

The Making Project

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1. The 'Why' (Abstract)

Inquiry Through Making: How do I experience the process of making?

Staff at Plymouth School of Creative Arts (PSCA) are considering pedagogy of practice-based research, where a collective inquiry through making explores its impact on the individual, and on the community. The inquiry sits alongside our curriculum - pedagogy of makingⁱ, using data and research evidence in order to make meaning for the school's understanding of learning.

PSCA has a clear and distinctive purpose: Creating Individuals, Making Futures. Making is therefore at the centre of our what we create:

Life is not a theoretical process. It involves doing alongside being and is a 'whole body' experience. We recognise that to fulfil our potential requires us to be active in mind and body together; making something connects us to ourselves and to others. (Beard et al. 2015)

In order to continue to grow and develop, PSCA is committed to an engagement with research and 'looking closer' in order to reposition our understanding for moving forward. We recognise that our 'learning village' is a place where 'meaning-making' happens, no matter what your age or position in the school.

The Making Projectⁱⁱ facilitates inquiry through a research question. In broad terms, this requires all learners to make, make meaning and find an audience with which to share their story. The project may be individual or collaborative. However, it will always create a personal significance and repositioning; where collaboration is sought (skill share; new learning; challenge etc.), individual meaning can be drawn from that as a path to better understand [my] 'language of learning'ⁱⁱⁱ and onward journey.

Our starting point has been through the eyes and hearts of staff. By engaging all staff in this process, we begin to build a community of researchers, who examine through inquiry - through the eyes of the learner. Furthermore, in line with our commitment to co-construction and collective responsibility, The Making Project shapes periods of curriculum time for our Phase Three students (current Year 7) and emergently Phase One (Reception to Year 3). During these periods, students' process follows a parallel flow of inquiry. Teaching draws in alongside the learner and the project they are developing. This armature for teaching and learning has significant resonance with great early years practice, which creates something of interest and significance for our all-through school (nursery to GCSE) and 'The Continuum' (PSCA and Plymouth College of Art).

This position paper shares our journey through The Making Project, so far, and aims to contribute to our understanding for the future 'Crafting of Education'^{iv} .



Plymouth School of Creative Arts opened in Millbay, Plymouth in September 2013. Our purpose-built school opened fully in February 2015. In making a school, we aim to transform the way creative action can enhance learning and thereby fulfill our purpose of 'Creating Individuals, Making Futures'.

2. The 'What' (Outline)

The Making Project facilitates inquiry through our research question, "How do I experience the process of making?" In broad terms, this requires all staff to make, make meaning and find an audience with which to share the story. The project should be fundamentally individual and sits as part of the performance management process as the individual target. Where collaboration is sought (skill share; new learning; challenge...), individual meaning can be drawn from that as a path to better understand [my] learning dispositions and onward journey.

3. The 'How' (Methodology)

We are interested in a democracy of making, where everyone is the learner, drawing individual meaning in to the collective knowledge. With this approach, our methodology positions the lead researcher as the facilitator of separate but connected individual inquiries; participants become researchers in practice, examining the process and impact of making. Therefore, the researcher is neither removed nor purely objective as an observer making that meaning as they are not separated from the experience. In fact, the experience leads the inquiry, believing that in order to make meaning, we must feel and be connected to the human experience of being the maker. We are challenging common research paradigms by stating that, in order to truly understand, one must make meaning through a connection, not simply step back to see.

Each thread of inquiry intertwines, weaving to create an image of the whole. Individual research perspectives are shaped by the level of selected engagement, driven by individual purpose and how we relate to the project. At times, the journey may be introspective and conceal a personal narrative, while at other times depict overt and more public challenge or collaboration. Any further refinement of methodology or process becomes emergent through the act of making research together; this becomes reflexive over time based on need, emerging patterns and what glows.

The pre-incarnation of The Making Project was launched with staff to consider the impact of inquiry – "How does making impact on community?" This was launched alongside an invitation to "make something and share it with others." While the open emphasis on making was clear, we noticed that our suggestion of impact on community through the question might lead and influence findings towards targeted impact – confirming what is 'in our head' rather than genuinely looking at making, with the potential to have 'got it wrong'. This countered our aims for genuine practice-based research through which to learn something new and determine our next steps; 'to build the plane whilst it is in the air'.

Further revision to locate our research question secured an opportunity to inquire through making, as adults, in a way that we expect of all learners in our school. We have chosen to position our research away from research as observers. Instead, we chose to democratise research by asking all members of staff to explore the question: 'How do I experience the process of making?' This ensures, rather than looking at, we are looking through our question - a lens. The purpose of this positioning is to align with our commitment to immersive research as a way to continue making pedagogy: what's working, what's missing, what's next.

