Paradox Fine Arts (2017) – For, About, Nearby: The value of diversity and difference in Fine Art Practice, research and Education

Jake Watts 'Shift/Work: Unlearning – A Paragogy for Not-Knowing', Slides & Talk Notes:

Slide 1

In this talk I will firstly introduce Shift/Work's and its recent activity, including Shift/Work Unlearning.

I will then outline two learning approaches that Shift/Work deploy through our Unlearning workshops.

I will then go on to discuss unlearning as a concept, and in relation to the approach of The Groundcourse.

After this I will describe how Shift/Work Unlearning has been devised and run, going on to give some examples of unlearning that have been produced through this process.

And I will conclude by reflecting on the learning while unlearning that Shift/Work itself goes through during each iteration of the unlearning workshops.

Shifting Gears

Shift Work: Speculations, March 2017, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.

Shift/Work was established in 2011 by Professor Neil Mulholland of Edinburgh College of Art & Dan Brown the curator of research at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.
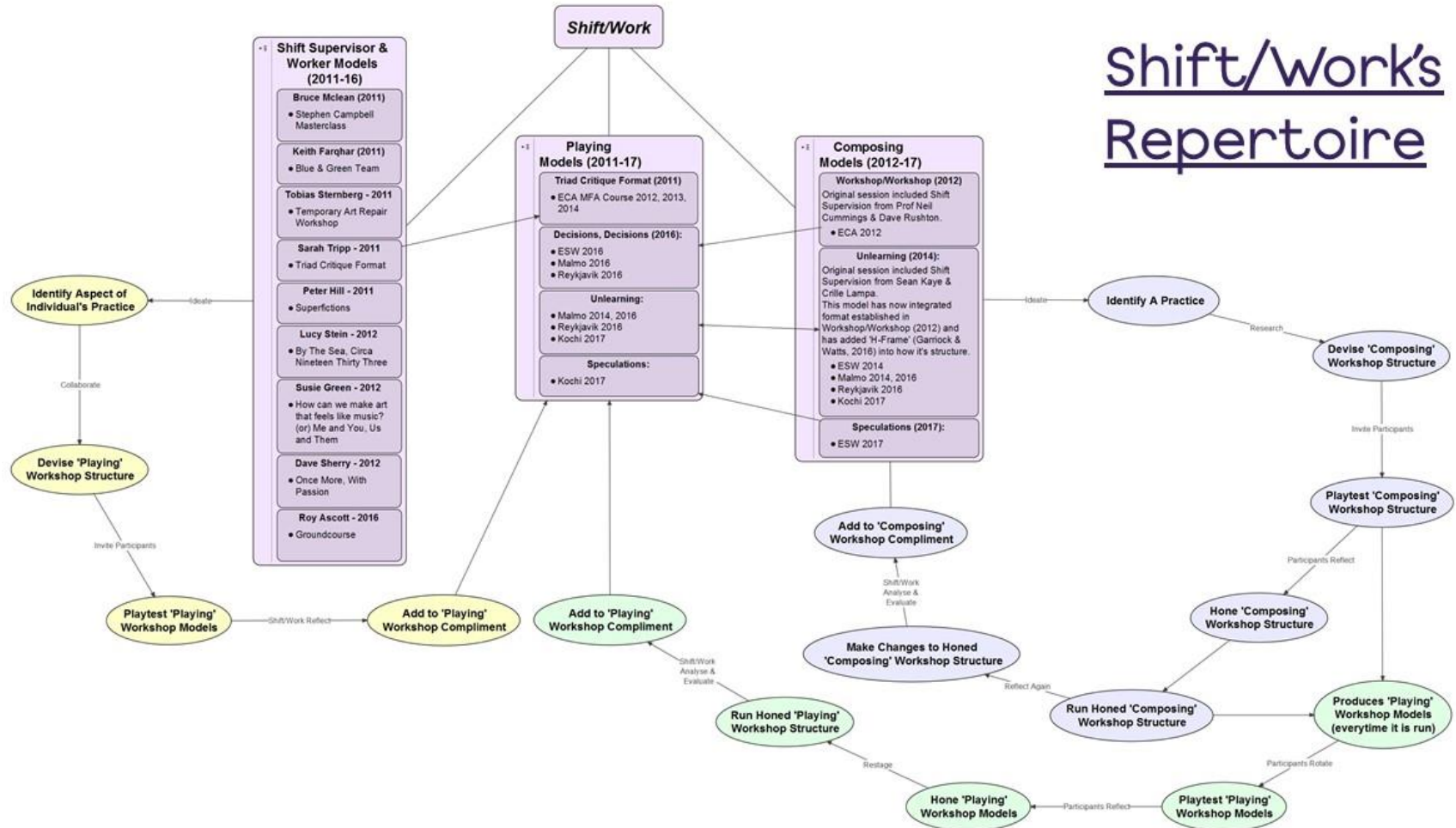
Shift/Work has an open engagement with practice (work) as a means of both generating and transferring new knowledge (shift). This experiential knowledge facilitates new practices and open educational resources for artists and art educators to adapt and implement.

