

Networking and advocacy, or The Wisdom of Crowds

I want to explore the theme of collaboration through networking.

In his book "The Wisdom of Crowds" James Surowiecki, the American writer and journalist, contends that groups of people can be collectively more effective at solving problems, undertaking innovation and decision making than individuals or elite groups. What happens when you also start to learn collaboratively and together in a network? How does the community of inquiry create learning space, and also support the well being and self esteem of those involved? Our community, our collaboration, our networks - they all give us opportunities to promote and to defend art craft and design education. This then, is my story.

It's a huge honour to be a part of this Conference and I must thank the organisers for inviting me and also for having the vision to make this online Conference happen and bring together people from all over our big world, under the umbrella of Visual Art Education.

I wear many hats in my work life and most of them connect to art education, and my talk today will explore connections. The world survives everything that nature throws at it, as do the human race, earthquakes, tsunamis, viruses, diseases, and the disasters that are people made, such as war and conflict, pollution, and (currently) global warming. But there is always a cost, always damage, always an aftermath. We do not know what the current pandemic will leave us with long term, but it has reminded us that we are but specks of sand in the history of the world and we as individuals have to make the very best of our own lives and live them with a sense of purpose and moral values. I feel that our own individual and collective love of art is something to be celebrated and that we as a group are the champions of something that will help the human race to record, to recover, to rejuvenate, to be alive again. We carry a torch. A bright shining torch. Much needed as we live in a world where the thing that is so important to art education- touch and other important haptic experiences are being constrained and forbidden by pandemic rules.

So, right now I can not go into a room full of my fellow creatives, hug them, shake hands, sit close to them and I will admit that I find that hard. What replaces this? I can sit in virtual spaces and I can talk, share images, and do all the things that can be done virtually. Can you imagine what this would have been like if we had the Corona virus 25 years ago? I would have been isolated, you would have been isolated.

It's important to realise that the internet really is a transformative infrastructure in developing networks in the past 25 years or so. The early internet (which we knew as Web.1.0) was an internet platform designed to give out information, which remained static unless the publisher changed it. The current internet structure known (as Web.2.0) is user generated. Instead of being "published" by someone, the people using the site publish and edit the content. The most important shift is away from broadcast (one to many) towards conversational (many to many) models of communication. The people "formerly known as the audience" are now in control. The rise of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, have extended this even further and conversation and sharing is a constant flow in the lives of those who engage with these platforms.

As long ago as 1999, John Seely Brown Chief, scientist of Xerox Corporation and director of its research centre, said “Let me end with a brief reflection on a very profound shift that I believe is happening—a shift between using technology to support the individual and using technology to support relationships. This shift will be very important because with it we will discover new ways, new tools and new social protocols for helping us help each other, which is really the very essence of social learning. It is also the essence of lifelong learning....”

There is a definite link between social media and creativity- you have to be interested in the human condition to do either. You have to watch, respond and listen. In his research paper “Living networks“ Dr Frittof Capra , the physicists and systems theorist, wrote that that the social network also produces a shared body of knowledge – including information, ideas and skills – that shapes the culture’s distinctive way of life in addition to its values and beliefs. Moreover, the culture’s values and beliefs also affect its body of knowledge. They are part of the lens through which we see the world. Frittof Capra also wrote in ‘The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living’ said that one of the key insights of the systems approach has been the realisation that the network is a pattern that is common to all life. Wherever we see life, we see networks.

So, from those early days we have the power and the technology to create create a powerful group of new teachers who will see a community of practice network as integral to what they do.

One of the texts that pushed me towards considering the power of networks is this book “The Wisdom of Crowds“ James Surowiecki, where the American writer and journalist, contends that groups of people can be collectively more effective at solving problems, undertaking innovation and decision making than individuals or elite groups. He also argues that learning from the distributed intelligence and knowledge of large groups represents a more powerful way to learn than in isolation within rigid and hierarchical relationships. My experiences with networks support this. Hierarchy likes secrets, but networks share. Hierarchy approves, authorises and allocates but networks learn, enable and do

