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Threshold Concept Theory and Nonformal Education: Community-Based Arts Learning in Palestine

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Abstract

Arts learning forums can provide a crucial opportunity for communities undergoing massive social upheaval to gather, reimagine, and exchange ideas. By providing multimodal expressive environments in which to explore, process, create, and share, a community arts education programme might be considered central to the sustenance of community during periods of collective trauma. Arts education programmes similarly maintain a capacity to disassemble communities, leading to greater exclusion, alienation, and dependence on foreign aid. This article critically reflects on the design of the Our Kids' Teachers programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which provided workshop training in arts education methodologies to over a thousand teachers and youth leaders in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Central to this design was an application of transformative, experiential learning, which might be posited as a practical example of threshold concept theory (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008). While scholarly research into threshold concept learning has predominantly focused on curricula within formal education, there is a clear relevance of this educational theory to community learning forums. Moreover, when contextualised within a community arts education process, it suggests ways of designing programmes to support a humanising pedagogy.

Key words: arts, community, education, threshold concepts, humanising pedagogy

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Introduction

We pass through the present with our eyes blindfolded. We are permitted merely to sense and guess at what we are actually experiencing. Only later when the cloth is untied can we glance at the past and find out what we have experienced and what meaning it has (Kundera, 1969/1999, p. 5).

The significance of the events that we experience as teachers can often feel blurred within the whirlwind of immediate teaching and learning concerns. While we may feel the experiences are very meaningful, we may not feel well equipped to recognise and translate distinct meanings into words that we (or others) may carry forward. Following Milan Kundera's (1999) reflective tone, my latter career as an academic has prompted much retrospection towards my earlier career as a community arts practitioner. What was going on in those teaching moments, and why was it happening that way?

While the intimidating wealth of scholarly theory has at times prompted me to disregard all of my prior experience and knowledge as banal, unoriginal, and uninformed, I have come to realise that such a disregard can be a disservice to academia. One of my academic quests has thus involved the use of autonarrative enquiry to explore the memories of community-based practitioners like myself to identify distinct principles and practices and theorise their relevance (see Rowe, Buck, & Martin, 2013; Rowe, Buck, & Shapiro-Phim, 2016). Within this article, I critically reflect on my experiences designing Our Kids' Teachers, a community arts teacher training programme within the West Bank and Gaza Strip during 2000–2005. More than simply a fond reminiscence of days in the field, my aim here is to reexamine the humanising pedagogy that underscored Our Kids' Teachers. In doing so, I hope to identify the project's theoretical significance and firmly position an emerging educational theory, threshold concept learning (Meyer & Land, 2005), within humanising pedagogies and community arts education. While research into threshold concept learning has predominantly focused on the curriculum design of formal tertiary education programmes (see Harlow, Peter, & McKim, 2014; Land et al., 2008), I argue here that it has both relevance and roots as a humanist pedagogy within nonformal community arts education.

Nonformal education (the community-based learning that takes place outside formal primary, secondary, and tertiary education) is increasingly recognised as a crucial means of addressing 21st century social, economic, and environmental challenges (UNESCO, 2006, 2011, 2013). It is therefore imperative that the complexity of nonformal education is explored and its practices theorised. This in turn may allow associations between formal and nonformal educational philosophies to emerge and prompt practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to advance knowledge on education that is responsive to diverse cultural locations.

Following an overview of the Our Kids' Teachers programme and threshold concept learning, I offer an analysis of how threshold concept learning aligns with Maria Del Carmen Salazar's (2013) articulation of humanising pedagogy. I then illustrate how threshold concepts were central to the Our Kids' Teachers programme. This contributes an alternate threshold concept narrative that might help connect histories of pedagogy in nonformal and formal learning spaces.