I joined Shift/Work in 2014, as part of the group I have conducted secondary research informing my practice-based PhD studies, which are into workshops as participatory environments for artistic learning.

The circumstances that precipitated the emergence of Shift/Work, and details of its early activity, have been outlined at length in 'Shift Happens' (Mulholland, 2013).

That paper was published prior to Shift/Work developing an element of its repertoire that we are calling *composing* workshops, *Shift/Work: Unlearning (2014)* being an example of such a model.

Shift/Work

Shift/Work's Repertoire

Shift Supervisor & Worker Models (2011-16)

Bruce Mclean (2011)
- Stephen Campbell Masterclass

Keith Farqhar (2011)
- Blue & Green Team

Tobias Sternberg - 2011
- Temporary Art Repair Workshop

Sarah Tripp - 2011
- Triad Critique Format

Peter Hill - 2011
- Superfictions

Lucy Stein - 2012
- By The Sea, Circa Nineteen Thirty Three

Susie Green - 2012
- How can we make art that feels like music? (or) Me and You, Us and Them

Dave Sherry - 2012
- Once More, With Passion

Roy Ascott - 2016
- Groundcourse

Playing Models (2011-17)

Triad Critique Format (2011)
- ECA MFA Course 2012, 2013, 2014

Decisions, Decisions (2016):
- ESW 2016
- Malmo 2016
- Reykjavik 2016

Unlearning:
- Malmo 2014, 2016
- Reykjavik 2016
- Kochi 2017

Speculations:
- Kochi 2017

Composing Models (2012-17)

Workshop/Workshop (2012)
Original session included Shift Supervision from Prof Neil Cummings & Dave Rushton.
- ECA 2012

Unlearning (2014):
Original session included Shift Supervision from Sean Kaye & Crille Lampa.
This model has now integrated format established in Workshop/Workshop (2012) and has added 'H-Frame' (Garriock & Watts, 2016) into how it's structure.
- ESW 2014
- Malmo 2014, 2016
- Reykjavik 2016
- Kochi 2017

Speculations (2017):
- ESW 2017

Identify Aspect of Individual's Practice

Ideate

Collaborate

Devise 'Playing' Workshop Structure

Invite Participants

Playtest 'Playing' Workshop Models

Shift/Work Reflect

Add to 'Playing' Workshop Compliment

Add to 'Playing' Workshop Compliment

Shift/Work Analyse & Evaluate

Run Honed 'Playing' Workshop Structure

Restage

Hone 'Playing' Workshop Models

Participants Reflect

Playtest 'Playing' Workshop Models

Participants Rotate

Add to 'Composing' Workshop Compliment

Shift/Work Analyse & Evaluate

Make Changes to Honed 'Composing' Workshop Structure

Reflect Again

Run Honed 'Composing' Workshop Structure

Identify A Practice

Ideate

Research

Devise 'Composing' Workshop Structure

Invite Participants

Playtest 'Composing' Workshop Structure

Participants Reflect

Hone 'Composing' Workshop Structure

Produces 'Playing' Workshop Models (everytime it is run)

Talk through diagram

Whether any participant has ever unlearnt something during *Shift/Work: Unlearning* is hard to account for, although attempts to do so are varied (as I will discuss later in the talk).

