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# Art/Design Education Resiliency: "Staying with the Trouble"

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Article abstract

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## Introduction:

I recently presented on a research project, *COVID-19 Anxiety*, at a National Art Education Association Annual Pre-Conference session with colleague Joanna Black, University of Manitoba. This presentation focussed on our COVID-19/anthropogenic longitudinal, experiential research creation project which has engaged over 100 people in Ontario and Manitoba. Session participants reviewed this project during the meeting. Together we explored the mutual feelings of anxiety, inspiration, and generativity experienced, and the art research and creation performed, during these pandemic years, noting the overwhelming effect this time has had on our identities and understandings of selves-as-researchers/artists/educators.

We enacted a multi-vocal dialogic juxtaposition in conversation, and it soon became evident how different roles and identities interwove, overlapped, and interrelated as we responded to the pandemic and each others' various art teaching, art making, and learning stories. Following this exploratory phase, we then briefly took on a deeply reflective analytical dialectic conversation toward future study. This dialogic/dialectic process so aptly illustrated diverse research voices in a praxis relationship often observed in co-learning communities of practice. I review these different and yet interrelated processes in more detail later in this writing. Suffice to say that understanding this as/in theory and applying these concepts in practice may have a profound impact on the successful workings of co-learning art and design groups.

I note how I am coming to appreciate the complex networks and communities of practice now forming as a result of pandemic collaborations among people, institutions, and communities. This activity marks an emergence of a conscious, intricate, and interwoven inter-relational art and design educational matrix which is revitalising art teacher confidence and capacity.

As I consulted this past year with a group of University of Toronto Scarborough Arts, Culture, and Media Teaching Stream faculty who are forming a community of practice to mutually explore inclusive pedagogy, I looked back to three key events. These were the establishment and workings of the *COVID-19 Anxiety* research project, the failings of the OCAD University Disability Caucus, and the emergence of Creative Research Inclusive Practices (CRIP) Lab. While each event acts as an individual case study, all can be discussed relative to each other. As institutional affiliation is the same for each group and membership composition similar, comparison is possible.

I'm going to discuss briefly these three different events as a kind of autoethnographic study of my own perceptions, complicity, and failure around art education co-learning.

## Pam Patterson

Pam Patterson (PhD) has had an active and varied career in the arts. Her research, performance, visual work, curating, and teaching have focused on embodiment in art practice, the "body" or haptic in art, women and health, disability, women's studies and art education. She is currently Assistant Professor Cross Disciplinary Arts (Art & Design Education), Co-Leader Creative Research Inclusive Practices (CRIP) Lab, and Artistic Director 113Research Project Gallery at OCADU, and research fellow Art Education, NSCAD. As a queer disability artist, Patterson has exhibited and performed across Canada and internationally.

**The COVID-19 Anxiety and Pedagogies Project:**



Figure 1. Video still, *Covid-19 Anxiety* (2020) by Pam Patterson, Joanna Black and Daniel Payne. A hand moves aside curtains  to reveal the masking signs and COVID-19 pandemic indicators outside a  window.

*COVID-19 Anxiety* was a research creation project which began June 2020 in which Pam Patterson, Joanna Black, and Daniel Payne, and OCAD University and University of Manitoba students learned and made together, co-investigating the social and political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. *COVID-19 Anxiety* manifested as a collaboration among many cultural practitioners and educators. We were investigating not only how we discerned COVID-19 pandemic anxieties but also how we might make creative use of them to generate cultural resources that would resonate with, and explicate potentially different perspectives on, this pandemic phenomenon.

