# See saws and sandboxes: enabling meaningful reflective practice in art and design teaching

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## Abstract

This paper tackles the 'wicked problem' of reflective teaching in the creative arts. Rittel and Webber (1973) characterise 'wicked problems' as problems that include a large number of complex variables, all of which are dynamic, contextually bound, and interdependent. Whilst 'reflection, the arts and education go hand in hand' (Burnard and Hennessey, 2006: ix) with students routinely expected to critically reflect, art and design lecturers may not practise meaningful reflection in their own teaching. This phenomenon is further complicated by differences in disciplinary contexts and generic institution-wide intervention. Academic development literature on this topic may be viewed as unconvincing and irrelevant, introducing models of reflection which lecturers may perceive as a 'right way to reflect' (James, 2007). Exposing this disconnect between reflective academic development theory and creative arts practice, the paper draws on the insights from a small scale EdD research exploration of how creative arts lecturers talk about reflecting on their teaching (McKie, 2022). The findings offer some new methodologies for stimulating reflection, particularly amongst dual professionals in art and design, which acknowledge the importance of understanding disciplinary social and cultural contexts influencing the take up of reflective pedagogy.

## Key words

Reflective teaching, reflective practice, disciplinary-based reflection, dual professionalism



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## Introduction

> 'Some empirical studies have observed the disconnect between art and design practice and educational theory, arguing that reflection on teaching takes on distinct forms due to differences in epistemological structure..' (Burnard *et al.*, 2006; Orr and Shreeve, 2017).

As an academic developer, I have long espoused the power of reflection to transform teaching experiences, actions and thoughts. As I introduce creative arts teaching colleagues to various theoretical concepts for reflection, I also encourage dialogue on the connections between reflective theory and practice. The rich discussions that follow suggest a keenness to engage with models and frameworks for reflection, but a hesitancy on how these might be worked into busy teaching routines. As James opines in her essay on fashion reflection, 'teachers are still wrestling with the concept of what reflection is and how it should be manifested' (James, 2007:7). One also detects a hesitancy around the language of reflective teaching, especially from dual professionals who may not have received formal training in pedagogy. These are often new academics who combine their knowledge of art and design with teaching or industry expertise, who are entering into a new world of practices in the academy in which they are novices. For these disciplinary-based academics, common pedagogical vocabularies introduced in academic development workshops might serve to further highlight differences, leading to an uncomfortable relationship between theory and practice. (Orr and Shreeve, 2017; Shreeve, 2011). Conversely, while students are routinely expected to critically reflect in the fashion curriculum, it is not always made clear to them what is meant by 'critical reflection'. Indeed, staff themselves may have differing ideas as to what it actually means (James, 2007).

## Critical incidents in fostering teacher reflectivity

Reflecting on your pedagogy as an art and design educator, and teaching your students in art and design to reflect, are interdependent reflective practices in a



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creative arts curriculum (James, 2007; McKie, 2022; Orr and Shreeve, 2017). The claim goes that if we practise reflection, we can more effectively encourage our students to reflect on, analyse, evaluate and improve their own learning to inspire critical change within the sector. This discourse aligns with the importance given to reflection in creative arts practice, where 'reflection, the arts and education go hand in hand' (Burnard and Hennessey, 2006: ix) and where lecturers encourage students to reflect on their practice through learning journals, sketchbooks and other multi modal forms of reflection (James, 2007; Orr and Shreeve, 2017).

Critical incidents in my own experiences of teaching reflectivity on teacher development programmes have prompted me to think differently about the interplay between generic and discipline-specific pedagogic discourse (see Critical Incident 1 and Critical Incident 2 below) I have observed a disconnect between theory and practice: the theoretical discourse of reflective practice espoused on teacher development programmes and the practice-based, reflective teaching discourse embodied by higher education lecturers. Because teacher development often requires time away from collegial contexts, its discourse might be viewed as independent of the practices and contexts in which lecturers engage. Conversely, situated discourse which takes place in the contexts in which practitioners teach, may be more dependent on the epistemological positioning of the practitioner.

## Incident 1

The first incident took place during a reflective teaching discussion about Schon's (1983) construct of reflection and action in teaching. An acting and performance lecturer began relating Schon's ideas to a concept in drama education referred to as "autopioetic feedback loop". While it is not unusual for a lecturer to interact with reflective schema introduced in academic development, I was struck by the preference to view educational concepts through the lens of their own discipline. I found it intriguing that by talking through their own preferred terms for reflection this encouraged the lecturer to see elements of their own practice in common with Schon's (1983) view of reflective practice.