What is more prominent is that these sessions have provided the space and time for participants to query their own educational practices;

To try out ideas about how we might (un)learn;

And to develop new ways of knowing something from peers in this process.

In doing so, each staging of *Shift/Work: Unlearning composing workshop* has provided its participants with the resources and experience to restage the workshop independently, or to adapt its approach to their own practices and research interests.

There are two learning concepts that relate to Shift/Work's approach to composing workshops which help facilitate these aims are *paragogy* and *metacognition*.

Paragogy

'Paragogy' is defined on the paragogy.net wiki as:

"The theory and practice of peer learning (otherwise known as peer-to-peer learning or peer-produced education). By coincidence, it also means "production" in Greek, and to our way of thinking, peer learning and production are indeed intrinsically linked."

(Corneli & Danoff, 2012)

Paragogy:

By paragogy I am referring to a peer-to-peer approach to learning. Paragogy is a way to consider learning differently to that of pedagogy. It places focus on how we learn from one another through the collective production of some-*thing. S*pecifically when – as Eamon Dunne has identified – there is no Lacanian "*sujet suppose savoir* [subject supposed to know] what this some-thing is supposed to be– as within pedagogy where the teacher performs this role.

The workshop can be an ideal paragogical environment, allowing participants of differing competencies, levels of experience, and disciplinary backgrounds, to collectively negotiate the meaning and application of ways of knowing; reifying them, experimenting and playing with them, challenging them, mutating them, and facilitating participants learning from one another in this process.

Workshops simultaneously sit within and outwith institutionalized education, they are what Moten & Harney would call an undercommons, as they are often "in, but not of it [the university]" (Moten & Harney, 2004: 101).

They sit peripherally to much of art education's curricula and its learning outcomes, operating alongside and overlapping with the domains of the studio and the humanities, putting each to work upon one another through the act of *doing* research with others.

Metacognition

- *What* is being learnt?
- *How* is it, or, could it be, learnt?
- Analyse our role as learners
- Critically consider what has been *understood* in the learning process.
- A metacognitive approach increases people's ability "to transfer or adapt their learning to new contexts and tasks" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000); Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Scardamalia et al., 1984; Schoenfeld, 1991).

Metacognition:

A composing workshop, such as *Shift/Work: Unlearning*, is *not only* about raising the proficiency of a community in the subject of the workshop (although this form of surface learning does indirectly occur – i.e. through discussing information about what practices are and how we practise them).

It is about developing deep learning processes that take "root in our apparatus of understanding, in the embedded meanings that define us, and that we use to define the world" (Tagg, 2003:70). Shift/Work's *Composing* workshops are about how to meaningfully understand and integrate the knowledge we collectively produce into the practices of the individual and the community; providing us with the means to shape our current knowledge practices and future learning.

A metacognitive approach can help facilitate this aim.

Metacognition (sometimes also referred to as Meta-learning) is one of the 5 principles of paragogy outlined by Corneli & Danoff. They suggest that meta-learning can provide an unending font of knowledge.

Whilst I feel this overstates its potential a little, it is nonetheless an integral component of artistic learning.

Metacognition put simply is to "think about one's thinking" (Chick, 2012). Whilst often presumed to be inherent in research and education practices, opportunities to collectively critically consider our the nature of our learning are infrequent. Especially when done actively and with insights from peers within our communities of practice.

A workshop, especially one on unlearning, can encourage us to experiment with, and to challenge, our artistic learning practices – and those of others – helping us to develop a deeper understanding *what* is being learnt, and, *how* it is, or, could be, learnt; pushing us to analyse our role as learners; and critically consider what has been *understood* in this process.

Importantly, a metacognitive approach increases people's ability "to transfer or adapt their learning to new contexts and tasks" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000); Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Scardamalia et al., 1984; Schoenfeld, 1991).

