

Dr. Stephen Felmingham

sfelmingham@pca.ac.uk

Programme Leader: BA (Hons) Painting, Drawing & Printmaking at Plymouth College of Art

Arguing out a Space: re-visioning criticality and student conference in a professionalized sector.

Fine art education sets out to develop critical thinking and the capacity for self-criticism; it gives the student by various means an apprenticeship that conveys in practical terms the nature of the profession that lies outside the institution and it can be seen as a “half-way house... a shelter for artists” (Charles Esche, 2007) or, as the curator Mai Abu ElDahab describes it: “a space where the freedom to experiment, to negotiate ideological positions and to fail are not only accepted, but defining”. Experimentation and the risk of failure, perceived as the basis of a studio practice, could be seen as problematic or at odds with a sector that is being asked increasingly to focus on professionalism and employability. Similarly, the ‘negotiation of ideological positions’ requires the critical space that is often lacking in the drive to serve learning outcomes.

The paper will propose that this apparent opposition can offer opportunities for fine art pedagogy, through rethinking criticality as a social function and as ‘embodied criticality’.¹ This re-visioning allows for meaning to emerge that is not produced in isolation or through isolating processes but rather through intricate webs of connectedness, with participants producing meaning through relations with one another. These interactions resonate with, and can create opportunities for, the agenda of professional practice teaching. The paper will take as its case study the recent PCA student conference as a space for subversion, critical thinking and experimentation within the Art School—using a flexibility in modular structure to introduce an ‘embedded’ education experience, where students led in research-led, experiential and situated learning in a peer community of practice. Learning-by-doing in this case study engendered a legitimate and critically significant event that produced deep learning. The paper will conclude that students construct the learning that they need through taking part in experiences that are relevant to them: utilising discursive networks and communities in student conference displays their emerging professionalism while offering a dynamic, independent space for criticality and debate in the curriculum.

¹ Rogoff, I. 2006. *Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality* [Online] [Accessed 24th February 2015] Available from: <http://transform.eipcp.net/>