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## Incident 2

The second incident was one in which a creative arts lecturer contested the use of the term 'practice' in reflective practice, asking to what practice I was referring. This incident highlighted to me the extent to which educational ideas used in academic development can feel alienating and invite difference. I remember empathising with the lecturer, as I recalled my own professional transition from librarian to educational developer. I was in a constant state of reflective doubt and hesitancy, as I absorbed added terms and references in the field of academic development. These early experiences even inspired me to author an article for the Art Libraries Journal, in which I reflected on acculturation from one professional field to another.

In response to these two teaching incidents, I have developed an interest in socio-cultural forms of teacher reflection (Boud and Brew, 2013; Loads and Campbell, 2015; Pilkington, 2016; Roxa and Martensson, 2009; 2012) which encourage university teachers to continually construct and develop an understanding about teaching and learning in conversation with 'significant others' (Roxa and Martensson, 2009; 555). Such forms of teacher reflection acknowledge that lecturers address teaching challenges collectively through shared sense-making (Boud and Brew, 2013; Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Roxa and Martensson, 2009, 2012). By exploring alternative models for developing academics' teaching, this potentially invites a more authentic engagement with academic development to fuse reflective pedagogy with local practice.

## Meaningful forms of teacher reflectivity

> 'academic development literature may be viewed as jargon-filled, unconvincing, unrewarding and irrelevant to their needs' (Loads, 2019:56).

The espousal of reflective pedagogy as key to effective learning is assumed to be obvious to all, yet the modelling of reflectivity in teaching is challenging in times of



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super-complexity, where teaching staff have competing research, knowledge exchange and education work demands. Juggling these demands may leave little time for the degree of mental processing espoused by reflective frameworks taught on PG Certs in learning and teaching. These tensions indicate the importance of negotiating relations between different aspects of being an academic, especially for those who have multiple professional roles in the university today. Dual practitioners in art and design are especially sensitive to these confusing narratives. These are often new academics who combine their knowledge of art and design with teaching or industry expertise, who are entering into a new world of practices in the academy in which they are novices. Common pedagogical vocabularies introduced in academic development workshops might serve to further highlight differences, leading to an uncomfortable relationship between teaching and practice. (Orr and Shreeve, 2017; Shreeve, 2011). To enable meaningful reflection on teaching, academic developers need to first acknowledge that that there are matches and mismatches in understanding of the disciplinary teaching communities they support (Akerlind, 2007; Boud and Walker, 1998). By exploring creative arts reflective teaching discourse, developers might begin to locate meaningful forms of teacher reflection that are cognisant of discipline and/or practice which are guided by previous experiences of individuals and the history of development that they bring to the workplace.

These observations have led me on a quest in my own research to locate more meaningful forms of teacher reflectivity, which encourage creative arts faculty to make positive associations, connections and applications to enhance pedagogic practices. This investigation culminated in an EdD research study (An exploration of how creative arts lecturers talk about reflection in their teaching the findings of which are referred to in the sections, 'Meaningful forms of teacher reflectivity' and 'What might we learn from talking with creative arts lecturers?'. The aim of the research was to explore how creative arts lecturers working in higher education talk about reflecting on their teaching. The focus on creative arts provides an opportunity to examine the socially situated reflective discourses of lecturers teaching art, design, creative and performance-based subjects, where educating students to



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become reflective practitioners is considered essential to their development (James, 2009; Orr *et al.,* 2010). The study offers fruitful insights into the socio-cultural and structural contextual influences on teacher reflectivity, which are 'mediated, influenced and shaped by individual understandings and values as well as external constraints and expectations' (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014:19).

## Research methodology

> 'The influence of social constructivism within this study is in alignment with the philosophical origins of creative arts practice, which are based on the presumption that each and every individual creates his/her own knowledge, and that such knowledge is primarily created through his/her interaction with the environment and other people/communication with society' (McKie, 2022: 76).

The methodology for the research inquiry employs an interpretive-qualitative design which is influenced by elements of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). The nature of knowledge gathered in this study is relative and subjective knowledge, generated through 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) to describe events in context. The findings are exploratory with a search for patterns and themes which theorise the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions of the individual accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To explore how creative arts lecturers in higher education talk about reflecting on their teaching, the following research questions (RQ) were deployed:

> RQ1: What words, phrases and metaphors do creative arts lecturers use when talking about reflecting on their teaching?
>
> RQ2: What incidents, experiences and events do creative arts lecturers refer to when talking about reflecting on their teaching?
>
> RQ3: How might creative arts lecturers' talk about reflection on teaching be helpful for a head of learning and teaching?