Through researcher activities including public talks, shared exchanges, and literature responses, we reflected from and spoke to our particular locations (as queer, with disabilities, etc.) exploring our unique experiences and productive uses of COVID-19 anxieties. These activities further evolved through differing university courses and related activities, student and research assistant collaborations, and the various projects and online exhibitions we developed to support our own research and that of our students.
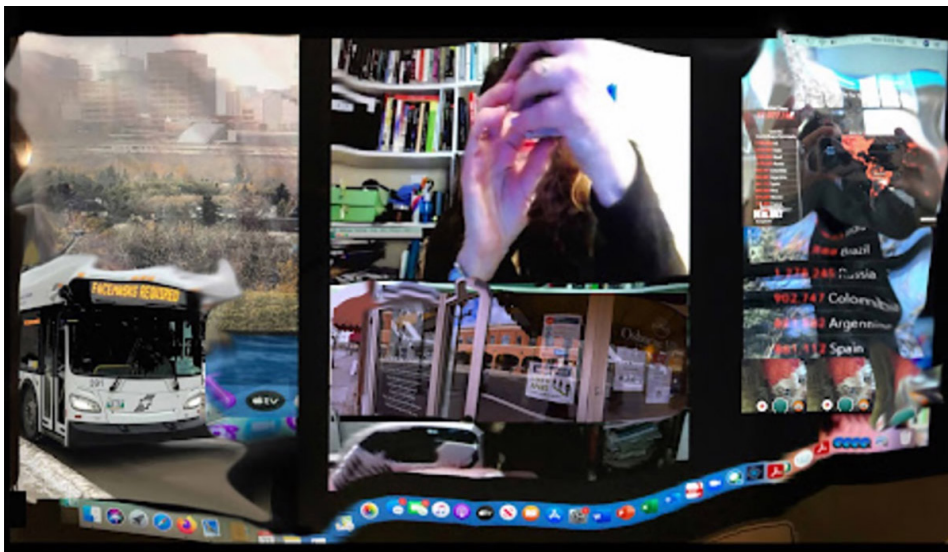


Figure 2. Joanna Black  [COVID-19] *Portrait 2021* Jarring multicolored chaotic images surround Joanna who is taking a selfie to mark this time.

In those early pandemic days, COVID-19 so completely enveloped our lives. The Government of Canada Public Health Agency (2021) noted, in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, "With social distancing and repeated lockdown measures, feelings of isolation and loneliness… [caused an] increase [in] … anxiety and depression." This anxiety seeped into our digital classrooms. How, we asked, could we work in creative and productive ways to examine this pandemic phenomenon?



**Figure 3. Daniel Payne, Vanitas:** *Homage to Clara Peters* **(2020) A librarian seated at a table with precious objects in the time of Covid-19.**

Our objective as artists connected online in isolation was to open ourselves to new approaches, concepts, and ways of being that we didn't yet necessarily know how to express. To counteract this irresolution, we asked: How might this moment alter our imaginings? How might curiosity guide us? How could we cultivate a capacity to follow this curiosity and sit with anxiety? What were we being rendered capable of?

Responses to these questions and more spoke to our intention to develop and produce "bodies of evidence. "These "bodies," acting as visual mnemonics, sparked further cultural responses to issues around the pandemic and larger anthropogenic fears. We specifically focussed our attention on ideas relating to location, loss, and refuge as we built these socially mediated and subjectively variable responses. We named these responses "shudders." Embodied in video, visual mediums, and story, they supported modes reflective of urgent embodied knowing, thinking, and feeling.



**Figure 4. Pam Patterson** *Killarney [breathing]* **(2020) A duplex diptych of a Irish forest is overlaid with white lung bronchiole and the black semi-erased text of a death certificate.**

It was a difficult time. I moved three times over those two years living on the edge of homelessness. This often strained my relationships with the others. My colleagues were patient, though direct and insistent. Other teaching stressors appeared as student demands, faculty office restrictions, and isolation took its toll on us all. Our concentration on the project kept us from succumbing to emotional collapse. We stayed focussed on the creative making. We created work for an online site named as *COVID-19 Anxiety: Location, Refuge, and Loss* and completed exhibitions and projects. These are now housed as *COVID-19 Pedagogies: Tools, Content & Strategies* on a Libguide at University of Manitoba and as *Pandemic Pondering* on Gallery 1313's website.



