
INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION IN THE VISUAL ART: POSSIBILITIES FOR STUDENT LEARNING

**Archana Tanwar, Research Scholar, Dept. of Fine Arts, Himalayan Garhwal
University,
Uttarakhand**

**Dr Sudha Jain, Professor, Dept. of Fine Arts, Himalayan Garhwal University,
Uttarakhand**

ABSTRACT

As stated in the research's introduction, the nineties in the United Kingdom saw an increase in interest in collaborative art production processes, which have become more popular across a wide spectrum of contemporary visual art practices. More options for artists to participate in multidisciplinary collaborative projects in professional settings have opened up new methods for artists to collaborate with non-arts practitioners. However, there were few writings critical of interdisciplinary and collaborative creative processes or addressing the distinctions between these new approaches to practice and more traditional models of solo visual art practice when this research began in 1997. By presenting formal study on the nature of collaborative working in the visual arts, this research tackles a knowledge gap in the qualities of multidisciplinary and collaborative practices. The goal of this study was to devise and test ways for involving visual artists (the researcher) and other practitioners in interdisciplinary collaborative processes of shared working. The nature of the collaborative process itself emerged as the major concern during the inquiry. Many visual artists collaborate with other artists and practitioners from a number of fields in various ways when creating artworks, and define the process as collaborative. Individuals, on the other hand, can have various perspectives on collaboration, as evidenced by studies of collaboration in organizational theory

KEY WORDS: Interdisciplinary, Collaboration, Communication, Visual Art, Student Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the Visual Arts

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a noticeable surge in collaborative and multidisciplinary activities in the visual arts. More artists, arts writers/critics, and artists are talking about it, and more artists are doing it. In the visual arts, however, there are few examples of critical literature addressing the unique nature of collaborative processes. If discussed at all, information about the aspects of collaboration tends to remain ingrained within the tacit experiences of visual artists, and is anecdotally conveyed. Collaborative modes of practice have been around for at least thirty years, if not longer, in the visual arts. Artists, on the other hand, have recently begun investigating the possible benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration in particular. The London Arts Board's Principal Combined Arts Officer, Paula Brown, has recognized:

“inter-disciplinary collaborative practice has emerged as one of the most significant art form developments of recent years. yet it has received negligible critical attention, a situation compounded perhaps by the apparent temporality of both the work itself and the collaborative partnerships which create it.”

(cited in walwin 1997:8)

The issues of methodology on the one hand, and the visual arts' contact with culture on the other, are at the heart of the concept of interdisciplinary collaboration in the visual arts. How do visual artists develop ways for cooperating with others, given that their education and professional practice have generally followed individual models? How are visual artists' contributions and prospective responsibilities regarded and appreciated by both artists and collaborators? What role does collaboration play in the positioning of the visual arts (and visual artists) in relation to other professions (and practitioners)?

To begin to answer these questions, the 'hows' (methods and strategies) and 'whys' (qualities and implications) of collaboration must be better understood in order to develop a critical and meaningful debate, and to determine whether the current interest in collaborative and

interdisciplinary processes implies real and tangible benefits for visual artists, or if it is simply a passing trend in contemporary practice.

Through a practice-led naturalistic methodology, this study attempts to answer some of these questions by developing and analyzing techniques for interdisciplinary collaboration. Collaboration in practice, collaboration in education, and case studies of collaboration in the visual arts are the three main threads of inquiry in this study. The research contributes a qualitative definition of 'collaboration,' and describes the main characteristics and key qualities required for successful collaborative processes, taking into account the researcher's perspective as a visual artist and experiences of collaboration (through a series of experimental research projects). These findings are primarily meant for other visual artists to use in establishing and evaluating their own collaborative methods. They are also designed for practitioners from other professions who are considering or have already collaborated with artists.

