# Embedding Socially Engaged Pedagogies for The Future of Art and Design Practice

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the shifting approaches to student and teaching experience on the MA Art and Design programmes at the University of Salford, (North West of England), in the wake of the global covid19 pandemic. The paper offers a series of case studies from both staff and students, which seek to employ socially engaged approaches to their practice. Each case study focuses on how individuals navigated their way through delivering projects whilst physically separated from each other and the communities they wished to engage with. The projects discussed were delivered both during and in the wake of the pandemic in the UK – which has left an indelible mark on the discourse students want to raise through their work. Case studies cover themes such as the role of creative technology as a democratized learning tool, visual communication as a powerful enabler of access and inclusivity to culture, and projects at the intersection of art, environment and health. The paper addresses conflicts, creative solutions and any emerging ethics of practice involved as a result of these projects. Ultimately the paper seeks to champion and argue how embedding socially engaged approaches to higher education (HE) pedagogy is crucial, even more so since the pandemic, to support staff and students to create art and design work which is not simply for society but work which is made with society. The paper also questions where and how art and design can exist in the world today.

**Key words: Socially engaged practice, University of Salford, Higher Education Pedagogy, Ethics of Practice. *Practice of Place,* Place Making**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role of socially engaged approaches to practice for both student and staff on the Masters (MA) Art and Design programmes at the University of Salford, in the wake of the global covid19 pandemic. Whilst all art invites some level of social interaction, what categorises socially engaged arts practice 'is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence' (Helguera, 2011). The pandemic, however, shook our relationship to and understanding of social engagement and social mobility. This paper offers a timely reflection upon how

students and staff had to re-think what 'social' means in arts and design practice in times of isolation and separation, and how they navigated their way through delivering projects during and post-pandemic.

It is important to discuss the structure of the MA programmes, which support a hybrid of subject specialist teaching and wider cross-subject peer learning across Creative Technology, Visual Communication, Contemporary Fine Art, Socially Engaged Art and Socially Engaged Photography. This structure was set up to create 'interdisciplinarity opportunities of working across subject areas. The Creative Research Methods module, for example, works well because the processes work so effectively within each subject area that students can clearly see the effectiveness of specific research methods through their development in other subject areas by students from different specialisms' (Isherwood, 2022). Furthermore some courses traditionally had different demographics; 'fine art and design tended to have students straight from undergraduate whereas socially engaged courses had mature students so this peer mixing worked well' (Ingleson, 2022). The structure of the programmes echo the social design model; embracing participatory, human-centred and transdisciplinary practice, but how could this model work within the constraints of the pandemic?

The paper discusses a series of projects by students and staff including democratized digital learning tools, the role of design as an enabler of access to culture, and projects at the intersection of art, environment, health and wellbeing. This paper addresses conflicts, creative solutions and ethics of practice which emerged, champions socially engaged approaches to practice, whilst also questioning how and where art and design can exist in society today.

## LITERATURE REVIEW
### 1.The stance: Socially Engaged Approaches to Practice as a method of Higher Education Pedagogy

**Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook Pablo Huelguera, 2011** - Explores the different approaches to socially engaged practice and the challenges this might present to artist and organisers. Helguera further discusses interconnections between creative pedagogy and socially engaged approaches to practice.

**Bell Hooks, Teaching to Transgress, Education As The Practice of Freedom, 1994 -** Sets forward a new education, education as a practice of freedom - advocating for a classroom community that acknowledges everyone's presence, recognising the classroom as a communal place to inspire a collective contribution to learning. There is an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic and that these contributions are resources. With the emphasis on connecting learning to overall life experiences, enabling students control over the decisions they make.

**Grant Kester, Conversation Pieces; Community and Communication in Modern Art, 2004 - 2013** Kester discusses a series of 'socially conscious projects'

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historically, relating them to key issues in contemporary art and argues that socially engaged practices need to be treated as a process not only a final product in order to critically understand their value.

**Stephen Wright, Towards A Lexicon of Usership, 2013** explores the idea of Usership Theory and the language of our age. Wright offers a lexicon of terms for the Museum of Arte Útil movement (useful art) and is designed as textual toolkit for its readers. The Museum of Art Útil echoes the Museum 3.0 model which is an idea that a museum is built on its usership and so it is a place that is created and given meaning by the sum actions of all its users.