**Figure 5. Screen shot of *COVID Pedagogies: Tools, Content & Strategies*, University of Manitoba. Opening video by Toronto Poet Laureate Lillian Allen greets us on this opening page. Index tags to resources are to the right. https://libguides.lib.umanitoba.ca/covid-pedagogies**

We researchers continued to work together after our and the student exhibitions were completed. Using interpretive strategies, we also responded as teacher researchers in writing about student work. The image and text below excerpted from *A Dialogic Reflection: Revealing Theoretical "Impacts" of Pandemic Art Education* (Cadotte et al, 2022, pp. 21-22) illustrate our method. The writers are Pam Patterson (PP), Daniel Payne (DP), and Emily Cadotte (EC):

PP: Katrina's vision captures me in this blue-dark toned poignant work. Prolonged isolation is sensed as she is contained–-unable to communicate beyond this tight transparent cube. In the Indigenous medicine wheel (a valuable worldview I honour and embrace in [w]holistic art curriculum design), the direction through which I perceive this work is east. Is there the promise of a rising sun?

DP: Katrina poignantly expresses the struggle between privacy and power in our remote learning environment (Véliz, 2021). How can we provide intellectual freedom when all our educational platforms are hosted by multinational conglomerates? It is of mortal concern. Marshall McLuhan (1964) reminds us that—through physically interacting with communication technologies—we connect our central nervous systems to keyboards and devices, and then to fiber-optic networks and servers, out into the cloud itself.

EC: In exploring the methodology of research-creation, Natalie Loveless (2019) considers the ways her students build "common livable worlds," quoting Haraway, "bit by bit" (p. 102). In constructing this interior scene, Katrina reveals her vulnerability and invites her viewer to identify with her own quarantined world, connecting and thereby sustaining the worlds of others.

Figure 6. Katrina Belen Alcantara, *Untitled*, 2020, digital illustration. A lone figure sits in her bedroom classroom encased in a transparent cube.

This writing was intentionally composed as an expressive interpretive text for art educational research. Such aesthetic texts (Beach, 2001) reveal the emotional and often visceral aspects of phenomena as experienced in living, feeling, thinking, and being, but are these comprehensible to a reader? And to what effect?

**Disability Caucusing: A Community Failure**

There is no question that the COVID-19 related work was deeply satisfying. It did enable us to express the turmoil we and our students felt during those pandemic years.  But other stressors and fissures within social and organizational structures were deeply affecting the marginalized and precariously housed members of our university communities. I was forced to move twice more, with my rent doubling, from my rural home community into a tiny two-room basement flat in the city.

My work and living situations were further aggravated by my worsening multiple disabilities. With all this as impetus, I met with the Executive Director of our university faculty association over a year working with him to establish a Disability Caucus that would proactively advocate for faculty access needs. My hope was that I would, in this Caucus, find a community of like-minded disability creatives genuinely interested in institutional change. In leading up to our first meeting, I invited disability colleagues from our university community and asked another faculty member to Co-Chair the group with me.

Canadian cultural theorist Natalie Loveless (2019) notes that spaces are being created for literacies that tell uncanny stories that can carry within them other ethics. Story had been key to our community work in COVID-19 Anxiety but could a more action-oriented group work with and reveal these other ethics? Loveless sees how these storied communications "*matter* as sites of friction and debate" (p. 56) but how friction and debate are handled has a considerable affect on the success of a (potential) co-learning community.

"Story had been key to our community work in COVID-19 Anxiety but could a more action-oriented group work with and reveal these other ethics?"

An established union has its own hierarchy, and assumptions by union members (and sometimes staff and executive members) are made, and conversations initiated, that often arise out of distrust of management and/or conflict. The first seventeen-member caucus meeting, I thought, was a success but issues surfaced quickly. Uninformed interference and accusations made by a non-caucus member bore an expressed suspicion of management who were working to support Disability Caucus asks. Assumptions were made around my work by a union executive and my Co-Chair without their having any intention to meaningfully engage in discussing this with me. I was hospitalized at the time and unaware of what was brewing. The morning I returned home I was contacted, and it was suggested I leave the position. I realized how much co-learning needed to be done to truly understand disability needs, accommodation, support, and care. In almost 50 years of working in communities, I had never experienced such a poorly handled situation. I was deeply shocked and rendered powerless to affect any movement towards resolution. After I left, no second meeting was called and there was no sign of any active Disability Caucus leadership. Members were not informed, and I was not in a position to facilitate this. The initiative had failed.

