**Title: Animation as Mindful Practice**

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**1 Introduction**

In a world that is rapidly changing, how can students be prepared for an­­ uncertain and unsettled future?

This paper reports on a joint research project between Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London and the Royal College of Art that investigates whether the *making* of drawn animation can be demonstrated as a *mindful* practice. We wanted to explore the potential application of Buddhist principles and practices, such as mindfulness and interconnectedness, to benefit art and design students.

During this interdisciplinary research project, which was initiated by a UAL Curriculum Development research grant, groups of art and design students from across the University attended a series of experiential workshops in which collaborative, drawn animation exercises were combined with mindful meditation techniques. This was followed by workshops which combined drawing and meditation. Our aim was to investigate whether the process of making animation can be used as a mindful practice to introduce art and design students to a series of coping strategies known as ‘sustainability literacies’.

Our research involved making connections between three distinct subject areas:

1. **Sustainability literacy** – the idea that students need life skills over and above the specific discipline that they come to learn in order to be able to survive a complex future;
2. **Mindfulness** – that secular meditative techniques derived from traditional Buddhist practice can positively affect well-being;
3. **Animation as process** – can be looked at as a process in itself without considering the final end product.

These three areas will now be considered in more detail.

**1.1 Sustainability Literacy**

While working with animation, art and design students, we had observed that they face problems beyond the demands of learning their specific subject. We had experienced them being stressed, finding it hard to focus, lacking motivation or confidence in themselves, experiencing crippling self-doubt and ‘stuckness’.

To the stresses that our students face about their studies, Stephen Sterling adds the issue of an uncertain future in a changing world. He argues that one of THE most important issues for Universities in the 21st century is to produce global citizens, who can take responsibility for their actions and the future of the planet. (Sterling 2012, 11) Sterling goes on to propose the idea of ‘sustainability literacy’, a set of characteristics that need to be developed in students in order for them to face the challenges of the future:

[…] the sustainability learner will be characterised by such qualities as resilience, resourcefulness, creativity, systemic and critical thinking, enterprise, and a co-operative and caring outlook. (Sterling 2012, 23)

This project was underpinned by the ambition to develop sustainability literacies of the type Sterling describes - positive attributes such as as self-awareness, ecological awareness, personal resilience and interconnectedness in our students to enable them to cope with stress and change, as well as their curriculum challenges.

Rather than making an animation *about* sustainability literacy, the workshops were intended to provide a transformational learning experience. Through a combination of meditation, sequential and collaborative drawing, we aimed to get students to engage multi-modally with sustainability literacy issues, to directly practice and encounter them.

**1.2 Mindfulness and Education**

Jon Kabat-Zinn has popularised the concept of ‘mindfulness’ in the West through his application of traditions of Buddhist meditation to the context of pain and stress reduction. Working with patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre in the late ‘70s, Kabat-Zinn developed a secular 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme. This course was then adapted by the scientists Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale for the treatment of depression through their Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy course (MBCT). Scientifically proven to be at least as effective in treating depression as taking medication, Mindfulness-Based interventions have been officially recommended by the UK Government’s National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) since 2004.

Mindfulness is also gaining prominence in discourses across a range of sectors, including industry, business, social enterprise and the public sector. Indeed, there is so much interest in investigation in this area that more than 500 peer-reviewed scientific journal papers are being published every year on the topic.

Mindfulness meditation is also of interest to learning developers, since research into cognition has demonstrated a positive correlation between the practice of mindfulness and increased self-related motivation, attentional functioning, cognitive flexibility, resourcefulness, self-awareness, creativity, emotional intelligence and compassion. Consequently, in the design of our workshops for general art and design students, we sought to combine meditation with a creative activity that encourages concentration and visual focus.

**1.3 Animation as Process**

Like meditation, drawn animation is an activity that requires practice, concentration and patience. After discussing similarities between the two, in our project we wanted to investigate combining the repetitive, haptic procedures of drawn animation with mindfulness meditation techniques.

Although it has often been considered as a series of techniques or as a type of output, animation can also be thought of as a process. Animation theorists argue for a shift in how the subject area is conceptualised. Alan Cholodenko, for example, considers animation as ‘idea, concept or process’ that goes beyond definition by the output and is:

… not delimited to and by the animation film (and conventional ideas of it) but as a notion whose purchase would be transdisciplinary, transinstitutional, implicating the most profound, complex and challenging questions of our culture, questions in the area of being and becoming, time, space, motion, change - indeed, life itself.

