Observations when Counselling Trainee Artists

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Artists occupy an unusual position in society, and their training exhibits significant differences from that of other professions. Trainee artists must constantly face direct, often devastating discoveries about themselves and their talent; assessment is direct and often subjective, conducted in a very competitive environment, and students must overcome many doubts, both of their abilities and of life after graduation.

This brief paper is based on eight years’ experience as counsellor with music, art, drama, dance, film and production students at a Melbourne arts training institute. It draws heavily on the testimony of students and staff themselves, as well as my own reflections as counsellor and artist. I have tried, where possible, to distinguish what appear to be issues specific to this cohort from those which affect other tertiary students or the general population. It is written to inform counsellors of some relevant issues with this cohort, and to suggest ways of improving professional service to them.

Students who undertake arts training are generally young, and going through a complex process which blends personal and skills development, in a large organisation bound by bureaucratic and other processes. At such a time, in such a setting, mishaps, misunderstandings are certain to occur, and it is these things, unfortunately, which often come to the notice of the counsellor. The examples given below are typical neither of life in this institute, nor of the counsellor’s experience, but are presented as vivid, perhaps extreme expressions of underlying attitudes, fears and longings.

The bulk of the paper takes the form of asking, and venturing answers to, these questions:

- Why do students train to be artists?
- Is arts training necessary?
- What are the main issues trainee artists bring to counselling?
- What are the principal obstacles, whether personal or instituteal, to completing professional training as an artist?
- What are staff concerns about trainee students? What constitutes duty of care in this environment?
- What are some strategies to assist trainee artists remain in and graduate from their courses?

However there are two things to examine first: myths around the artist, and the learning environment.

DISPOSING OF MYTHS ABOUT ARTISTS

When first assigned to the institute, some of my counselling colleagues, both at the University and elsewhere, remarked, “That’ll be interesting. I’m sure there are lots of mental health problems there”. The implication seemed to be that, compared with other students, trainee artists would prove a counsellor’s paradise. Why should this be so? I know of no objective study of the mental health issues of arts students vis-a-vis other student cohorts, nor in relation to any other part of society. Trainee artists, or artists themselves, cannot be instantly assumed to have a higher incidence of such problems than other professions, such as dairy farmers or child care workers. Or counsellors.

[I should also add that I have never found forecasts, predictions, quasi-labels very useful in advance of meeting real clients, and not very frequently afterwards. So what’s going on?]

I wonder if we’re not dealing with a myth: the artistic temperament. Here is a definition of this, spoken by a character in April Hopes, a novel of 1886 by perhaps the finest American novelist of that era, William Dean Howells.
You know what I mean by the artistic temperament; it’s that inability to be explicit; that habit of leaving things vague and undefined, and hoping they’ll somehow come out as you want of themselves; taking the long way round to get at what you wish to do or say, and of being very finicking about little things and lax about essentials.

Artists are apparently dippy, wantonly impractical, lost in dreamy imaginings; charming, child-like, exasperating, what a study they make! I would contend that, on the contrary, there is no one more truly practical, focused and determined than a successful imaginative artist.

A more subtle, modern version of marginalising/infantilising/relegating artists can be seen in a quote encountered when writing this article: “Artistic behaviour must be irrational precisely because people make sacrifices on behalf of their art, and obviously no rational person would do such a thing…”

A close relation of the supposed ‘artistic temperament’ referred to above is the presumed over-supply of ego amongst artists. Artists are after all trying to express a vision, to fulfil ambitions, but no more so, nor more shamelessly, than politicians, thinkers, planners, businessmen, or many other people. It is my contention that the particular, competitive, intense and insecure conditions of the training institute/learning environment, and of the profession artists go on to enter, largely contribute to what may on superficial gaze seem to be demanding, egotistical, over-demonstrative behaviour. But artists must be demonstrative, or at least expressive. Otherwise they would not be artists.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

More than many other students, trainee artists spend considerable time with other students and staff, in a group creative setting. Whether this involves having studio space next to another painter, playing in someone else’s string quartet, crewing on another’s film or rehearsing a play, trainee artists are continually thrown together in an intense, competitive manner. More than this, assessment often takes place straight after a performance or showing, by other students and staff, sometimes uncontrolled, condescending and devastating feedback, at a moment of heightened vulnerability.