**2: The Context:  The interconnection between nature, access and wellbeing**
*Nature Is A Human Right, (Why we're fighting for green in a grey world)*
*Edited by Ellen Miles,* **2022** This series of essays sets out the importance of nature connection and its influence on the wellbeing of people, planet and place. Bringing together research from science, sociology, anthropology, urban studies and creative design practices, It asks us to examine our relationship with nature in the wake of the current climate crisis.

## METHODOLOGY

As an on-going piece of research, the project intention was to continuously reflect and adapt approaches for both students and staff, undertaking an action-based methodology.

Similar to the socially engaged approaches of the projects discussed, which enables the 'viewer to speak back to the artist in a certain way, in which the reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself' (Kester, 2011) taking participatory and action based methodologies approaches to the research aimed to foster two-way exchange and an unfolding process of learning together. It would support multiple voices and experiences to be shared, creating 'a sum of all its userships' (Wright, 2013) rather than a solitary or hierarchical voice.

Appropriate research methods included:
- interviews with individual students based on co-designed evaluation questions between student and staff
- Regular student-led focus groups and workshops about each project as a case study, reflecting on the themes during and post-pandemic.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

The discussion is formed from the analysis of the following staff and student projects: Creative Technology Student Kennedy Iyeh's, 'Monie app'; a mobile learning app with a gamified approach to support people to learn important financial lessons 'within the mental stress of a traditional University structure' (Iyeh, 2022)

Socially Engaged Photography Graduate Lasma Poisa's 'Snappy Valley' project, a community photography collective formed in October 2019 in Todmorden, a West Yorkshire town in England. The aim of the project was to engage the local

community in photography with a view to develop participants' individual creative practice as well as create a collaborative body of work.

Visual Communication student Jessica Loveday's programme 'ELEVATE' (2021), an artist residency and community engagement project based at Stretford Public Hall, Trafford, Greater Manchester. ELEVATE was instigated as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests (2020); where stakeholders acknowledged that they must do more to engage local underserved communities. ELEVATE resulted in an artist residency, exhibition, public events and workshops.

Socially Engaged Art student Amelia Middle's, 'Let's Walk Alone Together', aimed to address the problems women face whilst walking alone. Middle lead a silent women's walk followed by a discussion and print workshop based at her home due to limitations on using more public spaces.

Socially Engaged Art Lecturer and Artist Niki Colclough's 'The People's Park' artwork was a project to utilize the natural areas on campus as a resource for creative wellbeing. The project was supported by The University of Salford's Revive fund which was initiated to re-integrate students back into campus life following the long period of home working. This was a collaborative action research project which investigated the role that art can play in nature and how spending creative and immersive time in greenspaces can be a tool for wellbeing, especially for those living in urban environments.



**Figure 1:** *The People's Park workshop session,* **in Peel Park, Universtiy of Salford campus, programme designed and delivered by artist and educator (Colclough, 2022)**

Whilst the paper can not offer a comprehensive description of each project, key themes emerged through the research process:

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## DIGITAL VS PHYSICAL AS A SPACE FOR SOCIAL LEARNING

The pandemic had a global shift on our use of online platforms for daily life but what effect did it have on our students' practice? In Poisa's 'Snappy Valley', the structure of the project moved from monthly in-person to weekly online sessions. This decision was a practical one, but turned out to be a complete 'game changer' for shifting the dynamic of the group. Poisa transitioned from learning facilitator to an active collaborator. 'We began to make work together in response to the current situation, and I felt my role within the project shift as we were all going through the same thing together. The scope of the project also developed to host international guest photographers via zoom, something which we'd never even considered before covid19' (Poisa, 2022).

But what is the legacy of these digital engagement tools? "The world had a crash course on zoom…but now its second nature" (Poisa, 2022) suggesting that online engagement has easily cemented its presence as a tool for social interaction, whilst other projects such as the People's Park were created as a direct antidote to the isolation and anxiety many experienced from remote learning and engagement.