As I mentioned previously, in Shift/Work unlearning the transference of these considerations can take the form of providing participants with the know-how to apply our approach to their own practice or research interests.

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2014, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.

Why Unlearning?

"We have made a profound error in trying to learn Art, since whatever Art stands for is whatever cannot be learned. The Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself"

- (e. e. Cummings, 1927: 68-69)

Unlearning is a provocative notion.

It is easier to say what unlearning is not than it is to define it as a practice.

As Eamon Dunne has noted in the foreword to The 'Pedagogics of Unlearning', Unlearning it is not an antonym of learning (Dunne, 2016: 14).

Nor is it necessarily a negation or rejection of knowledges held or previously established (although it is sometimes interpreted as an act of attempting to forget some of these).

Instead unlearning requires us to refocus our attention. Unlearning pushes us to challenge and define what learning is; when learning is happening and when it is not; what has been learnt (if anything); and to ask whether these processes require reconsideration.

"While operant conditioning and play (iO, iP) require contexts for activity that are relatively easy to predict and provide, the context for intensifying creativity is less straightforward to define. Beyond the draw of a given problem in itself, this will depend on the artist's responses to the irritants he encounters in CAM/L (education). The design of irritants of a sensory, intellectual, and social kind will be a major task of instructors and catalysts in CAM/L"

- (Ascott, 2003:144)

To facilitate these considerations, Shift/Work has settled on a provocational approach, via the concept of irritants.

'Irritants' is a term coined by Roy Ascott (2003:144).

Ascott was the founder of the Groundcourse which was a "two-year long, cutting-edge foundation art course taught at Ealing Art College in London from 1961 to 1964 and at Ipswich Civic College in Suffolk from 1964 to 1967." (Ayiter et al, 2015: 1).

The Groundcourse was predicated on a behaviourist conception of education where the intention was "to create an organism which is constantly seeking for irritation" (2003:155).

Ascott has described the need for irritants within arts education as follows:

Read Onscreen Quote

As Ascott notes, what requires consideration is how to create learning environments that do not deliver resolvable problems or predictable outcomes, but instead encourage and intensify creative collective approaches to learning.

Devising a space-time for pursuing processes of unlearning is one a way to make unpredictable – but potentially transformative – processes of learning a realisable aim.
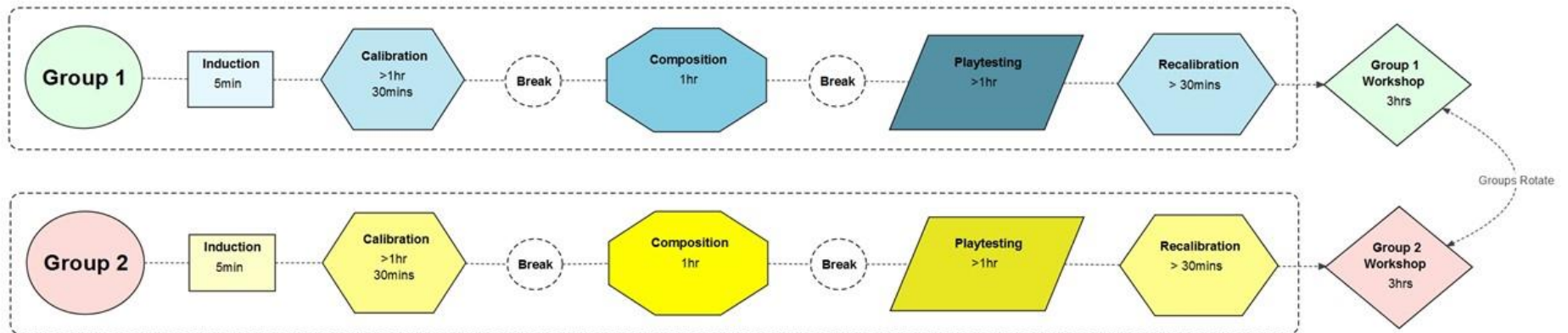
Within Shift/Work: Unlearning our irritant is a simple instructional prompt given to participants at the beginning of the workshop, which reads:

"The purpose of this workshop is to devise and take part in a workshop that will facilitate unlearning."

