

If The Cap Misfits

Year: 1994
Level: First Years
Unit: 10161 Foundation Studies 1 (Normal Delivery +Intensive Delivery Mode)
Duration: 13 days / 9 days*
Dates: February 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, Exhibition 'Transition' at YZ Gallery Feb. 28 – March 4
*February 28, March 4, 7, 11, 14, 18, 21, 25, 28

Origin

A number of scholarships were offered in 1994, jointly funded by UWS and TAFE for selected qualifying applicants to attend a four week 'summer school', on successful completion of which, would qualify them for direct entry into the second year of the degree. The 'summer school' comprised a theory/art history segment (2 days a week) and a Foundation Studies project (3 days a week). Rhett Brewer and I delivered the Foundation component and I was responsible for its conception. Nine students participated in the summer school and an exhibition of work produced was staged in the YZ Gallery to coincide with the first week of the new semester.

The same project was used with first years in Foundation Studies, as the first project of their semester.

Premise

At the time of its conception I was reading extensively from the writings of Oliver Sacks, which were heavily referenced in the project sheet, in particular 'The man who mistook his wife for a hat' (85). The start point was to look at manifestations of eccentricity and idiosyncrasy and examine the often formative nature of those states or 'conditions' to creative outcomes. An example was given whereby they were asked to write a detailed description of a mundane activity such as 'having breakfast'; each individual's ritual of performing this task immediately highlighted the different (idiosyncratic) ways we go about doing the same thing. The project intentionally encouraged the participants to engage with their personal 'quirks and foibles' (bound up with their sense of self-identity) as offering interesting insights by the very fact that they were not 'normative'; characteristics that might individualise a creative practice as a reflection of the personality of the maker. As such so-called aberrant behaviours were fostered throughout the project. The play on the word 'misfit' (from Sack's mistaken hat) prompted discussion around what constitutes 'fitting', in the sense of appropriate or apt, behaviour and in turning 'if the cap fits' on its head as a mismatch, the question arose as to how that predicament might be creatively dealt with.

IF THE CAP MISFITS

*"In the beginning is the impulse". Not a deed, not a reflex, but an 'impulse', which is both more obvious and more mysterious than either...."*¹

*"We have each of us, a life story, an inner narrative – whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative' and that this narrative is us, our identity. If we wish to know about somebody, we ask 'what is their story – their real inmost story?' – for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives – we are each of us unique. To be ourselves we must have ourselves – possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative of ourselves. We need such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative to maintain our own self-identity."*²

"Dialogue launches language, the mind, but once it is launched we develop a new power, 'inner speech', and it is this that is indispensable for our further development, our thinking. 'Inner speech' says Vygotsky, 'is speech almost without words.... It is not the interior aspect of external speech, it is a function in itself... while in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner-speech words die as they bring forth thought. Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings'. We start with dialogue, with language that is external and social, but then to think, to become ourselves, we have to move to a monologue, to inner speech. Inner speech is essentially solitary and it is profoundly mysterious, as unknown to science Vygotsky writes, as 'the other side of the moon'. 'We are our language', it is often said; but our real language, our real identity, lies in inner speech, in that ceaseless stream and

*generation of meaning that constitutes the individual mind. It is through inner speech that we achieve our own identity; it is through inner speech, finally, that we construct our own world.*³

The experiential condition of human 'subjectivity' in creating a particular viewpoint for each individual, through which they inherit license to elicit their own understanding of the world – subject their own 'word' to scrutiny – is often overlooked in its significance in equipping each individual with a set of unique insights, the deployment of which legitimises the existence of what-makes-them-different, of what it is that differentiates one individual from another. The educational possibilities in interrogating this differentiation of experience and how it determines the impulses that drive individuals to make 'art' are wide ranging.

The insights that Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, has gained from his long associations with so-called 'dysfunctional' patients, in focussing his attention upon what is gained in consequence of a 'defect' or 'loss; how a deficit in one faculty is compensated or enriched in another faculty, that very often the perceived 'peculiarities' of such individuals enhance our understanding of their ingenuity and resourcefulness – the 'intelligence' of the human mind – its capacity to adapt and improvise around quite substantial impediments or constraints to viably create alternative ways of apprehending or 'grasping' the world. These insights seem to have a particular bearing upon what it means to be creative, what it is to create meaning.