**Storying & Theorizing: Processual Possibilities for Community Collaboration**

Since that time, I have read Alice Walker's (1998) novel *By the light of my father's smile*. Early in the chapter entitled "The Cathedral of the Future" the narrator asks why the Mundo, a fictitious Indigenous Afro-Caribbean community, uses stories instead of ideas for community exchanges. The reply: "It is as if ideas are made of blocks. Rigid and hard. And stories are made of a gauze that is elastic… [B]ecause the imagination is always moving forward, you yourself are constantly stretching…. Of course, we do [have ideas] but we know there is a limit to them. After that, story!" (p. 371).

Storying had energized our COVID-19 group work and was present and shared in our first Disability Caucus meeting, so I decided to look deeper. As noted earlier, stories, according to Loveless, carry complex meanings that reference lives lived and carry ethical implications. Indigenous scholar and storyteller Thomas King (2003) wrote in his published Massey Lectures, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are... I tell [these] stories ... to suggest how stories can control our lives… for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, that is chained to these stories for as long as I live" (p. 9).

Storying is a value-rich resource that can inform arts practices. We know, as art educators, that we can mobilize ourselves, our students, and colleagues to take on challenging and often painful issues by focussing on the creative work at hand. King often uses humour in his own creative writing as a tool to expose the truth around Indigenous histories.

But how is storying identified as contributing to a community learning practice? I have observed two very different and yet related intra-community processes – the dialogic and the dialectic – in operation around community story sharing. These processes were operating during the *COVID-19 Anxiety* project, and I recognize them resurfacing in Creative Research Inclusive Practices (CRIP) Lab meetings.

We referenced often, in the COVID-19 research, pedagogical approaches that followed the principles of M.M. Bakhtin (1981). We used these multi-vocal strategies through dialogic sharing in classroom conversation and in researcher writing. In conference presentation we began to reflect more deeply on these "dialogic" texts.

Ali Jamali Nesari (2015) in also referencing Bakhtin notes that "everything is in a state of becoming..." (p. 646). Nesari writes, "different voices already established our cultural dialogue even before each of us joined the conversation. The voices of our ancestors have formed the language [we now use to] contribute to th[at] conversation" (p. 644). The utterances we make actuate different forces: one that binds our ideas together and another that teases our ideas apart. The dynamic allows for the creation and formation of new ideas. The importance and presence of other person(s) in dialogue is critical to this growth.

I have become increasingly drawn to investigate a theoretical framing through which to view this past work and the deep learning and joyful conversations now happening in CRIP Lab. What were/are we doing in the Lab? Beginning with story sharing, we offer entries into our various worldviews. And then we think!

Richard Paul (2012), notes:

  Dialogic thinking refers to thinking that involves a dialogue or extended exchange between different points of view... Whenever we consider concepts or issues deeply,

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we naturally explore their connections to other ideas and issues within different domains... Critical thinkers need to be able to engage in fruitful exploratory dialogue, proposing ideas, probing their roots, considering subject matter insights and evidence, testing ideas, and moving between various points of view. (p. 318)

The theory of dialogic action and its characteristics speak to cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis.

Dialectic reasoning, Paul further writes, refers to dialogic thinking practiced when conflicting points of view are under discussion (p. 318). These conversations – sometimes cacophonous and diverse, sometimes criss-crossing – often generate imaginative possibilities.

Psychologist Jillian Glasgow (2020) writes, "Dialectical thinking refers to the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives and to arrive at the most reasonable reconciliation of seemingly contradictory [positions]…" She invites protagonists to enter the paradox and allow the conflicting or inconsistent positions to exist simultaneously.

