HOW DO WE TEACH
SOCALLY ENGAGED
PRACTICE?

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FINDINGS REPORT:

HOW DO WE TEACH SOCIA LLY ENGAGED THEATRE PRACTICE?

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1. WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Dr Katharine Low and Sue Mayo are both engaged in the teaching of Applied Theatre in London Universities and share an interest in what University courses can offer, and how this work is taught. With ten Universities in the UK offering Masters courses in Applied Theatre/Drama\(^1\), and at least five other MAAs that can include an Applied Theatre strand\(^2\), plus an increasing number of Undergraduate Drama courses offering Applied Theatre as an option\(^3\), University is a strong option for people wanting to work with theatre in socially engaged settings. At the same time, many individuals do not access these courses, embarking on this work and learning through experience, short courses, and mentoring. Katharine and Sue represent these two approaches, with Katharine having developed her practice through the Academic route, through to a Doctorate and full time work in a University setting, and Sue having learned through practice, following an undergraduate Drama degree.

We began thinking about this research in the context of other parallel initiatives. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation began a research initiative examining the lifelong training and support of artists entitled ArtWorks, (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2013) and Kay Hepplewhite, a lecturer in Performance at York St John University began her work on the applied practitioner, ‘Alchemists at Work’ (York St. John University, 2012). Similarly in September 2012, Talawa Theatre and Emergency Exit Arts began a partnership to encourage and train BAME facilitators and participatory artists, and are now funded to do this in partnership with Goldsmiths, University of London. This interest in looking at how applied practitioners are taught and how they learn reflects something of the complexity of what is a very broad field, with its roots in Education, Social Cohesion, and political and personal change. Practitioners need an understanding of aesthetics, ethics, group dynamics, social and political context, funding structures, educational and political theory, therapeutic approaches, and a broad range of theatre and performance skills. Applied practitioners often work in partnership with other agencies, and sometimes in very challenging circumstances, and it is clear that, whatever their route to gaining skills, these practitioners need to be reflective, flexible, skilled individuals (Balfour, 2010; Hepplewhite, 2013).

Additionally, there is a real diversity in the needs of students attracted to studying MAAs in Applied Theatre/Drama. Some come to learn about the field and develop their practice, others come with experience and are looking for an opportunity to reflect on and interrogate their work. This calls for a flexible approach to learning and teaching.

\(^1\) Namely, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Goldsmiths, University of London, York St. John University, University of Exeter, Royal Holloway, University of London, University of Manchester, Staffordshire University, University of Leeds, University of Lincoln, University of Winchester, Queen Mary, University of London.

\(^2\) These include University College London and the University of Glasgow.

\(^3\) There are a number of specialist programmes in Applied Theatre and equivalents (e.g. Central’s BA (Hons) Drama, Applied Theatre & Education, Birmingham City University’s Applied Performance, the University of Wales’ Applied Drama (Newport), the University of Northumbria’s BA in Drama and Applied Theatre, and UEL’s Community Arts Practice) as well as courses which have a strong modular element on applied theatre within their existing BA courses (for example the University of Manchester, Royal Holloway (RHUL), the University of Birmingham and the newly developed module at Goldsmiths).
and a consideration of what approaches are most suitable at what point and for which student?

Our research points to the importance of framing academic courses in the ‘Applied’ field as part of a practitioner’s development, but not as a definitive ‘training.’ Good practice emerges as that in which practitioners are multi-skilled, reflexive and reflective, and aware that the learning they are engaged in is life long, and will come in different forms. This underlines the benefits of dialogue between the Academy and practicing artists and arts organisations, benefits that work both ways. However, the current economic climate pushes some individuals to seek a qualification in the hope that it will assure them employment, but our research with employers demonstrates that employers are most concerned that the right skills are in place, however these were gained. This demonstrates to us the importance of recognising more flexible pathways in MA training, and valuing non academic training routes.
2. HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

The research imperative began from a common interest held by both researchers who have approached the field of socially engaged practice from different backgrounds, one from a period through which the practice was learned through apprenticeships and professional development and the other through the academic route. Beginning with very different backgrounds in their professional development as practitioners, both researchers aimed to create an opportunity to share experiences of teaching socially engaged practice at MA level between diverse participants in order to gain a wider insight into the different experiences gained through practice, and ‘learning on the job’, and the academic route. The research events followed the order of activities outlined in the grid below.

Through this research we aimed to examine some of the different pedagogic methodologies used in formal and non-formal settings and consider what kind of dialogues can occur between practitioners of different generations and what learning opportunities are possible through these interactions. In order to achieve these aims, our objectives were:

• to develop a series of workshops and lesson plans for implementation at MA level teaching, which became three filmed provocations on particular themes and proposed accompanying activities;
• to articulate best practice in non-formal settings, in order to identify how this can be expanded into HE;
• and to allow for cross-generational reflection and investigation in order to allow young and older practitioners to articulate what have been for them the most effective pedagogical strategies.

In developing our methodology, we chose a participatory-based research approach, sharing our research findings as they emerged with the different participants. We decided on this approach as quantitative data would not reflect the many variables, (as noted above, the diversity of student’s experience and ambitions, the wide range of skills and expertise being taught and learned, and a body of practice that is also rich with a variety of approaches to developing skills and experience) and similarly a consideration of teaching and learning is very dependant on context.

The following grid demonstrates the different research activities that took place:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Research Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>September to November 2012</td>
<td>Filmed Interviews with five practitioners</td>
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<tr>
<td>September to December 2012</td>
<td>Survey conducted with fifteen companies; six invited because of their known training element for artists, the others responding through an open call sent out on our behalf by PAL (Participatory Arts London). The online survey brought good</td>
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material and this knowledge then fed into our student research day in January. This questionnaire covers the type of training arts organisations provide their new members of staff, and their on-going professional development provision which were the questions we were going to discuss with the companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January 2013</th>
<th>Research day with 10 students and graduates from Applied Theatre MA programmes</th>
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<td>March 2013</td>
<td>Research day with teachers of Applied Theatre practice and practitioners working in the field and an interviewed practitioner (11 people attended).</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Roundtable with invited participants from all sectors of the research, including: practitioners, lecturers, graduates and employers of MA graduates, responding to provocations circulated in advance (14 people attended).</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Three 1 hour workshops to pilot the films and activities, and to receive feedback from the students. Two sessions were run with MA students at Goldsmiths College, the other session was run with final year BA Applied Theatre students at Central.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On going throughout research period</td>
<td>Three online, filmed provocations with suggested activities for MA lecturers. One summative film to accompany the HEA report.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2013</td>
<td>Launch event</td>
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<tr>
<td>11th March 2014</td>
<td>Research Seminar at RCSSD</td>
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We began by simultaneously researching how arts organisations and companies support and train their arts workers and investigating their interest in employing practitioners with an MA in Applied Theatre or Applied Drama. Alongside this, we identified five practitioners who did not study socially engaged practice in their art form in an academic setting, and interviewed them to learn more about their training and development.