*"The abstract, the categorical, has no interest for the autistic person – the concrete, the particular, the singular, is all. Whether this is a question of capacity or disposition, it is strikingly the case. Lacking, or indisposed to the general, the autistic seem to compose their world picture entirely of particulars. Thus they live, not in a universe, but in what William James called a 'multiverse' of innumerable, exact and passionately intense particulars. It is a mode of mind at the opposite extreme from the generalising, the scientific, but still 'real', equally real, in a quite different way.*⁴

It is only through a close-up examination of the details of our sense of self – the fine finger prints of our existence – the 'innumerable exact and passionately intense particulars', that an authentic picture begins to emerge and assert unequivocally the discrepancies that not only discriminate one individual from another, but confirms the crucial role that the idiosyncratic plays in announcing each individual as a unique-identity-in-the-world.

*'Natural speech dose not consist of words alone, nor 'propositions' alone. It consists of utterance – an uttering-forth of one's whole meaning with one's whole being – the understanding of which involves infinitely more than mere word recognition. And this was the clue to aphasics' understanding, even when they might be wholly uncomprehending of words as such. For though the words, the verbal constructions, per se, might convey nothing, spoken language is normally suffused with 'tone', embedded in an expressiveness, so deep, so various, so complex, so subtle, which is perfectly preserved in aphasia, though understanding of words be destroyed. Preserved – and often more: preternaturally enhanced.*⁵

Institutions are notorious for homogenising its individuals, ostensibly in the interests of efficient management. 'Like-mindedness', as an agreeable conformation – to agree not to differ – reduces the incidence of disruptive variables. The compliance that eventuates more often than not silences 'unruly' inquisitiveness and tends to normalise outcomes. The capacity to raise awkward questions and to disagree, to maintain an integrity of intent, to remain idiosyncratically intact, reluctant to take things at face value, seeing the greater gains from problematising the institution itself, this attitude can only prevail if estimation remains high in relation to one's own idiopathy, (GK. *Idios* – one's own, pathos – suffering, deep feeling, thus characteristic or disposition peculiar to a person). Lets agree to differ.

*'Without repeating life in imagination, you can never be fully alive, 'lack of imagination' prevents people from 'existing'. 'Be loyal to the story', as one of her story-tellers admonishes the young, means no less than be loyal to life, don't create fiction but accept what life is giving you, show yourself worthy of whatever it may be by recollecting and pondering over it, thus repeating it in imagination; this is the way to reman alive.*⁶

This project has been designed to centre attention upon actions, impulses, and interests that contribute to an intrinsic 'sense' of one's overall identity whilst appearing often incidental or co-incidental to it. In drawing attention towards these normally undervalued peripheral occurrences – variously understood as idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, knacks, quirks, curiosities, unusual interests, particular ways of doing things, fascinations etc. and acknowledging the implicit value of such co-incidentals as characterising and affirming the complex diversity of impulses that continually converge upon and percolate through the

creative process active within each individual; in gaining an awareness of the value of 'character' to art itself through enriching the range of 'characteristics' available to it, an authenticity should begin to emerge, creative of exceptions rather than rules. This project, in part, addresses what it is about a work of 'art' that makes it in some way 'exceptional' and contends that it is somehow connected to Karen Blixen's notion of being 'Loyal to the Story'.

References

'The Man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales' Oliver Sacks (1985)

¹ From 'Hands' p.58

² From 'A Matter of Identity' p 105-6

³ From **'Seeing Voices – A journey into the world of the deaf' Oliver Sacks (1989) P.72-3**

⁴ From 'The Autist Artist' p 218-9

⁵ From 'The President's Speech' P 77

⁶ Hannah Arendt on Karen Blixen – source unknown – quoting from Blixen's 'Blank Page' in 'Last Tales' collection