(Cholodenko 1991, 15)

This idea about animation in terms of a process can also be seen in the area of animation therapy, which is currently being pioneered by practitioner researchers such as Melanie Hani, who has used animation for therapeutic work with different marginalised groups such as the bereaved, children excluded from mainstream education, the homeless and the offender community (Hani 2015; HEART 2010) and Susan Young, who is researching into the therapeutic benefits of making animation for recovering from trauma (Young 2016). In these projects, making animation is not considered as simply being in service of the end product, but as a valuable activity in its own right. It is not the final film or output of the process that has therapeutic value, but the activity of making it.

Thus, in our workshops, we aimed to use animation as a way for students to experience drawing as a non-threatening activity, question their own self-criticism, experience interconnectedness through collaborative working and develop strategies of resilience and focus. The animation that was created through the workshops was considered to be of much less importance than than the experience of making it.

**2. Methods**

**2.3 Procedure**

**Focus group**

We started brainstorming with six MA Character Animation (MACA) students (plus one of their course tutors) to use their experience of drawn animation to inform the design of the first workshops. Issues discussed included whether drawing in front of others would be stressful and what kind of exercises wouldn’t feel like you needed to ‘perform’ in public. Ideas for exercises were suggested that would avoid some of the more technically complex aspects of Character Animation, as this might prove daunting and too high a challenge for non-animators.

It was found that people who create pencil drawn animation, in particular, seem to experience moments of well-being, flow and mindfulness similar to meditative and contemplative experiences.

We noticed that the type of language students used to describe the experience of making drawn animation was similar to being in a meditative state.

**Animation workshops open to all students through the UAL-Wide Academic Support programme**

From the findings of the focus group, two workshops on Mindfulness Through Drawn Animation were devised in which meditation was combined with animation exercises. These were open to any general art and design student through the UAL-Wide Academic Support programme. No experience of animation was necessary. They were led by Birgitta Hosea and meditation teacher, Judy Holman, in collaboration with Graham Barton. Over a three-hour period, students experienced the following:

1. MEDITATION

The workshops started with a body scan meditation in a quiet room to experience being present with your physical self. We then went into the animation studio, which has a loud air conditioning system. Students were allocated materials (pencils and animation paper) and chose a desk space. We then did a short mindfulness of breathing meditation while seated at the desk.

2.  DRAWING THE BREATH

Students were then instructed to draw their experience of breathing (session 1) or what they thought the air might look like (session 2). They were encouraged not to look at anyone else's work and to draw without judgement. There is no right or wrong way to represent the breath.

3. INTERCONNECTED INBETWEENING

Using the light box, students then traced their original drawing and gave one to their neighbour. These were then ‘in-betweened’ to create a whole collaborative drawn animation. While students were in-betweening, we gave them instruction. They were encouraged to draw without judgement, that no single drawing in animation is more important than another as they form part of a sequence, to pay attention to their hand on the paper, to keep going even if they felt bored and to look for ever smaller increments of in-betweens.

4. REFLECTION AND REVIEW

Line-testing was aided by MACA student volunteers – who helped to scan, assemble and playback the animation for each individual, thus reducing the stress of learning how to operate unfamiliar equipment. All the participants were new to animation so seeing their drawings move was an exciting experience for them. This was followed by group discussion, feedback and evaluation. After the workshop, the clips were edited together to form one interconnected loop of breathing metamorphosis and uploaded to Vimeo. All participants were then sent a (password protected) link and follow-up material on mindfulness.

**3.2 Student evaluation of UAL Mindfulness Through Animation workshops**

We coded the feedback under four areas:

* indicators of new ideas / self-awareness
* change in behavioural intention
* indicators of surprise
* disposition towards collaboration

The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Participants indicated that they were noticing habits and dispositions such as self criticism and poor posture while working as well as learning new possibilities for their approach to their practice such as collaboration, perseverance and focussing on the task in hand.

**Bella Green - Mindfulness of Drawing Workshop, CSM**

Following these animation workshops, a public seminar on the project including a Mindfulness of Draw­ing workshop with artist, Bella Green, was held as part of the Strangelove Festival of Moving Image at Central Saint Martins.

Activities which encouraged the students to use drawing as a form of meditation, included slow motion observational drawing without looking at the paper, spontaneous, improvised drawings of pure movement from a video and collaborative drawings created with others in response to music. No animation was involved in the process to allow us to focus attention on mindful mark-making activities.

Although participants were reticent about giving verbal feedback in public, response to these activities was again overwhelmingly positive with participants reporting that they would adopt this approach to their practice.