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The exploration of reflective 'talk' which underpins the research project, represents my own quest for authentic forms of practice-based academic development, to augur understanding of everyday reflection in the creative arts, embedded in the social context of real-world relationships (Boud and Brew, 2013; Loads and Campbell, 2015; Roxa and Martensson, 2009). The exploration of talk is also influenced by socio-cultural perspectives, where learning and teaching take place through engaging with meaningful activities in context (Boud and Brew, 2013; Loads and Campbell, 2015; Roxa and Martensson, 2009). Reflecting on teaching with creative arts lecturers in this research inquiry offers a unique learning opportunity for critique and alternative explanations. Communication and dialogue, where meaning is negotiated, are important components of cultural construction and the development and maintenance of communities (Roxa and Martensson, 2009). Talking with others is also seen as central to the development of an open, critical perspective to move reflection from implicit to explicit thoughts and understandings (Akerlind, 2017:35; Roxa and Martensson, 2009). This dialogic form of reflective teaching aligns with the discursive and situated nature of professional educational learning (Boud and Walker, 1998), and accommodates the crucial role of dialogic interaction in developing shared understandings of teaching practice (Brookfield, 1995).

The data for the study was collected through extensive semi-structured interviews (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) with lecturer participants recruited from a full range of creative arts disciplines. Interviews (n=10) were conducted at two higher education institutions, with comparable creative arts provision and similar staff and student numbers. To ensure a varied insight into how creative arts lecturers talk about reflecting on teaching in line with the research aim, and to contribute to the authenticity of the findings, participants for this study were recruited using 'purposive and convenience sampling' (Patton, 2002). The intent of this study not to generalize but to explain, describe, and interpret. An interview schedule was used which included prepared and impromptu questions around the three narrower research questions. Each participant was interviewed individually and face to face, with anonymity assured. In addition, reflexivity has been used throughout this



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research project to develop an understanding of researcher centrality and influence during the research process (Roulston, 2010; Yanos and Hopper, 2008).

## Researcher positionality

> 'During the interview I found it a challenge to listen and follow Pedro's train of thought partly because I kept thinking I would have to think of something from teaching and learning theory which would correspond with his reflective experiences. I think that sometimes, during the interview, my positivist inclination was to try and make sense of the situation too quickly and I had to stop myself. It is a good discipline for me to stand back from teaching and immerse myself in the participant's world view – I am learning so much. '
>
> (excerpt from Reflective Journal, McKie, 2022)

A central consideration early on in the design and execution of this project has been my positioning as an interpretivist researcher and the impact of my own values and beliefs about teaching and learning. By adopting an interpretive-qualitative methodology, this has provided the space to recognise my centrality and influence in the research process and to acknowledge my own bias in data gathering and interpretation (Yanos and Hopper, 2008). I have therefore considered my role as an educational leader in reflective teaching, allied to institutional drivers for teaching excellence.

As a former librarian and now Associate Dean of Student Experience, I have personal opinions about creative arts reflective teaching practice, and these biases and assumptions cannot objectively be completely put aside. Rather than attempt to expunge biases and assumptions, this research acknowledges the subjective positions taken to the research topic and research participants to show how I have developed my reflexivity. This has involved critically reflecting not only on my different role, position and assumptions, but on the choices of methods and their applications while engaging with participants.



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Keeping a reflective journal throughout these research stages, has been one way of developing both personal reflection and reflexivity in this qualitative research project, looking for the 'warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I want to avoid and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfil my research need' (Peshkin, 1988: 18). As Roulston (2010) outlines, reflexivity 'requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researcher's social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process' (Roulston, 2010: 116). A strong influence on the approach I took to interviewing, for example, was the idea of viewing each interaction as a 'social encounter' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) where the interviewer and interviewee co-construct data, generating situated understandings and possible ways of talking about the research topic (Roulston, 2010: 60). This style of reflective interviewing, has been insightful at the data analysis and interpretation stages, and has also guided responses to the third research question ('How might creative arts lecturers' talk about reflection on teaching be helpful for a head of learning and teaching?').

The disadvantages of using an interpretive-qualitative methodology are that that the ontological view tends to be subjective rather than objective and research outcomes will therefore be affected by the researcher's own interpretations, belief system, ways of thinking or cultural preference. As Fine (2002) argues, even a 'giving voice' approach 'involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our arguments' (2002:218). To mitigate against this, I found it helpful to position myself as a "traveller", involved in the co-construction of whatever happens in conversations with my participants (Kvale 2006). This positioning helps to shift from a perspective of an insider looking around, to an outsider looking in.