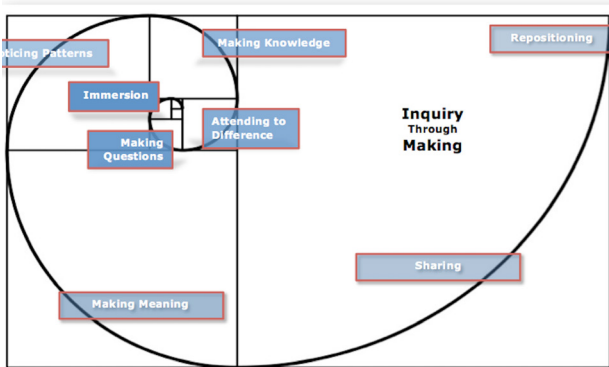


Fig 1. Inquiry Through Making Armature v.1

3.1. The Armature: Inquiry Through Making (Fig 1.)

When sharing the question, we avoided the presentation of formal ‘research’ and instead talked about an ‘inquiry,’ ‘being playful’ and ‘finding something that is within you; what brings you here and what do you bring here?’ We recognised that it was important to give people a starting provocation, putting ‘making’ at the centre with an armature for engagement. Using an armature to map the territory of this making process, we provided staff with phases of development. The appropriation of the Fibonacci spiral provided a visual metaphor for perpetual and cumulative repositioning; the proposal was that and inquiry through making led us somewhere new. The question asked staff to define what [my] journey was by examining how [I] experienced it. This had no set dates but was emphasised as a process for each individual to shape. Making rather than designing. The Making Project then formed each member of staff’s individual target as part of the progress and performance review process (performance management), supported by the staff ‘Individual Learning Process’ (ILP).^v

Simultaneously, we were invited to contribute to the school-based action research contribution for Cambridge Primary Review Trust Research Schools Network (CPRT, 2015). This work created a regular audience for sharing work in progress. In order to support the parallel nature of these critical perspectives, we set out a timeline for making, with an emphasis on the sequence of three key phases: Making; Making Meaning (noticing patterns); Sharing (engaging an audience). (Fig 2.)

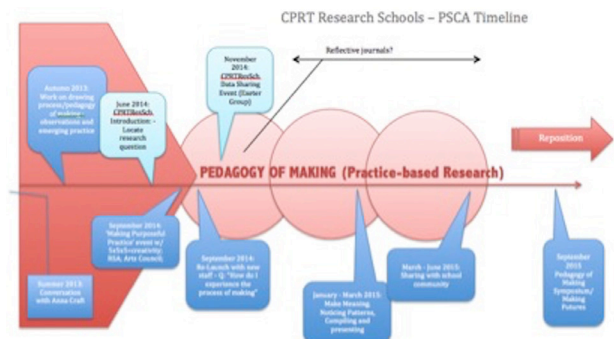


Fig 2. Phase One Timeline

3.2. Survey and interview

In late November 2014, we invited the sharing of project starting points. Our data gathering incorporated survey, audio interview (Fig 3.) and informal conversations, as well as some photography to document the process. Through the archiving and tagging of these ‘conversations in the corridor’ we began to identify themes that ‘glowed’, contributing to a narrative that we were able to share and reflect on. By using a range of data capture forms, we mirrored the fluidity and reflexive nature of how ideas were being made and developed. Our priority here, and throughout the process, was to gather data in a range of forms, each informing the picture, which enabled a research body to ‘follow the smoke’. Engagement with this process was not complete across the staff group and was possibly representative of those with an affected connection as opposed to those with an absence of such - no connection or a repressed connection. It was clear from the outset that the process provoked an emotional response within staff. How staff then related to this shaped their level of action thereon.



Fig 3. Interviews

3.3. Informal conversations

Through the autumn and spring term (2014-15), The Making Projects were continued through a 'making' phase. During this time, staff were choosing to make and connect in different ways. This was not managed or directed, other than to informally check in. This connection was not formalised through listing or registration. It relied on autonomy and an intrinsic motivation to inquire... or to make.

These moments brought to light an area of significance as a research project, particularly in relation to 'meaning making'.^{vi} With the data being emergent and non-sterile, there were increasing chances for elements to be missed from capture. Meaning becomes something that is transient and cannot be secured to one set of detail at one point in time. In practice, this process was depicting a progression from the Fibonacci starting point, instead showing a constant state of flux between making, making meaning and repositioning, all through sharing.

3.4. Sharing

At the end of the spring term, we brought the project to the surface by requesting that all staff bring their making to a meeting in order to share their individual journeys with others:

The purpose of sharing our making is to make meaning for ourselves, with others. Each individual inquiry is likely to be different, while creating the space for connections to be made. A forum of sharing will offer us all the opportunity to learn alongside each other. (Bisco 2015)

Based on the tagging of survey responses, identifying key themes, we prompted three key areas for all to consider. The purpose of this was to further extract the areas which were appearing as priorities, as opposed to something necessarily pre-designed. These three areas were:

The provocation – what motivated you?

