



## **Open-space Learning in Real World Contexts\***

### **Workshop Practice: The Commission**

#### **1. Description**

At its simplest the commission is a means of setting a collective task with clear expectations and a real world purpose. The task itself maybe a Deweyesque opportunity to 'experience' and 'make use' of disciplinary knowledge, abstract ethical and moral thinking and social co-discovery. In a commission there is an enterprise, a client and a real world commission. This commission may be extraordinarily complex and require trans-disciplinary teams and time to be successful. But a commission can also quite simply bring the real world into the classroom and allow students to operate both as they do in the world but also in professional, rather than academic, contexts. The commission is usually given to a groups of students who are then encouraged to become an autonomous enterprise and to use their collective resources to create something which has a real world connection. But they must also accept the 'mantle' of their enterprise. They must approach the task and each other according to their given occupation and task orientation rather than as themselves. Common commissions include curating exhibitions, editing collections or preparing evidence, organising conferences or building digital platforms, working as designers, renovating the past, working as artists.

#### **2. Learning Possibilities:**

Commissions require students to work together and to work to real world specifications and expectations. The playfulness of the imagined task and roles encourages students to look for possibilities, vary their approach, find an effective consensus, use dialogue to build and communicate ideas, enjoy responding to obstacles and challenges. Commissions can also protect students by offering role distance. In other words being in role provides an alternative way for students to express themselves. Relating their disciplinary learning to professional tasks often encourages critical thinking, and the questioning of ethical and moral concepts. In particular, the role aspect of commissions gives the opportunity for students to inhabit different intellectual positions. The teacher responds to the students as if they were professionals in the world and this changes the normative lecturer/student dynamic. It encourages adult-adult relationships!

### 3. Examples:

*Rough Men in the Night* In a rehearsal room approach to *Henry V* the class begin, in groups, to work as the sculptors of public art. Their commission is to produce a sculpture based on Winston's Churchill's words: *We sleep soundly in our beds, because rough men stand ready in the night to do violence to those who would harm us*. There are four groups of sculptures and each is commissioned by a different client – Help for Heroes, The Peace Foundation, Mother of the Fallen and a Military Academy. In each case the commission must reflect the client's 'values' and be for public display. When the work is discussed students can comment either as themselves or from the viewpoint of their particular client.

*The TUC Teaching Centre Mural Commission* As part of their studies of curriculum and pedagogy, a group of student teachers are given the commission to create a detailed image that might form part of a proposed mural commission from the TUC to grace the lobby of its new International Teaching Centre. The purpose of the mural is to celebrate the human importance of learning and the value of learning for working people in particular. The TUC have asked that the mural should make explicit reference to the murals of Diego Rivera (examples attached). The students were also given a set of three value propositions about education from bell hooks, John Dewey and Martha Nussbaum, with the expectation that the final piece would represent one of these intellectual and value positions.

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