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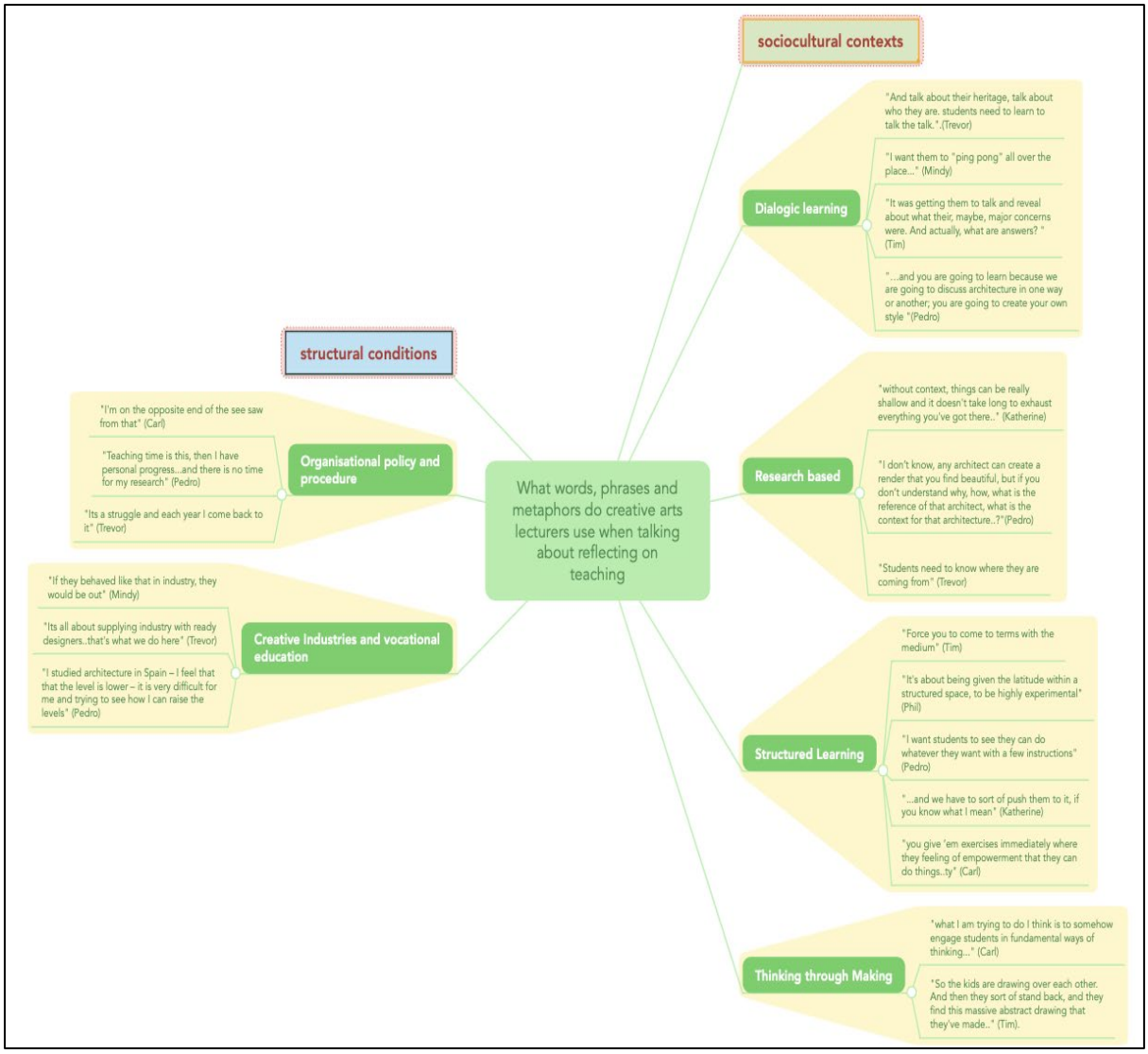


**Figure 1: Illustrative example of Conceptual Cluster development for RQ1**

True to the social-constructivist influences on this research, where the intention is to explore socially constructed and mediated reflections (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014:19), explicit and surface meanings are highlighted from the talk rather than underlying meanings or personal motivations. Each interview is viewed as a 'social encounter' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), where the interviewer and interviewee co-construct data, generating situated understandings and possible ways of talking about the research topic (Roulston, 2010: 60).