Based on these findings, we devised and delivered a collaborative research day with students and recent graduates of MA in Applied Theatre. At this event, we investigated the students’ views of doing an MA in Applied Theatre, considered the practice’s space within the academy and what it offered by the opportunity for considered research and reflection. Crucially we also explored with them the ingredients required for the applied or socially engaged practitioner and asked them to name where these skills and qualities came from (either through training or through practice, or through personal qualities that are enhanced through experience, or both) (A summary of these ideas can be found in Appendix F).

These ideas and discussions were then fed into our second collaborative research day with teachers of applied practice and practitioners who also teach at MA level.

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4 Many of the courses have slightly different names and we use ‘MA in Applied Theatre’ as a generic name to cover all of these courses.
Run in similar fashion, we shared with the participants the students’ views and our conclusions about their discussions. We asked the teachers to reflect on issues affecting the teaching of applied practice, including the sheer breadth of the field and the different levels of experience of students coming to do MAs. We then went on to invite them to consider the ingredients needed by the applied or socially engaged practitioner (examples of their views can be found in Appendix F).

Following on from this, we held a roundtable with invited presentations within a particular format. We asked two to three participants to prepare a response to one of the three provocations, which were circulated to all the participants prior to the event. The whole group heard these responses before embarking on a timed group discussion for each of the themes. As a whole we found this technique particularly effective in that the participants felt the conversation remained focused on discussing the theme in question.

Our final event will be a launch event of this report and a showing of the films, with contributions from invited speakers in November 2013.

**A final note on our research questions and objectives:**

Two other research questions were initially posited (How can we engage with and incorporate emerging fields and contexts such as technology and social media? and How can we articulate the strengths and weaknesses of such training, and who should be doing the assessing?). As the research developed we chose to focus on our first two questions as we felt these were more important to consider in depth, and at our research events participants foregrounded the aspects we have highlighted in the filmed provocations.

Nonetheless, when opening up the question of the use of technology and social media, while wanting increased connection and conversation (between teachers of applied practice, and between graduates of MA courses for example), the majority of responses favoured using existing networks rather than beginning anything new.

In relation to the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of different training routes, our methodology did not allow for a large enough number of respondents to produce robust qualitative evidence of views on this subject. However, many suggestions emerged from our research events, which do contribute to our recommendations, and will form part of later investigations and analysis.
3. FINDINGS

A. THE EMPLOYER SURVEY

Surveying fifteen arts organisations led to some interesting views and practices, namely on the levels of employment of artists with MAs, the in-house induction and training provided and the organisations’ views of the training offered on MAs in Applied Theatre, all of which we incorporated into our discussions with both the graduates and teachers of applied practice.

The results indicated that all fifteen organisations that responded employ freelance artists and they all look for particular skills held by these artists. The most popular skills noted were firstly strong practical skills specific to their art forms. Organisations mentioned the importance of recruiting experienced artists who also have excellent participative and facilitative skills, namely ‘Skills in working with people and engaging and negotiating with people’. Indeed creativity and flexibility were two oft-repeated skills alongside the importance of holding strong communication skills, specifically with people from wide and varied backgrounds and groups. Additionally strong administrative skills, including time management, reliability, planning and budgeting skills, were noted as being crucial for many of the organisations. Other key skills noted were reflective practice and critical thinking, collaborative approaches, and kindness and empathy.

In terms of qualifications and training, not all companies look for specific qualifications, but noted that they welcomed the diverse transferable skills that came from doing a BA or an MA in the subject area, with one company noting:

‘However, certain assumptions can be made if someone does have that qualification. That they will have had important discussions about participation and process versus product for example, that they are a reflective practitioner and that we will share a common language’.

Statistically, four companies noted that they did not know or did not ask about MA qualifications, the majority of the rest indicated low numbers of artists with MAs, between less than 5% to between 5 to 20%. The remaining four companies each noted a different percentage of 30-40%, 50%, 60% and 70%.

Surveying the induction and training offered by companies, 13 companies offer induction to their incoming artists, of which for ten companies this is a compulsory process. The induction offered varies across the different organisations and ranges from a six-month training process, to formal meetings and induction into the company’s policies and codes of conducts, to more informal observations of existing practice, work shadowing and introductions to the building (for building-based companies). Again, thirteen companies provide training for their freelance artists and of these organisations, three always pay their artists for training while for other companies it depends on the kind of training offered. In terms of content, the different trainings offered include Health and Safety, arts award training, safeguarding and child protection, first aid, specific skills development, CPD, specific groups (e.g. disability, dementia, access), and some mentoring is offered as well.
Additionally to the training offered to employed artists, ten companies offer training to artists outside of their organisations, some of which involves a fee depending on the content, the context (who it is for e.g. a school or local authority) and the costs. Many of the companies try to share their training with other organisations as well. Similarly to the training offered to employed artists, the training offered includes developing specific skills and practice or learning to work in different contexts or with specific groups, e.g. the criminal justice system.

Finally, we asked the organisations to comment on and offer their views of what is provided by MA programmes in applied theatre. While some organisations noted having no particular viewpoints, others celebrated the learning/training taking place, with one organisation noting, ‘It’s great, they have an awareness of ethics, objectives and a passion for community arts which other freelancers don’t always.’ Similarly, another organisation commented: ‘I think the training is great and getting better. We have MA students on placement and they are more and more capable and more and more sensitive. I think there is a danger that they finish the course thinking ‘I’m ready’ and perhaps in some cases emphasis needs to be put on the fact that this is one aspect of their training, the other being out in the world on their own.’ Other companies noted some reservations about some of the contents covered, for example one organisation noted ‘I fear sometimes that there is an over-reliance on the teachings of Boal and that lots of applied practice gets filtered through a Theatre of the Oppressed framework’. Alongside this, organisations also proposed areas which they would welcome greater focus on, such as some of the key facilitation skills and questioning styles, responsivity, critiquing one’s own practice and being reflective. Other suggestions included a stronger focus on the practicalities of freelance work and work after the degree, such as how to set up a company or pitch for work, and for the recruitment of more disabled students and professionals. Alongside this, one organisation commented:

‘I feel that their research based and theoretical explorations should be frames [sic] with practical application within a supportive environment as far as possible- preparing them to be flexible, resilient and perceptive once they enter professional working contracts’.

Building on these responses, fourteen of the companies indicated an interest in either continuing with their existing teaching contributions on MA programmes or developing partnerships and shared approaches with MA programmes, with one organisation commenting: ‘I think there is a need to look at the - valuable - conversations that happen within an academic setting and see how they translate on a practical level’.
B. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Our key findings are illustrated below with quotations from our research partners; students, academics and artists

1. THAT THE ACADEMIC ROUTE PROVIDES A CHANCE TO INVESTIGATE AND INTERROGATE

All current and past students who participated in the research spoke positively about the opportunity to reflect on practice.