There is, in my opinion, a degree of indelicacy/insensitivity in this pedagogical process. Giving instant feedback ignores the widely varying needs of artists; after presentation (in whatever form that takes), some artists wish to be left alone, others want re-assurance, others again seek detailed, critical feedback. People differ.

A photography student showed some recent work to some fellow students, in the presence of their lecturer. The first feedback he received went like this:

‘It’s obvious you’re seeking a general rather than high art audience, and it looks like both your subjects and methods are slanted that way’.

This feedback seemed to the student inaccurate, humiliating and offensive, and he soon after sent an angry email to his lecturer, indirectly threatening violence against the critic. Within a few hours the head of school, Faculty General Manager, Head of the Faculty, Manager of the Counselling Service and I were all involved. This example shows both the depth of feeling invested by trainee artists in their work, and the institute-wide consequences of a delicate, but not unusual situation.

This atmosphere of constant scrutiny, a feeling of surveillance, of public exposure, of naming and shaming, creates an extremely intense hothouse atmosphere in which weakness cannot be admitted to oneself or to others.

(1) Why do students study and train to be artists? Why make art at all?

• To express beauty, energy or joy
To stimulate
To work for change
To express yourself
To be validated

A belief that culture matters, whether as music, art, dance, drama, film or any other art form

A belief that they have a talent at and love for something which will bring both personal and social fulfillment. Not merely self-expression but pleasure, stimulus to others

A relative indifference to more conventional and lucrative professions

(2) Is arts training necessary?

Yes

- to develop certain craft and technical skills difficult or impossible to develop alone
- to learn the history and gain knowledge of the relevant art form
- to form useful connections
- to immerse oneself in the most active contemporary thinking on the subject

No

- it cannot develop, indeed may even stifle and distort genuine creativity and imagination
- it may lead the person to question and undermine their own self-belief
- it brings elements of comparison, competitiveness and professional ambition into what may originally and essentially be a calmer, more private and serene part of your life

There is much controversy on this subject. Many of the most famous artists in their field have had no or little training, or have essentially taught themselves, others have had a great deal of training. Many artists have only taken training for a particular skill or short-term aim, others for a wider cultural or general education. Many artists fear that excessive or overly-uniform training will stunt or destroy their own imaginative impulses. Many students therefore are deeply ambivalent about the actual value of being in this learning environment, and resolving, or at least tolerating, this dissonance is an immense strain.

Just how specific this learning environment is can be seen by simply asking such questions as: is it possible to become an economist, veterinarian or teacher of Japanese through no, or only private, training?

(3) What are the main issues trainee artists bring to counselling?

Intensity of the course

This includes the pressure of heavy course schedules (usually 9 to 6 each day, and often several evenings a week), the difficulty of combing this with any other performing/arts activity, course scheduling problems, and financial support for student projects.

Film students are expected to fund their own final year films, costing on average about $20,000. This is a major drain on their own and family finances.

Difficulty finding time to undertake part-time work to support learning

A student who attends classes from 9 am to 6 pm each day, as well as occasional evening work, has immense difficulty combining this schedule with any kind of paid job. Many students are patently exhausted and discouraged and find it hard to continue.
Add to this any other kind of pressure, eg relationship breakdown, illness, failure of the family business (casting doubt on whether the family can continue to pay fees), death of a parent in the home country, addiction, or many other possible problems, and stress is almost bound to occur.

**Assessment subjective, not clear, ideological attitudes to one’s art**

Many adult artists have arrived at very clear preferences and decisions on what is worth expressing. If these adult artists then become teachers, the very definite kinds of personal choices they have made are difficult to reconcile with the objectivity, self-effacement and refusal to judge needed when encouraging younger artists. This also at least partly explains why tensions occur between teaching staff and mature age students; the latter have often made equally definite personal and aesthetic choices.

1. Some years ago, a student committed suicide. When conducting a de-briefing for fellow students and staff, it became apparent to the counsellor that many students felt the deceased student’s chosen style, a matter of passionate importance to her, had been ridiculed and dismissed by teaching staff. The underlying implication, which was difficult to address or test, was that this attitude had in some way contributed to her state of mind. It is conceivable that other students also felt uneasy about the objectivity of their own assessment.