It's All about Belonging: The Our Kids' Teachers Programme

The Popular Art Centre (PAC), a Palestinian nongovernmental organisation, was established in Al-Bireh by local artists in 1987 with a mandate "to create a cultural environment that facilitates the building of a stronger connection between Palestinians and arts and culture" (Popular Art Centre, 2016, para. 1). In October 2000, in response to the intensification of Israeli military activity in the occupied Palestinian territories and the outbreak of the second intifada, PAC initiated the Our Kids programme. Our Kids was, at its time, the most extensive community arts outreach programme to have ever been implemented across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Over the following two years of intense political and military turmoil, the Our Kids programme travelled the length and breadth of the occupied Palestinian territories, providing 800 hours of dance, drama, and music workshops to more than 12,000 children in refugee camps, cities, and villages.

As an employee of the Popular Art Centre and director of the Our Kids programme, I was in a position to observe the teaching practices of the local arts teachers engaged in the programme, and co-construct a workshop design and methodology that might respond to the needs of the children and institutions that we were visiting each day in the refugee camps and villages. On the lengthy road trips to and from each location, the outbound teachers clustered in a minibus and talked through lesson plans, and on the return trips debriefed on how the children and local communities had responded. Arriving at each location we met and talked with parents and teachers before giving the workshops, and often stayed to eat and talk more afterwards. These experiences offered informal insights into the contexts of the children attending the workshops, and local perceptions and values of informal arts learning. Through discursive workshops held within the Popular Art Centre, the other teachers and I shared our experiences, role-played workshop scenarios, and sought to refine our approach to community-based arts learning interventions.

Our own values were very much informed by the ideals of the Popular Art Centre (PAC), which considered that the arts were instrumental in fostering a community: a space in which an individual could feel solidarity, significance, and security (Clarke, 1973). At the same time, the PAC maintained a deep concern over cultural imperialism (Escobar, 1995; Fanon, 1986; Said, 1993) and the normalising of relationships with Israel whilst under its military occupation. This often conflicted with the expectations of foreign donor agencies, which sought to use the arts to build relationships between Palestine and Israel (Rowe, 2010). The PAC's focus on community also contrasted with the apparent goals of arts learning within schools and other cultural institutes in the occupied Palestinian territories at the time, which prioritised and evaluated an individual's skills and development in an art form, or focused on the reproduction of iconic expressions of political art (Rowe, 2015). Within the PAC, the advancement of an art form could not come at the expense of Palestinian political autonomy or social inclusion, cultural pluralism, and collective regeneration within Palestinian communities. The Our Kids projects thus sought to use nonformal arts learning as a means of fostering an environment in which children could experience and extend such a sense of autonomy and community.

To advance cultural autonomy, the PAC sought ways to make the activities more locally sustainable in the refugee camps and villages that the Our Kids programme had visited. In 2002, the project shifted focus to become Our Kids' Teachers. While the Our Kids project continued at a more localised level, Our Kids' Teachers provided training in arts workshop methods to 1,100 teachers and youth leaders across the West Bank and Gaza Strip over the following four years. This involved the publication of *Art, During Siege* (Rowe, 2003), a training manual that documented the methods and activities generated within the programme. As a teacher trainer and course designer of the Our Kids' Teachers programme, I usually stayed within the communities for a week, facilitating workshops with trainees, observing their workshops, and meeting, talking, and eating at various homes and offices.

While I have critically analysed the values underpinning the Our Kids and Our Kids' Teachers projects and their sociopolitical relevance in other publications (see Rowe, 2003, 2008, 2015), within this article I focus on issues related to the course structure and teaching practices that emerged through the Our Kids' Teachers training programme. How did the Our Kids programmes extend their sociopolitical values within a pedagogic practice? How might these practices be understood as a humanising pedagogy? And, in particular, how might these teaching strategies appear aligned with threshold concept learning?

Finding New Paths: Threshold Concept Theory

Educational theorists Meyer and Land (2005) posited that threshold concepts create borders around our understanding of a subject. Crossing a threshold concept is like moving through "a portal,

opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 373). Meyer and Land suggested that five factors indicate a learning experience has involved the crossing of a threshold concept:

- Transformation (it changes a learner's perception of a subject),
- Irreversibility (it is something that cannot be unlearnt without considerable effort),
- Integration (it exposes an interrelatedness of knowledge and allows new conceptual associations to be built),
- Bound (it is relevant, significant, and limited to particular disciplinary contexts),
- Challenging (it contrasts with the dominant paradigms that a student may carry).