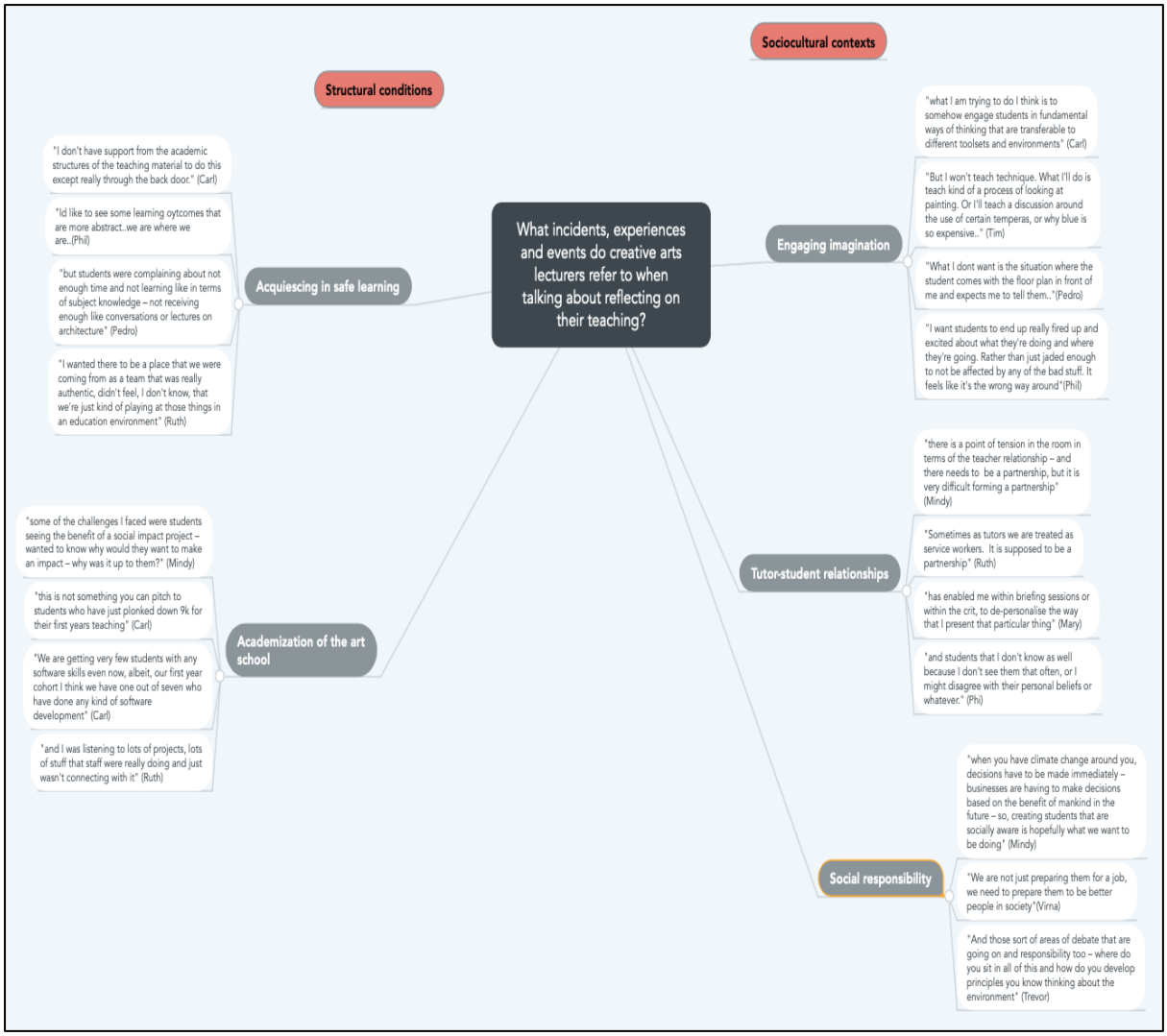


**Figure 2: Illustrative example of Conceptual Cluster development for RQ2**

To align with these intentions, an inductive, 'bottom-up' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79) approach has been used to analyse the data, using thematic analysis conducted within a constructionist framework. Constructionist thematic analysis recognises that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inhering within individuals (Burr, 1995). The analysis has been coded to the research questions to generate concepts and themes that orient to these questions. The final themes have been developed from the respondent data and literature and are framed around the words, phrases and metaphors used when reflecting on teaching (see Figure 1); incidents, experiences and events referred to when reflecting on teaching (see Figure 2) and the helpful aspects of the reflective talk (See Figure 3).



