

# Art and Other Matter(s) of Online Professional Education

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## Abstract

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Recognising and emphasising the materiality of technology and other matter of online professional education can usefully re-position learners and some knowledges. One way of turning attention to materiality is through art, as arts-based learning. Arts-based learning can also emulate some of the conditions of professional practice, including the requirement to operate within complex environments, with creativity. This investigation, informed by post-humanism, explores the affordances of art in online professional education from within, that is, through arts-based research.

## To cite this article

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## Introduction

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Countless life- and world-changing technologies have arisen out of a steady flow of scientific thinking. This has been a pervasive march; in many cases it has been positive and in some cases negative (for example, climate change). It is science that gets applauded (or blamed) for having made these technologies, but according to Janine Snyder, Robert Heckman and Michael Scialdone (2009: 1924), it is not necessarily science that can tell us how these technologies should be used. There is an obvious tension here, because Snyder, Heckman and Scialdone (2009: 1924) also observe that the "scientific model ... dominates professional higher education", that is, the education of users. What, then, are the implications for future professional education, more concerned with using than making technology, at a time when professional education is becoming increasingly technologised through, among other things, widespread offerings of online professional education courses? Is professional education at the crossroads – crisis in one direction and opportunity in the other?

A way of understanding this dilemma is to look differently at science and technology, and their relationship with online professional education. This paper adds to an area of education scholarship that places greater emphasis on the materiality of learning and teaching, which, as Tara Fenwick and Paolo Landri (2012: 1) point out, has been "slowly emerging [over] the past two decades or so". The focus of this is to: "decentre a long-term educational focus on the individual human subject ... eschew[ing] the domination

in education of representationalist concepts of knowledge, and explor[ing] ways that learning and knowing are rooted in action – including the ongoing action that brings forth the objects and identities constituting our worlds” (Fenwick and Landri, 2012: 1).

In this article I explore the materiality of online professional education and the place of art in the area of professional practice in which I teach – health services management. I do this through art. That is, art (in online professional education) is the object of study as well as method, and so the affordances of art are explored from within. This method of researching is framed by Margaret Somerville’s methodology of postmodern emergence, where “an idea begins to emerge ... as an assemblage of representations, each element of which is a pause in an iterative and cyclical process of representation, engagement and reflection” (2007: 240–41).

The first task in this work was to access what Angie Titchen and Debbie Horsfell (2007: 219) would call my “driving forces”. This involved me making three preliminary sketches about my interests and concerns about the topic of research, after which the work proceeded along the following lines: the three sketches were considered separately and also collectively, and they were then used as collage material by pasting them, or portions of them, onto a larger canvas. That larger painting was developed as I thought deeply about health services management as the context of professional practice. The notions of professional education, online professional education and arts-based learning were then worked with, in paint and in text, through this process of representation, engagement and reflection (Somerville, 2007: 240–241) until a new point of knowing about the affordances of art in online professional education crystallised.

## Artful beginnings

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The first of the three sketches (Figure 1) had something of a veiled appearance, especially the image of a leaf, barely discernible from its background.

### Figure 1

As I made this first sketch, I thought about what Mary Dixon and Kim Senior refer to as “academic linguistic discourse” (2011: 474). Could it be that conventional discourses of learning make some learners and their knowledges indiscernible – even invisible? Then, as I continued to sketch, I reflected on arts-based learning, and from this a second image (Figure 2) emerged; a dark section of the painting was contrasted with light – movement from one form to another, I thought. I took this to reference what I had for some time considered to be a particularly helpful comment by Graeme Sullivan (2009: 48) about how, in practice-led research, one moves from the unknown to the known, that is, in the opposite direction to more positivist or scientific research.

### Figure 2

The two sketches, taken together, invite speculation about how this unknown-to-known concept, if explored through arts-based learning, might be used to engage students and to make space for different epistemologies, in ways that other forms of teaching may not. I recalled a small group of students who were studying online towards a postgraduate qualification in health management. These ‘artful scholars’, as I called them, chose an option to use art as a way of thinking and responding to an assignment question about health policy. The question was not so much about actual policy, but the big issues such as Indigenous health that health policy purports to address. I remembered these students’ keen engagement with the task, revealing talents previously unspoken of on our online forum or in online meetings, and producing ideas that had not been spoken of either. I was astonished at the depth of their thinking and how their knowing (and learning) was illuminated. I then drew two vertical marks that dominated a third sketch (Figure 3). The subtle quality of these marks framed a shape – a tree trunk, I reflected – a transparent tree trunk – growing.