In emphasising the latter point, Meyer and Land identified that a threshold concept has particular significance because it contains "troublesome knowledge" (2005, p. 373). A student will inevitably experience a sense of intellectual and possibly emotional disruption as the threshold is navigated. Crossing a conceptual threshold is thus akin to experiencing an epiphany: a new and important way of seeing the world is realised, allowing a student to further guide her or his own learning in a subject.

Within an arts learning context, an example of a threshold concept might be the liberal, transcultural idea that individuals or collectives can reconstruct and rationalise their own aesthetic choices (Bhabha, 1994). In other words, people can determine for themselves what they think is art (and good art) without direction from traditions, doctrines, or authorities. The passage through such a conceptual threshold can allow learners to no longer consider an art form as defined by a prescribed and unchangeable set of aesthetic principles. This particular crossing can prompt students to construct new associations between artistic expression and their own life and cultural experiences, and self-direct their onward learning as a result.

While this may seem (on the surface) to be a very straightforward realisation, the movement across such a conceptual threshold can involve much oscillation, as the learner seeks to reconcile this new way of seeing the world with former ways of seeing the world (Land et al., 2008). Attending to this period of oscillation and allowing students to construct their own unique pathways beyond the threshold (rather than simply stuffing students with a new set of aesthetic rationales and testing them on their application) thus becomes the focus of the pedagogy. Once students are beyond the conceptual threshold, and inclined towards seeing the subject in a new way, they will be better positioned to guide and expand their own learning in the subject.

For threshold concept learning to be fully realised, the guided exploration of concepts needs to pervade the design of the entire curriculum, and not simply manifest as an occasional teaching and learning activity (Perkins, 2008). That means it is not enough to challenge students' perceptions within learning events, but then simply test them on "facts" at the end of the course. A more effective integration can be possible through the constructive alignment of a curriculum or course design—in which learning outcomes, assessment methods, learning activities, and learner capabilities maintain a logical cohesion (Biggs, 1996). This alignment starts by defining the outcomes of the learning, to guide the assessment process and learning tasks. So if passage beyond a conceptual threshold is the learning outcome, then assessments should measure not "what people are able to do, but what they are inclined to do" (Perkins, 2008, p. 9). Measuring learning progress can therefore focus on a student's disposition to explore theoretical possibilities beyond a threshold concept, rather than on their absorption of existing knowledge and consolidation of particular skills within a field. This in turn suggests that learning activities should focus on passing conceptual thresholds, and that the entry of students into the learning programme should be guided more by

their curiosity and inclination to explore a conceptual threshold, than by their existing skillset and knowledge.

Extending upon the earlier example of an arts learning threshold (which prompted students to confidently make and rationalise their own aesthetic choices), an examination process might evaluate the students' inclination to diversify their aesthetic choices, rather than assess their technical or theoretical competence in a particular aesthetic paradigm.

When a curriculum is thus focused on threshold concepts, teachers spend more time within the learning forum exploring diverse paths that might traverse the conceptual threshold, and allow the student's self-directed learning to subsequently seek and comprehend content knowledge that they consider culturally relevant (Rowe & Martin, 2014). This shift away from content heavy teaching responds to the accessibility and dynamism of knowledge in the 21st century: the digital age makes information so accessible that the delivery of content knowledge in the classroom is largely redundant. Moreover, students are facing a rapidly changing world, in which maintaining established knowledge is less valuable than a flexible disposition that allows them to "look beyond the apparent options" (Perkins, 2008, p. 9).

Threshold concept learning might therefore be seen as an extension of educational theories in transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975; Rothwell & Sensenig, 1999), the social construction of knowledge (Eisner, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), and the gaining of a disposition towards further knowledge acquisition and application (Perry, 1970). Moreover, threshold concept theory might be understood as contrasting with reductive education theories (Bartolomé, 1994) that emphasise the rote learning (Säljö, 1979) and the retention of building-block content knowledge as an essential pathway towards advanced knowledge in a subject (e.g., Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Threshold concept learning is in this sense rhizomic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) because it requires students to construct intersections between the subject area and their existing knowledge in ways that are not possible through a more arboreal approach to knowledge consolidation.