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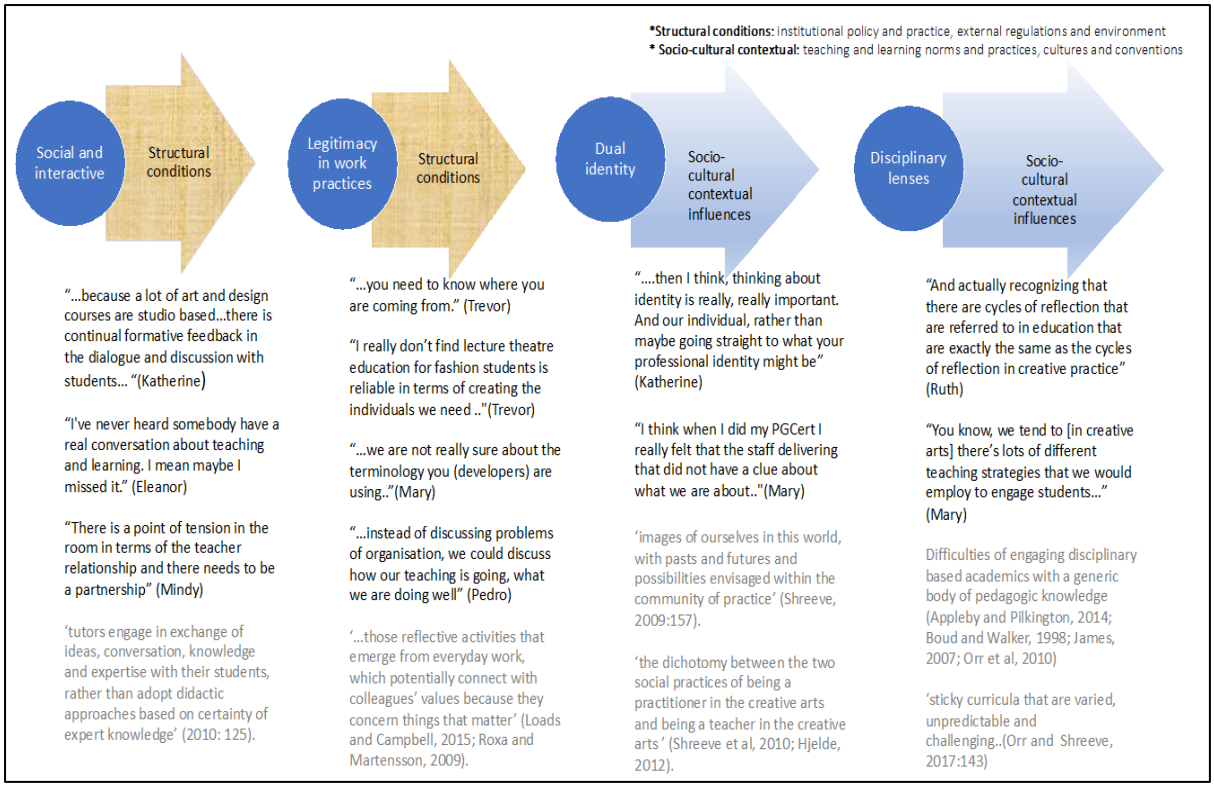


**Figure 3: Helpful aspects of the reflective talk**

## What might we learn from talking with creative arts lecturers?

The findings from my research (conceptualised in Figure 4) highlight the importance of understanding social and cultural contexts influencing the take up of reflective pedagogy. Even though developers may be well versed in educational theories and literature, they cannot always be familiar with the social and cultural components influencing reflection in teaching. These are the disciplinary norms and practices, cultures and conventions which impact on the adoption of scholarly and professional infrastructures (Englund *et al.*, 2018; Roxa and Martensson, 2009; Trowler *et al.*, 2012). Partly in response to this lack of contextual knowledge, approaches to academic development may be generic, based on a set of common principles of learning which are then expected to be translated into practice. However, as I was to discover in my research, generic educational discourse may also be conceived by lecturers as alienating or un-representative of their own disciplinary-based pedagogic principles. Enacting unfamiliar discourses may be particularly problematic in creative



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arts disciplines, where lecturers might not have a background in higher education and where their disciplinary or practitioner identities might be viewed as separate from their teacher identity (Orr and Shreeve, 2017; Sims and Shreeve, 2012). Learning and teaching practices in creative arts disciplines are typified as "sticky," and ambiguous, where knowledge is circumspect and where students learn by making and doing, to develop ways of knowing through experience of the tactile, visual and spatial (Orr and Shreeve 2017; Souleles, 2013). Creative arts practitioners may also be averse to universal perceptions of reflection that suggest a right way to reflect, rather than drawing on more familiar reflective practices found in their own disciplines (Hjelde, 2012).