Collaboration in the visual arts

Ian Pollock and Janet Silk, two collaborators, acknowledge that "creating a language to discuss joint work is difficult." This section examines collaboration definitions, primarily from the visual arts, to find positive and negative definitions, as well as to distinguish between collaboration described as a collaborative process, a type of art practice, and a type of artwork. Collaboration,' in its most basic definition, is an effort by two or more people to achieve a collaborative output in which 'the sum is larger than the individual parts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Methods and Data Generation

The research's three primary lines of study and gave a chronological and visual overview of their interrelationships. This section explains the methods used to generate and collect research data. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, a number of procedures for generating various types of primary data (interview transcripts, observational notes, textual and visual documents and recordings) were purposefully established to improve the validity

of the research findings. describes the precise research procedures used to generate data for the five research projects; describes the methods used to collect data for the two educational projects; and describes the methods used to conduct interviews with selected artists. The thesis Appendices provide the research data.

The Academic Context of Art and Design Research

It's crucial to highlight the relatively recent emergence of practitioner-led research in Art and Design, as well as the heated discussions that have surrounded progress in this field, notably in the last 10 years¹. The purpose of doctoral research in relation to professional and academic art and design contexts, the ontological positioning of art and design practitioners as researchers, and the methodological and epistemological questions of how practice can form a central methodology in formal academic research, as well as how knowledge acquired through practice-led research is valid and relevant to other practitioners have been the main topics of discussion.

These discussions were especially hot at the start of this project and have remained a primary issue throughout the process, as they have for all practitioners conducting practice-led research in art and design. Listic research approach is explored, according to Julian Malins (Researcher and Reader in Design at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen). The three main strands of inquiry (collaboration in practice, cooperation in education, and case examples of collaboration) are discussed, as well as the precise research methodologies employed to produce and collect data from each strand. The process of developing an adequate analytic framework, as well as the extent of the investigation and the suitability of the methodologies used, are summarized and appraised.

These discussions were especially hot at the start of this project and have remained a primary issue throughout the process, as they have for all practitioners conducting practice-led research in art and design. Julian Malins (Researcher and Reader in Design at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen) acknowledged that:

“Undertaking research for a higher degree in Art and Design is a relatively new concept and for this reason research in this field is at a particularly dynamic and evolving stage. Methods and procedures will need to be revised and adjusted through feedback following the successful completion of future research.”

(Julian Malins, cited in Ross 2001:79)

Individuals and institutions across the UK² have contributed to the development and articulation of acceptable approaches for research in Art and Design through ground-breaking work. Individual artists and designers have devised and altered research techniques relevant to their respective areas of study, resulting in a number of successful Ph.D.s (Douglas, 1992; Wheeler, 1996; Graham, 1997; Pengelly, 1997; Bunnell, 1998; Silver, 1999; Hinchcliffe, 2000; Burt, 2001; Ross, 2001). As a result, this thesis will not attempt to retell the history and controversies surrounding formal research procedures in Art and Design, as critical analyses are already available³.

It's vital to note, however, that this 'practice-led naturalistic inquiry' research methodology is built on the foundations laid by such antecedents.

Rationale for the Practice-led Naturalistic Inquiry

The 'post-positivistic' or 'new paradigm research' methodologies that have emerged as a means of deriving meaning from complexity within the 'soft' sciences⁴, as well as the naturalistic methodologies developed and adapted by Bunnell (1996) and Silver (1999) in relation to practice-led Art and Design research, have all influenced the practice-led naturalistic methodology used in this study.

- The requirement for a naturalistic and practice-led research technique was underlined in the early stages of this research by the following essential considerations:
- There were no previous Ph.D. research projects that looked at collaborative procedures from the standpoint of a visual artist.
- Collaboration is a difficult concept to grasp. A survey of the literature and selected instances of art practice revealed a scarcity of critical sources addressing the processes of collaboration in art and design.