While studies in threshold concept learning have predominantly focused on curriculum design in tertiary education, it is possible to see its application within the course design of nonformal learning. An analysis of its use within nonformal learning might also reveal its relevance to humanising pedagogy.

Name the World: Humanising Pedagogy

Threshold concept learning has more in common with the pedagogy advocated by Freire (1970) than simply a shared rebellion against the banking model of education. To further understand the complexity of this association, it is worth reflecting on the five factors of a humanising pedagogy identified by Maria del Carmen Salazar.

1. "The full development of the person is essential for humanization" (Salazar, 2013, p. 128). The Freirean idea of continuously becoming (Roberts, 2000) is central to a pedagogy focused on threshold concepts. Thresholds are crossed as part of an ongoing journey into new conceptual territories and ways of perceiving the world, rather than a final arrival at a set and limited body of knowledge. As Perkins (2008) suggested, the journey across a threshold concept can involve passive, performative, and proactive dispositions. Within a passive disposition, the learner experiences the new concept as a theory that distinctly exists amongst other theories. Within a performative

disposition, the learner imagines and enacts the new concept within prescribed and expected contexts. Within a proactive disposition, the learner creatively plays and responds to phenomena beyond the conceptual threshold (Buck & Rowe, 2015). This unfolding process prompts learners to seek deeper and deeper understandings, to not be satisfied with a single answer, and to thus allow their understandings of themselves in the world to remain in a continuous state of becoming.

2. “To deny someone else’s humanization is also to deny one’s own” (Salazar, 2013, p. 129). The navigation of threshold concepts involves a shift from a learning mindset defined by right way–wrong way dualism, past a multiplicity mindset that suggests there are various possible right ways, and to a relativist learning mindset that recognises all knowledge is subjected to personal interpretation to become meaningful, and that such meanings are infinite in number and value (Perkins, 2008). This challenges approaches to education that contrast valued knowledge with student deficiencies (Valenzuela, 1999), because the relativity mindset acknowledges that all students carry with them valuable knowledge and experiences that will enrich the subject matter being studied.

3. “The journey for humanization is an individual and collective endeavor toward critical consciousness” (Salazar, 2013, p. 131). The shared navigation of a threshold concept provides an opportunity for dialogue in which teachers and students have their understandings of a subject continually transformed through the realisation of new pathways across, and perceptions beyond, the threshold. A teacher’s focus is less on whether or not a student has understood and applied knowledge in a way that the teacher or the curriculum understands and applies it, and more on how the student is inclined to make sense of the concept within the context of her or his own life. By making new meanings of their own lives as a result of passage through the threshold, students contribute insights towards a shared critical consciousness (Jennings & Da Matta, 2009).

4. “Critical reflection and action can transform structures that impede our own and others’ humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all” (Salazar 2013, p. 136). While Freire emphasised the need to liberate students from oppressive, hegemonic educational structures, it could be argued that counterhegemonic educational imperatives can be just as oppressive (Rowe, 2008). Similarly, threshold concepts are not in and of themselves politically neutral or culturally universal (Cousins, 2008). Maintaining the student’s autonomy and critical reflection might therefore be seen as central to a humanising pedagogy, regardless of the political mandate. When underpinned by a humanising pedagogy, the multilinear curriculum of a threshold concept approach can foster such autonomy and reflection (Buck & Rowe, 2015). The student’s transition to a proactive disposition beyond the threshold concept correlates in this sense to Freire’s notion of praxis, or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 145).

5. “Educators are responsible for promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical principles and practices” (Salazar, 2013, p. 137). As Salazar noted, Freire’s ideals have been critiqued as “vague, imprecise, generic, and oversimplified and unhelpful for practitioners on the ground” (2013, p. 138). To adequately address such concerns, pedagogical principles and practices such as threshold concepts need to be more than a random learning tool, but a fully articulated and integrated practice. As Freire noted, “to exist humanely is to name the world, to change it” (1970, pp. 75–76). Providing a clear identification of pedagogical principles and practices can be essential to critiquing and advancing their use.

