

Art and Design Education in the Ecology of Care

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Art and Design Education in the Ecology of Care

Michael Koon Boon Tan

Abstract

In the light of challenges arising from contemporary issues such as inclusivity, sustainability and justice, the connections between art, design and caring appears to be pertinent. What role can artists and designers play in the ecology of care? How can we lead art and design students to connect and lend their creative skills to care needs? Drawing on the ethics of care and a relational view on health this paper highlights the various teaching approaches and initiatives introduced at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, to support and guide students to realise various art and design for health and wellbeing projects that provide opportunities for students to part take in ecology of care using their creative skills. Although creative explorations at the intersection of art, design and caring is still at an early stage, outcomes from this ongoing effort have been encouraging in response to the shifting social needs to create a more inclusive and flourishing society in Singapore.

Keywords

Arts and health; Design for health; Education; Care; Assemblage Theory; Singapore

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Introduction

The School of the Art Design and Media (ADM) at Nanyang Technological University was established in 2005. As the first professional art school on the university level in Singapore, the school currently offers degree programmes in areas of art, design and media at Undergraduate (B.F.A.), Masters and PhD level. The school leverages on the diverse

knowledge fields at the university to offer students a broad-based education that encourages interdisciplinary learning as well as research opportunities. Exposure to knowledge from disciplines outside of art and design such as social sciences and humanities offer students thinking tools to unpick issues in society as well as opportunities to reflect and imagine ways which art and design might respond to some of the challenges confronting society today. An example of such an exercise at ADM would be the evolving convergence and exploration of art, design and caring by students and staff.

Connecting Art, Design and the Ecology of Care: A Generative and Relational Perspective

Although caring may not necessary be a responsibility or concern that art and design students would immediately associate their creative practices and pursuits with, the connections between art, design and caring appears to be pertinent in the light of challenges arising from contemporary issues. How might artists and designers as active citizen respond to issues and challenges confronting an ageing population, social injustice or climate change? These are some of the pressing issues confronting many societies in the world today. How might creative practitioners part take in caring for the changing needs? This may be a timely juncture for us to be acquainted with the notion of care and reflect on ways which creative practices of artists and designers can offer to the ecology of care. To care is to recognize the lived experience of others as worthy of our attention; care suggests that we respond in ways that are helpful and which perhaps facilitate positive change and new ways of being together (Conradson, 2011). Caring is described by Tronto (1993) as comprising four aspects:

- Caring about – heeding the presence of a need and recognising a necessity to address the need.
- Caring for – undertaking responsibility for the identified need and determining how one's action can address those needs.
- Caregiving – acting in situations where a carer is in contact with the object of care through the 'direct meeting of needs for care'.
- Care-receiving – evaluating the efficacy of care exchange; how 'object of care' respond to the care it receives.

Care involves actions that help fulfil the need of others. While the connection between art and design practice and caring may seem remote, a growing number of initiatives have

emerged, exemplifying responses by artists and designers to part take in caring. For example, *Talking Minds*¹ an online resource for people experiencing psychosis developed by the Design for Health and Wellbeing (DHW) Lab in New Zealand, involves inputs from young people and their families to create a more user-friendly resource to help educate young people experiencing psychosis about the importance of adherence to medication in recovery. Another exemplary project would be the Dementia Lab² spear headed by Andrea Wilkinson and Niels Hendriks. The duo utilised a participatory and person centred approach to design for and together with persons with dementia to improve services and facilities in a residential care setting. While exemplifying the contributions that creative practitioners are making to the ecology of care, the above-mentioned examples also calls attention for us to reflect and reconsider our understanding on the ways which wellbeing is afforded through instances of connection and encounters brought on by creative practitioners to a particular community.