Discuss composing workshop structure

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2014, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.

Calibration Stage – Harkness Discussion with Sean Kaye

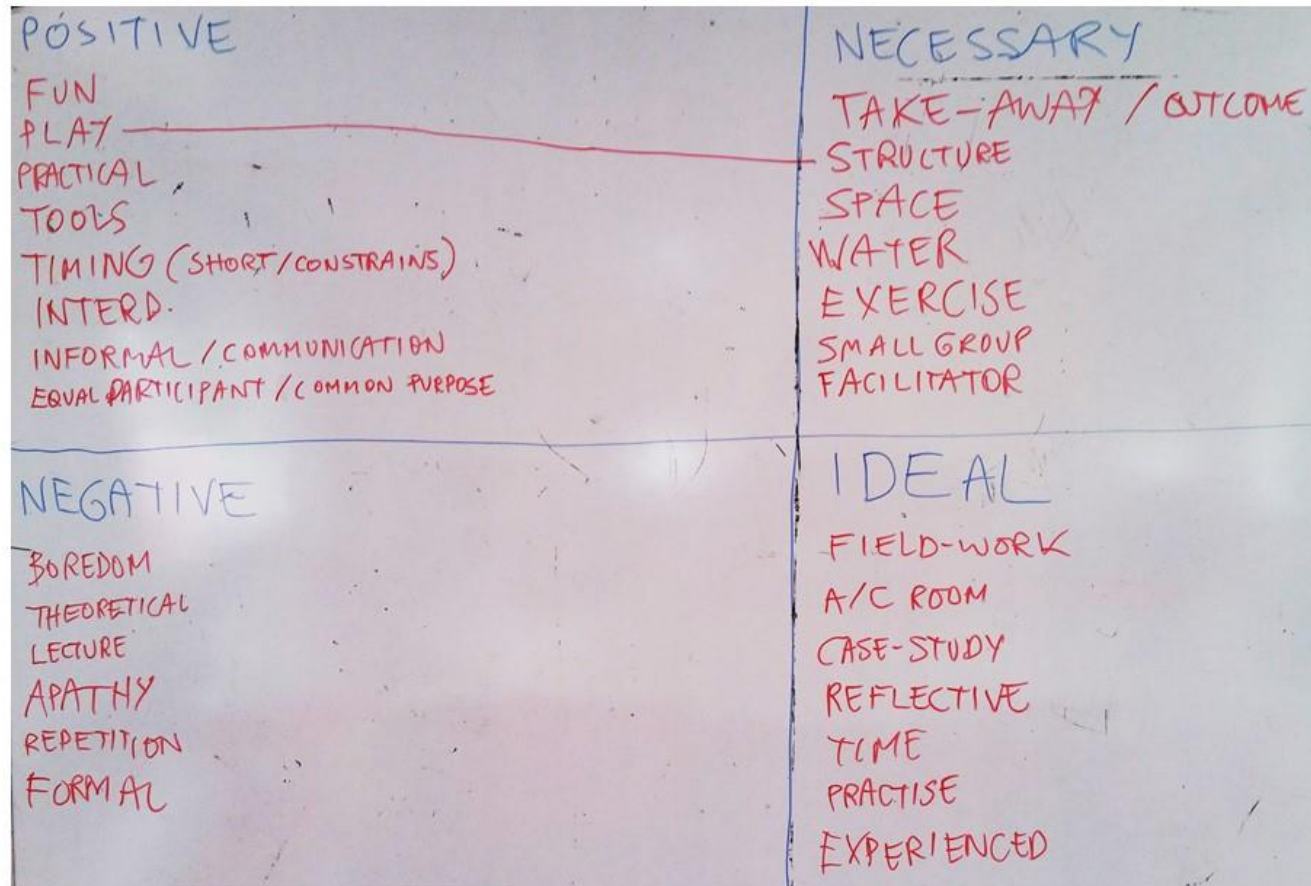*Shift Work: Unlearning,* 2014, **Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.**