While the application of threshold concept theory within a curriculum does not necessarily equate with the goals of a humanising pedagogy, it is possible to see how it might be used to support such an end. Nor does threshold concept theory reveal a revolutionary new pedagogic practice: the

phenomenon described here aligns with practices that teachers and curriculum designers have engaged in for decades. Indeed, one aim of this article is to illustrate how this practice was occurring within a nonformal community arts learning programme before it was theorised and published in academia. To extend this illustration, within the next section I identify how threshold concepts and the intent of a humanising pedagogy manifested within the design and implementation of the Our Kids' Teachers training programme.

Inclining People: Designing a Nonformal Teacher Training Programme

The Our Kids' Teachers programme provided successive groups of 12 to 20 participants with intensive teacher training workshops. On some occasions, partnerships with UNRWA (United Nations Refugee Works Agency) and the Palestinian Ministry of Education resulted in the workshops being delivered to a cohort of teachers from a particular school. At other times, the participants would be a diverse gathering of youth leaders, university students, community volunteers, librarians, aid workers, mothers, and fathers. The participating men and women maintained diverse religious convictions, from openly secular to deeply devout, and identified with diverse political factions including Hamas, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Almost all of the participants had no formal education in an art form, although many had extensive artistic experience and skills such as playing musical instruments or performing traditional dances at weddings. The variety of each group of participants thus created a complex sociopolitical and cultural learning forum, in which theoretical quandaries relating to social inclusion through the arts could be readily experienced.

The Our Kids' Teachers training programmes typically involved six intensive days of training for four hours each day. For the first five days, the participants engaged in task-based workshops that explored activities in dance, drama, music, and visual arts, and discussed workshop facilitation methods. On the sixth day the participants partnered together to lead arts workshops with local children. The schedule sometimes changed, depending on the military activity in the area or the professional responsibilities of the participants. This generally resulted in extending the workshops over a two-week period, but the restricted access to some of the areas (as a result of the military occupation) meant that implementing shorter, more intense community interventions was more viable.

The Our Kids' Teachers programme rationalised that if young people in the region could regularly participate in arts activities, then new, shared approaches to very long-standing sociopolitical problems might emerge. Achieving this regular engagement with arts learning required more than simply instructing people in arts education methods, however; it required a transformation in the way individuals and communities understood and felt about arts activities. The intended learning outcome of Our Kids' Teachers was therefore to leave individuals with tools to facilitate arts workshops, which they would feel inclined to use independently and without further intervention. The course design therefore required a strong emphasis on developing dispositions, rather than simply delivering content and refining skills. Such dispositions had to be relevant to the participants' local sociopolitical and cultural contexts, and yet motivate new actions through a way of seeing the world that was possibly in contrast to their predominant conceptions of arts, community, children, and themselves.

Hovering at the edge of these conceptualisations were some key threshold questions: Why do arts activities in a time of trauma? How can arts activity foster inclusion? Who can facilitate arts activities for children? These three *why, how* and *who* threshold concepts provide an illustration of the ways in which conceptual threshold learning underpinned the pedagogy and course design.

Why Arts in a Time of Trauma?

In advance of each workshop series, community leaders wanted to know “Why are you here and what do you want to do?” The notion that dancing, singing, painting, and acting might be useful during a period of collective trauma appeared, in Meyer and Land’s words, as “troublesome knowledge” (2005, p. 373). The arts were historically perceived as associated with celebration or individual achievement (Rowe, 2004). Much discussion was often required to clarify that the aim of the project was to provide communities under stress with arts activities for children as a community building tool. This instrumentalist use of arts and emphasis on children, inclusion, and communities provided a conceptual doorway through which community leaders could endorse the training workshops, and trainees could feel that their involvement in arts activities during a time of shared suffering was morally conscientable.

