The Function of Art Students' Use of Studio Conversations in Relation to their Artwork

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Abstract

The investigation presented in this article is focused on studies within a practice based MFA program in visual art in Sweden. The analysis presented is based on two interviews each with nine art students: One interview during their first and one during their fourth year of study. The analysis focuses on the relation between two aspects of their studies: The use of studio conversations and the relation to their own artwork. Data are analyzed and results are presented for each student as a case. The cases are compared and grouped based on similarities and differences. A close relationship between use of studio conversations and relation to own artwork is found, varying to its character from case to case. The results have implications for the understanding of the self-directed character of the studies and the very free form of curriculum typical of visual art practice education.

Introduction

Becoming an artist is today a very different process, compared to when apprenticeship was commonly practiced (cf. Riley, 2007; Singerman, 1999; Sullivan, 1996, 2005). Now, we educate artists at universities and the student's practice is the natural context for the teacher's activity, as opposed to the master-apprentice model, where the student's practice is subordinate to the master's professional context. Today an artist's work is largely cognitive in character, often with a high level of abstraction (Sullivan, 1996; Bach Hansen, 2001; Efland, 2002). This orientation of the artwork clashes with the educational ideal of apprenticeship. As Efland says, the apprentice ideal "is taken from a romanticized view of European medieval guilds, or from situations where the teacher is guru, as in pre-industrial cultures, and I question whether these practices are likely to be useful to emulate in future situations in industrialized contexts" (Efland, 2002, p. 72).

The development of education for artists at universities has not involved a corresponding development of a theoretical frame for learning of visual art practice (Edström, 2006, 2008a, 2008b). Harwood concludes that, "There is no established or even tentative theory of artistic development in the college years comparable with the multiple models of intellectual, ethical and psychological development" (Harwood, 2007, p. 315). This means that there is little besides the master-apprentice model to refer to, which, from a pedagogical perspective, is not sufficient when describing and discussing contemporary art education. In practice, this means that a teacher, employed on outstanding artistic merits, mainly relies on his/her own experiences of art education as a pedagogical reference (cf. Hjelde, 2008). To a large extent, these personal experiences are likely to be non-articulated, and this lack of theoretical reference frames may very well account for some of the confusion that springs from the double identities of being both an artist and a teacher (cf. Hall, 2010; Hickman, 2010; Shreve, 2009).

Harwood (2007) brings studio teaching, the most frequent form of teaching within the art disciplines, to the fore as a crucial object of research because of its unique setting and potential to contribute to our educational knowledge. The study presented in this article is in line with Harwood's request for empirically based research on studio teaching from a student perspective. The results presented hopefully will add to our knowledge about visual art practice and also suggest how other educational practices may benefit from deepened knowledge of this very special form of teaching.

The specific character of the studio teaching studied here is the one-to-one meeting between student and tutor taking place in the student's private studio. This setting with private studios for the students is common in Swedish higher education in visual arts, and these one-to-one tutorials, or studio conversations, is the most frequent form of teaching. Thus, studio

conversations form an important part of the students' learning environments. Svensson (2002, 2009) discusses learning environment in the context of learning at work, as dependent on the activity of the learner:

> The most immediate context for learning is the activity itself. When it comes to learning at work, the activity of work is the most central part of the activity that possibly involves learning. […] here we are using the term learning environment to refer to what is outside the activity of the individual, but important to learning involved in the activity (Svensson, 2002, p. 24).

The present investigation is based upon a tradition of research on studying and learning, started in 1970 (Marton & Säljö, 1976, Svensson 1977, Marton & Svensson 1979). A central orientation of this research was named phenomenography (cf. Marton, 1981). Phenomenography was defined as aiming at describing, analyzing and understanding people's conceptions of, or ways of experiencing, phenomena in and aspects of the world. A person's experience of a phenomenon is understood as an internal relation between the experiencing subject and the object experienced. Learning is seen as a qualitative change in the relation between the subject and the experienced object. In phenomenographic research on learning, descriptions of qualitative differences in students' approaches to subject matter, related to qualitative differences in learning outcome, have been a central part (Johansson, Marton & Svensson, 1985; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1976, 1977, 1989).

Phenomenographic research has grown considerably, and the orientation is often used in educational research, especially in relation to higher education (e.g. Booth & Ingerman, 2002; Bowden, 2004; Bowden & Marton, 1998; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003; Svensson & Wihlborg 2007, 2010). In this research tradition there is an emphasis on students as agents and their approaches in learning. In recent research the focus on students' approaches to subject matter has been deepened to descriptions of students' use of language in expressing their understanding of subject matter in different fields of study (Anderberg, 2000, Anderberg, Svensson, Alvegård & Johansson 2008, Svensson, Anderberg, Alvegård & Johansson 2010). In the present investigation students' agency in making use of studio conversation in developing their own artwork is in focus.

Two previous studies (Edström, 2008a, 2008b), carried out within the phenomenographic research tradition, and using the same empirical material as the present study, form an immediate backdrop to the present study. The first study (Edström 2008a) focused on changes in the students' relation to their own artwork. The notion of 'resting assured' was used to describe a central characteristic of the qualitative change found in this relation. 'To rest

assured' refers to a state of trust that the students developed over time. The students' capacity to rest assured was discerned in relation to three fundamental aspects of their relations to their artwork, which the author labeled 'to rest assured': 1) In the intimate, 2) in the uncertain and 3) in the work process. To rest assured in the intimate refers to experiences of confidence and trust in the individual's unique artistic expression. To rest assured in the uncertain has two meanings, one related to the initial phase of uncertainty when starting a new artwork, while the other refers to the kind of uncertainty that is present all through the work process. Finally, to rest assured in the work process refers to an experience of confidence and trust related to the practical aspect of the artistic work.