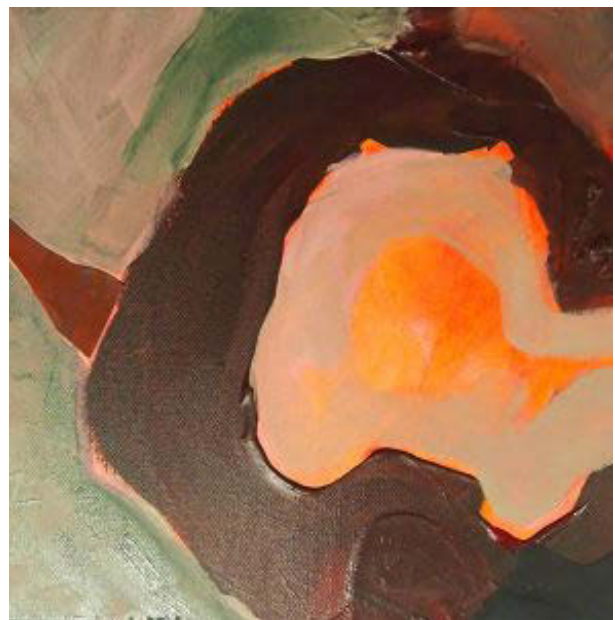
Figure 3

As I painted this third sketch, an earlier encounter with the work of Martin Heidegger came into focus, especially Heidegger’s (1997: 21) notion of “let[ting] what presences come forth into unconcealment”, as if “an ‘undercurrent’ striving towards the light of day” (Whitehead, 2003: 1). This may be interpreted as a comment about the difference between requiring a student to complete a task (listening, writing, reading, or discussing, analyzing or synthesizing, for example) in order that she or he ‘learn’, and an alternative view of education more concerned with opportunities and pathways for learning, different epistemologies, and students’ growth (or coming forth) from their unknowing to knowing.

The final painting, called *Making Arrangements* (Figure 4), was pieced together, at least initially, by arranging material from the three preliminary sketches and their concerns about epistemology, the direction of knowing, and growth. *Making*



Sketch No. 1, 30 x 30 cm acrylic on canvas



Sketch No. 2, 30 x 30 cm acrylic on canvas

*Arrangements* became heavily layered with small sheets of canvas and multiple coats of acrylic paint and varnish. This composite picture, enveloping and extending my initial ideas, was a means for me to create “new families of association and structures of meaning” (Carter, 2007: 15–16), and as Paul Carter (2007: 19) might add, as a “testing ground of new ideas”.

Figure 4



*Sketch No. 3*, 30 x 30 cm acrylic on canvas



*Making Arrangements*, 49 x 28 cm acrylic and collage

A feature of the painting *Making Arrangements* is the presence of human bodies, more conspicuous than those ‘indiscernible’ forms that had emerged earlier. That is how I thought about them as I wrote this manuscript and wondered about bodies (in the painting and in online professional learning) coming forth and becoming. One body, transparent and framed by heavy lines, catches the eye. The material of that body, which might be considered the body of the learner, and might equally be understood as their body of knowledge, proved to be generative. An idea emerged that the material of the body was also the material context – the shape framed by the heavy lines was the material background. The learner and her knowledge is at the same time the material self and the material context; learners and their knowledges are “always already related to animals, machines, and things” (Snaza et al., 2014: 40). Notwithstanding recent work

coming out of practice-theoretical scholarship (see, for example, the edition by Green [2009]), this is a disruption to the traditional way in which professional education privileges humans (and their embodied knowing) over other things, and privileges one form of knowing over another. That is, there is a tendency in professional education to attend to professional matters without necessarily attending to their material context, nor to the professional's embodied knowledge. Still playing with this idea, I added a representation of a hand crank to the painting, thinking of this as a symbol for the machine and in particular the 'new materialism' (A hand crank also features in a painting by Paul Klee called *Twittering Machine* that is referred to by Deleuze and Guattari [1987] in their seminal text called *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*). The hand crank in the painting can be thought of as connecting one body with another, and connecting these bodies with their material context. Thus, *Making Arrangements* more assertively places the notion of learner and epistemological (in)visibility within the new materialism paradigm.

## Arrangements of matter

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Professional practice always occurs within material contexts. A health manager, for example, acts as part of an arrangement of matter to organise, plan, record, communicate, create and so forth. This matter, writes Stephanie Springgay and Nikki Rotas (2015: 552), is "indeterminant, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways": matter has agency. The new materialism "abandons the idea [that] matter [is] inert and subject to predictable forces" (Springgay and Rotas, 2015: 552), yet it remains familiar in form (Springgay and Rotas, 2015: 561). Further, Karin Bolldén (2015), drawing from Theodore Schatzki's view of practice as the site of the social, claims that entities, objects, or matter, form an arrangement that is central to practice, and in online professional education this can be "understood as a set of organised activities in terms of teachers' and students' doings and sayings, and material arrangements in terms of online settings" Bolldén (2015: 3). Such arrangements, according to Lee Shulman (2005: 53), are not for understanding alone: "it is preparation for accomplished and responsible practice in the service of others. It is preparation for 'good work'". The agency of matter, then, is no small matter.