I felt that I, I had picked up bits of training along the way but I hadn't had a rigorous training in applied drama and I didn’t have, I didn’t know the foundations of it the theory behind it, and the MA really filled that gap really in my professional life actually, and it also, it gave me a network of people which I got in pockets because I worked for different organisation with their own networks, but I don’t know, I suppose it gave me a slightly different, an academic and theoretical perspective rather than just a practical perspective and it contextualised everything I was doing and gave me much more confidence and also allowed me to reflect on my practice and hopefully allowed me to make it better and it continues to do that.

Leonie Dodd, MA Applied Theatre graduate

Those who already had an established practice felt that it gave them a chance to step back and reflect, and many students appreciated the opportunity to engage with contextual writing by artists and theorists that they felt deepened their understanding and challenged them.

Established artists who we interviewed also spoke about the opportunities that the MA route could offer

I might like to do an MA, only because the opportunity, the invitation to reflect is a really valuable one and the danger is that in practice is that you don’t reflect so you sort of tumble on and I think that might be interesting, just to have time to stop and think.

Liz Rothschild, Actor & Director

2. THAT THE ACADEMIC ROUTE CAN BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP AS A PRACTITIONER

Many students and past students reported that their courses exposed them to the breadth of the field of work, and to important ethical and practical issues. For some it was also an opportunity to redefine themselves as practitioners. Given the variety of backgrounds, work experience and training that the students come from, the courses often gave students the opportunity to build up an area in which they had less confidence.
The idea of identifying myself as an artist was for me the really crucial thing that I learned.

Jenni Halton, MA Graduate

I felt like the MA really supported me in discovering what my practice was and linking all those different parts of my life together to create my own practice so not to emulate someone else’s practice but to make the practice of Anna Bosworth if that makes sense, quite rigorous and a truth, a reality in my own life.

Anna Bosworth, MA Graduate

3. THAT STUDYING APPLIED THEATRE AT MA LEVEL IS ONE PART OF LIFE LONG LEARNING

The experienced practitioners who we interviewed emphasised again and again that they were still learning, and that they were people who loved to learn. Their learning consisted both in taking courses, (for example in Community Building), but also in looking for situations that would challenge them to go into new territory.

I have never done the same thing twice!

Lucy Steggals, visual artist

For students, there was sometimes a sense of hoping that the course would somehow be a ‘complete’ training, but all those we met who had graduated had a very clear sense that the learning was ongoing.

I think it’s something that I have to go away and develop further after the course finished and maybe that was something that was done for a reason because maybe actually you need to find that out outside of, that particular course isn’t the best place for everyone to be trying to find out what their artistic identity is because there is not room so that is something that started near the end of the course but was really crucial for me …it’s not a bullet point list of things that you learn but it’s an ability to have a discussion about that what things to be looking out for in your work and to kind of develop a confidence to be open about things

Jenni Halton MA graduate

I thought I was coming to the end, but actually it is just the beginning!

Carrie Hage, current MA student
4. THAT STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN FROM PRACTITIONERS AND THAT PRACTICE NEEDS TO BE RECOGNISED

Lecturers from University courses acknowledged that their courses do not often attract experienced practitioners. This may be because their past practice is not acknowledged in a formal sense within the course, i.e. it is not credited. One clear suggestion is that Universities look at ways for experienced participatory artists to be able to get a credit for past experience.

*I think I’d like to see more credence taken of practitioner experience. There are a number of practitioners who’ve been out there in this sector doing the work for a number of years, so if the courses that they elect to subscribe to could somehow take an understanding of that experience, and factor that into the learning process, both for them and for their colleagues in their cohort, I think that would be useful.*

*Sylvan Baker, PhD student and Associate Director, People’s Palace Projects*

This aspect was also a recognition that students gain a huge amount for direct contact with practice, through teachers and lecturers who also practice, through direct involvement in projects, and through placements. The value lies not only in the passing on of particular skills and approaches, but also in the contact with role models and rich experience, including experiences of challenging difficult experiences. (It was acknowledged that in London, there is competition for placement hosts, with some organisations taking on students from several institutions. In a meeting of Placement Hosts in one London institution there were several hosts who reported that they had students from three institutions at one time, all with different protocols and arrangements.)

5. THAT BECOMING OVER ANALYTICAL, AND AN EMPHASIS ON SUCCESS CAN CAUSE ANXIETY IN STUDENTS

All the teachers of Applied Practice reflected on a high level of anxiety that can exist within their student cohorts. This was attributed to a variety of pressures:

- Increasing anxiety about gaining employment
- The system of accreditation, highlighting the desire for high grades
- A number of students who have been away from academic study for some time
- The breadth and complexity of the field and the necessity to cover many aspects in a short period of time
- The lack of a cohort who have gone before you (since most MA courses are one year)

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5 This discussion is more fully examined in Amanda Stuart Fisher and Susan Oman’s 2011 Palatine Research Project, Exchange Collaborations, which produced a report examining enhancing collaborative models of learning and teaching in the performing arts with HEIs and their professional partners.
For me, I see a contrast between what happens for BA students, where they get to learn about the course, and the progress, and the career of a student, and what it is to be a student, from people a couple of years ahead of them, and they get anxious, but they also have seen it happen. And for MA students, for the vast majority of them are 1-year courses, it’s you and your cohort usually, and you don’t get to learn what it’s like to be at the crisis point, you don’t get to learn what it looks like – going into your final project... And I think that’s what magnifies the anxiety. Along with some other things – money, the fact that you’ve made sacrifices, the fact that it needs to be a decisive life-changing period for you. But all of that adds up to a very anxious person.

Gareth White, Senior Lecturer, Royal Central School of Speech & Drama

This led us to recommend

• Clarity in the offer made by Universities, in order to place this course as part of training rather than a complete training
• More contact for students with alumni of their course
• More space for reflection in the courses

I think very similar to what other people have been saying – less weight on the end – and remembering that actually the point of being in an institution is to make mistakes and to learn – that’s why we go there. We go there because we don’t know. We don’t go there to prove what we already know. And reminding students that that’s why they’re there.

Lucy Steggals, Visual Artist

6. THAT THE COURSES ARE ENRICHED WHEN THERE IS DIVERSITY IN STAFF AND STUDENTS

Two issues that emerged were around diversity in both staff and student bodies in the Universities. This reflected both a lack of Black and Minority Ethnic students and staff, but also a lack of disabled students and staff. It was also noted that the MA courses attract very few men. Given the groups and communities that socially engaged practitioners are likely to work with, it was felt that efforts need to be made to address these issues. Such examples of partnerships are common; for example Converge is York St John University’s partnership with Leeds and York NHS Trust Mental Health Services, while Goldsmith’s partnership with Talawa and Emergency Exit Arts, has resulted in the Creating Routes project, offering training to emerging BAME practitioners. Finally, Central, in partnership with Access All Areas, are collaborating to provide a one-year Performance Making Diploma for adults with learning disabilities, starting in 2014.