The second previous study (Edström, 2008b) focused on the students' use of studio conversations. Within the MFA-program studied, studio conversations are the main form of teaching/supervision. The educational program attaches great importance to this specific form of teaching. The results reported bring five aspects of the students' use of studio conversations to the fore. The two first aspects concern who to talk to and when to talk. The three other aspects concern the function of the talk: expanding the student's options, testing the artistic expression, and exploring the context of the student's artwork. To a great extent, the studio conversations rest upon the student's initiative. The student decides to whom to talk, when, and also sets the theme for the studio conversation, usually by presenting some finished or unfinished work. In the program, the studio conversation as a teaching form depends on the student's initiative, in fact there would be no studio conversation without it. Also, the different functions of studio conversations are dependent on the student's initiative.

In the previous two studies, what was most striking in the students' descriptions of changes in their relation to their artwork respectively in their use of studio conversations was described separately. The present analysis does not relate these two previous separate results. Instead it presents an entirely new analysis, taking its starting point in the whole of the experience of the development of the own artwork and the use of studio conversations to find how these two aspects are internally related. Our aim is to explore the character of the internal relation, unique to each student, between the students' relation to their artwork and their use of studio conversations. Since other conditions than the students' relation to their artwork may also influence the use of studio conversations, the question raised here is if it is possible to find a meaningful relation between the students' relation to their artwork and their use of studio conversations, within the context of how they themselves express and describe these two aspects of their studies.

Empirical Material

The present study is based on data from an interview investigation that was carried out in the period 2001-2007. A group of students at a practice-based MFA-program in visual art in

Sweden were interviewed. The material used consists of interviews made at the end of their first year of the program in spring 2002 and at the beginning of their fourth year in fall/winter 2004-05. The initial group of students consisted of seven men and four women aged 21-25 at the time of the first interview. The interviews were quite open, with some main questions serving as a starting point for a conversation, and the students were encouraged to elaborate on the themes introduced. The second author of the present article was the interviewer. A typical interview lasted about one hour and took place at the school. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Other data, such as observations of activities and art products or diaries, would most likely have given a different and complementary picture of the relationship between the two focused aspects.

In the first interview, the students were specifically asked about their experiences of supervision so far, in the MFA program as well as in previous art education. Similarities and differences were brought up, usually by the students, along with pros and cons of different ways of teaching. The second interview included more specific questions on getting critique of their artwork, and the students were encouraged to exemplify their experiences of criticism. Those experiences mostly referred to individual supervision in studio conversations. Student-to-student critique and group critique were considerably less frequent. Nine students are included in the material. The original group had eleven students participating in the study. Two students left after one year and are not included in this analysis. Several students had gone through preparatory MFA, or MFA compatible, programs before attending the MFA program, and we saw no reason to exclude these experiences. These additional experiences rather proved to be an asset during the interviews, providing the students with a basis for comparison, and encouraging their reflections on the development of their relation to their artwork and to studio conversations.

Analysis

The research approach used in phenomenographic research is a case of a general methodology called contextual analysis (Marton & Svensson 1979; Svensson 1976, 1997, 2005). In contextual analysis, the studied phenomenon is treated as a whole, and parts are discerned within this whole. These parts are regarded as being dependent of each other for their meaning. The internal relations between parts, as well as the internal relations between parts and wholes, are seen as central in the analysis. To do a contextual analysis means to start from an understanding of what is the phenomenon to be investigated. In the present investigation the phenomenon is the relation between a student's use of studio conversations and his/her relation to the own artwork. The context is the activity and situation of the student. Most forms of qualitative analysis starts with individual data as meaning units, codifies and/or categorize those, and group them into bigger meaning units in an inductive way. In contextual analysis we start with the data delimited as being about the whole phenomenon investigated,

and search for main parts of the phenomenon, main aspects and/or components, and the relations between those parts. The analysis is a case based analysis, in the sense described by Miles and Huberman (1994), in contrast to a variable based analysis.

There is a difference, in principle, between starting from already discerned categories (meanings) within aspects (variables) and relating those to each other, and finding internal relations by discerning meanings within aspects interdependently. The contextual analysis started from the whole of each student's relation to use of studio conversations and to their artwork, to find meaningful relations between these two aspects. The aim was to explore and interpret how the two identified main aspects were related, through finding specific contents within the aspects that were meaningfully related. This was done based on individual students' reports of developments within the two aspects. The description of the relation between students' approaches to their artwork and to studio conversations is an interpretation of the students' statements about their artwork and their studies. The interpretation was not explicitly given by the students. It is the researchers' interpretation. Other data, such as observations of activities and art products or diaries, would most likely have given a different and complementary picture of the relationship between the two focused aspects.

Results. The results are presented in the form of describing each case, also based on comparing the cases. This means that a rather extensive picture is given of each student. Nevertheless, in the description of the students we have left out some information that might possibly have contributed to the understanding of the case. We are not telling what media and techniques the students are using. Also, some other information that could serve to identify individual students is not mentioned. We do not indicate if the student is a man or woman, and the feminine is used neutrally. Some of the students were anxious not to be too easily identified, and were promised that this would not be the case. The students are named with a letter from A to I in the order they are presented in the text.

There are quite big differences between all nine students in most of the aspects covered in the interviews. To get a picture of the relation between the two focused main aspects, their use of studio conversations and their relation to their own artwork, we have grouped the students in five types of relations, with two students expressing each type, except the last type, expressed by a single student. The results are presented in the form of similarities and variation within and between types. The students are presented as expressing a certain type of relation between the two main aspects on the basis of the situation in the fourth year of study, against the background of the previous development. Students' references to preparatory visual art practice education are also included, which increases the period covered, differently for different students. Also, during this period two of the students visited educational programs

abroad for some time, and had studio conversations within those programs according to the local curriculum.

The naming of the types of relations found, presented below, focuses on the expected function of studio conversations, seen in relation to students' development of their artwork. The subheadings summarize what is characteristic of the relation between the two aspects in the cases placed under each subheading. When there are two cases, the subheadings summarize what is common to the two cases. The subheadings are also intended to catch what is common to one type of relation compared to the other types, described under the other subheadings. The description and comparison of the cases of course are much richer than what is captured in the subheadings, which only name a general quality of the relation, a quality that stands out in the over-all comparison.

