

# Reflective Essay

Education & Fine Art



National College of Art and Design  
*A Recognised College of University College Dublin*

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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN  
A Recognised College of University College Dublin

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

BA (Joint Hons) in Education and Design or Fine Art

Year 4

Reflective Practice Assignment

Art School and School Art

Brianna Marshall Crowe

“Reflection is a process of self-examination and self-evaluation in which effective educators regularly engage to improve their professional practices.” (Bright, 1996)

Reflecting on thoughts, actions and reactions affirms learning, supports growth and self-esteem in students (Helyer, 2015), (Bright, 1996), (Schön, 1983). Whilst reflecting on my time as a student art teacher working in Irish schools, I must draw on every aspect of my life that has brought me to this point. There have been many influences in my life that have allowed me to explore art as well as encouraging me to pursue a career in facilitating and teaching. There have also been challenges and setbacks, ultimately altering my choices. I reflect on how I reacted to each situation, as the Ancient Stoic Greek philosopher, Epictetus said “It’s not about what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters” (Kirov, 2017). With this quote in mind, I have reflected on my time studying my BA by analysing my reactions and their consequences. Looking at my background, my teaching placements and my studio work, I have developed as a person as a result and am proud of the person I have become.

I am fortunate to have been raised in such a holistic environment as my birthplace and forever home in the Wicklow mountains. As a child, long-haired and barefoot, I would roam around the 2-acre garden which boasted a biodiverse yet neatly kept landscape and a river running through the bottom to divide the magnificent valleys. My parents are passionate creators who have shared their artistic qualities, appreciation for beauty and spiritual way of life with me and my seven older siblings. My mother began her own business, teaching pregnancy yoga, birth preparation and rebirthing as one of the few of her time. My father is a highly skilled craftsman in restoring period furniture, a collector of antiques and a talented musician. With his passion and hardworking nature, my father devoted his life to providing for his family, leaving his wellbeing to suffer. As I grew older, so did his temper and as I grew wiser, so did his mind deteriorate.



*Figure 1 My Family Home*

At school, I felt little interest in anything other than music, art and alcohol. I had no motivation to study or do well and I rarely showed up to classes. My art teachers had a huge impact on me as they allowed me to truly be myself, to express how I felt, and they encouraged me to go to art college. It was quite something to feel that for once, I was not a caretaker, a villain, or a victim and I could just be a child in a class. At seventeen, I began working at my first job in a health-conscious café in Greystones. During that time, it dawned on me that I should utilise my artistic qualities and pursue a career to help troubled individuals like myself. I decided to research art therapy and uncovered a clear pathway which included this joint honours degree. Admittedly, I may have chosen the art therapy and caretaker path for unconscious and unhealthy reasons.

“Women from dysfunctional homes (and especially, I have observed, from alcoholic homes) are overrepresented in the helping professions, working as nurses, counsellors, therapists, and social workers. We are drawn to those who are needy, compassionately identifying with their pain and seeking to relieve it in order to ameliorate our own.” (Norwood, 1985)

As a survivor of child abuse, neglect, and trauma, I have naturally struggled with criticism, self-esteem and allowing myself to feel close to people. In the last four years of my life, I have been forced into uncomfortable situations whilst impetuously charging toward others at full speed. I have recognised, studied, and practiced healthy patterns through reading about psychology and regularly going to therapy. I can reflect on and understand my experiences as a teenager and the impacts of my decisions, which heavily influences my aspiration to be an encouraging art teacher. I feel that all teenagers struggle but I can also closely recognise personal issues and negative patterns that my students may have. I believe

that with everything that I have learned through my own healing journey, I can empathise and approach struggling students with healthy compassion and encouragement while maintaining professional boundaries.

“In addition to the general curriculum, students must be taught and given guidance around self-care and internal processing of their environmental and internal stress. As part of learning to take care of themselves and think for themselves they need to be given the tools to process their thoughts and feelings. Many children struggling with behavioural challenges will benefit from art therapy and emotional processing.” (Rogers, 2019)

Throughout my learning within and outside of NCAD over the last four years, I have found that my true passion lies with assisting young people to access their creative spirit and idea of beauty. I have always found art to be a release and expression of my thoughts and feelings. I only hope I can inspire others to find as much calm, self-worth and clarity in such a therapeutic practice. Drawing on emotional wisdom gained from my healing journey, I have felt passionate about teaching my students certain tools such as CBT, boundaries, assertive communication, consent and conflict resolution in the classroom. Arthur Efland founded the term ‘school art’ to signify art that is created by children with guidance of a teacher (Efland, 1976). I believe that the ‘school art’ setting is suited to me, and yet, I find myself drawn to teaching SPHE and incorporating art therapy practices into my lessons. Shannon Rogers is an experienced elementary school teacher and suggests that art therapy can be very beneficial for students when integrated into the classroom. (Rogers, 2019)

I have had the pleasure to hold consent and bystander training workshops with Active Consent, NUI Galway at NCAD (Consent, n.d.). Learning about the unsettling statistics of sexual violence amongst young adults has driven me to want to teach the basics of consent and assertive communication to students at a young age. It is recognised that we must educate students on confident awareness of consent and communication form as young as primary school (Association, 2016) (Dent, 2021).

