Becoming Blended:
Dissections of Assembling Active Learning Lectures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'How Many Ways Can an Articulate Alien Analyse an Animated Robot?' is a performative, becoming-blended, active learning lecture that has evolved into one modelled on the principles of active blended learning. The author assembles the thinking of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, amongst others, to create a discussion about how working with students actively, collaboratively, and in modes of blended delivery can enhance critical thinking and student engagement. The structure of this chapter echoes the way the lecture is organised, as in a three-act play. This enables a form of immersive experience, as the acts and actions of the lecture, dissected throughout the chapter, unfold.

INTRODUCTION

Director's Notes

The active, becoming-blended, learning lecture 'How Many Ways Can An Articulate Alien Analyse An Animated Robot?' (HMWCAAAAAAR) was first presented in 2014 at London College of Communication (LCC) – part of the University of the Arts London (UAL). I was asked by the then Programme Director, and now Dean of the LCC Design School, Dr Nicky Ryan to give a talk to all postgraduate students in the school. This was to be in the slot of her lecture, 'Critical Histories of Design', that she had given to students for the previous three years. I was told to make it my own.

Since its latest 'performance' in the Autumn term of 2020, and in thinking about writing it up for conferences, journal articles, and book chapters such as this one, the realisation has dawned that I had unconsciously constructed it like a classic three-act play – even, at times, having a 20-minute interval.

It is in the realm of a Brechtian immersive performative lecture where the audience actively takes part – although hopefully is not alienated.

I have also structured this chapter as if it were the script for a play or film. There are parallel temporal narratives throughout. One narrative describes what happened when the 14-plus iterations of the 60-90 minute lectures were delivered. The other temporal narrative shows the evolution over the six years of the lecture, from 2014 to 2020. The three parts of this chapter, the three acts, are called Act(ions), alluding to the animated nature of the presentation.

In this chapter, I dissect the evolution of assembling HMWCAAAAAAR, from being constructed as an active learning session, as in Weimer (2017), to one that has become, and is modelled on, the principles of Active Blended Learning, such as Hrastinski (2019), Palmer, Lomer and Bashliyska (2017), and Armellini (2019). I examine how students become active participants in the exploration of the research methods iteratively and collaboratively developed in the lecture. This is as authors Freire (2000), hooks (1996) and, when discussing pedagogy, Deleuze and Guattari (2005) articulate in their works. One of the aims has been to encourage the students to acclimatise to, and appreciate the benefits of, learning through multiple modalities and with different styles and contexts (Palmer et al., 2017, p. 3).

I experiment with weaving some of the literature on Active Blended Learning with that of Deleuzoguattarian philosophical ideas of learning as rhizomatic, nomadic, assembled and becoming. The idea of 'becoming' is used by Deleuze and Guattari in their thinking as "intensive experimentation, […] discussed in terms of 'becoming', in which (at least) two systems come together to form an emergent system or 'assemblage'" (Smith 2018). As Dan Goodly (2007) suggests, "These concepts construct pedagogies as 'becoming' rather than 'being' – opening up resistant spaces and potential territories of social justice – all of them uncertain". The aim of this chapter is to show that, even given something as traditional as a lecture, active learning, online learning and blended learning can be combined to create Active Blended Learning. I see this lecture as on its way to becoming something that can be modelled on the principles of Active Blended Learning; it is not quite there yet, but I hope in its further iterations it will become more so.

Background – Synopsis

After initially beginning to prepare a conventional design or art history type of lecture in 2014, I soon came to realise that I was trying to copy my predecessor's lecture rather than make it my own. I had fallen into the trap of trying to make a "tracing rather than a map" (Deleuze, & Guattari, 2005, p. 12) of the ideas the lecture was trying to impart. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue, "What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real" (Deleuze, & Guattari, 2005, p. 12). I appreciated that the session was to be more about the methods of how to understand critical histories of design, rather than being a history of critical histories of design. Having taught art, design, media, practice, and theory in higher education for many years, I wondered why I had assumed the lecture theatre had to be a place of passive watching and listening and not a place that could be activated, animated, and co-produced by all participants.

This lecture is an attempt to see knowledge as being co-produced and co-created, where the lecturer moves from centre stage to being mingled with, and participating with, the audience. I have an anathema of inactive, passive, and transmissive modes of teaching that this sort of lecture can sometimes entail (Ingham, 2016; Peberdy, 2019). For a workshop at a UAL conference I facilitated in 2016, called 'Creating Spaces for Conversations to Begin in Post-Digital Learning Places', I wrote:

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