2. Recently a student from a different country and religious background felt her work was constantly disparaged by staff assessing it, not - she believed - on technical grounds, but through implicit opposition to its cultural basis.

While staff members say that students should not take comments on their work personally, resentment is only natural when remarks are being passed and judgements made on someone’s appearance, voice, abilities, originality, choice of subject or style and, by implication, entire potential as a creative artist. Inconsistent, subjective or dismissive assessment of this kind is in marked contrast to, for example, the study of basic biochemistry or Japanese history, where a more ‘impersonal’ body of material is either mastered or not, shown by performance at competitive examinations and/ or progressive submission of essays. It cannot be stressed too strongly that, in these environments, assessment is a strong reflection of self-worth.

As well as appraising or judging a chosen style or personal aesthetic, staff feedback also deals with questions of the trainee’s very abilities or suitability to be an artist at all.

A woman in her early 40s, who had left school at 16, enjoyed painting a great deal, worked in various fields, married, had three children, including one with autism, studied art at night, was admitted to the School of Art. She attended Counselling for low self-esteem and anxiety. She had recently been told by one of her lecturers, “You shouldn’t be here, you should be back in TAFE”. [This remark, amongst its other features, raises questions about the moral obligation of an institute to support students, once they have been enrolled, paid fees in good faith, etc.]

**Opera Singer** I really love music, and thought I had some talent, but I’m doubting it now. It would be good if someone just said, “You have a nice voice”.

[This student later went on to win national acclaim.]

**Consistency and transparency of assessment**

Apart from the subjectivity and group-nature of assessment mentioned above, concerns arise if there is lack of clarity over what is assessed and what is not, and feel extreme annoyance when something is deemed assessable when previously this has not occurred. Moreover, there have been many occasions where students have made significant effort to produce work under the assumption that it was assessable only to find that this was not the case.

One student was told, at a time when her sister was dying, that a certain piece of work was not assessable. One week after the sister’s death, she was informed that it was assessable, and that it was now late.

**Doubts about whether you have the right personality to be an artist**
The strong emphasis in many courses on studio attendance, group feedback and participation means that students who are more reserved, shy, inhibited or gentle can feel, and actually become, marginalised and extremely isolated. Many young artists are already vulnerable and self-doubting enough, without the powerful effects of group dynamics to exacerbate this process.

There are to my knowledge few parallels with this context and atmosphere of continual analysis, almost surveillance, by one’s peers and teachers. [Perhaps a small research group in a laboratory may come closest.]

A film student, for instance, will one week crew on someone else’s film, the next direct his own, using the previous director in some other capacity. All this, while an understandable use of resources, as well as useful training in various functions, certainly does nothing to reduce elements of jockeying, rivalry and aggression amongst young film-makers. Students often worry whether they are assertive enough, can handle competition, etc.

**Acting Student:** I’m starting to feel I don’t have any ability. All the other students seem so confident.

**Counsellor:** Have you done much acting before?

**Student:** Oh yes, in Sydney I did a lot of student theatre, radio and community television, even some professional work.

**Counsellor:** And you enjoyed it? The feedback was good?

**Student:** Both. I really want to be an actor

**Counsellor:** Could you ask the teacher for any suggestions?

**Student:** I don’t think she likes us to show weakness.

**Counsellor:** And asking for assistance is considered a weakness?

**Student:** Yes

There is often a perceptible and painful gulf between the student’s own requirements as an individual artist versus the institute’s requirements for the students to be a team player

**Students feeling uncomfortable re body language/ use of touch/ harassment**

In some courses, some students mention feeling uncomfortable when staff members touch or come too near them. Given the art-form, tools used, skills, techniques being imparted, some contact may only be expected, but lack of clarity when people are of different (or the same) gender, cultural background, etc, makes this another recurrent problem area.

**Psychological interpretation and deconstruction**

A first year Acting student, from Europe, was explicitly asked not to contact her family or friends, nor to let them contact her, in order to ‘put your past behind you’. Apparently her new role as trainee artist required the relinquishing of major ties. She was naturally feeling lonely and unsupported, a situation which changed when the counsellor suggested she resume contact.

