

Looking through the window: Making in order to mediate understanding

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Background

My views about creativity in higher education are developing out of conversations such as this one where people are sharing their perspectives and experiences on creativity, what I read, my research and my first-hand experiences and subsequent reflections. In this narrative I intend to reflect on discussions I had with an academic colleague, Alana, whom I thought was creative and also some artworks that I made to help me mediate my understanding of creativity in this particular research context.

Making artefacts as mediating devices is an important part of my research practice. I conduct interviews with my research participants to develop a perspective based on their narratives and draw on this to make the artefact that I then show to my participants. In this way I hope to gain deeper perspectives. The purpose of my making, then, is to stimulate responses from research participants that might not be achieved from simply asking a question.

The context of this particular narrative is research I did into how Alana developed a novel approach to teaching fire investigation to policing students — this is completely out of my disciplinary area of expertise but I was interested to see how Alana was able to create a virtual teaching environment from footage that she took of a house burning. I should add that the house was burnt intentionally in order to train fire fighters — it is certainly not the sort of thing that one would normally do.

Making & using artistic mediating artefacts

In leading this project, Alana found herself in a very unfamiliar environment — in protective clothing amidst heat, flames and smoke, and a high level of unpredictability, but with the support of those experienced in such things. I made three artistic artefacts in response to her story.

After my first meeting with Alana I drew a mind map to inform my first piece of art, a sculpture. I hoped that this and two other artworks that I eventually made would lead to the emergence of a fresh or expanded understanding of creativity in higher education. Thinking about this now, I do believe that the emergent insight about creativity that did eventually arise did so from the linking together and perhaps even the friction between the materiality of the wax I used to mould 'Alana' and the other materials that I used to produce the sculpture. As has been noted in our discussion already, there would have been an emotional response too and all this together allowed something new to emerge. I used paint and canvas in the two paintings, along with my memory of the salient points of my interaction with Alana.

The artwork that facilitated the greatest reaction from Alana and caused the most discussion was the sculpture exhibited below (Artwork #1). The original idea for the form of this artefact was established almost immediately after I first interviewed Alana — after I had made a rough drawing and reflected on my notes reproduced below.



Artwork #1

'I had fairly early on in the piece, a view that the sculpture would be of Alana climbing through or peering through a window, and that this would be a window of a house on fire. The window would be cut from a sheet of glass tinted orange. You would be able to see through the glass and so get a sense of multiple dimensions. Alana would be represented in wax and she would be supported by a colleague dressed in fire-fighting equipment'.

As I made the sculpture, I was aware that I was framing a question to Alana. That is, what lies on the other side of the window? To this, Alana responded:

"It makes me think about somebody who's looking through a window into an open space, into a big wide world. The body position looks sort of like they're interested, you can't see the facial expression, but you can see where the shoulders are, and the hands, and they look sort of relaxed. So it's not that they're looking through with fear, they're looking through with interest".

And further: "It's about that, looking through the fire to see what's on the other side – there's only one slither of the glass, I'm not looking into the fire, I'm looking through the fire to what's going to be on the outside. Okay, I went to the fire but what was important to me was, what was this [footage] going to be used for, and what was going to happen on the other side of that. So the burning of the house was only one part of it".

It is interesting to note that the first time Alana and I met, Alana emphasised how she focused on the opportunity of taking film footage and using that to produce a teaching resource: 'I just grabbed it at the time', she said. Alana also told me about the risk associated with taking the filming:

"We were treading along unfamiliar territory, you can get a bit distracted, and so you had to keep bringing yourself back, what is it that you actually want to achieve here, what do you want for the students – and thought that had to keep occurring, because it then guided what you actually did".

Artwork # 2

When we met the second time, in the company of the artefacts I had made, Alana emphasised her vision: 'looking into a big world', she said. As planned, the art work seemed to take the conversation beyond practical considerations. This deeper conversation was more helpful in understanding Alana and her team's creativity.



Reflecting on the painting I had made (Artwork #2), Alana commented:

"There's a lot of things that were new, and I was stepping into a world that I didn't actually know a lot about, but I was going to learn very quickly. And I think that's about who I am, and the way that I approach life actually".

I asked Alana: 'Who are you in that sort of context?' — she responded:

"I'm the learner and the leader. The learner because it is all new to me, and I am being guided by experts in various areas – but the other side of it is I'm the leader because this is new to them as well, and I'm saying this will be okay, look I can do this, so you can too".

Alana added, examining the painting:

"The white [person] is about leading and about going forward, and the dark [person] is about, we're solid and we're behind you, but it's the light that's going to shine and go forward ... the white is about leading and about going forward".



Artwork # 3

This third artefact helped Alana to think about some of the temporal aspects of her project, notably how she perceived something she termed ‘messiness’ at the beginning and then ‘tightness and tidiness’ towards the end.