To emphasise the instrumentalist use of arts within Our Kids, the teachers working on the programme identified four key values central to all of the arts activities we were offering: creativity, communication, collaboration, and continuity (Rowe, 2004, 2015). If an arts activity did not provide a child with the opportunity to create, to communicate, to collaborate, and to enable them to feel confident to continue on, then it did not serve the mandate of the programme. Within the Our Kids’ Teachers training workshops, these themes were explored within large and small group discussions, and participants were encouraged to reflect on their former experiences in artistic activity—identifying moments when creativity, communication, collaboration, and a sense of being able to continue on had (or had not) occurred, and how this had made them feel. These reflective discussions were held in tandem with experiential learning tasks that provided examples of arts activities to further deconstruct creativity, collaboration, communication, and confidence building. Through these reflective discussions and activities, participants identified that the arts could be a place to both realise and express ideas (Robinson, 1982), and that those artistic realisations were valuable and affirming, even if they were not entirely original to the world (Craft, 2001).

The participants were traversing a conceptual boundary that declared that *the fundamental purpose of arts learning is to refine skills and present an artistic product*. In challenging this assumption, they explored the value of the process of arts learning, and moved beyond a teacher’s preoccupation with the development of skills and an artist’s preoccupation with the quality of the final artistic product. This opened up possibilities for diverse extrinsic reasons for engaging in arts activities.

How Can Arts Foster Inclusion?

Historically, collectivised arts practices in Palestine (such as songs and dances) had been complex locations of both social inclusion and exclusion. These historical practices had been extensively disassembled and reassembled, however, first through the reproduction of art as a commodity for tourists to Palestine from the mid-19th century onwards, and subsequently via the formal education system, broadly introduced during the period of the British Mandate and extended under the rule of subsequent governments. These introduced modernist notions of arts and education stemming from industrialisation, nationalisation, and empire building in Europe (Rowe, 2010). Throughout the 20th century, traditions associating the arts with gender roles, political identities, and cultural forums were thus invented and reinvented in Palestine in processes of collective-identity reconstruction (Kaschl, 2003).

Addressing issues of social inclusion in the arts was thus not a politically neutral process for the Our Kids’ Teachers programme, and required much negotiation between competing assumptions over local history. The collective trauma of the second intifada did, however, provide communities with a social urgency: a very strong impetus to critically reflect and consider new extrinsic reasons and roles

for arts activities (Rowe, 2015). Central to these reflections were concerns over how communities might be sustained: a concept valued in Arabic as *sumud* (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993). Again, small and large group discussions within the workshop deconstructed what it meant to feel involved or left out, and arts-based tasks that focused on fostering inclusion were introduced. This included activities that required groups to physically organise themselves into inward facing circular formations and engage in turn taking to ensure everybody contributed in some meaningful way.

Many of the tasks were structured into the of form games to prompt the participants to experience both a sense of fun and a sense of interdependence. The clear requirements and goal-oriented nature of a game offered an activity that participants could easily take away with them: they could reenact the game independently and endlessly with ever changing outcomes. While the games shared within the programme were diverse in their modality and direction, the collaborative creation and communication of an idea through an artistic medium remained central to each. These games led into more complex tasks that involved creative collaboration in a way that could only emerge from the inclusion of all participants in a group. The collaborative emphasis within these tasks meant that the creative process was less focused on a personal sense of self-actualisation (Rogers, 1980), and more focused on a communal sense of collective actualisation (Rowe, 2015). This challenged the conceptual boundary that *creative realisation and expression is a deeply personal and individualised process*. Beyond this threshold, it was hoped that the participants would feel inclined to value social complexity within a collaborative art making process and actively seek diverse and divergent perspectives.

Who Can Facilitate Arts Workshops?