Ways forward focussed on the structure and nature of the courses:
So more mentoring opportunities, more close relationships between the academy and practice, more flexible structures with less focus on assessment, more opportunity for the student-centred approaches which look at what students bring, and where they’re at and how that can be nurtured, and the diversity of presence that that postgraduate level is much more accessible to people from a wide range of background, which will enrich the general community of learning as well.

Kay Hepplewhite, Lecturer, York St John University

It was also noted that where there is considerable diversity in the level of experience of students coming to do MAs. Some come with a practice on which to reflect and others wanting to learn the practice, having come from another background. This can work well, in terms of an exchange of skills between students, but can also be challenging in terms of pitching teaching at a universally accessible level.

7. THAT WE MUST MAKE SPACE TO REFLECT]

Students and lecturers spoke of the need to digest and reflect on what they were learning. Practitioners spoke about reflection and ‘down time’ as crucial to their development.

But it takes time; it takes space. You also have the MA student who’s coming because they want the sense of space and a structure, a structure within which they have to do that because it’s so hard to do that on your own. And yet the MA is so full, and crams so many things, that this space which they’re wanting, and don’t get it, and so that’s also part of the anxiety. The field gets bigger and bigger and there’s more and more to learn – and actually, really, they just need a week to just sit quietly, on their own, without any kind of task, and think.

Fiona Macbeth, Senior Lecturer, Exeter University

Building in time for reflection, but also encouraging and guiding reflective practice within a cohort, so that students are supported to discuss and reflect together seems crucial to the absorption of the learning.

… doing an MA in anything I think a lot of it is just being thoughtful for a year or two years and really thinking about something for that long, (...) me I think anything you put that much thought into anything you study for that amount of time will always enrich whatever practice it is that you are doing, you could do fine art, you could have done an MA in, I don’t know, an MA in Anthropology and it is still, it’s still the level of thought that has gone into something

Kate Treadell, MA Graduate
C. Adaptations

“I’d like to see more eccentricity. More risk. More exposure to other arts or mixing with other arts in collaboration. More absurdity. More anarchy. More honesty. More space to experiment. And more small stepping stones to larger pieces of work.” Alison Jeffers.

During the two research days with the MA students and graduates and the teachers of socially engaged practice, we asked both groups to consider what they would like more and less of during the MA programme. The answers from the students and graduates were shared with the teachers and they reflected on these as well, before contributing their views. Broadly speaking, among the students, many indicated a strong desire for more exposure to practice, opportunities to practice and facilitate and to understanding the practicalities of working after the MA. Indeed there was an evident desire for greater links with practitioners and more placements ‘practicing’ with organisations who do socially engaged work, although in the discussions with the students there was an acknowledgement of the existing placement parts of their courses and an understanding of the possibilities and the limitations of placements. Students also wished for more time and more staff and opportunities for peer led workshop practice and a sharing of peer and alumni knowledge, while wishing for less on-going evaluation of the courses (which is indicative of an on-going evaluation fatigue amongst HE students) and for lesser fees and smaller class sizes.

Don’t keep asking me to evaluate things, when the people who will benefit are the next cohort of students, not me. We had too many evaluation forms!

Ben Myers MA Graduate

However, it was the ‘More & Less’ comments from the teachers which were the most illuminating (and can be seen in more depth on the accompanying HEA DVD). Strikingly, one of the recurring notes from the teachers was a desire to see less fear among the students, less anxiety which was hobbling the students’ ability and space to learn. One teacher noted her concerns about ‘the students’ sort of sense of fear, and about the desperation and the high stakes. And I think sometimes that’s easy to get sucked into a vortex of that kind of – an anxiety vortex’. This trend in the ‘More & Less’ section echoed an earlier discussion during the teachers’ research day, in which a number of the teachers and practitioners discussed the high levels of student anxiety. While acknowledging the ‘high stakes’ involved for MA students (the fees, the decision to not work for a year or two in order to return to HE, other family or life...
pressures), it was noted that often the MA students want the staff to lead and direct their learning and become anxious in the face of practice which is more individually led. As one person commented, ‘they want to be taught and come out with their Badge “AT practitioner”’ but are wary of taking the responsibility for their learning through a fear of failing and a fear of ‘not being ready’.

Continuing this vein of discussion, one practitioner noted the importance of placing less weight on the end result but encouraging the students to recall the importance of making mistakes and learning, an approach which might also begin to help alleviate student anxiety. Similarly another teacher noted that having more flexible and responsive structures to the MA programmes might help to support the students better, ‘in a sense of centring on the students and what they bring and where their learning journeys could be’, while building strong links with external practice so that “real life practitioners” can have ‘a very close relationship with the students so that they can mentor the students as well as give examples of their practice and their work’.

Indeed, this aim/desire/suggestion for stronger links with practice and practitioners (echoing the students’ desires) was a popular note from the teachers, who indicated a range of responses beginning with a desire to see official credit given to practitioner experience, more visiting practitioners coming in (while acknowledging that this does occur) and a stronger investigation into the potential mutually beneficial collaborations possible between the academy and practice, and an investigation into more flexible routes through and into doing an MA.
4. OUTPUTS FROM THE RESEARCH

From our workshops and filmed interviews we have created a set of three films and three workshops plans, to use with MA students. These focus on our three key themes: Praxis, Skills and Qualities, and Creative Risk.

These films can be used as provocations for discussion in classes, and the workshop activities adapted to meet particular needs and intention.

Participants on our two research days also created Venn diagrams, to show their own opinions of what could best be learned through academic study, what best through practice, and which elements were found in both. These diagrams are also good for opening up discussion, or simply as an activity that students could do.

All of the films and suggested activities can be obtained online from the HEA Socially Engaged Teaching website on Central’s research pages: http://www.cssd.ac.uk/research/funded-research-projects/how-do-we-teach-socially-engaged-theatre-practice

An example of the diagram produced – full details can be found in the appendices.
5. ENCOURAGEMENTS TO THE HEA

I now wonder if the real benefit of that [reading] week was in the stopping, in letting things absorb into the mind, heart and body, in having just that luxurious time to think. Over the course of my professional life, I’ve learned more and more to carve out silence, solitude and time to think and the benefits have always been immense. (Gerri Moriarty)

The recommendations we make to the HEA and to our colleagues fall into two areas: the practical aspects of and the delivery of an MA programme, and the student learning experience, and the relationship with the industry and external practitioners.

Accordingly, we offer the following encouragements, with the caveat that in proposing certain actions and activities we are not suggesting that some of these approaches are not already in place at some institutions. Rather we have chosen to emphasise the importance of certain actions by reiterating them here as well as offering some other considerations, hence why we have described this section as encouragements.