Studio conversations for restricted support of artwork. The first type of relation is characteristic of two students (A and B). Both of them have chosen to work mainly in one medium. What is common to them in their relation to their artwork is that this relation has developed over a long period, including preparatory art education and their present education, in a very continuous and non-dramatic way, in small steps and without any big changes. The student who is most restricted in the use of studio conversations is presented first.

Student A has learned to take responsibility for the work process already during the preparatory education. This student is very focused on and works exclusively in the chosen medium, using an established way of working. However, there is a development towards being somewhat freer in relation to the established way of working. Studio conversations have been sparse, due to experienced difficulties to talk about art in general, including the student's artwork. These experienced difficulties sometimes lead to anxiety, since they clash with the ethos of the educational program.

> In my work there's been no difference at all [comparing the MFA program with the preparatory art school]… it was pretty much the same as here, a great deal of freedom… I think I can say that I learned to take responsibility for my own time at the preparatory art school.

> [At preparatory art school] you found out what you want to do… To me, I'm interested in working the way I work; I'm not interested in any of the other stuff. It would be very awkward for me to do anything else.

> I don't have studio conversations that often… I haven't really been criticized, and I don't find it difficult to take criticism, but I do find it hard to defend myself and to feel the pressure to say something clever.

This relation to the artwork is combined with using studio conversations to get rather specific comments that might lead to small changes, if the student agrees with the comments. The restrictive attitude towards talking about the artwork includes choosing to talk to supervisors that are sympathetic to the student's choice of media and way of working. The studio conversations preferably take place during the work, rather than after completing a piece.

> Small things maybe, I think I could make small changes if I got criticized and I agreed with it.

> I think that a good supervisor kind of relates to what you do and doesn't think you should do something else. That seems like an obvious thing, but it's pretty common at preparatory art schools that supervisors think you're into the wrong thing or try to get you to do something completely different, I think that's a really bad thing.

> The times that I've had studio conversations I've usually shown the stuff I'm in the middle of working with.

Student B works in a single medium, just as student A, and with a work routine that was established already at preparatory level. This student is very focused on work, building up the work in steps. Like student A, student B experiences an increased freedom in relation to the established way of working, but this is combined with a somewhat more analytic and conceptual approach, in line with the ethos of the educational program.

> Yes I think my working routine was founded during those years [at preparatory art school]…In that way, my process is very much the same. I work very studio based, I have got to be in the studio.

> I want to work in this technique, that's my starting point. It's still my starting point but now I'm more, I can play a bit more with what it is.

> I'm not a person who takes big steps. It builds up, like from your first year [at the MFA program] you slowly walk up the hill to your fifth year. There are no big jumps. You feel that you bring with you what you've done before.

This rather established way of working and developing the work in steps seems to be the backdrop of wanting to show finished work, to get a rather immanent form of critique, eventually leading to small changes in relation to the next piece of work. The student appreciates a supervisor who works in a similar way, so that the studio conversation may have a more specific focus. Other studio conversations may concern concrete solutions to practical problems, or be of a more informal, personal character. The student acknowledges the difficulties with how much one should take notice of different comments from the supervisors, but at the same time seems to be on top of it, when narrowing down the viewpoints received on the work to fit the experienced development of the artwork.

> Clearly, you'd often like to talk to [supervisors] that work a bit like you and hear their opinions… (In a studio conversation) you may talk about other things than your artwork, like exhibitions and material and so on… You should get along, and be able to talk […] informally as well.

> To me, it's best to show a finished piece of work, then you have a concrete artwork to talk about, to see what's good or bad, you have a concrete piece to talk about anyway… Then sometimes you only talk about practical things with the supervisor, things you wonder about - how can I solve this? More informal talks…

> This thing about taking criticism from the supervisors, you can get great ideas and angles… it's difficult - should I follow this advice, or should I not follow this advice?

> This can be tough, how much should one allow oneself to be influenced by the supervisors? ...maybe you do as they told you, just to test it,…. You check it out and then maybe in the end you think that 'I rather want it this way, because I think…'

> [Referring to criticism from supervisors] I am told I work with things that have been done before. That's kind of tough to take. I do work within a tradition, and surely this tradition is part of my work… I can't do the stuff I do without relating to its history. That would be stupid.

The two students have in common that they have a long established relation to their artwork, and this seems to frame their relation to the use of studio conversations. What is common to them in their relation to studio conversations is that they want to narrow the viewpoints received to fit their own relation to their artwork. Their orientation in their use of studio conversations is to perhaps get suggestions for minor adjustments within the work already established. They differ in that student A has difficulties talking about art and is very

restrictive with having studio conversations at all. Compared to student A, student B is more open to others' views and willing to talk about her artwork.

Studio conversations for input to a very varied way of working. The second type of relation is characteristic of students C and D. They have in common that they work with a great variation of media and techniques, in long established ways. However, their way of working is open, explorative. The first student seems to be very explorative and guided by an implicit theme in an intuitive way, while the second student starts out from individual ideas, exploring them in the work process. They are both comfortable with their general way of working, which is, however, more varying, open and experimental than in the first group. The students are presented below, starting with student C, who is most in need of support in the form of input of ideas, and continuing with student D, who enjoys the conversations more.

Student C works in various media. The student has an explorative approach, but at the same time the artwork is rather consistent, in an almost unconscious way, with the same themes, forming a red thread across different media. There are expressed problems with keeping up work pace, and a need of support in a controlled renewal of the work. The student needs input from others, and finds it difficult to produce if the periods of solitary studio work are too extended. Input in the form of conversations (with supervisors or others) is a greatly valued support, especially in the initial stage of the work process.

> It's difficult to get away from the core that makes you do the things you do, I don't know, I guess it's quite unconscious … the same theme in one way or the other.