## Bodies and affectivity matter too

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“These are the specters haunting the classrooms – bodies and affects”.

This comment by Michalinos Zembylas (2007: 19), in reference to the physical classroom, but just as usefully applied to the online classroom, draws attention to the materiality of the body – bodily matter and how the body participates in learning. One way in which the body participates in learning is through affect. It is worth noting that there is an emerging debate, premised on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), and before that Benedict Spinoza (2000), that affect is different from emotion. Take for example Cate Poynton and Alison Lee's (2011) work; they discuss different

conceptualisations of affect, including it being ‘pre-personal’, following Brian Massumi (1987), saying that it is “what comes before action and by implication forms, rather than carries out, the dictates of desire” (Poynton and Lee, 2011: 637). So, affect is more than a mental state – it is social – it ‘affects’ bodies, and other material.

This is important, not only to the argument presented here, but because “evidence is building that indicates that the potency of quality teaching is not restricted to pedagogical techniques solely concerned with subject content and academic processes, but that its efficacy also lies in attending to the affective dimension of teaching and learning” (Lovat, 2010: 491). For online professional education, this prompts questions about affectivity in relation to bodily and contextual materials of learning, and draws attention to, “among other things, the *where* of teaching and learning (class room and field) and the *what* of teaching and learning” (Mulcahy, 2015: 116). The position of teachers (and teaching) becomes unsettled. As Mulcahy (2015: 116), coming from a new materialism perspective, suggests: “teachers are far from being lone actors in relation to conditions that create quality teaching. Other social and material actors and agencies come into play”. Again, here is a challenge to the present anthropocentric view of education practice, and it is a challenge that might be leveraged to open up the creative potential of education, including online professional education.

## Learning online – essentially

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The notion of online learning needs to be considered alongside concern for technology in education generally, and a useful starting point is Sian Bayne’s (2015: 9) note as follows: “Technology can be utilized to enhance pre-existing personal and societal educational objectives (instrumentalism); equally ‘learning’ can be transformed by the imminent pedagogical value of certain technologies simply by allowing itself to be open to them (essentialism)”.

Notwithstanding the importance of meeting personal, societal and indeed educational objectives, which are often fixed and linked to legislature, policy and professional standards, there is of course value in being open to transformation, as Bayne put it. To transform, however, teachers and education itself must, as Dan Bouhnik and Golan Carmi (2012: 202) assert, stop viewing “computerized technologies as a source of information alone [because this] limits their potential as a thinking tool”. Bouhnik and Carmi (2012: 202) also suggest that “a new thinking paradigm should be developed”, which, as Bayne notes, includes looking beyond what is human in online learning and “understand[ing] learning, teaching and all associated academic practices as dependent upon and enacted through material technologies – with which they are enmeshed” (Bayne, 2015: 11). After all, this is the experience of the online learner who sits on something called “chair”, perhaps made from material dug out of the earth, heated and cast, and covered with material grown or harvested, or shorn from the backs of animals. They sit, feet resting comfortably on sections cut from the hides of other animals, typing ideas into a machine that connects effortlessly with storage devices, plugs, cables, more excavated metal that has been processed and re-formed, connecting with other students

doing very similar work, grappling with the same questions, taught by a teacher who is located elsewhere yet interacts with these students through those same cables, inspired by what is around her – nature, the sculpture she walks past on her way to the library, the familiarity of her office, the poster on the wall. Together, these things, and many more, “co-constitute the act of teaching” (Bolldén, 2012: 1–2).

The above description is intended to typify the context of online teaching and learning and its materiality. Following Louise Mifsud (2013: 146), one might then ask: What does this mean for teaching *practices*? Estrid Sørensen (2009: 79) makes the point that technology needs to be studied as an *embedded* practice, and extending on this from the perspectives of the new materialism and also essentialism, one might further argue that other material involved in education should be studied as embedded practices. Here, this would include art.

## Affordances of art

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What role might art and arts-based learning play, and how might it be useful in online professional education? First, however, what is arts-based learning? According to José van den Akker (2014: 753), arts-based learning is an experience, just as art itself is an experience (Dewey, 1934). This can create deeper, wider and more powerful learning, engaging intellectual, visual and kinaesthetic domains, and involves reflective practice (van den Akker, 2014: 751–3). Kendra Rieger and Wannda Chernomas (2013: 53) add that arts-based learning is “a creative strategy that relies on an art form to facilitate learning about another subject matter. It engages learners and simultaneously connects thoughts with feelings as part of the learning process”. This occurs, according to Snyder, Heckman and Scialdone (2009: 1923), because art works with an “artistic mode of knowing”, even in some highly technology-based disciplines which “ha[ve] more in common than would first appear with the work of design professionals and creative and performance artists” (p. 1923). This “artistic mode of knowing” can be explained by Sullivan’s movement from the unknown to the known, and also, following Bettina Brendal (1999), by considering art as a form of metaphor, where metaphor generates new insights (Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011: 291) because it draws a link with other subject matter.