A reconsideration of the allocation of time for reflection during the MA:

- Following what has been noted in all of the research events and many of the interviews with practitioners, we suggest that there needs to be an examination of the way time is allocated on an MA, in order to try to locate spaces and times for critical reflection and thinking. Some courses do offer reading weeks (c.f. Goldsmiths and QMUL), which provide a key period for independent thought and reflection. As one practitioner commented, there is a need for to sit in a field and think.

Considering different ways of reducing the student ‘anxiety vortex’ and the potential negative repercussions in terms of experimentation and creative risk taking.

- Teachers of applied practice were particularly aware of a level of anxiety in students and a lack of time and space to process the amount of learning that they were offered.

Clarity of the purpose of the MA pathway as being part of a learning experience.

- Responses from the online survey of employers demonstrated that employers are primarily looking for a skill-set and experience in future employees, and that an MA qualification is not universally accepted as evidence of such. (More than 50% of respondents did not know how many of their freelancers had MAs). This underlines our recommendation that Education institutions are clear about the MA pathway being part of a learning experience, and not a guaranteed qualification for.
Encourage opportunities for students across courses to meet and share experiences with recent graduates

- For example, we believe that responses from recently graduated students will be hugely useful to the students currently engaged in MA courses. These are accessible both through the films and potentially through other edits of the filmed material. The graduates spoke clearly about the ways in which their courses had benefited their practice, about what could only be learned in the field, and about how much they missed the opportunity to discuss ideas and concepts and interrogate their work deeply.

- In our discussions, we decided we did not want to create a new online forum but rather encourage students and past students to contribute to existing blog sites which would encourage guest bloggers, such as http://www.irundramasessions.blogspot.co.uk/

Sharing of practice between experienced practitioners and the learning dialogues possible.

- The films and suggested activities will allow others to build on our learning and continue to explore methodologies and approaches.

- In particular they will provide access to practitioners talking about their practice (not necessarily the practitioners in person but gaining access into their approaches and their life stories, the history of their experiences and hearing how and what they learned) which has been noted as a key aspect of learning/student experience.

Stronger links and more concrete relationships with both independent practitioners and the industry.

- Views from the companies indicated that the importance of incorporating existing organisations and practitioners within the MA teaching of applied practice. It is not to suggest that this does not already occur, it does and is very successful (a number of the organisations surveyed do teach or offer placements on the MAs) however it is to emphasise the importance that the companies place on such a relationship and indicate that this relationship should be one to explore and support further.

To investigate further the formal recognition of professional experience and offer more flexible routes in:

- To explore the possibilities of a mutually beneficial accreditation system for practitioners and developing stronger links with the academy.

- Aim to encourage “more flexible routes through and in. Which I think might open up some of the diversity issues that we have about MA cohorts. And perhaps allow some of the tensions between the need for more practice for some people – to learn a practice – to start from scratch with a practice even –
and for other people, to learn to reflect on a practice that’s already established”

Finally, the encouragements of new lines of investigation outlined above, (including the formal recognition of professional experience, increased contact between individual practitioners and companies and the academy, the place of student placements, for example), would all benefit from further research. We are in discussion with some of the attendees of our consultation days to look at how they and we might further this, and hope that the dialogue will continue informally and through our final event. This may lead to more formal research, and/or to informal discussions between teachers of applied practice in order to formulate proposals or experiment with new approaches
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY


7. APPENDICES

A. List of research contributors

The following people kindly participated in and contributed to our research:

- Dr. Alison Jeffers, Lecturer, University of Manchester
- Alice Malseed, independent theatre practitioner
- Anna Faye Bosworth - Digital Theatre Practitioner
- Anna Herrmann, Head of Education, Clean Break
- Ben Myers, independent theatre practitioner
- Fabio Santos, Artistic Director/ Joint CEO, Project Phakama UK
- Fiona Macbeth, Senior Lecturer, University of Exeter
- Gail Babb, Participation and Education Officer, Talawa Theatre Company
- Dr. Gareth White, Senior Lecturer, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
- Gerri Moriarty, community artist and arts consultant
- Jenni Halton, Community Drama and Theatre Practitioner
- Jessica Hodge, Youth arts manager, Croydon Council
- Joanne Scott, Practitioner and Doctoral Researcher, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
- Katherine Gill, independent theatre practitioner
- Kate Lovell, independent theatre practitioner
- Kay Hepplewhite, Senior Lecturer Theatre (Community), York St John University
- Kate Treadell, independent theatre practitioner
- Liz Rothschild, Director, Kicking the Bucket Festival, & Theatre Practitioner
- Lucy Steggals, Visual Artist
- Leonie Dodd, independent theatre practitioner
- Ola Animashawun, Creative Director Euphoric Ink Ltd
- Rosie Storr, independent theatre practitioner
- Sylvan Baker, Collaborative Doctoral Researcher. Associate Director, PPP (or People's Palace Projects)

The following students kindly took part in the pilot sessions:

- Andrea Tuijens
- Anna Bosworth
- Anniken Jensen
- Axa Hynes
- Caitlin Kennedy
- Christina Mejia
- Esther Mathews
- Joanne McGahon
- Katie Baskeyfield
- Kristel Kubber
The following companies contributed to our research and responded to our survey:

- Geese Theatre
- Magic Me
- Oval House Theatre
- Young Vic
- Green Shoes Arts
- 10 companies who responded anonymously
B. Descriptions of the films

As part of the research, four films were developed; three are short provocation films on the three key themes which emerged from the research and the other film is a summary of the major research findings and is not intended for teaching purposes.

C. Suggested activities to accompany the films

The three films that have come out of our research show practitioners, teachers and students talking about a particular theme. These are intended to provoke discussion and reflection around the theme, and to help students to reflect on their own ideas, opinions and dilemmas. All three films were piloted with groups of current and recently graduated students, and here we offer you some potential activities that can be used to develop the themes. Please adapt and develop; the activities obviously depend a lot on the stage and experience of your students, and the place in any course where they might be used.

With each theme we asked students to listen out for key ideas and phrases that struck them in the films, and note them down. These fuelled discussion, questions and personal response. In each of our workshops we used the film at a different point, but never first. Warm-up activities encouraged the group to start thinking about the themes themselves, which made them more alert to the filmed interviews.

1. PRAXIS

This film explores the balance between action and reflection, with particular reference to the theoretical reading that MA students in Applied Drama/Theatre might encounter, and the ways in which this might facilitate their reflection.

- Warm up activity: Place a book (ideally one familiar to the students from their reading list) and a ball in the centre of the circle. These represent reflection and action respectively. Everyone goes in one by one to show the relationship for them of these two aspects, with each other, and with them as a student, using still or moving image, but no words.
In our pilot workshop students bounced the ball on the book, tried to close the ball in the book, tried to open the book using the ball – a whole range of imaginative and revealing images.

- After watching and responding to the DVD, ask students to work in pairs. Their task is to share with each other any key text or idea that they have encountered that has helped them to understand a piece of practice better.