“The piece of art that's got the person slightly sitting and their arms bent, they're being sort of held, is actually from my perspective, that's a shorter, smaller piece of artwork, as opposed to this one here (Artwork #2). This to me depicts the length of time it took; it took time to do, and you've got this flow because the person is sort of bending, and the dress flows. With this one, that sort of shows that it's not that the project was short and sharp, but the tightness around the project, the tidiness around the project if you like, whereas this one says, well it took this long and it just sort of flowed on, and this one says, it was a nice, tight, neat project”.

Further:

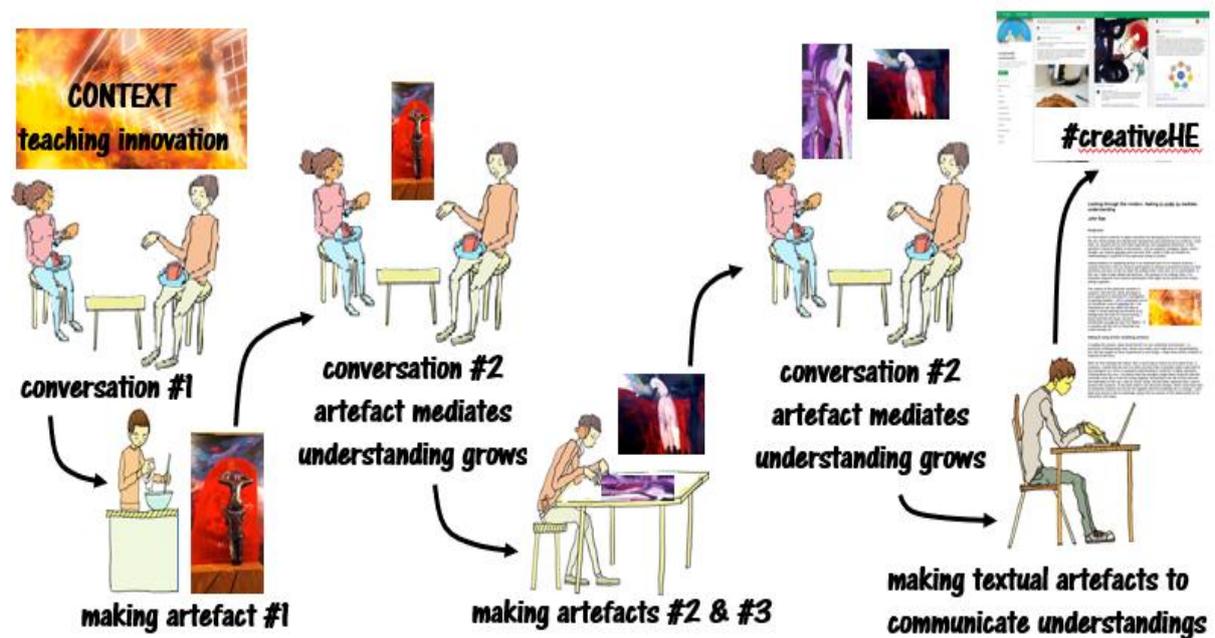
“There was a bit of messiness at the beginning until I sort of got myself sorted out, and some other factors unfortunately came into play, like we lost some of the files and so forth, but once that got sorted out, it was okay”.

Making a research process

I am grateful to Alana. Our working together helped me to develop a new perspective on creativity in higher education. I am now more alert to the importance of vision, learning, leading and support, as elements of creativity. I have much more to ponder too, especially about messiness and what can be the productive qualities of that. I am a little more confident too in my own making, not so much in terms of producing an end product, or even regarding how making gives me joy — I have always felt that — but how making is a useful way of generating insight.

Making does not only relate to the creation of objects, it also relates to the creation of processes, experiences and knowing. My narrative describes more than one form of making - this is summarised in Figure 1, a representation or map of my making process. The first making was an overall process constructed in order to gain the understandings I was seeking in my research project. The second type of making was the creation of artefacts within my research process. These took the form audio and textual records of conversations and my synthesis accounts (including this narrative), and the artistic artefacts I created to act as mediating devices in the conversations I undertook with Alana. Through this combination of making practices I was able to gain or make - new perspectives on creativity in the context of a particular teaching innovation.

Figure 1 The research process I made within which I made and used artefacts to mediate conversations and learning. This narrative constitutes another artefact grown through this process to facilitate (mediate learning) in the #creativeHE conversation.



You might say that as a maker I took *my relevant past experiences* as a researcher and keen observer of learning and teaching, moved forward armed with various materials, emotions, memories and motivations in my *unfolding present* towards an *unknown and uncertain future*. I would call that future '*knowing*', not, say, '*knowledge*', which seems to signify something concrete and final. I am just heading in that direction knowing that I am moving in the direction I want to travel.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Alana for sharing her story of innovation. This narrative (artefact) was made to perform a mediating role for the #creativeHE conversation 'Creativity in the Making March 06-20th 2018 <https://plus.google.com/communities/110898703741307769041?hl=en>

Do you have any experiences you can share of making an artefact explicitly to perform a mediating role?