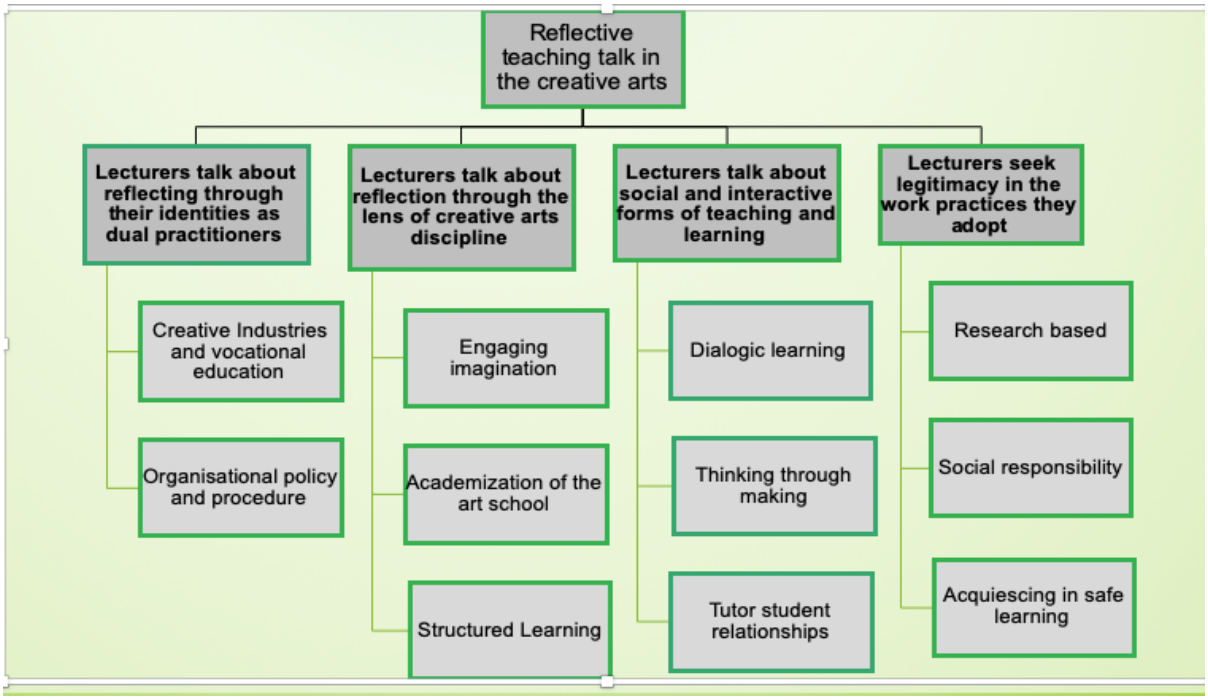


**Figure 4: Analysis of reflective teaching talk in the creative arts**

## Reflections on fostering meaningful reflective practices

The research findings from my small-scale research project are not generalisable. Therefore, any conclusions should be received as reflections on the experience of talking about teaching with creative arts lecturers. I believe that my research study highlights the importance for academic developers of reflecting in, and on academic development. This study draws attention to the critically reflective educational



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discourse used in academic development, inferring such talk can be alienating to academics who might see teaching as additional to their profession or discipline. The discoveries from this research inquiry suggest that creative arts academics are inherently reflective in their teaching but tend to talk about these reflections through their identities as dual practitioners rather than with reference to educational literature or pedagogic constructs. Academic developers might therefore consider their role as more like a facilitator, steering essential conversations about teaching which reaffirm the different elements of academic practice individuals negotiate in their everyday lives. To illustrate this thinking, a set of dialogic reflective prompt cards (See Figure 5) have been developed which stem from the research highlights and might be used by academic developers to stimulate meaningful reflective conversations.


**Figure 5: Dialogic Prompt Cards for stimulating reflective conversations**

A useful insight from this study is the value of metaphor for encouraging lecturers to talk about their reflections on teaching (James and Brookfield, 2014; Kerchner, 2006). Incorporating metaphor into reflective teaching development potentially opens fresh possibilities of thought and action, encouraging lecturers to see elements of their own practices in common with reflective constructs in academic



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development. Participants enjoyed locating their own expressions for reflectivity which were often connected to the student experience. For example, terms such as 'sandboxes', and 'see saws' were seen as more viable as expressions of reflection on teaching to enhance the student experience. Fostering approaches to reflective teaching development which encourage the surfacing of these student-centred references may also blur the boundaries between generic and discipline specific pedagogies, to support better relationships and conversations between academic developers and lecturers.

The implications for policy from this study are that specialists and generalists can see the world differently. Appreciating that lecturers are values-based individuals with diverse histories (rather than empty "vessels") seems an important implication for the development of learning and teaching policy and practive . Creative arts lecturers interviewed for this study, need to see the relevance of change initiatives in teaching and learning, before engaging with its documents and practices. The findings from this study surface the uneasy relationship of creative arts disciplines with organisational policy and procedure, and the importance of research-based pedagogies. Given the constructivist roots of creative arts learning and teaching, characterised as 'kind of exchange' (Orr and Shreeve, 2017; Sims and Shreeve, 2012), where the lecturer's role is more like a facilitator than a didactic expert, policy and practice might recognize this by deferring from generalized terminology to describe teaching and learning. Applying this insight to the development of university learning and teaching, heads of learning and teaching might for example, think differently about their application of the UKPSF (2023) in accredited teacher development. Rather than expecting lecturers to engage with a professional discourse involving "evidence" "skills" and "enhancing your practice", a first step might be to provide safe spaces for lecturers (whose first discipline is not education) to deconstruct these terms and come up with their own glossary. Additionally, this study promotes the benefits of making space for dialogue within institutional processes and systems, by promoting a teacher reflectivity which utilizes socio-cultural, relationship-based contexts. The insights from this research highlight possibilities for academic developers to develop a 'pragmatic professionalism'



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(Bostock and Baume, 2016:32), which is less about being an educational expert, and more about facilitating dialogue based on a desire to learn from each other. This understanding may also be useful to paradigmatically shift the trademark image of academic development as a decontextualised "service" to one which is guided by previous experiences of individuals and the history of development that they bring to the workplace.