- Small groups: Give out a case study to each group, (for examples please Appendix D) and a short piece of contextual writing (a different one to each group) Ask the group to read these aloud and then see how they can help to illuminate each other.

- After 10 minutes ask the pairs to discuss an experience or piece of practice that has helped them to understand a key theory or idea better.

- Share back the students responses.

- When and where do we reflect? On a large piece of flipchart paper gather student’s observations on when and where they are able to reflect on practice and on theory. Ask each student to create for themselves a list (taken from the flipchart) of ways to increase their opportunities for reflection.

- Return to the warm up game. Again, going one by one into the circle, use the book and the ball to show your ideal relationship between theory/reflection and practice.

In our workshop all the students showed a different way of relating action and reflection this time around.

2. QUALITIES & SKILLS

In this film interviewees reflect on the qualities and skills that an artist needs to work in participatory and socially engaged settings. The distinction we make is between innate qualities, that the practitioner already possesses but can be developed, and skills that they need to learn. The film also explores where skills are learned and qualities honed.
• Warm-up activity: Show the students a wide range of objects, (we used a real variety, including a notebook, a banana, a screwdriver, a juggling ball, a camera, a pair of glasses, a mug, a set of keys, a crown, a toy bird, paints, binoculars) and ask them to choose objects that represent skills or qualities that they believe they have, as practitioners, and label them using a post-it.

• After watching the film create on the floor two large overlapping circles, using tape or string. Either by using distinct colours, or by labelling, identify one section as ‘Practice’, and the other ‘Academic courses’, with the overlapping section as ‘Both’. Ask students to place their objects and labels in the spaces which best represents where they could learn or have learned this skill or developed this quality.

• Once the entire group has contributed, look at the whole Venn diagram, and discuss.

• Show the group the Venn diagram created in our student research group (Appendix E). Discuss how this compares with their own one. What discoveries, and contradictions do they find?

• Personal audit: Ask each person to fill in a short audit form, under the headings: I have, I need to learn, I need to get from another person/organisation (see Appendix F for an example of the form).

• Share these back
3. CREATIVE RISKS

This film opens up the need to take creative risks, and a need to accept mistakes and failures, which can sometimes be at odds with the ethos of the academic world, where students’ goal is to succeed.

- Warm-up activity:
  On a large piece of flip-chart paper collect all the words and responses to the word Risk

- Identify which of these terms you would see as positive or negative. Try to unpack what are the ideas, attractions and fears that attach to the notion of risk.

- Ask the group to stand in a line across the room that expresses, as a continuum, where each person feels they stand in relation to Creative Risk, and then personal risk. Discuss

- After watching the DVD, and hearing responses, work in pairs to look at the following (or others that you might want to select) quotes from the DVD

  I’m really keen to do things I don’t know how to do or I don’t know anything about that means I’m going to have to find out how to do that and sort of in terms of learning and practice, there is a bit of me, I means it’s the same lesson of failure is fine, it’s actually, I mean again it’s with age and maturity you’ve got a certain level of going this set of workshops isn’t going to work. Or if there is a chance of it not going to work, but that’s fine because I’m trying to find something out.

  I really learnt something about the group of people that I was working with about how much fear, I think a lot of what you are doing is removing the fear from people’s existence so they can do whatever they want to do and that’s not always necessarily a creative thing but it’s a creative path to get there to sort of thinking “well I can”.


Maybe it’s being responsive to them, talking to them, listening to them, creating a safe environment, creating space

• In the same pairs discuss the notion of Safe Space. Create a joint definition, and share this back with the group.
• In small groups or individually write a short manifesto for an applied practitioner that includes the words ‘safe space’ and ‘creative risk’. For example, one group of students noted: “Safety brings people the ability to lose their sense of fear, to trust each other and to relax. So, as practitioners we must always aim to make our spaces feel safe, physically and emotionally. But the aim of this is to help people to take creative risks, to play and release their imaginations. The two things are hand in hand.”
D. Case Studies for Praxis Film Activities

CASE STUDY 1

Working in a regular drama workshop for children with and without disabilities, aged between 8 and 12, the facilitators aim to work in ways that help everyone to participate, whatever their particular needs. There are two drama facilitators and two volunteers who are there to help with one to one support. In one workshop the facilitators want to do some sensory work and ask all the children to remove their shoes. They have prepared different surfaces for the group to walk on, including bubble wrap and artificial grass. One of the children wears ankle boots that help him with his mobility, and he doesn’t unusually remove them in the daytime. One of the volunteers is unhappy about this, but, rather than contradict the facilitator in the session, goes ahead and helps the boy off with his shoes. His mobility is affected, but with an adult on each side of him, he is able to walk across the different surfaces, and seems to enjoy it. However, in the evaluation after the session the volunteer and the facilitator remain really adamant about their positions, one arguing that it was important to support the young person to do something unfamiliar, and the volunteer who believed that the activity was too risky.

- How would you ask questions about access issues using this case study?
- How would you ask questions about risk and the role of the practitioner using this case study?

CASE STUDY 2

Working in a situation where the facilitator and the participants come from different cultural contexts, on issues that the local community want to discuss, the facilitator aims to be open and welcoming to the participants, creating a space in which allows all to participate and contribute at a level they feel comfortable at. One participant is deeply involved in the practice, contributing, playing and enjoying, generally helping to push and expand the work. After one session, the participant approaches the practitioner to ask for some advice. She is living with her baby’s father who is providing shelter and food for them, however he is not faithful and is occasionally violent. She does not have anyone else to turn to and does not feel able to return home to live with her family (it would mean returning to the countryside where there is very limited work). She is currently unemployed, her child is under a year old and feels she has no options. She asks the facilitator for help because they are the same age and she feels the facilitator would be able to offer advice. The facilitator is very troubled by this, particularly seeing how despairing the young woman is. What advice can she offer in this context?

- How would you consider the ethics of this situation and what ethical framework would you drawn on?
- How would you question and consider the role of and the limits of the practitioner in this context?
E. Venn Diagrams

Where do we learn our skills in applied arts practice?
Views of teachers in Applied Theatre practice

BOTH

ACADEMIC

- To speak is the language that important people understand
- The importance of structure
- Connection to the wealth and riches of the ideas and practice and rejection of others all over the world
- Learn from others (who you’ve never met) footsteps
- Rigorous and expansive analysis
- Understanding of the structures and values of formal learning
- Being asked to articulate ideas and intuitions, and not assume I am understood
- Greater/increased sensitivity to a larger world
- Time - to think and seek answers rather than just to keep swimming

PRACTICE

- Play
- Resilience
- Reading people
- Lateral thinking
- A safe space to take risks
- The importance and intuition
- To collaborate, share knowledge, skills etc
- Sweat enjoyment
- Bolt of inspiration (what moments)
- What safety and safe space actually means
- The passage of thoughts/ideas/skills from one part of myself to another
- Learn from the past/wise ones
- Asking: What does the work need
- Adapt for the future/new
- Luck

