personal.¹ Crucially, such blurring is the necessary reason for this paper to be written and presented in a certain eccentric manner, for the act of teaching brings together relational frameworks into a complex pedagogical technique that should address lived problems (Ravitch, 2020). In other words, teaching should not be thought of as merely a transfer of knowledge to another, but as a phenomenon of encountering (other/student) that continually collides individual needs and differences with communal intention. In this way, teaching becomes political (Piacentini, 2023), and this essay is a radical acknowledgement that resists the idea of academia as being impervious to the socio-political conditions of our lives. This is the intent of the paper and the anchor in which the argument of transgression and new media is discussed. While it is unclear if this article will be accepted in its original form, the very fact that you are able to read this article indicates certain boundaries have been nudged in accepting anomalies in how we understand and present research (in teaching), especially in Malaysia.

Transgression as Radical Learning

I did not realize the amount of challenge that I would have to face when I got a teaching job. The initial excitement disguised the forthcoming troubles in my practice, for I was overwhelmed by the opportunity of being able to do what I am truly passionate about. Here, I must blame my personal experience in learning for the negligence of not being 'critical' to my task. After completing my undergraduate studies, I landed a job as a tutor at an art institution. Coming from a background of technology studies, I was surprised by the 'radicality' engrained in art practice. In my urgency for knowledge, especially related to art and new media, I was led to encounter certain art practitioners, and a major part of my learning process was through or by the lived

experience of encountering them. In other words, it was in the ‘everyday’ that my learning took place, not in the institution (Bennett, 2012).

The reason for such pedagogy is obvious to me as I decipher the agitation of ‘radicalism’ that I felt. Art as a form of practice is critical of its structural artificiality that delimitates meaning and function. In a rather paradoxical loop of self-criticality, Art constantly builds new meanings by extracting the everyday into its operation as means of progress. This I proclaim following the arguments of Charles R. Garoian as he explains *“Accordingly, the spatial practice of Art developed dialectically through organic and incremental process of social necessity and advocacy. Its span of history secreted over time through the emulation of natural processes and the shifting and deciphering of everyday practice and routine; its value and purpose accrued according to the situations, locations, and spatial circumstances of the society from which it emerged”* (Garoian, 2013).

Such an approach enabled me to evaluate (and unlearn) the things that I have picked from formal education, concurrently making my learning easier and teaching insignificant, a mistake that I now revisit. While I certainly understand the necessity of institutionalizing art, art as a subject never ceases to tease the artificiality of structuring knowledge, or, to be specific, the teaching processes that sell ideas and perpetuate a fixed notion of what art is and its potentiality. If I could embrace my experience of learning into my teaching, then I could see my approach as an integrated form of learning that bounces off of living—perhaps a holistic pedagogical model.

In this light, Bell Hook comes to mind when I consider my learning experience. She insists on the necessity of a holistic approach to teaching—considering every aspect of living made possible by bridging the gap between living and learning. She expresses, *“During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when student want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge”* (Hooks, 2022). I relate this to my learning curve with the artists. There was no demarcation of scholarship, and consequently, education could take place at any possible moment. This, I argue, has to do with the absence of a distinction between teacher and learner. There was no grading, no test, no evaluation, nor any standard to adhere to, and as such, the formality of learning evaporated (there was no room for dissonance to cause ‘dis-ease’) and education as an embodied experience was prevalent and ever present. I was foremost seen as a person rather than a student.

While I cherish my past experience, it must be noted that this was possible due to the unrestrictive circumstances that I was in. Considering this, my irritation at the moment is due to my obligation as an educator operating within the vicinity of an institutionalized space (Field, 1972). Reluctantly, I must now admit to the sense of ‘dis-ease’ to which Bell refers, but this occurs in a peculiar way. This is not my first time as a teacher, for I have taught many times in various contexts and to diverse groups of people. I am familiar with the sort of performance that I must enact when I stand in front of a class, as defined by Bell Hooks. However, teaching history of art differs from my previous encounters. There is a particular form of operation of people and technology that ‘questions’ my pedagogical approach to teaching. Bell’s enthusiasm to perform, or more accurately, to be the instigator for participation in learning, is admirable (Hooks, 2022). I have been emulating this approach for many years in my practice, with the intention of reducing (or possibly even eradicating) the hierarchy between student and teacher, therefore empowering students’ agency for contribution as well as creating ownership over what is being learned. Arguably, this has worked in previous instances, but at the moment it is creating annoyance.