Composition Stage – **Jigsaw Classroom approach with Crille Lampa**

Shift Work: Unlearning, Kochi-Muzuris Biennale 2017 (above); Iceland Academy of the Arts 2016 (right)
Calibration Stage – H-Frame Exercise

POSITIVE

FUN
PLAY
PRACTICAL
TOOLS
TIMING (SHORT/CONSTRAINS)
INTERD.
INFORMAL / COMMUNICATION
EQUAL PARTICIPANT / COMMON PURPOSE

NECESSARY

TAKE-AWAY / OUTCOME
STRUCTURE
SPACE
WATER
EXERCISE
SMALL GROUP
FACILITATOR

NEGATIVE

BOREDOM
THEORETICAL
LECTURE
APATHY
REPETITION
FORMAL

IDEAL

FIELD-WORK
A/C ROOM
CASE-STUDY
REFLECTIVE
TIME
PRACTISE
EXPERIENCED

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2017, Kochi-Muzuris Biennale.

Calibration Stage – Covenant Exercise
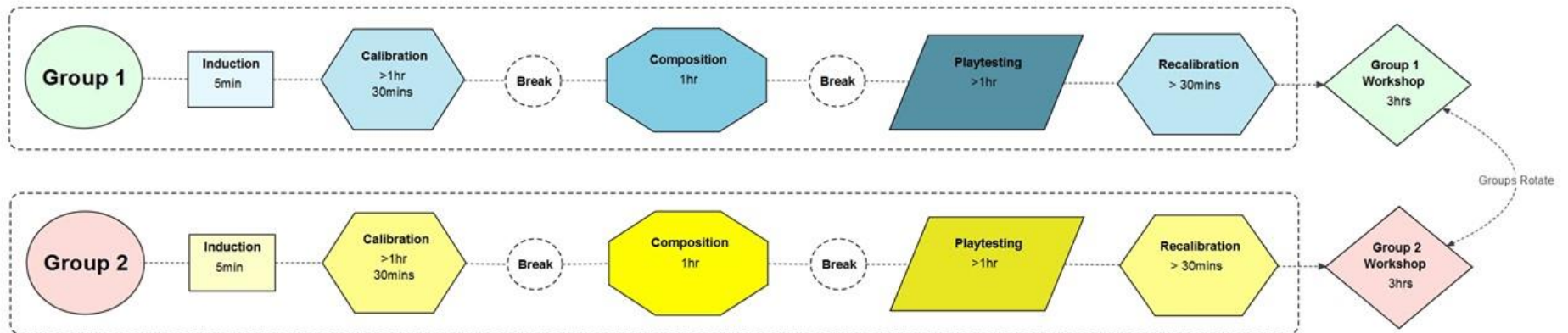
Its structure (i.e. Ascott's 'conditioning for play') provides productive constraints for activity to be focused through; combining this with the proposition of unlearning as an irritant to stimulate and provide context to the activity, provides *Shift/Work: Unlearning* with an interrogative and experimental drive.

Examples of Unlearning

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2014, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.

Across the various stagings of *Shift/Work: Unlearning* a couple of themes have become apparent in what types of unlearning processes participants devise.

A common theme is that of inhibiting or restricting the bodies of participants.

This has included taking selfies while blindfolded (Edinburgh);

following arbitrary instructions to stage an unfamiliar performative engagement with a familiar experience, such as viewing an exhibition (Kochi);

Making a pot of tea while limbs are bound to others (Edinburgh);

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2016,
Iceland Academy of The Arts.

Physically disrupting someone's ability to complete simple tasks, like drawing (Reykjavik);

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2014, Malmö Art Academy.

Or creating sculptural assemblages using only one arm (Malmo).

Such disruptive approaches appear to be an attempt to raise participants' awareness of what Bordieu terms their "habitus" of "durably installed" gestural routines and "regulated improvisations" (1977: 78).

Forcing them to confront, challenge, and transform their actions through acts of unlearning-through-doing.

This requires participants to perform tasks differently and to create alternative or lateral ways of perceiving, encountering, or knowing a subject.