The process – how did you choose to go about it?

Personal impact and meaning – what have you noticed about yourself through making? (Bisco 2015)

As introduction to the meeting, we recognised that everyone may be in different places; the facility here being to find out and share what each of those individual places were. We captured aspects of this sharing through audio, film and photography. Three of these films were then edited and published on the school website, sharing inquiry with the school community.



Fig 4. Sharing (small group); 'Making Sourdough'

Groups of four to six individuals were made informally and across staff teams including teaching staff, support staff, senior leadership and resource & development roles within the school.

Following this sharing experience, we asked staff to write a direct response to the research question. (Fig 6.) The function of this follow up question was to capture qualitative data in the moment after sharing with others. Prior to this event, The Making Project had been running in the background, supported in places by informal conversation. However, with this more formal and structured audience, albeit small, the project became deliberately more confronting for reasons two-fold: to affect staff more comprehensively and to draw connections with the platforms we often create for students to share their work.

By continuing to share over time, and in different ways, we are interested in how individual understanding develops and is processed - a distillation of meaning. Through the process of tagging qualitative responses, we intended to spotlight themes, which will continue to be mirrored back to staff (and students in their parallel projects) in order to facilitate the next phase of making meaning and repositioning. We are not creating a linear process. However, for the cohesion of a connected research group there are sequential lenses through which to examine how making materialises, evolves, is observed and is reflected upon before it stimulates the budding of a proceeding idea.

The timescale of our sequence synchronises with the armature of the academic year in order to engage practice-based research as part of ‘learning alongside’.^{vii} The current picture depicts a complex layering of processes where the ‘researcher’ or ‘learner’ or ‘maker’ (synonymous) inquires independently yet with a contribution to the collective understanding and journey; every maker has a voice (Fig 5.). This aligns with the school’s vision of co-construction, where making a school is a collaborative community-driven process – ‘collaborative construction’.

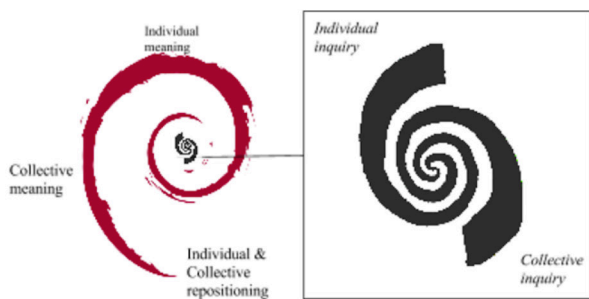


Fig 5. Collaborative-construction

An on-going aspect of building this research picture is to share it with the school community, which includes students and wider community partners. In July 2015, the school held a Summer Festival. This was a programme of events over the period of a week, which celebrated various aspects of making within the school. During this week, an open seminar was held in the school’s theatre space where keynote speakers were invited to share their Making Project with a different audience. The invitation was open to the school community and the audience was made up of staff along with a small group of students and parents. It is our intention that the growth and development of The Making Project design incorporates engagement of a broader audience, including further connection with the direct community as well as from interested parties further afield.

4. ‘How Well’ (Current Position)

Throughout the process, our emphasis has been on individual meaning making in order to then influence the collective understanding. We are discovering that this process is dynamic, and a collaborative experience. Through the process of designing the research timeline, we are seeing that meaning is not made as a result of making, but throughout the process and at different times (and in different ways) for individuals. This tension between ‘everyone being in it together’ and ‘I’m doing this on my own’ has created something worth questioning further.

An area that ‘glowed’ as significant early on was the choice made between investments in developing ‘me’ alongside those projects with a more deliberate [perceived] contribution to the school. This identifies certain distinctions across personal purpose and the needs of the maker, perhaps for validation of impact or purpose. With this, it will be important to locate the next research question within the realms of reviewing how each individual secures their own individual purpose. This could be practised through examining the making of meaning, what (or who) drives it and how it is valued by the individual and by others.

Among the priorities cited by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust Research Schools Network (CPRT, 2015), our work began to demand a distinction between The Arts (as the teaching of) and ‘Being the Artist’^{viii} - by ‘being’ the maker, our research inquiry offers engagement with The Arts from within as a vehicle for meaning making, repositioning and ultimately seeing the world in a different way. Crucially, The Making Project stimulated engagement in process within the context of making. This offers rich potential going forward to examine the impact of maker thinking upon the human condition both in the present (to understand myself) and as a learner stepping forward (to contemplate my future).