- The inquiry's central thread is practice. The creation of acceptable research methods for research projects involving 'real' partners in 'real' situations necessitated a flexible approach.
- Direct experiences of starting, participating in, and assessing collaborative procedures are recognized as critical to the development of effective research techniques.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

COMMUNICATIONS WITH ARTS

This joint project investigates the intersections between science, media, and modern fine art while acknowledging the complexity of cultural knowledge as it is influenced by experimentation, interpretive science, intuition, and myth. Schools, government agencies, nonprofits, for-profit companies, and public services are just a few of the many organisations that have worked with artists to offer "artist residencies." These partnerships are typically built on tactics and chances that result in initiatives that benefit both parties and give artists the chance to raise their careers, grow their audiences, and make money. Artists generate and embrace opportunities to take part in this knowledge-sharing that enables access to "other" universes. Organizations with a relationship between the arts and media have greater access to resources and can do research in new areas.



Fig. 1. Title screen for the 1985 Nintendo Entertainment System game, Super Mario Bros. Super Mario Wiki. 23 May 2012. Web. 9 Mar. 2015.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from That 1 Science Game, an educational Flash game created for the 2011 Iowa State University Game Development Competition. Screenshot by author. 9 Mar. 2015.

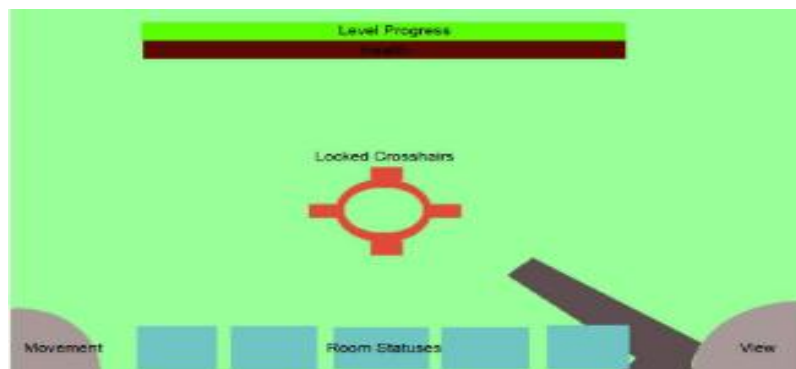


Fig. 3. Concept art illustrating the original version of Project Powerhouse.

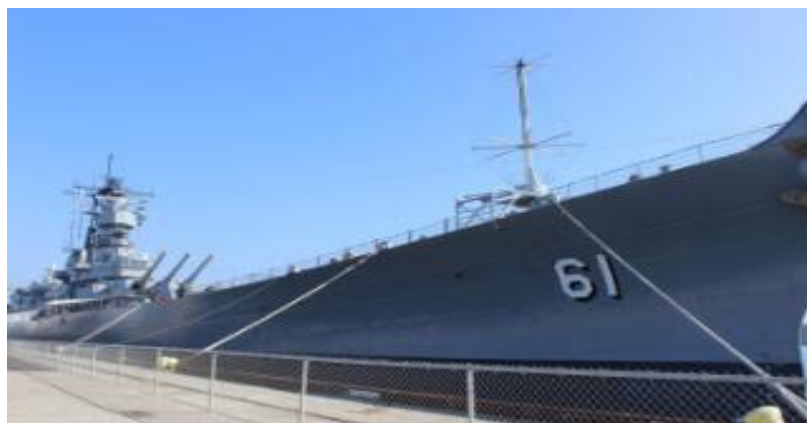


Fig. 4. Exterior of the USS Iowa. Personal photograph by author. 9 Nov. 2014.



Fig. 5. Peanuts by Charles Schulz, an example of a comic I would have encountered in my childhood. GoComics. 4 Mar. 2015. Web. 10 Mar. 2015.

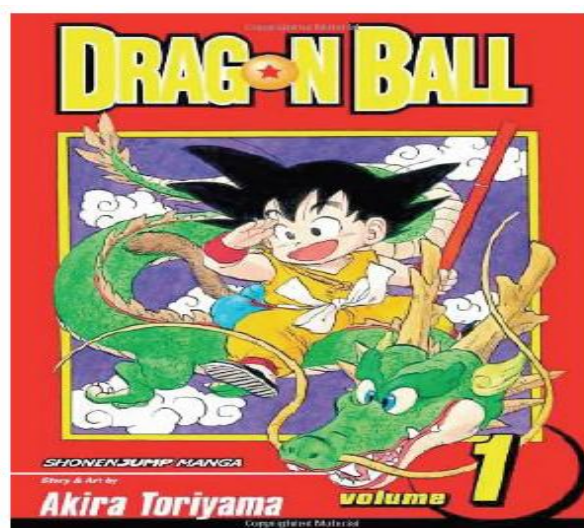


Fig. 6. Cover for the 2003 American edition of Dragon Ball by Akira Toriyama, published by Viz Media. Amazon. N.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2015.