As the participants of the Our Kids' Teachers training programme explored new conceptual territory around the ideas of why arts learning is valuable, and how arts can be inclusive, they were also reconsidering ideas of who can learn arts, who can teach arts, and how arts learning forums might be organised. As noted earlier, the formal education system within the Occupied Palestinian Territories emphasised modernist, colonial-era paradigms regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers, students, and communities. This predominantly resulted in local perceptions of education as isolated from other community forums, pedagogy as an authoritarian practice, learning as a submissive practice, curriculum as focused on content absorption, and inclusion as determined by knowledge and skills competence (Fasheh, 1990). Flowing on from this was the expectation that teachers must have strong pedagogical content knowledge (Schulman, 1986), and that arts teachers must have an expertise and skills in arts practices (Rowe, 2008).

Given the social inclusion aims and limited scope of the Our Kids' Teachers training programme, however, new conceptualisations of teaching had to emerge. Our Kids' Teachers had six days to prepare individuals to facilitate arts workshops, even if the participants had little prior experience and knowledge of teaching within formal education and the arts. This required disassembling expectations of authoritative teaching, submissive learning, and content absorption. To achieve this, the leadership of the training workshops was continually distributed to the participants as they took turns facilitating group tasks and leading guided discovery activities. While the training manual *Art, During Siege* (Rowe, 2003, 2004) provided hundreds of arts-based games and activities for the trainee workshop leaders to draw on, the process of how to invent new games and create new tasks was also explored so that participants could be active designers of their own teaching and learning activities.

Throughout this training process, the participants' capacities to structure activities and patiently encourage everyone's involvement were valued, while their abilities to exemplify a practice and

correct learners were given less emphasis. Traversing conceptual thresholds around “what is teaching?” involved much discussion on the identity of a teacher in a community setting as opposed to within formal education. This reconfiguration of teaching identity was essential to moving participants from a passive to proactive disposition beyond the conceptual threshold (Perkins, 2008). If they did not feel actively disposed to facilitate workshops and explore how arts could be made more and more relevant to their communities, then the rest of the training would be redundant. This further involved discussions as to how the participants in each location might become more interdependent, developing a local community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in order to sustain their proactive dispositions.

The Lip of Insanity: Conclusion

The Our Kids’ Teachers programme brings back some of my happiest memories of teaching. The workshops were filled with the sort of laughter that bursts out of people like a sudden, oversized wave as the playfulness of the arts games provided an unexpected relief from the surrounding sociopolitical tension. This laughter affirmed the importance that arts education holds for children and adults, and motivated me to keep going in moments of despair.

I do not present Our Kids’ Teachers as an exemplar case study in pedagogy, however, and acknowledge that the outcomes were never measured and no claims of efficacy can be made. Anecdotally, I observed mixed results. Sometimes workshop participants with little artistic expertise presented a wonderfully inclusive workshop to a group of 25 children on the sixth day, and continued to present workshops in their camp or village for months afterwards. Others simply taught a familiar dance or revolutionary song to students in an instructive, authoritarian manner on the sixth day, in a way that diminished and excluded some children and rewarded others.

Nor am I proposing here that that the pedagogy used in this particular programme was completely new. The activities and practices outlined here are inevitably familiar to many teachers in diverse learning contexts. Through recalling the Our Kids’ Teachers programme, however, I am reminded of how teaching and learning in nonformal contexts can be dynamic and deeply reflective and contribute to our understandings of learning theories within formal education. Through the prism of this nonformal arts education programme, the alignment between threshold concept learning and a humanising pedagogy becomes clearer.

For educational rationalism to remain relevant in a postindustrial, postcolonial era, educational theories must recognise the complex needs and values that exist in diverse learning spaces. Community-based learning forums maintain not just marginalised knowledge, but also marginalised pedagogies. As an academic, I am concerned over the hegemony of formal education systems, which can expect nonformal learning systems to emulate them in order to appear valid. Much scholarly research is therefore needed to further unpack the rationales and methods of community-based arts teachers—to identify their significance and recognise their potential contributions to theories of teaching and learning. As a former community-based practitioner, I am increasingly revisiting earlier teaching and learning experiences to glimpse this complexity. Such returns can lead to surprising revelations. As the 13th century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi suggested:

*I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.*

I've been knocking from the inside! (Barks & Moyne, 1995, p. 281).

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