**Pressure to form and maintain numerous useful positive contacts**

To many students this kind of networking can seem diametrically opposed to the private, hidden part of themselves which generates their art.

**Favouritism/ preferential treatment**

Related to the above, a number of students mentioned their dismay at hearing other students greatly praised (and thus, to their way of thinking, themselves disparaged) by staff speaking in public. What might be well-intended, and quite unexceptionable in other circumstances, is being perceived in this small, intense, competitive setting as ‘streaming’ or grooming, and thus exclusion of others. The institute is perceived by many as a ‘make or break’ time, where establishing strong, fruitful and useful contacts is very much part of the agenda. The potential for misconstruction of staff behaviour is very great.
Dance Student  The other day, three or four of us were standing and talking with Paula (staff member), and someone said “Where’s Michele?(another student). And Paula said, “Oh Michele, now she’s a REAL dancer”. What does that make the rest of us?

Perhaps the unspoken issue is, why [Michele] has been singled out as worthy of commendation, and not me.

**Worries about not having a wide enough education/ enough practical skills**

Dance Student: I’ve been a dancer for about ten years, and I think I’m doing well, but I just feel really dumb, like I don’t know anything.

Counsellor: What sort of things?

Student: Oh, things about politics, the economy, recent history, things like that.

A number of students begin to see that by training in the arts, their only work experience is being a waiter, call centre work, etc. Meanwhile their school friends are taking up lucrative positions much earlier, etc. Perhaps it is incumbent on the institute to take the broader view that the student cannot, and enhance its efforts to produce a well-rounded graduate in these disciplines.

**Worries about what happens after graduation**

Some of the best-achieving students approach the counsellor with ‘anticipatory depression’; the course has provided a safe dependable structure, what will happen without it? Many staff members, both academic and professional, are themselves graduates of the institute. The absence of a defined career structure means there is a constant urgent need for continual re-motivation and development of emotional self-sufficiency, in a crowded, competitive and sometimes disturbing field.

Approximately 80 % of drama graduates are no longer working as actors within four years of graduation. When graduates find themselves unable to continue the struggle to work in the field they are suited to and prefer, how fitted are they for other kinds of training or employment?

Recent music theatre graduate

“Coming out into the real world again can be quite a shock for some graduates. I came to terms with the fact that I wasn’t probably going to be working too much in the industry this year, straight away, and it was hard, going from three years of intense training and performing to practically nothing”.

(4) **What are the principal obstacles, whether personal or instituteal, to completing professional training as an artist?**

Apart from those obstacles which beset all students, the principal hurdle for trainee artists is, in my view, **accepting changes in motivation.** A large part of the counsellor’s role is assisting clients to recognise that motivation varies quite often, that these changes are normal, that there there are strategies to deal with it, and that some brief laying off might be sensible. But of course to young people intent on successfully establishing themselves in a competitive, overcrowded profession by the age of 30, this can be a very difficult, indeed inadmissible idea.

(5) **What are staff concerns about trainee artists?**

Staff are generally very concerned, dedicated people, all too aware of what can go wrong in this field. However, one feature worth noting is some staff reluctance to be ‘bureaucratic’, even where knowledge and enforcement of some basic rules of conduct would provide a safer, far less stressful learning environment for both students and staff. It is also not often made clear what is unacceptable student behaviour. This covers everything from use of drugs, to behaviour in the classroom, to staff feeling uncomfortable or threatened.

An art student destroyed the work of another student, purely in order to take over the studio space the other student occupied. Students do not seem to know of the Code of Conduct, nor are staff sometimes comfortable in stating or reinforcing it.
A music student was asked to perform some songs, which reflected her own cultural background. This exercise soon released a flood of distressing feelings based on her own and her family’s experience as refugees, and both the staff member and other students did not know how to respond.

Duty of care in this environment seems to be interpreted in various ways. At one end there are staff scrupulously concerned not to act unless explicitly requested to by a particular student or his/her classmates. At the other, there are others who, with equal conscientiousness, try to remain alert to the changes they perceive either in individuals or group dynamics. For instance, if a student is not attending, practice differs on whether to write, ring, ask other students, etc.