All credit must be given, for there is no fault in the proactive teaching of Bell, and I insist this is a necessary criticality that must be embodied by any educator who is concerned about students. But this comes with a price, especially in flattening the hierarchal structure for ‘mutual’ learning. Bell even acknowledges this when she professes her experience of being in the women’s studies class, as she explains, *"Those classrooms were the one space where teachers were willing to acknowledge a connection between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices. And, despite those times when students abused that freedom in the classroom by only wanting to dwell on personal experience, feminists classroom were, on the whole, one location where I witnessed professors striving to create participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge"* (Hooks, 2022). What I am picking on here is the possibility of misconduct that comes with openness in learning. When the emphasis in a classroom shifts from one agency (the educator) to multiple agencies (everyone in class) in the name of learning, this creates empowerment. The problem with this empowerment is that if it is not channelled accordingly, it will potentially create discord in the process of learning—multiple voices competing for attention.

In Bell’s example, she managed to recover the bifurcation in learning by recuperating the ‘active’ speaking of students as a component of learning (*one location where I witnessed professors striving to create participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge*). In this instance, regardless of the

content or subject being spoken (*dwell on personal experience*), the very act of speaking is considered participation. With the appropriate handling of classroom discussion and guidance from the subject, this 'speaking' could be directed to create an active learning environment. It is one of the crucial skills that I had to learn when I started teaching for higher education. In the process of treating students as peers, a substantial preference is given to the voice. And only by speaking out can a student be able to challenge, reconsider, and reformulate his or her worldview. My challenge lies here—as in, not in the discord caused by speaking up, for I am encouraged and anxiously anticipate this—but by the emergence of silence (and distraction) in the name of empowerment and equality.

New Media in Education

Technology has become an unavoidable substance an educator must encounter in today's teaching environment. Regardless of the prerequisite rule for facilities or even the demands of the institution to force adaptation for teaching aid, the students themselves come well informed and fully equipped with the latest technological devices (Lister et al., 2010). These objects of media and communication, or what I call new media⁵ have become norms in lecture halls and seminar classrooms. While I am all for technology (remembering my background in technology studies and my research interest in new media), nevertheless, these gizmos operate in a 'passive transgressive' mode in the classroom. While my task is to encounter these non-human objects in teaching (and this is not the first time), to compete, and to anticipate challenge (anything uttered or taught could be cross-referenced on the internet immediately), my irritation abides in the justification of indulgence (and forbidding thereof) with such devices during a critical and engaging discussion in a classroom.

It must now be apparent—my challenge is to negotiate new media in teaching, and my irritation is the justification of its existence for learning. I am certainly familiar with having new media as part of my academic career, for I started this journey by teaching technology-related art subjects. Nevertheless, teaching History of Art (and this is my first-time teaching 'pure' art subject) amplifies something specific to invoke this irritation. Radicality taught in class, as reflected in teaching art, creates a sort of leeway (freedom to transgress) for students to dwell on '*personal experience*' or intimate engagement with technology, which stops students from having an active conversation in class. In other words, the tiny yet provocative distractions that occur

during a seminar when a student is busy flicking through a smart phone, hand-held device, or computer screen dampen the enthusiasm that I once had for teaching. It is art, in all its criticality, coming back to haunt me by riding on the back of new media.

Now this might sound extremely gloomy, but my objective here is to emphasise a fundamental change that must be considered, along with Bell's inspirational guidance in accordance with the change of living that has occurred. Transgression, as in eradicating the ivory tower of elitism, class, and gender segregation to create even ground for the intermingling of institutions and life, is happening. I argue that in the present, new media context, this is inevitable, for it is inherent to new media's ability. Given the circumstances, 'transgression' as a strategy for teaching must be reassessed (Poore, 2016). By this, I am not undermining Bell's thoughts but instead using her framework to articulate transgression as a pedagogical model. What I am after(or attempting to comfort myself here) is to perceive my disenchantment as an agitator that would propagate the reconfiguration of openness and equality—not only in terms of student/teacher engagement but also to include the human/non-human encounter.

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Author's Bio

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