Collaboration In The Visual Arts

Artists collaborate, despite the fact that no equivalent comprehensive doctorate studies on collaboration in the visual arts have been uncovered in the course of this review¹⁶. What factors influence the 'need' or 'desire' for artists to collaborate? What impact does collaboration have on their work habits? What does the quality of collaborative processes mean to them? Where can evidence of collaborative traits and/or collaborative models be found? Some answers to these concerns are sought in this and the next parts from a variety of

different styles of art practice and available literature. To begin, this section discusses the key challenges that collaboration poses in connection to 'traditional' views of individual creative production.

The Four Models of Collaboration in the Visual Arts

The research has contributed a new critical language and criteria for addressing collaboration and evaluating the main features influencing successful collaborative processes as a result of the qualitative definition, main characteristics, and key qualities of collaboration that were developed as a result of the research. Various types of cooperation exist in the visual arts across a range of different modes of practice, and artists cooperate with a variety of people, including other artists, other practitioners or professionals, and even 'audiences'.

The five primary research programs began various forms of collaboration with various individuals and in various settings. The identity of the collaborators and how their separate disciplines interacted were discovered to be critical elements in determining the form of collaboration. A matrix that distinguished four types of collaboration relevant to visual artists was established to develop a useful critical framework for identifying and evaluating different forms of collaboration that might be experienced by visual artists. The matrix depicts four cooperation models based on collaborators' familiarity/unfamiliarity and the relatedness/unrelatedness of their respective disciplines. The following four collaboration models were found and described:

- The Associate Model, which occurs amongst artists and/or art practitioners in a professional art context, is 'simpler' since individuals already share common ground.
- The Personal Model, which occurs amongst practitioners whose areas are not professionally related, is "simpler" in that similar interests and trust already existing between collaborators, but "more complex" in that common ground between disciplines is not previously existent.
- The Professional Model, which occurs between different fields of practice that are linked by professional networks and models, and is 'simpler' in that different disciplines or

fields of practice already interact in a professional context, and their common and different values and methodologies are already recognized, but is 'more complex' in that relationships between individual collaborators do not yet exist, and mutual understanding and trust must be developed.

- The Interdisciplinary Model, which occurs between strangers from different disciplines or professionally unrelated fields of practice, is 'more complex' because there is no existing common ground between individual collaborators or their respective disciplines, so the collaboration is started 'from the ground up,' rather than on the basis of existing relationships and shared knowledge.

These four models illustrate different types of cooperation, each of which necessitates different tactics for engaging in collaboration. The matrix was used to analyze the successes and/or limitations of the five primary research projects using the qualitative definition of collaboration,

VISUAL DOCUMENTATION



as well as the main traits and important qualities of the collaborative process. These findings provide an initial fundamental framework for distinguishing different types of collaboration relevant to visual artists, as well as defining and evaluating appropriate tactics for engaging in successful collaborative processes in each model. An evaluation of the research projects highlighted the primary strengths and shortcomings of the collaborative tactics used in each project, demonstrating the use of the critical framework. This implies that different types of collaboration necessitate distinct techniques in order to accomplish the key traits required for a successful collaborative process. The appropriateness of the tactics I used to initiate and grow collaborative processes through the research projects grew as my awareness of the main characteristics and critical attributes of collaborative processes grew throughout the research. While the critical framework was helpful in identifying and evaluating why strategies for engaging collaboration were successful or unsuccessful in relation to the five main research projects, it still needs to be tested and developed further by other artists/researchers in order to be evaluated for other artists.