It all started to happen for me when I was studying for my Artist Teacher Masters in 2006-2009, early days of Facebook and early days for myself setting up a teacher network NEATEN (North East Art Teacher Educator Network) in the north east of England, that network is now 13 years old and has influence across a region which is far away from London and all the resources that city offers, so we create our own regional identity to support our local art educators, linking with galleries and arts organisations. That network connects to a larger network, the NSEAD National Society for Education through Art and Design which has a reach across the whole of the UK, and beyond. Through NSEAD, when I was its President, I discovered InSEA, and became a member in 2003 because I wanted to be part of an even wider community and because Dr John Steers (past President of InSEA) persuaded me of its worth and importance . I am proud to have been re-elected as a World

Council member in 2019 for InSEA, I truly believe in its mission which is that it has established an international community dedicated to advocacy, networking and the advancement of research and praxis in art education by providing a world-wide networking platform for its members. InSEA aims to help members share ideas and projects in addition to promoting dialogue about the contribution art can make to education. And, our reach has widened significantly in the past two years through active use of social media platforms. Opening the door thereafter to new members. So my little local English circle is the heart of my network, my bigger national NSEAD circle connects me further nationally, and my InSEA Circle seems to have no barriers, apart from time of course (and time zones!).

But why is it important to me? Because it's about what I love.

What is art to me? It's as simple as this, everything that is written in the InSEA Manifesto which I helped to compile is my motivation and beliefs: <https://www.insea.org/InSEA-Manifesto>. Art for me, well, it has just given me my voice. For me, Art is an exploration of the human condition, or what it is to be human. Art always speaks to the heart. It can move us, art can wake us up. It can and should challenge us. Art can be timeless, art can be innovative, art can be memory and art can be message, art can shimmer and shine and art can heal. Art breaks boundaries. Art Celebrates Life, reflects life, imitates life and it feeds my soul. And, from being a small child it has been the most consistent and important part of my life. I want this right to art education for every learner of every age in every part of the world, and I can advocate for this through my networks with my own tribe of people who feel the same!

So I have used my networks to connect, to collaborate and to create. I have used it as a tool for campaigning for the arts in schools and against government initiatives which have been toxic and damaging to visual art education in England. I have used it to share good practice, positive stories, offer space for debate and for professional development. Lipman wrote that 'The community of inquiry represents a magnification of the efficiency of the learning process, since students who thought that all learning had to be learning by oneself come to discover that they can also use and profit from the learning processes of others.' For me being in a community of practice is the single most important thing in my professional life, leading also to friendships that develop from that and which I value hugely.

Seven years ago I also helped to set up Sketchbook Circle, bringing art teachers together through sharing sketchbooks. The aims of the circle were to: provide a framework, which takes in consideration a teacher's busy schedule; encourage art teachers to make time and space for making personal work and for reflection; re-engage teachers with their own artistic practice and build confidence; develop a depth of exploring and making; enable teachers to collaborate with others across the country; improve classroom practice; and to strengthen national art teacher networks. Through the TEA sketchbook circle, we wanted teachers to allow themselves time to become 'a true combination of artist and teacher' (in the words of Jim Daichendt).

So the physical books move around and the interaction takes place online through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and recently this has developed into online CPD sessions

too. We are truly a community of practice that supports the artist teacher and the mental health and well being of very busy people.

I want to conclude with a reference to a document I read as part of this research, which for me underlines the importance of a network to artist/teachers. Futurlab's

"Social Software and Learning "was published in 2006 and cites the example of one of the historically important parallel of practice that already exists in educational practice: "The crit" is the central feature of all the teaching of creative practice in art, design and architecture schools. It consists of a critical dialogue between peers where work in progress is exposed for developmental discussion....a means of expressing the collegial activity of helping each other in an emergent process. It is an interaction that changes the learner and leads to a better outcome and a more reflexive learner. However, most of all it is that critical community of practice that is essential to "the crit". It is a community in which we can trust the judgement of others, a community where there is no fear about presenting ideas"

The "crit" develops now into the dialogue of our times, supportive, sometimes challenging, but usually a positive and affirmative interaction.

Be true to yourself, connect with those who you need to connect with. Enjoy art, love art, make art, share art, educate through art.... and remember why it is that you do what you do.

This is my story....what's yours?

Susan M Coles

@theartcriminal

susanmcoles@gmail.com