> That's what's been most difficult, to kind of keep up your working pace… It's difficult to keep up your pace yourself but you have to, and it's a good thing as well to be made to feel what it's like since that's what it's like I suppose, to work as an artist.

> …sometimes you isolate yourself. You sit in your studio, like in a small cell, and try to do nothing but work […] periods that you may be a bit unsociable, afraid as you are sometimes, I clearly notice a decline in my work, because it is the studio conversations that… You have a lot to thank other people for, ideas and stuff, if you think about it.

> Conversations with people outside the school have given me a lot of energy and inspiration… Conversations about anything but art give me the most inspiration [and] ideas…

Just as student B, this student acknowledges problems with having several supervisors commenting the artwork, and feels that it is difficult to use such viewpoints if they differ a lot.

As a consequence, the student has become more restrictive with studio conversations, thus avoiding too diverging influences.

> I have maybe one or two studio conversations a month. At the most two. I've cut down on it quite a lot. I've talked to a number of supervisors. I think it's good to hear all opinions, but in the end it gets too much… It's difficult if you talk about your artwork with five different supervisors because everyone says what they think, in their way, and it all gets shattered. Especially if you talk to these supervisors on a regular basis, then you feel like you unconsciously try to please all these supervisors in a way, by integrating some of their… kind of take in what they told you, even if at heart you ought to do things just like you yourself want them to be.

> These studio conversations, you have conversations when you just sit and talk. Sometimes you don't talk about your artwork at all, you talk about all kinds of things. That's what's great about the studio conversations. They don't have to be a certain way… they are usually rather non-criticizing…

Student D works in various media and with an explorative approach. The starting point may be an idea, just as well as a specific material. During preparatory art education, the student felt a pressure to focus on a particular medium and a single way of working, instead of varying and mixing. Now the student feels no such expectations, from within or from the environment, and has arrived at a point where there is no need to change the relation to the artwork or the way of working.

> [Now I] feel confident working the way I do. I know I've been told at preparatory art school that you have to choose and create a niche for yourself in some way… to give a serious impression. I know now that I don't have to. I can work in my way…

> In the beginning when I worked I wanted to be sure of what I was doing before I did it… Now at least I've allowed myself to kind of start doing things, without being so sure of what I'm getting at, just because I've taken an interest in something, and letting the words come later.

> I start out with a thought and then I choose a material from that. Though I have started to work the other way around, to choose a material that I find interesting and then I try to think of why I do that… It's all up to myself really.

The student values a supervisor who works with the same medium and who listens. The studio conversations usually focus on sharing ideas in relation to the student's ongoing work, but

occasionally there has been critique on finished work. Critique is received positively and as help in the process of developing an idea, as well as expressing it. The relatively newly reached confidence in working in a very open and varied way, seems to have lead to an interest mainly in using studio conversations to get suggestions about alternative possibilities. The student values different opinions from supervisors, and seem to manage well in deciding what comments to pay attention to.

> Once there was [this supervisor] who worked pretty much within the same material as I do. We'd sit and bandy ideas on ways to use the material, and that was extremely rewarding…

> You notice right away when [a supervisor] listens and is part of the discussion… Some supervisors come with a kind of template for what [art] should look like, and if you don't fit in the model you're no good.

> Often [the studio conversations] takes place during a process of working with something. You rarely show something that you've decided is complete, like you'd do in an exhibition.

> [Referring to studio conversations] And you notice that everyone [of the supervisors] is more or less on the same level, but they all have so very different opinions about what's good. So in the end you realize that it is all up to yourself and what you think is good and what you can stand for, and that's a great feeling.

The students in this second group share a concern for getting ideas that may help to direct their work. They are preoccupied with getting ideas and comments, and select the ideas and comments that stimulate and support their work. Their expectations on the function of studio conversations may be understood in relation to that they are working in a very varied although well established way. There is a difference between the students in that student C is more dependent on input from others to get started, while student D is more interested in getting ideas during work.

Studio conversations to support a new form of expression. Students E and F have in common that their work is more restricted to certain materials, compared to the preceding two students. However, they are working with a broader variation of material than the first group. They have also in common that they quite recently have found a way of expressing themselves in their artwork that they feel is very authentic. There is a difference between the two students in that the first student is more in need of and expecting to get support for developing the new

expression, while the second student is more focused on testing how the expression communicates.

Student E was initially devoted to one medium, but has developed an interest in additional media over time. There is a conceptual consistency that runs through the artwork, regardless of the medium. A previous great interest for conversations seems to have been connected to an orientation towards imitation. Later in the studies, the student describes a change in the relation to her artwork, from imitating what "art should look like" towards an authentic and personal expression. As far as the work process is concerned, there are no big changes, except struggling to draw a line between work and private time.

> A lot of things have fallen into place. I've challenged myself and dared to get a language of my own, an expression of my own… I used to imitate a lot; I'd imitate something like what I thought art should look like. Now, I'm a real lousy imitator so it turned out pretty interesting anyway.

> I work exactly the same now as before [the MFA program]… I've always worked like that, I think, it's not that different. I try to allow myself not to work, that's something new, that I don't have to work and may take some time off and think of other things.

There is an expressed development from seeking an expression of one's own, to the point of reaching a state of confidence and trust in the artwork. This student used to have many studio conversations, from the stage of idea to showing a finished piece of artwork. The need to talk to supervisors has gradually become less, and today there is no need to have that many conversations anymore. Like several others, this student greatly values a supervisor who works in a similar way.

> These studio conversations can be very different. With the regular supervisors I can talk, from not having any idea at all and just wanting to talk to someone, to talking about a finished piece. And then you have the guest supervisors that you can book for a studio conversation. Then it's a different thing, it's more of a performance thing.

> If I am in the middle of working with something there may be a concrete problem that I want to solve: white or black? And then I get different responses from different supervisors and in the end it's all up to me.