- Constantly re-shuffling
- To keep things in motion
- On the spot flexibility
- To bend, be flexible
- Plan B/GUARD
- Readiness
- Work with/through failure
- To be at ease with what I do/how I do it
- Expect the unexpected
- Lesego
- Endurance
- Subtle, nuanced differences that come out of all our choices, none are wrong
- Feedback that helps me know my strengths and my weaknesses

= Learned through both
= Through an academic/MA route
= I have learned from practice
Where do we learn our skills in applied arts practice?:

Views of recent graduates in Applied Theatre practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACADEMIC</th>
<th>PRACTICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security and confidence</td>
<td>Taking mental images to inform future planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Networks</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy/Economics/Cultural/Social context</td>
<td>Leaving room for surprise and inspiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice and ethical grounding from established practitioners</td>
<td>Flexibility, sensitivity, resourcefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident to deal with difficult issues in the moment but then to reflect</td>
<td>Be honest, in a light, positive, inquisitive open way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The support and skills of other applied practitioners</td>
<td>Managing participants expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional confidence and a protective layer.</td>
<td>If I give something of myself I connect with people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allies: peers, tutors, and the people we read</td>
<td>Know everyone’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping an open mind facilitator and participants</td>
<td>Responsiveness, Fluidity, impulsiveness, Intuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and people with whom to reflect, plan and deconstruct</td>
<td>An assured voice (with a mute and a quiet button)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sharp, thinking on the spot and being adaptable</td>
<td>Willingness to scrap plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the bigger picture fits with the detail</td>
<td>Be welcoming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

= I have learned from practice
= Through an academic/MA route
= Learned through both
F. Form for Qualities and Skills exercise

Personal Qualities and Skills

I have:

I need to learn:

I need to get from another person:
G. Conference paper presented at the TaPRA 2013 Conference

This is a version of the paper presented at the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Conference entitled: ‘Without reflection – “You Tumble On” – considering the need for spaces of reflection and reducing the student anxiety vortex’, and is based on the findings of this research.

TAPRA 2013:

Without reflection – “You Tumble On” – considering the need for spaces of reflection and reducing the student anxiety vortex

by Dr Katharine Low (Royal Central School of Speech & Drama) and Sue Mayo (Goldsmiths College)

Glasgow, September 2013

KAT

This research has always been about examining the field of MA teaching in socially engaged theatre as a whole and we are mindful of not comparing courses individually but rather are pulling out findings which reflect on the field. In keeping with this, we are not identifying all of the participants.

Sue and I began this research prompted by the realization that we were both teaching MA courses in applied theatre but had come from different paths ourselves and had noted how our different paths into applied practice had had an influence on our teaching approaches.

In essence we mirrored the two approaches into applied practice: the academic route and the apprenticeship path.

Together we shared and supported each other’s teaching but it prompted the desire to research the different routes into becoming an ‘Applied Theatre Practitioner’ (that supposed badge) and to consider what it is specifically that an MA in the subject offers. As an area of research, this is growing and we encourage you to draw from and engage with Kay’s excellent research into the applied practitioner and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s ArtWorks initiative and research into ongoing training and support for working practitioners.

With ten Universities in the UK offering Masters courses in Applied Theatre/Drama, and at least five other MAs that can include an Applied Theatre strand, plus an increasing number of Undergraduate Drama courses offering Applied Theatre as an module, University is a strong option for people wanting to work with theatre in socially engaged settings. At the same time, many individuals do not access these courses, learning instead through experience, short courses, and mentoring.

Taking as our main question – how do you teach socially engaged practice at MA
level, we interviewed a number of practitioners who had not taken the academic route in and conducted a survey of 15 companies about their freelance practitioners. We shared the emerging findings with students and graduates of MA courses at a collaborative research day before meeting teachers of socially engaged practice at another research day. Here we asked the teachers to reflect on issues affecting the teaching of applied practice and eventually brought all of these ideas to a final roundtable discussion in June. Alongside these research days and interviews, we have also developed three teaching films noting some of the key issues in teaching and some suggested activities to accompany them, a findings report and accompanying films.

Our research has shown that both experienced and new practitioners, whether or not they have done an MA, identify three main elements that they need. One is a cohort or a collective. For many of the experienced practitioners, namely Fabio Santos, Gerri Moriarty, Liz Rothschild, Lucy Steggals, and Ola Animashawun, this had come through time spent working with a group of colleagues and experiencing, reflecting and improving their practice together. For the graduates, this had come through their courses, with many students staying connected and sometimes working together after graduating. The second important factor, was the benefit of mentors. These might be practitioners with whom they worked (for example Jane Winnearls, Annie Castledine, Noel Greig, Graham Woodruff, Steven Jeffreys, and Augusto Boal, or they might be writers with whom they engaged. The third aspect was that of space and time to reflect, to make mistakes and to take risks.

This was also a key point for the teachers of applied practice who identified a need for much more space and time within Masters courses. Many of them commented on high levels of anxiety amongst students.

It is this point that is the crux of the paper – does the academic framework and course structure of an MA programme provide enough space for students to experiment, make mistakes and reflect. We will set the context, hear from teachers through the film and then we will share some of our findings.

SUE

Firstly, I want to draw attention to two elements which are crucial to the context of the research. Many of our research respondents spoke about the sheer complexity of the field, its growth, the importance of international dimensions, and the sheer variety of work that a course might endeavour to cover. One student remarked: *I think there is so much sort of, sociological, artistic, community led and academic force behind the applied field that it really needs to be in an institution that supports and recognises that completely. I don’t think it could be done anywhere else.*

In my teaching experience, the more established the field becomes, the more students expect it to be an easily identifiable, monolithic object. That is to say a field that has a fence, and some gates that lead to other fields. My sense is that this needs to be unravelled, opened up and re-presented as a force field, (as described by Kurt Lewin in Field Theory, where the field is seen as a dynamic, shifting field of forces, where elements constellate and separate according to outer and inner
influences. This approach, I propose, allows students to be much more responsible for making their own connections, building their own learning and engaging with the key ideas and underlying themes that bring this ‘force field’ under an umbrella term. It also challenges students who have a very fixed view of what the field might be, for example students who are only aware of work with young people, to learn through the disturbance of their fixed position, and to encounter new forms, new content, new intentions.

Another layer of context is the diversity of the student body studying Applied Theatre at MA level. From the experience of myself and of Kat, as well as what we heard from other lecturers in the Academy, students come from backgrounds in theatre, in social activism, in education, or from a passion for a particular group, for example learning disabled adults, or refugees. In many institutions they are also very international groups, and there can be a wide age range. This adds richness to the courses, and to the cohort that so many students value. Because their practice will demand a raft of skills, the variety of skills brought into the student cohort can be a real gift in terms of skills exchange.

