

Learning is understanding in practice: exploring the interrelations between perception, creativity and skill.

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Abstract

Both art and anthropology may be considered as ways of exploring how the knowledge that people have of the world around them is generated, organised and transferred. Our project aims to bring both disciplines together in order to forge an integrated approach to such an exploration. The fundamental premise of this approach is that knowing, along with perceiving, learning, remembering and imagining, is a social activity that goes on within the context of people's mutual involvement in a richly structured environment. A research team comprising of artists, art historians, anthropologists and architects have been developing this approach by way of a study of the knowledge practices of fine art.

What can be learned from the practice of making? How does art enrich pedagogy? How are artists' skills learned or acquired? Can an artist be educated? How does knowledge gained through art practice relate to other forms of knowledge regarded by the public as more or less authoritative or trustworthy? Underlying these questions is the broader question of how information transmitted through formal instruction relates to skill that learners develop through their own experiments. Skill is often understood as the mere application of knowledge. This implies however, that knowledge is transmitted in a disembodied, context-free form-that is, as information – independently and in advance of its application in specific contexts of practice. Our approach overturns this view. We take skill to consist in the embodied capacities of action and perception that people develop throughout life in the course of their practical activities. In this sense, we argue, skill is the very ground of knowledge, and not merely its application. Nevertheless the relation between skill and information remains problematic.

As a collaborative venture between researchers in art and anthropology, this project is entirely novel. Up to now, most anthropological work in the field of art has treated visual culture as an object of investigation, yielding an anthropology of art (Coote and Shelton 1992, Gell 1998). Our approach, by contrast, regards art an investigative and exploratory practice, on par with the practice of anthropology. Thus our aim is to exploit the synergy between art and anthropology as practices of exploration. The synergy, in

short, lies not so much in the products of art and anthropology, as in their ways of working. Though novel in art history and social anthropology, our approach resonates with that of well-established currents of research in ecological psychology and in science and technology studies (STS). Influenced by James Gibson's (1979) pioneering work on visual perception, ecological psychologists have shown how the development of perceptual skills –or what Gibson calls 'the education of attention' –takes place within the contexts of perceivers' direct, practical engagement with their surroundings. This has been paralleled, in STS, with the approach to knowledge as grounded in environmentally situated actions, developed by Lucy Suchman (1987). Building on this work, the sociologist of science David Turnbull has explored the relation between local knowledge and comparative scientific traditions, in a way that could have direct parallels for our investigation of how locally developed, skilled practices can suggest new ways of looking at environmental perception and understandings of nature (Ingold 2000), the politics of objectification (Harvey 1998), the connections between persons, technologies and places (Harvey, Green and Agar 2000), and the relation between 'local' and 'global' knowledge systems (Strathern 1995).

In the context of our research we treat the fine art teaching studio, the anthropology seminar room and the architectural design teaching studio as places in which to study the interrelations, in practice, between perception, creativity, innovation and skill. Within these contexts we are examining how students, teachers and creative practitioners move between a variety of materials and technologies in the exploration of innovative practices. Through this, we aim to understand how students and teachers of fine art, architecture and anthropology perceive the relation between the mental and the material, and how this might be affected by the introduction of new technologies into situated contexts of learning.

Central to the entire project is the idea of practice-based exploration conceived as a way of enhancing collaboration between the various disciplines and knowledge traditions involved in the study. The methodologies adopted are designed to connect the research questions with the ethnographic practice of participant observation. The way to understand how knowledge is acquired, we contend, is for the researcher to participate in the processes and settings of its acquisition, and to reflect critically on these from the perspective of an insider. This is fundamental to an anthropological approach adopted by the project. It is for this reason too the project is intrinsically interdisciplinary. Moreover our experiments in teaching and learning have contributed to our project aims of testing whether learning can be a way of doing research, and practice a way of doing theory

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The research project has its origins in an approach from Professor Tim Ingold at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, to members of the Department of Fine Art at the University of Dundee. Professor Ingold is one of the leading anthropologists of his generation, and in recent years he has put the study of skilled practices at the heart of his research effort. Ingold's insight that art and anthropology are similar in their focus upon learning through doing, gives the project its direction. The work of Tim Ingold explicitly sets out to show how the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology can be connected on the level of exploratory practice.

Professor Macdonald's contribution to the research (in part through his studies of the work of Patrick Geddes) and his focus on the very idea of interdisciplinarity – is significant in this regard. A key member of the project team is postdoctoral research fellow Dr Wendy Gunn. Her research focuses on the interconnections, in practice, of speech, gesture, drawing and writing, and the role of narrative and the coupling of actions and perceptions in artists' and teachers working practices. By working alongside graduate students taking the Master's of Fine Art programme at the University of Dundee, she is addressing specific questions concerning the nature of artists' skills, how they are acquired, how the artists' knowledge relates to anthropological and architectural knowledge traditions, and how this is affected by technological changes. She has extensive experience of fine art education and practice, architectural teaching and collaborative architectural practice alongside research training in social anthropology. This background in art, architecture and anthropology has been essential in negotiating a middle ground across the various disciplines involved in the research. Two PhD students, Ray Lucas and Sandra McNeil, one based in Aberdeen, the other in Dundee, complete the project team. Lucas's doctoral research is concerned with the ways in which various modes of inscriptive performance – in addition to, or alongside, conventional forms of academic writing – can become a means by which theoretical ideas are brought into practice. Central to McNeil's research has been the questions of what aspects of fine art knowledge systems resist change and how traditional skills are understood by undergraduate fine art students in terms of present day concerns. Advisors to the project include the artists, David Nash, James Hugonin and Arthur Watson and the anthropologist Suzanne Kuechler.