I get much from the process, however I am equally driven by the product. I love the satisfaction of having made something, it doesn’t matter what it is. I see making/ learning as an investment of time, and something far more valuable than a monetary investment. During this recent making project I have begun to think about slowness in making, and the fact that the longer something takes, the greater the investment and the greater the reward; much like a sourdough. I was initially feeling rushed and pressured to have something made, I now feel that this was misguided and that it is perfectly ok to be making rather than to have made. (Extract from written response to research question)

There have been a number of individual stories, which continue to resonate. The most prominent thread that emerged through the process of data tagging was termed ‘challenge’. Anecdotally, challenge became more of a driving force once others were seen to have challenged themselves in direct or indirect ways.

Furthermore, what was learned wasn't always in the design. In those cases where evidence showed the greater personal impact (upon the self or another), it was specifically the unplanned nature of these discoveries that made the connection. There was one notable case within the small group sharing sessions where a member of staff revealed detail around their own barriers to learning, not previously shared, in a way that was quoted as hugely significant both for themselves and to the others in the group. This was a particularly moving experience, as well as significant for the understanding of the project. It does, however, highlight the transient and impermanent nature of meaning making.

"I wish I was enjoying the opportunity to learn for myself more than I am - need to think about who am I doing it for and why?"

"Realising that doubts are part of the learning process. I gave myself permission to be present to the process, it's ups and downs and whatever the outcome."

"I have continually questioned and doubted whether my making has been good enough, right, wrong, or whether I needed a product to validate it. I am holding onto and believing that my experience, what I learnt, am still learning and experiencing is valid and worth sharing (and might even give something to others)."

(Extracts from written responses to research question)

Initial findings also highlight a strong correlation between effective repositioning and the quality of active reflection. This sits alongside the observation that, as a staff team, there is a significant strength in identifying where 'stretch' is or is not present in self-directed learning (making); effective reflections on where stretch was not found appear to motivate the next step to 'do things differently'. It was clear that this had the greatest impact when confronted through the process of sharing.

"It always makes me feel like I want to do better"

"Sharing the experience with others (and knowing that this would be part of the process) has really helped me to challenge myself to 'do things differently'"

"Initially really unsure of what to pick and lots of self doubt, followed by having to get the end product "right" that would stand up alongside others when sharing, then looking at the journey and realising it's not about the result but the journey. Quite a roller coaster of emotions!"

"After hearing, today, the other staff journeys, I am struggling and think I chose the easy option. I found it really really hard to share tonight."

(Extracts from written responses to research question)

5. 'Where Next'

The Making Project continues to develop as a process for inquiring into learning and 'being' the learner. It is currently used to form the individual targets on staff ILPs, contributing to our aim for all staff to be engaged in a level of research forming a contractual commitment to the development of our school. The staff projects run in parallel to The Making Projects of students as part of curriculum design in Phase Two (upper primary; Key Stage 2) and Phase Three (lower secondary; Key Stage 3). One week in every half term of the academic calendar is committed to these projects, with student autonomy mapped with teaching support that enables students to lead their own learning through the research question.

Drawing direct comparisons, and citing the parallel facets of these learning processes, will become a significant area of curiosity and inquiry as we move forward. We will be using The Making Project to explore the common nature of the learning experience irrespective of age, status or hierarchy in our school. By continuing to look at how learning is made and in turn what that means to our school, we aim to continue to strive for a better understanding of our learning community and ourselves.

"I have therefore produced a fair amount of rubbish...but that's ok, all artists do...it's the process that counts. I like the idea that art is transitory...that's why I like theatre and carnival, after the show is over it all gets thrown away... and the memory is always better...anecdote into legend (and you get to work with beautiful people)"

(Extract from written response to research question)

References:

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i Pedagogy of making; our emergent theory and practice of teaching and learning anchored in our school's vision for putting making at the centre; a mode of learning where authorship and the learner's unique voice shapes the content, process and outcome of what is being learnt.

ii The Making Project; a process of parallel projects in response to a collective research question, which are shared in order to make meaning for and with our school, and for the individual.

iii Language of Learning; lenses through which to reflect on individual learning attributes: embracing uncertainty, working together, thinking for myself, purposeful practice, playing and experimenting.

iv Crafting of Education; aligning with Making Futures 2015 aims and themes, 'Making Thinking - Crafting Education'

v Individual Learning Process (ILP); the process through which performance, progress and attainment is captured and reflected up alongside what makes me individual and my goals and aspirations. This process and accompanying document is used for everyone in our school in place of a school report (student) and performance management (staff).

vi Meaning-making; the process of understanding, comprehension, processing and response. It recognises that each individual will make meaning based on their own history and experience, which will be different from another individual, irrespective of the same provocation or stimulus; what meaning have I made and how have I made that meaning?

vii Learning alongside; in contrast to teaching from the front of the class, learning alongside takes the learner at their unique starting point and provides appropriate intervention, coaching and stretch in order to facilitate next steps in learning.

viii Being the Artist; an holistic approach to understanding what needs to be learnt. Beyond facts and knowledge, being is where learning enters the muscle.