The context of professional practice is complex, with multiple and non-linear relationships, and fragmented information sets. It requires, drawing from complex adaptive systems theory, learning to work with the unknown. This is another way in which arts-based learning can be useful: “aesthetic understanding can help one to coherently interpret ambiguous situations by illuminating the correspondences and relationships involved” (Snyder, Heckman and Scialdone, 2009: 1924).

As I have demonstrated in my discussion of my own art work above, arts-based learning also draws attention to the material. The jump from the materiality of art-making to the materiality of professional practice would seem to be less jarring than from the materiality of an A4 page or computer screen to the materiality of professional practice.

Also, art's place in connecting thoughts with feelings, getting back to Rieger and Chernomas (2013: 53), provides a helpful link to the notions of the body and affect and their influences on learning, as well as what was referred to above as invisible knowledges: "When art is understood materially, as an affective agent, it becomes irreducible to function, form, and technique. It becomes a force of relations that makes learning felt and inarticulate – in excess of language" (Springgay and Rotas, 2015: 554).

The online world need not be a barrier to arts-based learning or detract from its material experience. Thinking again about my artful scholars, I enjoyed enlarging the images of their artworks on my computer screen, impressed by the way in which they constructed their artwork, often with a good deal of care. I sensed and enjoyed that these students had a high level of understanding of what they were doing within their medium, and that their work had in fact generated ideas about their chosen policy context. As such work often does, theirs raised a lot of questions and required them to work with the literature in the area. I recalled noticing how one student's thinking really took shape after she referred to the work of a certain scholar, because she was able to link her work with theory, and use that theory to inform her artwork – "plugging one text into another", as Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2013: 261) describe the process. The fact that these artful scholars were engaging with the materiality of their art-making at a distance from other students and myself, as teacher, was of little consequence. After all, we were well connected through similar storage devices, plugs, cables, and excavated metal. In fact, the digital representations of these students' artworks offered more scope for interpretation than I observe in many standard, face-to-face, non-arts-based classes that I teach. Considering the Internet as something more than a means of data storage and sharing – more like Web 2.0 – makes available a whole range of creative possibilities. As David Gauntlett (2011: 81) puts it in his useful text on craft as a means of connecting: "you can't *literally* press your fingers into the craft material, the equivalent of the clay or wood or paint, because it's all digital. But you can certainly leave your metaphorical fingerprints all over the thing you're making; indeed, it's hard not to".

## Conclusion

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The new materialism has set the stage for a review of online professional education (if not education more generally), provoking students, educators and higher education institutions to reconsider the agency of matter in learning, teaching and practice. Art, especially, is a way of responding to the new materialism, redefining the position of teachers and their embodied practices, and learners and their embodied knowing, and in the process, creating new opportunities. Indeed, if professional education is at the crossroads, as was suggested at the beginning of this article, then it may be that thinking differently about art and other matters of online professional education may be a way of exploiting these opportunities. The alternative would be to continue to take an instrumentalist view of technology, art, and other material – to try to harness them in the name of learning. However, this could create a distance between online



professional education and the way in which professional practitioners are now expected to operate. As Snaza and his colleagues (2014: 43) remind us, technology such as “computerized communications devices are reshaping human cognition, embodied experience, and the relations of the wider world”. Working with art means consequently working with different epistemologies and ontologies, including notions of unknowing and becoming, which may help to prepare learners for practising in ways that are thoughtful and skilful, and teach them to respond creatively “in real time to the unfolding and coevolving worlds in which they must function” (McDaniel and Driebe, 2001: 31).

This investigation of art in online professional learning, explored through art itself, and coming from a posthumanist perspective, should be considered work-in-progress. This would be similar to how the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti described his art-making – as *non finito* – something which, according to James Lord (1980: 92) was evident right back to Michelangelo. Such a view aligns with Somerville’s (2007: 235) epistemology around ‘generating’: “I want to focus on the makings, the creation of products and assemblages, in an iterative process of representation and reflection through which we come to know in research”, she writes. Following Somerville, and also Giacometti, I think of this work as one iterative movement in a much larger project shaped by scholars like Deleuze and Guattari, and before that Spinoza, and more recently by scholars such as Springgay – it is a project that others will no doubt continue.

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## About the Author

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