“It is difficult for children to understand the nuance between sexual empowerment and sexual objectification – which dehumanises women and makes them toys to be played with.” (Dent, 2021)

I feel that young people must learn about red flags in relationships during school in order to prevent abusive relationships and protect their wellbeing. I believe that these topics are of great importance and can indeed be researched and taught through art. Suggested projects could be collaborative digital media role play on communication, sculpting body language, painting or stitching boundary phrases and intentional and conscious mark making to symbolise feeling. On top of studying social, economic and cultural issues, students will be provoked to become aware of issues that they will be faced with each day and find new ways to approach them. Perhaps, once I feel I have healed and grown enough, and that I have explored the possibilities of blended Art & SPHE, I will continue to evolve my profession and pursue art therapy.

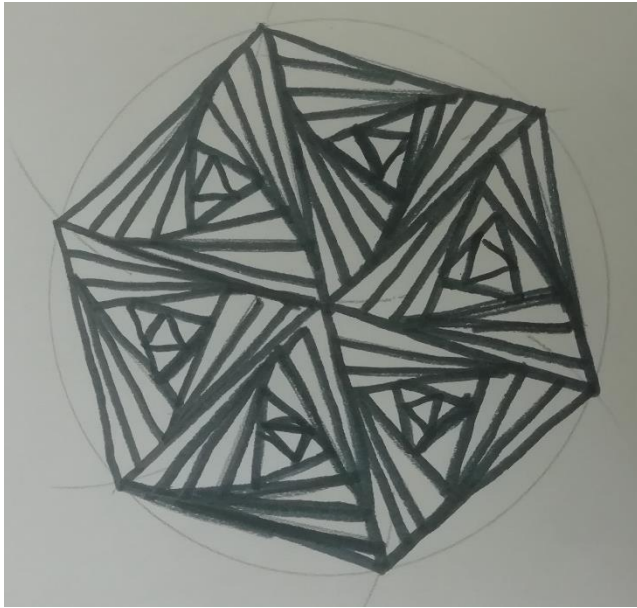
During my teaching placement in a mixed secondary school in third year, I was faced with not only the challenges of teaching online, but teaching to an extremely diverse range of

needs. When practicing differentiation, I found that approximately 55% of my class needed extra support and motivation due to additional educational needs and learning difficulties, self-esteem and emotional issues or absenteeism. As the needs of my students were diverse, so were their backgrounds. I had students in my class from privileged backgrounds sitting amongst others from disadvantaged families and living situations. This was a challenging yet formative experience for my teaching growth and style. I saw first-hand how art therapy practices can improve the atmosphere in a classroom and developed methods for engaging all students at once. For example, five young males in my class had a high record of absenteeism, had been violent in class and regularly caused disruptions. The students were learning about marine wildlife and environmentalism by creating clay vessels inspired by forms and textures found on the ocean floor. I managed to settle these students by allowing them to simply play with a ball of clay during explanations and demonstrations. The physical act of squishing, pressing and squeezing the clay calmed them. I reinforced my classroom management by constantly encouraging them and confidently asserting myself.



*Figure 2 Student's work, clay vessel, 'the surface beneath'*

I overcame a range of challenges on this placement. I worked in the autism unit and taught life skills and mathematics through art. This was of course a challenge, but I carried out a great deal of research into additional needs and differentiation in order to confidently deliver. In my first week, I intervened in a physical fight between young males while receiving verbal abuse from them. This week was also emotionally challenging as a young girl from the area, whom my students knew personally had been assaulted by a group of students from a local school, one being a student of mine. During this time, I was creating no artwork and had no creative outlet other than my work within the school. I believe I dealt with these pedagogical challenges well and received a good grade for my work, while also gaining invaluable on-site teaching experience in assertion, classroom management, differentiation and boundaries. As I carried out schemes in line with the Irish curriculum (NCCA, 2021), I hadn't yet brought my own artistic practice and methodology to the classroom, this daunted me as I was simply unsure of where to start.