In terms of the pedagogy, it also presents challenges. In the film that accompanies this report, Fiona Macbeth (University of Exeter) speaks about the practitioner with ten years experience who wants to step back and reflect, working alongside a recent BA drama graduate. There can be challenges both in terms of teaching methodologies, and in terms of meeting needs. If we think of the route taken by some of our artist interviewees, they worked, as I did, in situations where inexperienced artists were mentored within Companies, or by individuals. Many of them spoke about particular, significant individuals who provided support and challenge as they found their own way. Is this kind of learning possible, and is it desirable, within the Academic structure?

Both the complexity of the field, and the diverse needs and skills of the students call for adequate time and structures to reflect, digest and make sense of the taught aspects of the course. And underlying this is the need to recognise what all the artists interviewed underline, that the learning in this field is life-long. Encouragingly, the group of past MA students who we met with articulated clearly that what they had learned on their MA made sense in new ways as they entered the world of work, and that this synthesis of their academic learning and their practice was proving to be the most valuable thing.

Yet the increased professionalisation of the field that our research indicated, creates a greater pressure from students to feel that they leave courses qualified as Masters of their practice. Does this make them more risk averse, more anxious about succeeding, i.e. getting their qualification and getting it with distinction? One lecturer emphasised the Academy as a place to learn through taking risks. If an MA isn’t a place to take risks, then that’s actually quite frightening. So I would be really worried if I thought that an MA course didn’t allow a student to do that, and that they didn’t get assessed on it either. You know, you get assessed on your creative risk, fine if you fail, but you get assessed on just taking those risks. To which another lecturer

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6 The Kurt Lewin Reader 1999 American Psychological Association
responded: Well it’s really interesting that the students internalise that notion of ‘I must! I must! I can’t fail!’

In the accompanying film, writer and director Liz Rothschild is identifying the danger of just tumbling on without creating a space to reflect as something which happens to practitioners, but in actual fact, is this something which does happen on an MA as well. One of the biggest impairments to reflection is anxiety and student anxiety was one of the recurring points raised by the teachers. They expressed a desire to see less fear among the students, less anxiety which was hobbling the students’ ability and space to learn. One lecturer noted her concerns about ‘the students’ sort of sense of fear, and about the desperation and the high stakes. And I think sometimes that’s easy to get sucked into a vortex of that kind of – an anxiety vortex’.

It is important to understand and name the context of the pressure on and pressure from students to succeed, to not fail. For MA students there are a variety of pressures:

- Increasing anxiety about gaining employment
- The system of accreditation, highlighting the desire for high grades
- The cost of an MA: the fees, the decision to not work for a year or two in order to return to HE, other family or life pressures
- A number of students might have been away from academic study for some time
- The breadth and complexity of the field and the necessity to cover many aspects in a short period of time
- A Key pressure is also the lack of contact with the cohort which went before you (since most MA courses are one year)
  - Indeed, an MA can feel like an island and the space and time to build a collective is less than on a BA for example where you have the space to learn from and reflect on the crisis points. On an MA experiences are heightened and speeded up: there is a new institution, a new course structure and even a new country to get your head around.

Finally, there is also

- A lack of other possible options? There are few vocational or non-HE options. If someone wanted to take a year to enhance their skills what routes would be possible. The freelance practitioner route can been difficult and daunting.

While there are ‘high stakes’ involved for MA students, what we observed and heard from the teachers that often the MA students want the staff to lead and direct their learning and become anxious in the face of practice which is more individually led. Indeed while, ‘they want to be taught and come out with their Badge “AT practitioner”’ (Gareth) they are wary of taking the responsibility for their learning through a fear of failing and a fear of ‘not being ready’.
Coupled with this, there also exists a high level of student anxiety around theory and about not being taught enough. For example, the students commented in the research day that they wanted more: ‘More: History of Applied’, ‘More up to date/emerging issues and practice’ ‘More longer tutorials’ ‘More: time’. This is similar to what both Sue and I have heard from other students’ and their desire to want more information, more ‘lectures’. However, as Fiona points out in the film, “the MA is so full...and actually, really, they just need a week to just sit quietly, on their own, without any kind of task, and think”.

Having that space to think might also help to alleviate fears of theory. One practitioner who had completed an MA in Fine Arts spoke of how an institution should be a ‘safe space for chaos’ where you can learn and experiment with ideas and theory. However, sometimes for students, the fears associated with taking risks as Sue has mentioned above, coupled with a concern that you won’t understand the theory can increase anxiety. As one person commented: “the weight of theory becomes so heavy that you feel like you’re like stuck to the floor, when you’re so paralyzed with fear that you can’t get up and do anything.

Indeed, as you have seen on the film, Lucy notes the importance of placing less weight on the end result and encouraging the students to recall that ‘the point of being in an institution is to make mistakes and to learn’, an approach which might also begin to help alleviate student anxiety. Here too, finding more space or ways of encouraging students to identify reflection strategies and techniques useful to them, and not necessarily linked with their assessment tasks, would be useful. Perhaps this could be achieved by building stronger links with external practice so that “real life practitioners” can have ‘a very close relationship with the students so that they can mentor the students as well as give examples of their practice, their work,’ and their reflection strategies.

Indeed, one of our recommendations is to explore more flexible and responsive structures to the MA programmes as this might help to support the students better and lessen that anxiety vortex. There is an interest in exploring what the students ‘bring and where their learning journeys could be’.

**SUE**

In many ways this piece of research feels like the beginning of a long conversation rather than a conclusion. Nonetheless, there are a few points that emerge that could be called recommendations, although we know that we are addressing a wide range of institutes who may already be doing these things, so we would also call them encouragements.

- Framing academic courses in the ‘Applied’ field as part of a practitioner’s development, but not as ‘definitive’, final or a ‘training’. This needs to be clear in the invitation to students, but also in the content of courses. What would support this is more contact with experienced artists, and past graduates of the same MA, not just as lecturers, but also as exemplars of future pathways.
- Attracting more experienced practitioners to MA courses, by finding ways to formally credit past practice as part of their degree
- Building on good relationships between practicing artists and organisations and students, for mutual benefit.
- Appreciating and structuring in the need for time to reflect. For this student it...
meant doing the course part time:

You have more time to grow. Time to network. Time to breathe. In my first year the theory side to the course at times seemed very overwhelming. It was hard to get my head around it all and it seemed like there was a lot. For me I learnt more from applying the theory/learning the theory through doing the practical learning in the weekly workshops. When sitting at home reading I never fully felt I was getting 100% out of the theory, it was only when we applied it that I began to fully engage with it. You really do need time to sit and think and let it digest. Then once it’s digested you need more time to think about what you really feel and how you place yourself within the field and the theory? Then once you have thought about that, you need more time to think about how you can combine and apply your own practice. Then after that you need time to think about your doubts and your excitement. Time is vital! and by being part time I have had longer to engage with it, understand it, and interrogate it. This has made the whole learning experience much more fulfilling and worthwhile for me.