According to Deleuze & Guattari (1988), our experience of the world and aspects of living is afforded and affected by assemblages – encounters with a collection of animate and inanimate things. When considered in this perspective, life and its events are framed as a ‘constellation of singularities and traits deducted from the flow- selected, organised and stratified – in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, 406). The concept of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) has inspired a turn towards a relational approach to health and well-being. A relational approach views health and well-being as states constituted, afforded and amendable by a network involving the body’s relation and its interaction with other bodies, materialities, and processes (Andrews, 2014; Andrews et al, 2014; Atkinson, 2013; Duff, 2014; Fox, 2002; Mol, 2002; Williams, 2003). From a relational approach, health and well-being are also understood as momentary states that are ‘situated’ and ‘emergent’ ‘effects’ (Atkinson, 2013), constantly ‘taking place’ (Andrews et al, 2014) or co-evolving and co-created (Andrews, 2014). In this sense, the gain or depletion of subjective health and well-being is understood to be affected and effected by encounters, networks and associations according to the availability of enabling resources (Duff, 2011; Fox, 1998; 2002). Given such understanding on how health and well-being can be shaped and influenced by assemblages - networks and encounters with human, materials and processes – the concept can also be useful to open up thinking and

¹ <https://www.dhwlab.com/talking-minds-1>

² <http://www.dementialab.com/content/>

imagination of the possible connection and contributions that artists and designers could offer as part of the network and ecology of care.

How can art and design care?: Teaching Approaches

To foster exploration of creative practices in context of caring, several teaching approaches were developed at ADM in recent years to provide students opportunities to expand their creative research. One way is through the Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA)³ Programme. URECA is an undergraduate research general elective to provide outstanding undergraduates an opportunity to pursue independent research under the supervision of a faculty over an 11 month period. Through this channel, briefs on Art and Design for Wellbeing were developed to invite eligible students to devise ways to promote wellbeing of patients in the geriatric ward at the hospital with their creative research. The briefs were developed in partnership with staff of the Occupational Therapy Department at the Ng Teng Fong General Hospital. At the start of the project, students undertook a Discovery Phase where they had an opportunity to interact with staff of the Occupational Therapy Department at the hospital to learn about the challenges and needs confronting care in an acute rehabilitation setting. This was achieved first through a visit and tour at hospital to get an overview of the services. The discovery phase also involved participant observations where students took on a week-long participant observation activity at the geriatric ward to gain insight and to identify the design challenges emerging from their interaction and observation of the setting. Alongside the participant observation exercise, students were also introduced to literature on the art and design in health, and on issues related to ageing to further contextualise their projects. The information and insight gained from the discovery phase were used in the Development and Prototyping Phase to guide and inform conceptual development of the students' work. During the Development & Prototyping phase, meetings were periodically held with the hospital staff for the students to receive inputs to enable them to refine and further develop their work. Towards the end of the project, the finalised prototypes by the students were presented to staff. Selected prototypes were put on trial by the hospital's volunteers with patients. Some of the notable outcomes from the URECA are *Match link*: A Multi-sensorial Game to Engage Persons with Dementia by Cassandra Seah and *'Jiak Ba Buay'*: A Multi-Sensorial Engagement Tool Kit for Volunteers by Grace Goh.

³ http://www.ntu.edu.sg/ureca/about_us/URECA/Pages/index.aspx

Match link is a multi-sensorial game intended for use by Occupational Therapy or volunteers to engage Persons with Dementia to increase functional ability and promote cognitive stimulation. It involves the use of sensory, visual, memory, precision, co-ordination and creative skills to stimulate cognitive processing and motor skills, through tactile and visual means. Drawing on inputs from the occupational therapist, the kit offers various activities to suite patients with varying cognitive ability. Activities include identifying colours, matching colours, identifying textures, matching textures, remembering locations of colours, textures and arranging blocks to create designs, evoking memories through conversation and touch. *Matchlink* can be used one-on-one with the Occupational Therapist or even in a group setting, amongst the elderly and their caretakers (see Figure 1).