Educating Practitioners: Implications of Collaborative Models

Adopting a collaborative practice methodology necessitates additional skills, knowledge, and expertise not always included in the 'individual studio experience' offered by many art schools. Many students lacked the social, organizational, and communication skills essential for successful collaboration in the research projects established for BA Fine Art students. Regardless, students who approached collaboration with a positive attitude discovered that it allowed them to widen their vision of art practice from a narrow subject-specific perspective of being a painter, sculptor, or printmaker to a broader perspective of being a 'artist.'

The requirement for additional abilities in shared working is highlighted by a collaborative creative process that stimulates a repositioning of individual practice to make individual talents relevant to collaborative project goals. This study found that even for artists and individuals that want to cooperate with others and are eager to do so, collaboration can be difficult. Because Fine Art education has primarily focused on encouraging artists to develop individual creative processes, or what artist Gordon Young described as "rugged individualism," a particular challenge for visual artists is that collaborators share control of

the creative process, which may lead to tensions and friction. It might be challenging to move from an individual creative process to a collaborative, shared creative approach. Young was interested in working with others as a student, but he didn't know how to go about it and was unsure of what abilities he could bring to the table.

If multidisciplinary collaboration proves to be a feasible new practice paradigm for visual artists, a major concern about the nature of visual art education arises. How can educational institutions ensure that students learn the necessary skills and strategies for successful creative cooperation so that they can reap the benefits of a collaborative practice methodology? Is it necessary for visual artists to be well-versed in a certain Fine Art topic area before they may collaborate with people from other disciplines? In the visual arts, there are currently no obvious instances of collaborative educational courses. Perhaps this is a good time to reassess our approaches to visual art education as a whole, with more financial support becoming available for artists to participate in collaborative projects. Based on my professional experiences as an art and design lecturer, I believe that there is value not only in teaching students how to collaborate with others, but also in introducing collaborative educational projects as teaching methods to accelerate and enhance students' learning methods and enable them to tackle more challenging and complex issues that may be more difficult to address individually.

The obvious question is where to begin when revising the Higher Education Fine Art curriculum to better prepare students for collaborative forms of practice. While caution must be exercised to avoid throwing away the baby with the bathwater and losing the strengths of current teaching, there may be an opportunity to experiment with wholly new approaches to visual art education. A possible approach would be to reconsider how individual creativity is implicitly addressed in the educational context, while also conducting a skills audit of collaborative models of practice in the professional context and relating this back to the educational context to ensure that students are being provided with the skills they will need to function successfully as professional practitioners. Csikszentmihalyi's (1988 & 1996) systems model of creativity, which situates the creative process within the social systems and relationships that occur between the individual, their field of practice (professional discipline), and the domain in which the products of practice are situated, may be useful in

the first stage (cultural context). In the second case, it might be useful to expand on the critical framework presented in this study by evaluating specific case examples of collaborative practice in the professional context in order to identify the skills, experience, and expertise that visual artists who work in this way have developed.

CONCLUSION

The study took a broad epistemological approach to understanding the nature of collaboration as a separate process of shared work, identifying the problems, rewards, and consequences of collaborative creative processes for visual artists. A practice-led, naturalistic inquiry was conducted with the goal of developing and evaluating techniques for engaging multidisciplinary collaboration between a visual artist (the researcher) and other practitioners.

Exploratory collaboration methodologies were produced through a series of research initiatives that offered the research's core strand as well as the primary research data. Throughout the research, I developed a critical understanding of collaboration (as a process of shared working to produce collaborative outcomes) that was largely informed by my direct experiences with collaboration (as a practitioner and researcher), a broad literature review of collaborative processes and practices, and other artists' experiences with collaborative working in professional contexts. From the perspective of a practitioner, the aspects and characteristics of the collaborative process, as well as the consequences of multidisciplinary collaboration as a model of practice for visual artists, are discussed. This method resulted in the creation of a practical critical framework (mainly for visual artists) that can be used to identify, compare, and assess collaborative models of practice, as well as practitioners' own collaborative experiences.

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