*Figure 3 Mathematical art in the Autism unit*

It is suggested that the contrasting identities of an artist and art teacher conflict with each other and often the artistic practices of an art teacher are neglected and discontinued (Cohen-Evron, 2002), (Blair & Fitch, 2015), (Morrissey, 2021), (Jordan, 2015). I have experienced this in my teaching practice as I was out of studio for a year and had no artistic projects with college at the time. I study Textile Art & Artefact, within the Fine Art School of NCAD and contrasting with my studio practice, I took up oil painting as an attempt to maintain an art practice during this year and even sold some seascape pieces. I was able to practice this skill whilst simultaneously being creative in my teaching practices.

I have researched how creativity can be practiced through teaching in the classroom (Gregerson, et al., 2013) (Marin, n.d.). I feel that though I am not creating my own artwork, I am still very much engaging in creativity when teaching. In my opinion, devising up projects and schemes are an artform of mine, an opportunity to create exciting lessons and research inspiring artists. I feel I am being creative with handouts and visual aids, refining my pedagogical technique while trying out alternative methods. Finally, and most importantly, I feel that each time I deliver a lesson or am challenged by a student, how I approach this is a method of creativity. Responses from pupils will nearly always differ as each individual has their own background, thoughts and feelings and it is my job to adapt my lessons and appeal to those individual needs and their interest (Tomlinson, 2014).

When simultaneously achieving a joint degree in Education and Fine art, it can be challenging at times to link one to the other. In studio we can be inspired to research topics that are important yet may be inappropriate for school students and must be censored (Meban, 2002). Although my subject matter is very much appropriate for the classroom with no need for censorship, my methodology is a little abstract, by linking in a forest school perspective that dares to attempt to meet the learning outcomes. Forest school is becoming more and more integrated into schools today as researchers have discovered the benefits for students such as engagement with and appreciation for nature, building self-esteem and collaborative teamwork (O'Brien & Murray, 2007). My research topics and themes have

explored heritage and environmentalism through science and geography, all of which are appropriate for the classroom and important school topics in themselves. I have connected deeply with my Quaker ancestors by practicing their slow and sustainable ways of living off the land. I have peeled the many layers of fast fashion right back to basics by harvesting, spinning and weaving my own fabric from my garden and using my local landscape to forage for natural dyes. Through scientific experimentation with endless recipes, I have created a seaweed-based bioplastic and naturally dyed, sun printed and painted my designs onto fabric by altering the PH and the colour.



*Figure 4 & 5 Natural Dyes with Anthotype Sun Printing*



*Figure 6 Seaweed Bio-plastics*

Whilst flourishing in studio by connecting to my roots, discovering my idea of beauty and what I want my artwork to say, I have linked elements of my art practice into my educational studies. With overlapping subjects such as geography and science, I have attempted to introduce a bio-diversity theme with natural dyes into the class and explore environmental appreciation. In my final year placement at an all-girls school, I devised a scheme using embroidery and natural dyes to create a collaborative quilt and focus on biodiversity whilst highlighting the history and female stereotype of stitch. The students explored native Irish plants and the importance of biodiversity. We made seed bombs in class and naturally dyed fabrics. We also studied the collaborative element of quilting and their powerful message whilst looking at female artists who have reclaimed the 'purely functional' stereotype of stitch to create fine art. By bringing my own studio skills and research to the classroom, I felt excited and confident to show the students such a topic. Admittedly, I packed too much into one scheme and should have divided it in two, allowing the elements to be fully absorbed. I believe that with more experience and exploration, I will comfortably and competently be able to practice an exploration into natural dyes, anthotype sun prints and biodegradable plastics with my students. As suggested by Sarah Sparks, art teachers must practice and develop their own art whilst teaching (Sparks, 2012). Luckily, within the summer months, artist residencies or retreats are available to deepen my exploration and further evolve my practice.



Figure 7 Making seed bombs with second years, teaching about biodiversity



Figure 8 & 9 Visual aids for finished piece



Figure 10 Collaborative quilt in progress, each square sewed by a student

After daring to take risks, my teaching style has shaped and formed, and will continue to do so. Reflecting on my upbringing, I was unsafe, yet there was a huge influence of artistic expression and creativity with the space to explore. Drawing on my healing journey and growth, I feel passionate about creating a safe space for students coming from all backgrounds. I feel strongly about integrating art therapy practices and SPHE topics into the classroom environment to enhance personal growth, self-worth and self-awareness in my students. With the Irish education system evolving, I feel supported to bring life skills that I feel passionate about, such as consent, conflict resolution, bystander training and many more important topics to the art room. I aspire to perfect the act of artistic methodology that links with that of our ancestors, engaging with the earth and feeling that sense of place by working outside and immersing into the rich history and heritage of the landscape. What excites me are the many topics that I feel passionate about which I have not had the pleasure to research and teach yet. As my pedagogical technique and style develop, I will continue to take risks, to reflect and to practice what has worked, and I will constantly flourish as I grow.

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