<Figure 1 Here >

Jiak Ba Buay aims to create a set of culturally relevant, multi-sensorial engagement tool kit for volunteers interacting with elders with dementia. The project's title *Jiak Ba Buay* is a Chinese dialect greeting that is commonly used by many locals. The phrase asks if one have had their meal and is often used as a greeting as well as a conversation starter. The activities materials of the engagement tool kit are contained in a *Ting-Kat*. The *Ting-kat* is a traditional multi-tier food container commonly use to pack food for take away; it is often associated with comfort. In this instance, the ting-kat is repurposed to contain the various activity materials of the engagement kit. The first activity *Jiak!* (Eat in a dialect) focuses on storytelling using popular local cuisines that are commonly found at *kopitiams* (local coffee shops). The activity made use of food magnets depicting a variety of local delights to allow volunteers to engage an elderly in conversation over a "meal". A guidebook is available to provide volunteers with some conversation prompts related to local food cultural and dishes. A deck of recipe cards is also available to engage the participants to identify and match food item to create a dish. The second activity utilises audio recordings of commonly environments sound to engage the participants to identify the source and also share their experiences of those sound. The final activity uses scented doughs, which are infused with local spices and herbs to engage the participants to identify the scent as well as to create little sculptural pieces of local dishes (see Figure 2).

<Figure 2 Here >

Final Year Project

Another teaching approach that enable students part take in ecology of care using their creative skills would be through their Final Year Project (FYP) where students would undertake a 12 month long individual project with a supervisor. Similar to the URECA, the FYP involves contextualising and discovery phase, followed by development and prototyping phase, which conclude with delivery. Through this channel, students were encouraged to identify and connect with partners from a variety of health and social organisations.

<Figure 3 Here >

In *Heart Times* by Ng Wei-En Serene (see Figure 3), the student had an opportunity to connect and explore her interest in illustration to caring in a pediatric ward. Targeted at children below the age of six, and designed according to the needs of the therapist working with these children, the project explores how illustration can address the psychological, social and emotional issues battled by children in the hospital. When developing the project, Serene had the opportunity of engaging the experience and expertise of play therapist in the National University Hospital (NUH) of Singapore. Through her visits to the environment and interviews with the play therapist, she was able to gather valuable and practical insights into the local healthcare system as well as the real problems faced by the child patients during therapy sessions. The project aims to attend to this very fear of separation anxiety in the child patient, through the adventure embarked on by a protagonist with the same mindset and fears. Following the completion of the project, the illustration book is published and available for purchase by Epigram.

In another project, *Sensory Pizza* by Cheong Tong Pei (see Figure 4), the student explored how surface design could complement the work of Occupational Therapists (OTs) during Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT) for children living with Sensory Processing Disorders (SPDs). In doing so, it also explored the synergy between occupational therapists and the designer through surface design to develop products that inspires imaginative and therapeutic play. The development for this project followed a systematic design methodology. The first phase involved literature research on sensory processing disorders and sensory integration therapy. The second phase took place at three occupational therapy centres as observational studies and interviews. From the research and information gathered in phases one and two, the information was used for design and prototyping. The prototypes were reviewed by the

therapist to ensure that what was designed suit their use. Based on their feedback, improvements were made on the prototypes to create the final design outcome.

<Figure 4 Here>

Arts, Ageing and Wellbeing (@artsageingntu twitter)