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2016, Kochi-Muzuris Biennale.

More complex applications of the concept have come through playing with the fallibility of memory, or actively attempting to forget to produce new things, such as:

Attempting to unlearn repetition and negative behaviours to produce mantras for future making (India).

Shift Work: Unlearning, 2014, Malmö Art Academy.

Simulating a journey home from memory whilst sat in chairs in a car park (Malmö);

As Jack Halberstam has suggested, learning is "part memorization and part forgetting, part accumulation and part erasure." (2011: 83).

The outlined unlearning processes exemplify attempts to actively engage with forgetting as a strategy for producing contexts "without a teleology" (Halberstam, 2011: 80), allowing participants to introduce the "chaotic potentiality of random action" (ibid) and thus improvisation into (un)learning environments, facilitating alternative ways of engaging with acts of learning.
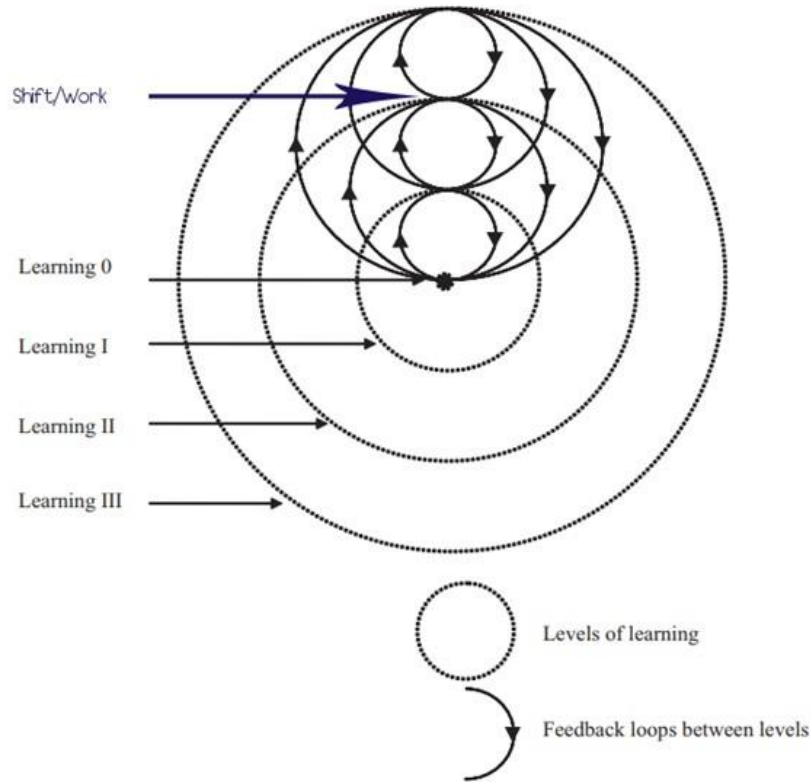
Figure 1. Bateson's levels arranged as a recursive hierarchy.

Figure originally from Tosey, Visser, and Saunders (2011)

Conclusion: Learning While Unlearning

Second-Order Learning' which requires:

"A corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made, or it is a change in how the sequence of experience is punctuated'."

- (Bateson, 1973: 263-264)

Every restaging of the *Shift/Work: Unlearning* composing workshop has also afforded us the opportunity to playtest, recalibrate, and hone the workshop's structure.

These reflective refinements have been a form of what Bateson would call 'second-order learning' which requires "a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made, or it is a change in how the sequence of experience is punctuated'." (Bateson, 1973: 263-264)

We have enacted this second-order learning by continuing to develop and fine tune how we run *Shift/Work: Unlearning*, altering its structure, incorporating new elements, and experimenting with its sequencing at each opportunity.

As such, we are continuing to learn every time we attempt to unlearn, with our explorations continuing to influence how we devise our composing workshops. Including Shift/Work: Speculations which we initiated this year, that while not duplicating the structure of Shift/Work: Unlearning is indebted to approaches we have iteratively developed through running the unlearning sessions internationally.

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