The original contribution of the research is its consideration of the 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) of reflective teaching, which is a disconnect between academic development discourse or "education-speak" and the more socially situated, culturally imbued dialogue on reflection that arises from creative arts teaching contexts. The study has illuminated the dialogue of creative arts lecturers, giving voice to this under-represented participant group, and highlighting their reflective pedagogic practices. Drawing on creative arts practitioner 'discursive repertoires' (Trowler, 2001; 2008) has enabled a rich understanding of teaching and learning contexts in higher education and the benefits of adopting more divergent reflective practices to engage faculty in meaningful conversations to reflect on their teaching. Therefore, this study extends understanding of how heads of learning and teaching might build trusting working relationships to connect in with academic communities.

The pedagogic reflectivity of the ten creative arts lecturers interviewed for this study could be conceived as oblique: diverging from a straight line or course of action. There is a sense from this research that lecturers may be more receptive to radical pedagogies which are cognisant of the dialogical and interrogative disposition inherent in creative arts practices (Danvers, 2003:55). This contrasts with corporate pedagogies, aimed at achieving institutional targets around teaching excellence (Bleakley, 1999; Clegg et al., 1999; Clegg, 2000), which may be conceived as technocratic and unrepresentative of creative arts practice. Concurring with the literature, these are practitioners who are used to critical interrogation, revision and redefinition within their own creative art and design practice which leads to an inherent instability, which is seen as positive, dynamic and productive (Danvers, 2003:54). The learnings from this observation of the data suggest that rather than



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struggling to engage busy teaching staff with unrelatable educational schemas and frameworks, developers might utilise a combination of 'oblique strategies for reflecting on teaching' (Appendix 1) inspired by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies.* Applying oblique strategies to everyday teaching contexts may help developers to break habitual thinking patterns and encourage a more positive active development of criticality and reflectivity in teaching. Modelling the literature reviewed for this study, the conceptualisation of this resource is based on a type of reflective conversation which includes questioning and formulating multiple solutions to daily challenges that arise in arts practice captured across a wide range of symbiotic forms, expressive languages, and actions (Burnard and Hennessey, 2006; Eisner, 2002). By working with lecturers in this way, another route is offered to integrate reflective teaching practices into local pedagogies and shift mindsets for positive improvements in learning and teaching.

## Disclosure Statement

All materials included in the article represent the authors' own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. This work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere. We declare there are no potential conflicts of interest which might have influenced the authors in reporting their findings completely and honestly.

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# Appendix 1

# Oblique Strategies for reflecting on teaching

| **Use your own ideas** |
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| *Apply reflective practices that are personally meaningful and that connect with the realities of your educative context*. These might include reflective thinking tools that consider other creative pathways and modalities. For example, create a timeline of your teaching journey – what patterns emerge? |
| **State the problem in words as clearly as possible** |
| *Talk through your educative challenges with your colleague (s) aiming to distill from each other's dialogue, your understanding of the problem.* This might involve asking powerful questions to enrich understanding and challenge assumptions. For example, remove one key element from your teaching – what happens? |
| **Work at a different speed** |
| *Put your teaching into slow motion to locate previously unconscious material or see familiar aspects in fresh ways. This might involve teaching a concept at half your usual pace, or extending silence in the classroom.* For example, ask a question and wait longer than feels comfortable. |
| **Turn it upside down** |
| *Disrupt reflection on your educational practices by thinking about it as a provocation, a story, poem or a metaphor.* Narrative techniques to help you do this could include the use of free writing, writing a postcard to self, or telling the story through your students' viewpoints. For example, using metaphor: if your |



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| teaching were a landscape, a weather pattern, or a piece of music, what would it be? |
| **Don't avoid what is easy** |
| *Set up safe spaces to deconstruct teaching terms, experiment with educative technology and "un-learn" practices.* These might include setting up a 'sandpit' to play with pedagogy or creating a 'what if' forum to discuss links between disciplinary practice and inclusive pedagogy. |
| **Use an old idea** |
| *Locate an idea from your disciplinary practice to put a fresh perspective on your reflection as an educator.* Your discipline, for example, may be more receptive to radical pedagogies, which embrace social justice or social purpose, and which by nature are more dialogic and interrogative. |



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