Student Iyeh argues that technology is the way forward for learning. "With time educational apps will feature a great deal of Augmented Reality, engaging the Metaverse, use Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, tearing down institutional walls (Iyeh, 2022). This leaves the question of what HE can learn from the future of digital platforms for education, and how do we still ensure the 'social' still exists within these designs if removed from in-person settings? `
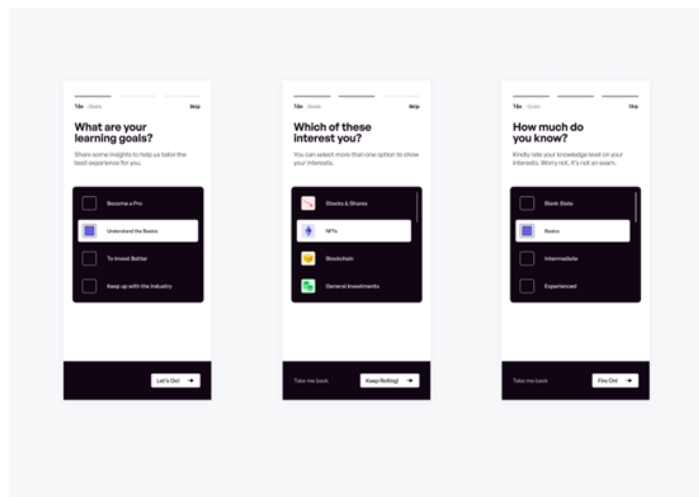


**Figure 2: onboarding design of Monie App, Major project for Creative Technology Master Degree at University of Salford, (Iyeh 2021)**

## MENTAL HEALTH

The Pandemic had a profound effect on people's wellbeing and our students were finding themselves addressing mental health as a topic in their own work for themselves and those they wished to engage with. With the 'Monie App', Iyeh's decision to develop the app 'stemmed from the mental fatigue which arose from

the effect of the lockdown and the restrictions on movement and socializing. For Iyeh, to offer something educational for a 'generation with a weak attention span who is going through anxiety', his design needed to 'move away from the formal institutional learning approach which could not be particularly appealing to them given their current distress' (Iyeh, 2022)

In the 'Snappy Valley' collective most of the group, including Poisa, realised during the lockdown that they lived alone, so the design of the project changed to increase in frequency and felt more informal. The photographs made over this time instead became a way of processing what was going on for everyone, it became a therapeutic process" (Poisa, 2022). With Colclough's People's Park, participating students reported that they had taken the creative 'tools' for wellbeing and adapted them into their daily routines enabling them to manage stress, low mood and feel more able to face the challenges of study.



**Figure 3:** *Group Therapy* series, collaborative photographic series produced in reponse to the Pandemic by Socially Engaged Photography Graduate Lasma Poisa and Snappy Valley collective, (Poisa 2021)

## DOMESTIC SPACE

For a period of time society's homes became their whole lives - their offices, gyms, school and for artists and designers, their studios. This was initially foregrounded by the digital engagement already discussed, when delivery across online platforms was the only option. Later, as rules relaxed but public spaces remained closed, artists began to consider how domestic spaces could become alternative places for engaging people in creative activity. In Middle's 'Lets Walk Alone Together' project which included participants joining in a discussion and print workshop in her home she reflected, 'the domestic setting actually added to an open discussion and feeling of building a community'. Whilst teaching staff needed to address safeguarding procedures students would need when using their private spaces for public purposes, it was clear that Middle's project challenged this question of where art and culture can exist in society today.

**Figure 4:** *Lets Walk Alone Together***, workshop by Socially Engaged Art student Amelia Middle based at her home (Middle 2022)**

## THE ECOLOGICAL TURN

The pandemic provided an opportunity for society to reflect upon their relationship to immediate physical and social spaces, which instigated a renewed interest in public greenspaces. It followed that socially engaged artists would revisit the potential of outdoor spaces - as a safe space to physically meet, as a place that could support wellbeing and as a way to engage people with one of the most pressing issues of our time - the climate crisis.