**Mindfulness of Drawing Workshops, India**

Two workshops were run as a follow up by Birgitta Hosea while on an artists’ residency in Goa. These workshops were designed around mindfulness of the body and interconnected drawing exercises. The first of the workshops consisted of individuals drawing with their eyes shut while focusing on the body. The second was in pairs using pencil sharing for interconnectedness, first focusing on the body and then responding to sound.

Following on from the previous workshops, these were designed to explore:

1. Being spontaneous and non judgmental about drawn marks;

2. Exploring the physical sensations of mark making as a process - not just about the final output or what it looks like, but how it feels to make drawings;

3. Thinking about the body posture, how we sit and hold the pencil;

4. Creating collaborative artworks - working with others.

Participants engaged fully with the workshops and were asked to write down what they felt at the end of each session as a form of open non-cued recall.

**3.6 Conclusion**

Our project aimed to discover whether mindfulness and certain mark-making activities could have the potential for developing sustainability literacies such as self-awareness, ecological awareness, personal resilience and interconnectedness.

**Self awareness**

One of the aims of this project was to develop strategies to counter negative self-judgement and criticism. In the Focus Group, it was reported that drawing in public was considered as an activity that can be stressful in a competitive art school environment with students comparing themselves unfavourably to their peers. Through a focus on the activity of mark making, rather than the end product of this process, participants in the workshops responded positively to the instruction to respond in the moment with curiosity to the task and to be non-judgmental about what they produced. Our strategies to encourage students to enjoy the process of drawing without judging the outcome, included drawing non-representationally, drawing with the eyes shut or without looking at the paper. This encouraged an open and flexible attitude to change as participants were required to question their usual ways of working, their automated thought and habitual behaviour patterns. In the exercises, which focused on the body, participants gained new insights about their posture and habitual patterns of holding a pencil. This has important implications for their future well-being as many animators and illustrators go on to develop RSI.

**Ecological awareness**

For the initial animation workshops, a focus on the breath and on drawing the breath was designed as a starting point for a discussion on air pollution to increase ecological awareness through its literal inclusion as subject matter. However, students were so enthralled by the discovery of a new technical process and the introduction to meditation that this aspect of the workshop fell into third place. For any claims to increasing ecological awareness, the project would require further research, however, our experience echoes that of other researchers, in that connectedness to surroundings appeared as a coded theme in the student feedback

**Personal resilience**

During all of the workshops, the participants were asked to carry out mark making tasks for extended time periods. The combination with more conventional meditation techniques emphasised the importance of attention regulation, perseverance and visual focus. This was a challenge for some of the participants in the animation workshops. As they were asked to add more and more inbetweens to their sequences, for some the activity was absorbing, but for others it became almost excruciating. They wanted to stop and felt bored. This was used as material for the exercise and a talking point in the evaluation sessions afterwards. The meditation trainer gave instructions to notice any feelings of boredom, explore them, to keep going without judgment and focus on the moment.

**Collaboration**

The majority of participants were very positive about working collaboratively, although we were surprised by one participant who was extremely irritated by this aspect of the workshop. We had made it clear that the workshop involved collaborative exercises, but in future this should be made even more obvious.

From participant feedback, it can be concluded that for many the pressure of sole authorship goes away when given someone else's drawing to work with - and stress about the merit of the individual drawing is replaced by the feeling of engagement with a puzzle - how to transform one drawing into another.

**3.7 Limitations,** **Future Research and Potential Applications**

**Pedagogical approaches**

Due to the context in which we work, we acknowledge that our research has a very Western viewpoint, so we are most interested to get feedback from a range of different perspectives.

It is beyond the scope of this project to undertake a randomised controlled trial, and as a result the findings are unlikely to be generalisable. However, in the spirit of exploratory practice (Allwright and Hanks 2009), it is intended that the results will inform exploration into the use of mark making activities as meditation practice, and the effect of mindfulness meditation practices on student learning at higher education level.

We plan to continue this workshop and also to develop others on ‘Flow’ - featuring the animation of liquid or highly malleable materials.

**Drawing and animation**

Building on previous work that theorises the act of drawing for animation (Cholodenko 2000; Hosea 2010), this research raises issues around the nature of time-based mark making. Unlike conventional drawing, one of the aspects of drawing for animation is that no single drawing is precious, rather a series of drawings are viewed in a sequence. Each frame of animation that is drawn is transitory and relates to changes between the frame before and the frame after, rather than being an end in itself. In our workshops, it was demonstrated that creating images for animation allowed participants to relax and enjoy making marks rather than to fixate on one particular image. Not only are the frames themselves interconnected, but the making of animation is most frequently a collaborative activity that connects a team of people. It requires patience and resilience. For all these reasons, we conclude that animation does indeed have the potential to be a mindful practice.

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