> I feel like I don't have that many studio conversations anymore, for some reason… In the beginning [of the MFA studies] I was seeking… 'What am I doing'? And like I

said, imitating. 'What happens if I do this? Let's try.' I talked to a lot of people then, but I don't really do that anymore.

Student F works in a number of media, with a well functioning working routine that was established during preparatory art studies. There has been a recent development towards experienced authenticity of the artistic expression. The student describes this development in relation to the preparatory art school education as well as in relation to the MFA program. The student expresses the experience of the development of authenticity strongly, and almost poetically.

> I brought the working discipline with me from my previous art school studies… So, it's still the same though maybe more discipline now than before. Like getting started. I set up more deadlines for myself now; this has to be finished by a certain date, to make it work…

> At preparatory art school you learn a lot of techniques and you're influenced a great deal by the teachers and their point of view, the way they look upon the world and so on. In a way you end up making their art, even if I'm the one who makes it. Now I've returned to what interests me, and it feels like a relief because all the time I used to feel like I was doing someone else's art… I feel that what I do now, it's under the skin. What I did before was more like something I'd put on, it was outside the skin.

The student has had experiences of supervisors that are only interested in talking about their own art, and tries to force a way of working on the student. There seem to be a relation between the new, more intimate and authentic relation to the artwork, and the explicitness in what the student expects from a studio conversation. This student focuses on expressing something coming from within, and wants the studio conversations to be about how successful the expressing is. Studio conversations preferably concern a finished artwork and the student wants critique concerning how the chosen way of expressing communicates and if the intention is coming through.

> I have problems with, a bad supervisor is someone who just talks about their own stuff and wants you to do things their way…

> [Referring to studio conversations with supervisors.] There will be questions like 'well, how do you plan to show this, are your intentions coming through, is this the best way to express your thought?' … I've used [friends/other students] more like supervisors and said 'I would like people to conceive my piece of work like this'.

> Then they say 'yes, I think you've succeeded' or 'no, you have to change this' and then they come up with suggestions.

These two students are similar in their expectation on studio conversation to focus on artistic expressions. This may be understood as depending on that they have quite recently developed an artistic expression which they experience as much more authentic than what they had done previously. They seem to be anxious to elaborate on this expression. There is a difference in that the first student is more into establishing the expression and the second is more concerned with testing the expression.

Studio conversations to hear others' interpretations of the artwork. The two students grouped together under this labeling (G and H) both express that they have established their relation to their artwork, their ways of working, and their expression, so this is not so much in focus any more. However, their confidence in their artwork has been achieved quite recently. They are the ones most concerned with how their artwork is interpreted and understood by others, and they want to use studio conversations to find out about others' interpretations. They are very different in their interest in the interpretations of others. While the first student is mainly concerned that the intention of the artwork is being understood, the second appears to be essentially interested in the variation in others' interpretations.

Student G is working with one medium in a very personal way. There has been a change from another medium to the present one during the first year in the program. The student has experienced a change in the relation to her artwork, expressed as a developed closeness to her work, a feeling of coming home. The work process has become stable, empty periods do not come so often. The student has regular studio conversations with one teacher and one main supervisor, who is doing quite different things, compared with the student's artwork, but is good in relating to the student's work. The student's focus is now on confirming that the intended message is understood by the viewer/interpreter.

> Finding my own expression has been important to me earlier, and I think I am finding it more and more.

> It was like coming home somehow, personally. To come back to something I think I was interested in for a period, before I was a teenager… I feel very close to my own artwork. Before it was more alien to me… I was more influenced by others. I had a hard time finding what I wanted to do. In my work I tried to set out from themes that weren't really close to me, and this goes for ways of working as well.

> When I have to explain, I usually say that my artistry is a bit like a sister to me, someone that I can talk to but at the same time be engaged in a dialog with and who, when I am finished with a piece, often says something back to me about myself and shows me something that I haven't thought of before…

> My artwork is very much based on intuition, in the way that it is very close to myself and when I think too much I end up distancing myself from it.

Student G is more comfortable with talking about her artwork now than before, and more explicit in what the conversations should focus upon, which includes restricting what pieces of artwork are shown to others. The student has personal interpretations of her artwork, but finds it interesting to hear others' interpretations, and can manage to disagree with critique from the supervisors. A supervisor with a lot of experience is appreciated, since he or she is more likely to give a new angle to the artwork. At the same time the student wants to be confirmed and the artwork to be understood by people who can take the perspective of the student. The student works in a very intuitive way, the artwork reveals very much of the student's inner life, and therefore there is a preference towards having studio conversations with people, who know the student well enough to understand why something is done in a certain way. Consequently, the student is sensitive to showing work where the intentions of the artwork risks not to be understood, or to be misunderstood.

> [The most important thing is] that you have something in common, that you feel that the supervisor understands you somehow… [At the school] there is no supervisor who works the way I do, it would be nice to sit and talk technique and stuff, things that maybe aren't that developing for me artistically, but it's still an important part of it all, at least for me it is… We have a great supervisor here, who makes things that are totally different from mine but can still definitely relate to what I do, and understand what I'm doing.

> Now I feel more confident in what I do… Now I choose, if I invite someone to my studio that isn't… some people may be respectful but still kind of barge in, then I take aside certain pieces of my art work and say 'no, I don't want to talk about them'… I've become more explicit about the way I want to talk to people.

> If you don't agree with [criticism] you don't have to agree with it. I can handle that now. It was a different situation a while ago, two three years ago, it was a lot more difficult back then. After all, you do listen to a supervisor and sometimes it's not right.

> You can't deny that a supervisor that has a lot of experience and has seen a lot of art and has read a lot of books, that (he/she) can provide a new angle of approach that is new to me.