In The People's Park project, 'the process empowered students to feel that nature can be a free, accessible tool for wellbeing that can be available to all' (Colclough, 2022). In Let's Walk Alone Together, there was a focus on access and inclusivity to utlising greenspaces, 'I'd always been interested in walking, but with key pandemic moments, namely the rules on daily walks, limitations on the right to protest and the Sarah Everard case; walking came into sharp focus. It made me reflect on others who had limited accessibility to walking and green spaces, due to issues of class, culture, gender, age and disability' (Middle, 2022).

## ACCESS

This issue of access and inclusivity emerged throughout the case studies. For Middle, 'the pandemic highlighted the disparities and inequalities in our society and invigorated a passion in [her] to try and make useful art' (Middle, 2022). The year 2020 was not only synonymous with the pandemic but other major events including Black Lives Matter protests, which spurred the ELEVATE project by student Loveday. The project aimed to engage the local Black and Minority ethnic community (BME) around Stretford Public Hall. For Loveday her role was two fold; to act as producer for the programme and as a graphic designer focusing on accessible design which felt relevant to the community she was trying to reach out to. Loveday focused on a participatory design approach. This required 'an understanding of who is best

placed to deliver the participatory activity so that it is inclusive and representative of the community it wishes to engage. Loveday invited the commissioned artist in all the decision making from the beginning. This was crucial to 'create a non-hierarchical working relationship, where the artist felt empowered to shape the project, which was particularly important as a white person working with a person of color'. (Loveday 2022).



**Figure 5: Workshop and promotional design for ELEVATE residency programme, Programme designed by Visual Communication studen (Loveday, 2021)**

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AS PEDAGOGY

With the Socially Engaged Art and Photography courses, it has always been acknowledged that students and staff make art which exists in a range of social and public contexts. Students are encouraged throughout to ask ethical and moral questions of themselves and their practice - what is it that they wish to do in the world? What changes do they want to see? How are we designing and shaping social spaces? In the wake of the pandemic, this approach to pedagogy became crucial for students from all disciplines to consider their own resilience and to find a place for their arts and design in society today. In The People's Park project students were guided through a series of artistic activities to connect with the green spaces on campus, developing their own wellbeing relationship with nature before sharing these 'tools' with the local community through a public workshop. In this way, the project not only supported students with their own resilience, but gave them confidence to share these techniques with participants in their future projects including youth work, counseling, occupational therapy and art settings.

## CONCLUSION

The pandemic and the political context of the time with Black Lives Matter and

environmental protests, all highlighted the inequalities facing society today, which in turn fueled students to make art that spoke to these issues. Meanwhile, notions of learning and engagement were challenged at a fundamental level for students and staff to re-think their relationship to the digital as a social and educational tool.

The fabric of our social infrastructure has undoubtedly shifted over this time. If educational settings are to be responsive to these changes, then so too must our pedagogy adapt. Helguera discusses how in art school settings, the environment is essentially artificial and 'too often is not challenging enough or does not provide students with a clear understanding of the world in which professional art activity takes place'. In response the MA programmes are considering how social engagement processes can be better embedded in teaching, and more real world contexts employed. This is foregrounded by a non-hierarchical approach to the classroom, challenging where the classroom setting can be, and enabling students to set out their own enquiries honestly, supported by the lived experience and knowledge of the cohort.

The research is still on-going so is very much a work in progress at this stage. The paper does, however, go some way to highlighting the benefits of the social in social design and champions practice which incorporates multiple people in its inception and delivery.

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**Figures**

Figure 1: *The People's Park workshop session*, in Peel Park, Universtiy of Salford campus, programme designed and delivered by artist and educator, Colclough, N (2022)

Figure 2: onboarding design of Monie App, Major project for Creative Technology Master Degree at University of Salford, Iyeh, K (2021)

Figure 3: *Group Therapy* series, collaborative photographic series produced in reponse to the Pandemic by Socially Engaged Photography Graduate Lasma Poisa and Snappy Valley collective, (Poisa, L 2021)

Figure 4: *Lets Walk Alone Together*, workshop by Socially Engaged Art student Amelia Middle based at her home, (Middle, A 2022)

Figure 5: Workshop and promotional design for ELEVATE residency programme at Stretford Public Hall (Loveday, J 2021)

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