The school also had an opportunity to connect with the School of Social Science to offer a course on Arts, Ageing and Wellbeing as a part of the MSc in Applied Gerontology programme. The course provides an overview of the interdisciplinary field of arts and health with focus on the use of arts and creative approaches in context of ageing and eldercare. It explores concepts of art, ageing, and wellbeing, historical and contemporary debates, as well as examples of best practices and resources related to the field (see Figure 5). The course starts by exploring concepts, perspectives and issues on ageing, the aged body and wellbeing. It then proceeds to examine the impact of arts, creativity on older adults through a review of research, literature and discussions. Building on these understandings, the course also proceeded to examine in details the various contexts where the arts is mobilised through examples of best practices, field trips and seminar discussion. The course also introduces students to resources that support implementation of art-based projects for older adults in various setting. The series of studio explorations is a unique feature of the course where students can learn, explore and experience various modes of art and creative processes. Drawing on learning gained blend of independent online research, seminar, arts workshop, field trips, students are tasked to develop an art project for implementation in a proposed eldercare facility to promote healthy ageing. They had an opportunity to conduct their project in class and received peer feedback towards the end of the course. To extend the benefits, selected activities are collated to create a toolkit which will be made available to the community and staff in the health and social care sector. This initiative is done in collaboration with staff at the Agency for Integrated Care, a national agency that oversee eldercare service quality and development in Singapore.

<Figure 5 Here>

Art, Design for Health (AD4H) Lab

To consolidate the ongoing exploration on art, design and care, The Art & Design for Health Lab (AD4H Lab) was established in June 2017 at The Nanyang Technological University.

The Lab is a research initiative dedicated to promote research in creative art and design for the promotion of health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in various settings.

AD4H Lab aims to:

- Promote exchange and collaboration among practitioners and researchers in the arts, design, humanities, health, medicine and other related fields to explore the potential of creative practices and design strategies to improve experiences, services and product for health and wellbeing.
- Connect with end users and community partners to co-create innovative approaches and outcomes that provide insight or address health and wellbeing issues and challenges in various settings.
- Develop capability and scholarship in art and design for health through project supervision and workshops.
- Promote networking and build relationship with local and international institutions, organisations and individuals working in this dynamic area of interdisciplinary research.
- Develop resource to support and facilitate research, practice and education in art and design for health and wellbeing.

Through this platform, reading group sessions were organised to allow like-minded students and staff to connect and discuss issues and topics related to art and health in an informal and friendly environment.

Conclusion

Although caring may not necessarily be a responsibility or concern that art and design students would immediately associate their creative practices and pursuits with, the connections between art, design and caring appears to be pertinent in the light of challenges arising from contemporary issues. The concept of assemblage offers a useful perspective to reframe our understanding of health and wellbeing; viewing optimal health and wellbeing as states that are emergent, constituted, afforded and amendable by a network involving the body's relation and its interaction with other bodies, materialities, and processes. The various teaching approaches and initiatives highlighted earlier have been inspired by the concept of assemblage to create platforms to encourage exploration by students to connect their creative practice to the ecology of care. Although this area of work on art, design and caring is still at

an early stage, outcomes from this ongoing effort has been encouraging and seem to be gaining traction as a respond the shifting social needs to create a more inclusive and flourishing society in Singapore.

Michael Koon Boon Tan is an arts-health practitioner and currently Assistant Professor at the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University. His research interest explores how art and design strategies can be mobilised as health and well-being resource for individuals and groups marginalised by their health or age status. As a leading advocate for Arts and Health development in Singapore, he has been actively engaging stakeholders in the fields of art, health and social care to explore possibilities at this intersection. He has designed and conducted art programme for organization such as the Parkinson's Society Singapore (PSS), National University Hospital, Alzheimer's Disease Association, Singapore. His most recent project in collaboration with the Agency for Integrated Care and the National Arts Council. Sparks! paved way for the first ever artist residency in Nursing home programme in Singapore. Contact: Nanyang Technological University, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University- School of Art, Design & Media, 81 Nanyang Drive Art 4-30, Singapore 639798. Email: michaeltan@ntu.edu.sg

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Legends

Figure 1: Matchlink- A Multi-sensorial Game to Engage Persons with Dementia by
Cassandra Seah

Figure 2: Jiak Ba Buay A Multi-Sensorial Engagement Tool Kit by Grace Goh

Figure 3: Heart Times by Ng Wei-En Serene

Figure 4: Sensory Pizza in a therapy setting by Cheong Tong Pei

Figure 5: Studio exploration by students of Arts, Ageing and Wellbeing course