Student H is working in quite a broad way with different materials, and has now found a functioning way of working. The student worked a lot in the same techniques before, and has now picked them up again, having developed a feeling of confidence concerning her own ability and the intentions of the artwork, along with having become less dependent on authorities. The artwork gets its meaning through its social function outside the studio and the school, as a participation in societal life. There is a strong orientation towards exhibitions and towards doing new things. The student likes to invite people to discuss her artwork and enjoys listening to others' interpretations. The most interesting setup is to have a small group of people and hear their interpretations and follow the discussion.

> It is a totally different kind of motivation when you work with things that you show to others. You feel like you participate in society somehow. You work outwards instead of within the structure here [at the school]…

> I worked a lot in this technique before I started at the MFA program. Now I've taken it up again… I feel like I have a base now. If I want to use this technique, it's fine. I don't doubt my own knowledge, or what do you call it, my own intentions, any more… my trust in authority was a lot stronger in the beginning…

> I've found out that usually it's better to try to finish something and then… you don't have to criticize all the time. It tends to disturb more than it helps.

> I've found a distribution of work, a functioning way to work. It's taken all the time up to now.

Student H has a very different relation to showing her artwork compared to student G, being very positive to showing her artwork to many people in different ways, getting deep-reaching critique from some, and more general reactions from others. Critique is considered important. As far as studio conversations are concerned, the student prefers to talk to someone who is similar in a personal way, and to take advantage of a supervisor who can question the work. She finds it interesting to hear what other people think about her artwork, and the interpretations may well be totally different from her own. This student is very open to and interested in what others can communicate about the artwork.

I am interested in getting to know someone [supervisor] that I can benefit from, someone that's a bit like me personally… I guess it's important that either I like the stuff the artist [supervisor] does, or that I like his/her way of talking or thinking about it… at least like, not just be able to talk about their own stuff, but also looking at what the students do and be able to talk about their stuff, to kind of raise problematic aspects of it and take an interest in it.

…now I've found a few that I like to talk to here at the school. We [students and supervisors] know each other, they are familiar with my way of talking about my work and I know their interests and their ways of criticizing art and what kind of questions they ask.

I find it interesting to hear what people think, because I've realized that what my little brain produces is not at all what comes up in other people's heads. Thoughts and associations related to the stuff I do.

It's the best when the discussion flows between them and I can just sit and listen. That's super interesting.

Although these two students are very different, they both focus on interpretations of their artwork in their communication with others and in their view of the function of studio conversations. This seems to be dependent on a similar relation to their artwork, in that they have already established expressions and ways of working, and are not primarily preoccupied with performance aspects of their artwork. They have shifted their focus to the interpretation of the work, although they focus on interpretations in very different ways. The difference can also be understood as dependent on their relation to their artwork. Student G works very intuitively, strives to do so, and finds her artwork very revealing in an intimate way that is not obvious to the student until afterwards. There is sensitiveness to this revealing character of her artwork, and the student is most concerned with being understood. To student H, what makes her artwork meaningful is its function in a broader social context. The student has found a way of working which is very outgoing, in collaboration with others, and there is a constant openness towards new things. The student trusts her own capability and is focused on others' reception of the artwork. This is the context for this student's focus on getting others' interpretations as the function of studio conversations.

Studio conversations for a critical discussion of the artwork. In this category, there is only one student. Student I works in various media, similar to students E and F, starting out from a concept rather than a medium. There is a clear conceptual consistency, regardless of media used. The student has a long established relation to her artwork, along with a well functioning

way of working, although the student thinks that minor aspects of the work process may still be improved. The establishment of this relation to the artwork and the way of working goes back to preparatory art studies. There is an intentional development from a rather "narrow" towards a more "consumer-friendly" form of artwork.

> Yes the working process, I know what it means. Since I've started at an art school with a similar structure before, I know what it's like… I get more done now than during my first year. My process is more fluent now, but still it can become even more fluent.

> I have concepts of my own that I work with… I think I work with the same themes now as I did that time (of the first interview). Certainly I've become more refined, more sophisticated, more distinct.

> There is this aspect as well, that artwork that is made to hang on a wall is a lot easier to sell. It is an object that may be passed on. That is an aspect of my production that needs to be improved. I don't mind that my artwork generates money in the end. As I said, I am very tired of being a student, and I am very tired of being poor.

The student's expectations on the content of the studio conversations are explicit. The artwork is clearly concept-based, and that is the aspect that the student wants the conversations to focus upon. The studio conversations are used to show finished work, rather than as a support in the process of making it.

> Above all, a supervisor should be able to relate theoretically to what you do, be someone who is theoretically oriented, and relates to your work process. Someone that you can discuss your artwork with, conceptually as well as esthetically… [The supervisors] give me references that I can use, and that's good, that's really good.

> I'd like to have a finished piece of artwork, I don't need to talk about how to do the stuff.

> [Referring to showing a collaborative piece of artwork to a guest supervisor from abroad] I think he/she got cross with us. He/she took it as a provocation… It was an interesting discussion, because I don't think we would have reached this angle of approach with a Scandinavian supervisor. It's certainly based on cultural understanding… very interesting.

This student focuses on having a critical discussion of the artwork, rather than mainly getting others' interpretations, which is considered the main character of the previous category

(students G and H). This may well be due to the strong conceptual emphasis, in combination with the long established relationship to her artwork of student I, as opposed to the more explorative approach and relatively recently achieved confidence in relation to their own artwork of students G and H.

Discussion. The students participating in this investigation apparently are very different, both in their artwork and their use of studio conversations. The aim and content of the studies and the education concern artistic development. Artistic development therefore is the most relevant quality with respect to which the use of studio conversations should be considered in an educational perspective. Both artistic development and use of studio conversations are very complex phenomena, and in this investigation the connection between these two aspects of the studies have been focused. What has been focused is the students' subjective experience of how their relation to their artwork has developed or, to be more precise, what they are most aware of and find relevant and important to tell the interviewer about this development. The same can be said about the focus on studio conversations.