One student began to act quite angrily, but it did not occur to relevant staff for quite a while that he simply preferred less time in the studio than others, and wished to work more on his own. Because studio attendance was a major part of assessment, he was being made to comply and highly resented it. Little allowance was being made for what appeared to be a legitimate individual preference. When a less rigid situation was negotiated, matters improved.

A film student wanted to make a short film based on the murder of her father by her mother, when the student was a child. Her lecturer asked me to assess the student and the suitability of her project. She seemed to me well able to deal with even this intensely personal subject.

In addition, and in contrast to other faculties, staff sometimes do not consider suggesting or encouraging the use of Special Consideration as a way to assist students. Perhaps related to the tough-minded attitudes mentioned above, students start to feel from their teachers that to refer to non-institute factors is to show oneself a weakling, and thus implicitly unsuited to the life of an artist. Many, many problems are thus left ‘untreated’ until a late and often highly distressing stage.

(6) What are some strategies for counsellors to assist trainee artists remain in and graduate from their courses?

The short answer to this question is:

*discover, and reinforce to the trainee artist, whatever supports their motivation and self-belief.*

Given the numerous hurdles and barriers outlined in previous pages, the young artist must above all learn to be both fluid yet single-minded, idealistic but practical. I consider the counsellor’s aim with this group is, broadly, to increase the client’s *stamina*, and reduce the passivity and pessimism of these fervently pursued but often luckless fields.

Much early work with this cohort deals with re-establishing basic self-care, sleep, diet, exercise, relaxation, level of socialising, need for solitude, etc. This extends further to questions of

- time management, eg. regular use of a diary
- work/study balance
- money, eg ability to reduce expenditure, save, use an accountant, know of all tax deductions, etc,

then into questions of

- assertiveness
- reliability
- ability to continually make assessments of what you can do right now, whether to ask or give promises or commitments, how to end or change them, etc

Useful work can be done by a counsellor in simply naming emotions such as disappointment, doubt, rejection, envy, neglect/indifference, and discussing ways of dealing with them, learning how to ‘re-group’. The need for continual self-review is stressed, not forgetting pleasure, giving yourself credit, forming relationships through your arts practice, friends, fans, well-wishers. This inter-personal aspect includes such
things as how to express enthusiasm or thanks, how to phrase criticism honestly yet tactfully, and accurately assessing both who is on your side, and who isn’t.

While not strictly a counsellor’s role, it is also useful to encourage trainee artists to connect with the profession and the wider society, eg. through lobby groups, professional associations, corporate sponsors; this both reduces isolation and promotes knowledge and use of resources of society, government and business.

Another useful tactic, when this cohort feels motivation is failing, is to suggest the client take a fresh look at their own on-going development, their current growth, the possible need to re-discover some curiosity or sense of daring. This may involve a conscious keeping up to date with what’s going on, the decision to see one new film or painter, read one new book, hear one new singer a month, etc. This is also usefully accompanied by deliberate but unstressful study of history of the art form, of creativity in your own country, reading the journals and biographies of great practitioners, etc.

In this way the young artist is being re-stimulated, calmly researching and extending knowledge, and can so avoid the ‘tyranny of the present’, repeating mistakes and clichés through ignorance. There is also the constant pleasure of learning new skills, gaining new insights and making new friends and contacts through projects and self-study. In this way the trainee artist can learn how to achieve, control, mistrust or avoid success in any outward sense, something which is both the aim but sometimes the enemy of artistic fulfilment. To an artist, survival is, in itself, success.

Apart from these strategies for individual students, a counsellor of trainee artists is also advised to get to know the staff thoroughly over a considerable time, and to let them get to know you. Invite yourself along to Staff meetings, mention current trends, appeal for assistance, run workshops, etc - word gets around. Because learning in this setting is so closely bound up with student-to-student relations, and student-staff relations, familiarity with the practices of all concerned seems to give better service. Of course this may place the counsellor, even more than in other sole practice settings, in an extremely involved role, but that is neither new, nor to be feared.

Darryl Cloonan, counsellor at the University of Melbourne, wishes to state his gratitude to his colleagues Garry Thomson and Jonathan Norton in the writing of this piece.

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