This is not, I've observed, an unusual position for artists to embrace.

This use of dialogic and dialectic thinking is a reasoned reflective practice toward resolution; it is integrative and deeply committed.

**Defining and Activating Communities of Practice**

Donna Haraway (2016) writes:

> Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy… with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence. The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. (p. 1)

I am deeply moved by the eloquence of Haraway's writing. I am now at an age when decades-long friends are dying, and familiar places and cultures disappearing so this resonates powerfully. The constants through all this change are the communities I support and those which in turn support me. We act together as/in communities of practice. dian marino (1997), an influential arts educator and activist, advocates difference but also advocates connectedness in community. To her, being different in a creative way means that she is willing to connect her difference to other people's difference. She writes, "We … search for common threads while we appreciate our differences" (p. 45). This defines an underlying commitment. Adding to this, I reference again Thomas King. In positioning Native and Judaeo-Christian creation stories, King (2003) notes our choices: "...a world in which creation is a solitary individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity...a world marked by competition, or a world determined by cooperation" (p. 24).

So how, I ask, might the idea of an art educational community of practice expand a research collaboration, challenge the problematics of a union-led caucus, and point to a more inclusive, empowering, and lateral way of working?

Wenger-Trayner et al (2023) define communities of practice as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they identify with and/or care about. In "practice" they engage voluntarily in a process of collective learning, often sharing leadership, in relationships of shared trust, support, commitment, and knowing.

The *COVID-19 Anxiety* project as a community of researcher/artist practitioners took responsibility for defining the challenges we shared and for structuring a learning process to address them. We articulated the demands, challenges, contexts, and content of our research and learned from each other. We appreciated the relevance of individual experience and collective wisdom. As Wenger-Trayner et al write, "The learning is not separated from the learner, the knowledge from the knower, the practice from the practitioner" (p. 13).

A community of practice supports member capacity-building, partnership development, mutual engagement, and a commitment to collective progress in practice. Practitioners – not the institutions, the union, faculty offices etc. – drive the process and the structure and lead learning.

As witnessed in my past community work and now in my most recent experience with CRIP Lab, leadership is often a consequence of member dynamics. Leadership may shift depending on tasks,

"The constants through all this change are the communities I support and those which in turn support me. We act together as/in communities of practice"

issues, challenges, and personal needs and interests. As a group, we engage with each other as practice-based partners in conversation, nurturing new and strategic capabilities, and affirming ourselves as engaged and committed artist/designer educators, as we connect with each other and with colleagues worldwide. In this collective work, we build networks of creative engagement.



**Figure 7. CRIP Lab THE LAUNCH opening with student Lab participants Ali Brown and Lauchlin MacQuarrie. Video showing on the wall is by Matt Hawthorn (University of Derby).**

What I think is so critical in CRIP Lab as a community of practice are three concepts: voice, vision, and value. Gloria Steinem (2022) remarks that groups need to provide opportunities where there is as much talking as listening. Each voice needs to be heard at least once. Once you do this you have a group. At every CRIP Lab meeting we begin with a member go-around. Often stories are told; it's the way we know what each other is feeling. As we vision for action, we share our differences and make connections. Actions – projects, papers, exhibitions – are grassroot rather than hierarchical. From this we come to know that we are linked, not ranked. Leadership in our Lab is not dependent on having tenure; students have an equal opportunity to assume leadership. We are valued for our unique perspectives and recognized for our accomplishments and contributions.

There is a joy in our dialogic sharing, but we also take up more concerted work through a dialectical process of describing, questioning, and elucidating. Whether we are preparing a letter of intent or an idea for a project, we persevere. We work together - often in small groups – clarifying the formal and creative elements – as we go. Because we value and respect each other, we are comfortable, as Haraway (2016) would say, in "staying with the trouble." "Staying with the trouble" she notes, "requires learning to be truly present" (p.1). It is a commitment we freely make and a pleasure we willingly embrace.

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