Edström (2008a) reported that uncertainty and becoming assured was the most striking aspect of the students' experiences of the development of their relations to own artwork. She also described that uncertainty and 'to rest assured' had some different meanings. Our present results are in line with this development described by Edström, and show that the use of studio conversations is dependent on the more specific character of the artwork and the student's relation to his/her own artwork. The results are also in line with the previously by Edström (2008b) reported general descriptions of different uses of studio conversations. The case based description presented here is more specific and varied and discerns and adds more features of the relation to own artwork and the use of studio conversations. The main result concerns the very varied and specific ways in which the function of art students' use of studio conversations is closely related to their own artwork.

Artistic development and studio conversations. As we can see, the approaches to their artwork, to the use of studio conversations, and the relation between these two aspects of the art studies are very different in the nine cases described. They all have different relations and have experienced different trajectories in the development of their relationship to their artwork according to what they say. For instance, some students mention that they have experienced a dramatic change, while others say that there has only been very little change.

The students who have the most stable relation to their artwork during the period covered are A, B and I. In our analysis, A and B are grouped together, on the basis of a similarity in their view of the function of studio conversations. They both have a strong wish to narrow down the studio conversations to what has already been their focus in their artwork for a long time.

They seem to have their basis in a specific material, and this also forms the main basis for the function they want studio conversations to have. Student A has difficulties in talking about art, including the own artwork, and of course this is very relevant in relation to having studio conversations. The student specifically finds it difficult to defend her artwork, which results in a reluctance towards having studio conversations. Additionally, Student A is deeply involved in developing her artwork and does not want to be disturbed by having studio conversations. Student B is also involved in developing the artwork within the frames of a given medium and approach without being interrupted. This takes the form of working with a piece of art as a project, and not discussing it until it is finished. Once a piece of artwork is finished, the student is open to and interested in having studio conversations, to get ideas that can be used in developing the next piece of work within the same material and approach.

Student I is similar to students A and B in having a very stable and long established relation to her artwork. However, student I has a quite different relation to artwork through the clearly conceptual approach, and by working in several different media. The conceptual approach forms the basis for the view that the function of studio conversations is to be a more general critical discussion of art. As in the case of students A and B, there is no expectation of much direct influence on her artwork. The established conceptual approach, which is not expected to be changed, forms the basis for an interest in discussing art as a conceptual matter. The comparison of these three students shows how the approach to the use of studio conversations is very closely related to their relationship to their own artwork in each individual case, in a way that is not entirely captured in the general type of relations summarized in the subheadings under which they are grouped. This is also true for the rest of the cases studied.

Students C and D are very explorative in their artwork, using a great variation of materials. They have both become more assured to let ideas come after a while, and to change during the work. Also, they have become more stable in their general way of working, and search for stimulation and support in developing ideas within their established yet very varying way of working. Student C has problems with getting started and keeping up pace in the work. She has a need of getting ideas to deal with these problems, and expects to get ideas through studio conversations. Student D, although working in a very explorative and varied manner, has no corresponding problems with getting started and keeping up pace. This student is more concerned with getting help in exploring alternative possibilities of how to carry out the artwork.

Students E and F are mainly concerned with their artistic expressions and their use of studio conversations are linked to this concern. They both work with a restricted set of material and have recently found a new and authentic form of expression that they want to establish. Student E was previously very interested in having frequent studio conversations, but does not

feel the same need any longer. This is probably due to the fact that a previous search for establishing a form of expression has come to an end. Now the student is mainly concerned with elaborating her own expression. Student F seems to have reached a new, but comparatively somewhat more established, authentic expression. There has been a clear shift in the relationship to her artwork, from the experience of doing others' art to the experience of doing own art. This student is very preoccupied with succeeding in expressing and communicating what "comes from within", and the student wants to test this in studio conversations.

Students G and H are similar in having an established way of working with their art that they feel satisfied with. Both students have reached a quite relaxed relation to the uncertainty of making artwork, and they feel assured about their ability to develop useful ideas. These two students are both more concerned with others' interpretation of their art than the other students. However, they differ considerably from each other in the type of concern for others' interpretation, a difference also connected to their relation to their artwork. Student G is quite anchored in her own interpretation of the artwork and is preoccupied with making the intentions in the artwork come through. The student uses the studio conversations to confirm that this is the case. This is related to that the student's artwork is very much a matter of expressing inner life. Student H is very different. This student is the one whose relation to her artwork has the most of a social dimension. Interaction with others is a clear source of inspiration. Also, the artwork gets its relevance and meaning through the interpretations of others. Thus studio conversations, as well as other conversations, are used to find out about as many different interpretations as possible.

From the results presented above, it is clear that there is a specific relation between the two aspects a) relation to own artwork and b) use of studio conversations in each case. Thus we find a rather close relation between these two aspects of the students' art studies. The precise nature of this relation varies from case to case. This relation is a very central one within the education and with respect to its aims. Of course one may argue that the education includes the whole environment offered to the students to benefit from. Nevertheless, even if studio conversations are just one part of the education, it is the one that is generally considered most important, even if not by all students, and also the one that illustrates the character of the practice-based visual art education studied here. The very individually varying character of the main relation that emerges in the analysis, between the students' relationship to their artwork and their attitude to studio conversations, surely has a profound importance for theorizing about and forming curricula of visual art practice education.

Approaches in learning and the visual arts curriculum. There are two very striking interrelated characteristics of the results that appear particularly important in a general

educational perspective. The first is the strong experience of a developmental nature of the studies. The other is the experience of the very free character of the studies. The developmental character is revealed, not least through the importance of the preparatory studies for the continuing studies in the higher education program (cf. Edström, 2008a). In some cases, it is emphasized that it is a matter of taking further steps, building closely on what has already been achieved. In other cases, there are dramatic changes. In the cases of big changes, those are understood and described in relation to and as starting from what has been achieved in preparatory studies. This relation to preparatory studies concerns both the relationship to the students' artwork and to the use of studio conversations, as well as the relation between these two aspects. This very close connection to previous studies is characteristic of artistic education, due to the focus on and character of artistic development.