Research methods

Murdo Macdonald's work directly (in part through his studies of the work of Patrick Geddes) has made the very idea of interdisciplinarity a critical focus of his research. Building on the research of Macdonald and Gunn, McNeil's doctoral research, *The nature of the impression: memory, narrative and learning in a fine art teaching studio context* deals with the institutional structure of an art school and its connections to ethnographic analysis of art practice. Central to McNeil's research has been the questions of what aspects of fine art knowledge systems resist change and how traditional skills are understood by undergraduate fine art students in terms of present day- concerns.

The work of Tim Ingold, explicitly sets out to show how the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology can be connected on the level of exploratory practice.

Lucas's doctoral research, currently entitled, *Towards a theory of notation and drawing as thinking tools*, is concerned with the ways in which various modes of inscriptive performance – in addition to, or alongside, conventional forms of academic writing- can become a means by which theoretical ideas are brought into practice. This work engages closely with Ingold's comparative anthropology of the line, which is similarly dealing with the varieties of inscriptive practices. Ingold's studies in the comparative anthropology of the line link directly to Lucas's work on notational systems, and also tie in also with the emergent emphasis in my own work on the interconnections, in practice, of speech, gesture, drawing and writing, and the role of narrative and the coupling of actions and perceptions in artists' and teachers working practices. By working alongside

graduate students taking the Master's of Fine Arts programme at the University of Dundee I am addressing specific questions concerning the nature of artists' skills, how they are acquired, how the artists' knowledge relates to knowledge of other kinds, and how it is affected by material and technological changes.

Central to the entire project is the idea of practice-based exploration conceived as a way of enhancing collaboration between the various disciplines and knowledge traditions involved in the study.

Interdisciplinary work of this kind calls for a fundamental rethinking of the terms of reference for each subject area. Working together over the three-year period, members of the research team have needed to familiarise themselves with each other's concepts, methods and approaches, providing advice and support beyond the regular exchange of ideas and information.

We are:

- Conducting comparative research on fine art practice within a situated context of learning, sensitive to the diversity of knowledge traditions and of social and environmental conditions.
- Developing interdisciplinary methods for the study of artists' skills/ knowledges, involving ethnographic techniques of participant observation and hands-on training; obtained through the application of these methods;
- Develop an integrative framework of theory and concepts for analysing the material obtained through the application of the methods.

Research questions

Art, architectural and anthropological investigations

1. Interweave analysis of fieldwork materials (2002-2004) concerning institutional modes of learning across the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology with narratives of learning within the workplaces and field sites of artists, anthropologists and architects (1998 –2004).
2. Utilize tension between analysis and narrative, to address the problem of prefabricated knowledge and the disjuncture between art & humanities and scientific knowledge in mainstream Euro American contemporary educational systems.
3. Through the analysis of the material, I will be able to address – and to answer – specific questions set out in the scheme of research, concerning the nature of artists' skills, how they are acquired, how the artists' knowledge relates to anthropological and architectural knowledge traditions, and how this is affected by technological changes. My analysis so far has highlighted the importance of looking at the interconnections, in practice, of speech, gesture, drawing and

writing, and at the role narrative and the coupling of actions and perceptions in artists' and teachers' working practices.

The methodologies adopted are designed to connect the research questions with the ethnographic practice of participant observation. The way to understand how knowledge is acquired, we contend, is for the researcher to participate in the processes and settings of its acquisition, and to reflect critically on these from the perspective of an insider. This is fundamental to the anthropological approach adopted by the project.

It is for this reason, too that the project is intrinsically interdisciplinary. It brings an anthropological approach to bear in an attempt to understand the knowledge practices of fine art. Murdo Macdonald (in part through his studies of the work of Patrick Geddes) has made the very idea of interdisciplinarity in relation to partnerships between scientists and artists – is significant in this regard. The work of Tim Ingold, along with PhD student Ray Lucas, explicitly sets out to show how the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology can be connected on the level of exploratory practice.

Complementing my own anthropological study of the teaching and learning practices of fine art with an Aberdeen-based study of the applicability of practical, studio-based approaches in fine art to teaching and learning in anthropology. The study set up a series of experimental workshops involving undergraduate students and teachers in art and anthropology. The workshops provided a context for research into situated learning, as well as a practical forum for the joint exploration – by students and researchers working together – of the ideas we were developing about art and anthropology (as well as archaeology and architecture) as ways of understanding and shaping how people perceive and relate to their surroundings. The development of these ideas is a central aim of the project. Moreover as an experiment in teaching and learning, the course contributed to the project aims of testing whether learning can be a way of doing research, and practice a way of doing theory.

Translating research into the public domain