Relating to previous personal development is relevant in most fields of learning. However, the relation to what has already been achieved is usually not so much in focus as in artistic education. What are more frequently in focus in other types of education are learning outcomes that are expected to be achieved. This is related to the fact that there are mostly learning goals predefined in some way, and specified in syllabi and curricula. It is especially apparent in the fields of learning languages, mathematics and science, where there are often rather specific goals. Also, there is greater expectance of similarity in learning between students, also concerning aim and content of the studies, and more of a shared curriculum. Although there is often some emphasis on the need for individualizing instruction, there is a great difference between individualized instruction towards a predefined and common goal, compared to an individualization of the goals. This difference is also important with respect to the meaning of autonomy and self-direction within the very free character of the visual art education.

In higher education in visual art practice, goals and content are left very open, and are assumed to emerge through the work of the student. The student is expected to develop his/her own artistic expression in a way that is convincing to the world of art and society, but which cannot be decided beforehand by anyone else or even by the student. This situation is discussed by Austerlitz et al (2008) who says:

> Art and design pedagogy is concerned with the importance of students interacting with openness and uncertainty to enable them, on graduation, to negotiate the complex and unpredictable demands of the creative industries. The kind of knowledge that art and design deals with is procedural, provisional, socially constructed and ever changing. There are few laws, formulae and tangible content lists that form a visible curriculum. In the creative industries practitioners and consumers construct what is appropriate, new and innovative. The pedagogies of

art and design relate to these kinds of knowledge; where many 'right' answers exist and where there is difficulty in articulating in advance what an appropriate response might look like: 'I know when I see it' (p. 127).

At the same time, the artwork will be examined and has to meet certain criteria, which are however very varying and not very explicit. This emerging character of the aim, content and outcome gives quite special conditions for the education, forming the background for the importance of 'resting assured in the uncertain' (Edström, 2008a). This free character also makes great demand on the students to develop their approach to their artwork and their studies.

Approaches in learning have in previous research been described in terms of deep versus surface, and holistic versus atomistic approaches (Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997; Svensson, 1976, 1977). Those differences in approach have been described in relation to students' understanding of messages and problems presented to them in a given form, and where their understanding may be compared with an understanding established within a subject matter field. In the case of visual art practice, there is no established whole of a message, no problem or solution to a problem, to identify or compare with.

In other fields, what is wanted is usually a deep holistic approach and outcome. Corresponding deep and holistic qualities might also be searched for in visual art practice. To identify those qualities would take an analysis of the students' artwork, which has not been the aim of the present investigation. What is clear from the results however, is, that the students' specific approach to their artwork is embedded in the broader situation of studying art and becoming an artist. This general approach is very individual and varying, and has developed over a long period of time. How this overall approach is related to individual students' approach in their specific artwork remains to investigate further.

The very varying character of the students' approaches to learning reflects the curriculum of the MFA program, at the same time as it represents an important condition for the curriculum. Nevertheless there are commonalities between this characteristic of visual art education and a general development within other fields of higher education, with traditionally much more predefined goals. Bowden (2004), for instance, argues in favor of an alternative and extended understanding of the goal of higher education, in terms of a capability to act referred to as 'knowledge capability':

> This ability to handle previously unseen, real-life situations, to make sense of them, to figure out what the relevant aspects are, to relate them to what you know and to find out what you don't know but need to use […], to define the problem

and only then solve it, is what I have termed knowledge capability (p. 40).

A curriculum based on the aim of knowledge capability, Bowden argues, would be more in harmony with the changes of today's working life, than the traditional focus on accumulation of knowledge. We also find most of these qualities as parts of artistic development (cf. Austerlitz et al 2008; Lockheart, Gamble, Miller, Fisher & Henderson, 2008). The qualities very much involve being able to approach new situations in a successful way, finding out their possibilities and, based on previous experience and knowledge, finding a way to act that will lead to the desired outcomes. The approaches in handling new and open situations have to be more innovative, compared to approaches in educational situations with a given subject matter and expected outcome. In the case of visual art practice there is a demand for innovative approaches, also including the choice of situations and contents or "subject matter" addressed.

Another example is Barnett and Coate (2005), who have addressed the problem with the lack of curriculum thinking generally in higher education, arguing for a conceptualizing of curriculum as engagement in terms of knowing, acting and being. They describe how the focus in higher education has traditionally been on knowing, but has changed towards more emphasis on acting, especially "skills that are intended to be transferable and employment-related capabilities" (p. 105). However, Barnett and Coate go one step further by their use of the concept of being. They envisage that in the context of the increasing integration of higher education with the wider world, the forms of being that will be encouraged will much more be those of being-in-the-world, rather than being-in-knowledge (p. 119). Therefore, the conceptualization of curriculum must be widened to "embrace a sense of the student's self and self-understanding; of the student as a person of being and becoming" (p. 7). Against this backdrop, Barnett and Coate argue for an engaging curriculum, i.e. a view of curriculum as an ongoing process which actively engages both students and academics. They add that the curriculum should be explicitly dealt with through the development of a 'scholarship of curriculum', including meta-reflection over the curriculum process and seeing curriculum issues in a larger perspective.

The result of the present investigation points to the importance of knowledge about the function of the content and the form of teaching seen in relation to students' development of their artistic work, and Barnett and Coate's discussion and suggestions are very relevant here. Higher education in visual art practice comes close to the focus on acting and being suggested by Barnett and Coate (2005), as opposed to higher education in general and its traditional focus on knowing. Clearly, higher education in general has much to learn from visual art practice when it comes to development of acting and being. At the same time, being "an untheorized teaching tradition that is largely mimetic from expert teacher to student novice" (Harwood, 2007, p. 315), higher education in visual art practice will surely benefit from a

pedagogical reference frame that will aid in finding words to describe, and developing research to underpin, the unique characteristics and conditions of this field of knowledge and teaching.

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