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# Creative Focus: How Encounters with Nature Encourage Student Attentiveness

## Context of the Project / Activity

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The Fine Art Course has been redeveloped to adapt to changing contexts of learning. The course strategy is to focus on collaborative, practice, and the wider applications of creativity, sustainability, and wellbeing. This pedagogic philosophy can be summarised by a focus on transferable skills, encouragement of collaborative practice (Biggs 2003), cross-disciplinary discussion and inclusivity (Bamber 2009).

Establishing partnerships is a key strategy regarding this and the project reaches out from Art to Design, consolidates a partnership with FoDST, and fosters the development of a professional relationship with the Royal College of Art. The thinking behind this project feeds into the early stages of an ongoing research project with the CCRI as part of the university of Gloucestershire and connects to the research priority area Landscape at the University of Gloucestershire.

The first part of this project was supported by the FoDST. The university has a well-established relationship with the FoDST, and the project enabled the progress of a longstanding ambition of FODST to bring together art schools and practitioners from different regions in the forest.

This project brought in opportunities for students to gain teaching experience and follow the approach outlined in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* by John Biggs who writes, “there is no single best method of teaching, but the second best is students teaching other students (McKeachie et al 1986) (K2). learning takes place through the active behaviour of the student: it is what he does that he learns not what the teacher does.” (Tyler, R. 1969)

This University Teaching Fellowship was initially called *Virtual Experiences of Nature* however, this shifted in the second phase to become the final project which was

### Project Lead(s)

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### School / Subject Community / Prof Dept

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called *Creative Focus: How Encounters with Nature Encourage Student Attentiveness*.



## Aim(s)

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This project was intended to support research-led teaching to develop academic challenge for Fine Art and Landscape Design undergraduates and this is a primary component of the new curriculum in Fine Art. By seeking connections between staff research interests in relation to curriculum development, the project focused on promoting transferable attributes. Through **building partnerships which create opportunity, innovation and mutual benefit for these creative communities**, the project enhanced students' abilities to tell stories and communicate their experiences.



## Approach / Implementation

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The principal focus of this project was on encounters with nature and with making artworks, and the impact this might have on learning and, more widely, wellbeing. The project grew out of experiences in learning and teaching developed through the Fine Art course team's response to teaching a practical subject online. We believe that the adaptations made to support learning in situations where learners were separated from the benefits of haptic connection in Fine Art have a wider application in other subject areas and for wellbeing more broadly. This project directly compared phenomenological experiences and encounters with nature firsthand with imaginative experiences with nature encountered virtually by undergraduate students. The project was structured in two iterations:



Spring 2022: (Supported by the ADU Teaching Fellowship) A residential event over 4 days at the FoDST, with students from UoG in Fine Art and Performing Arts. The students attended the forest initially for one day to record their experiences digitally and put on a digital showcase of works made using video projection, augmented and virtual reality, installation, and performance. The Fine Art students then attended the forest for a further 3 days on a

residential with guest artists including practitioners from the Royal College of Art. This event invited participants to share, host, engage in discussions and to collaborate through encounters with nature – and to be offered tools through which they might compare firsthand experiences with their previous virtual encounters.



Spring 2023: A second residential in the mountains of the Brecon Beacons. (Supported by Kate and Tom's travel agency) The first stages of the project were so successful it was decided that the Fine Art BA course would allocate the travel budget usually used by a select few students to take all first-year students away to a landscape in the second semester to form a tighter community and to help them with their focus on their studies. It was also decided that the project team would do a focus group before the residential and two after to better analyse the impact it has had.

## Outcomes / Impact

The focus groups that we conducted after the second iteration of the residency have provided the project team with findings that demonstrate students' sustained experience of encounters with landscape significantly increased their perception of focus both during the encounter and in their ongoing studies.

"With virtual it's more seeing and hearing stuff, but when you are in the forest, it's feeling it. You feel the wind."

"You look around more, there is more to see, you have the elements."

This was a new thing. It got me to do something I hadn't done in a while. Foraging for materials.

"It was my first time properly walking through the forest."

"Yes, I benefited from being in the forest when it comes to making the scenes for my work, seeing the trees and the rocks was really good."

"There's more of an impact on the real encounter than the virtual encounter."

"It made me think about textures more".

"We viewed it more as absorbing rather than making."

"It will come into my practice quite heavily. Part of my drawing is using fabric textures to recreate a forest."

“It’s all about putting yourself out of your comfort zone. It’s all about trying new stuff at this stage. You’re going to benefit from all that stuff.”



## Lessons Learned / Tips for Others

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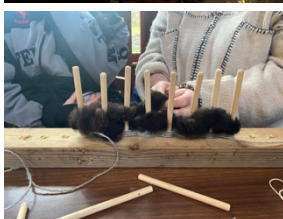
One of the things that the project did was to bring together creative practitioners and new voices into a temporary community in a neutral location. This energised the student experience on the course. Activities that could be considered extra-curricular that the project and residency engendered such as communal cooking, cleaning up, living together, evening activities such as talks and performances significantly enhanced the forming of the cohort interconnectedness and sense of belonging.

Our department recommends that the extra-curricular becomes core to the core components of the course. We would therefore recommend that all university departments do similar residential events.

At a recent presentation about Arts and Health at the University of Gloucestershire- the project team presented this research project and its findings, the feedback received was positive and colleagues from Gloucestershire NHS Trust and ArtLift/ Art Shape were encouraging and informative.

This thinking from the project will inform ongoing research into Arts and health which will impact on the wider Southwest England communities and will feed into the research project with CCRI in partnership with Hestercombe House and Gardens.

We would welcome conversations to support anyone who would like to implement this approach in their department or research.

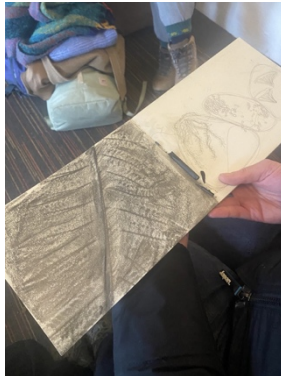


## Future Development / Next Steps

This residency directly led to new thinking around ecology, experiences of landscape and climate change in relation to health, for the Fine Art curriculum. The new 'Wellbeing and Creativity' in Fine Art module, which was introduced in 2021/2 has been adapted for future academic years because of this UTF project. The course has, more widely been directly impacted by the project, which engenders the University values of nurture creativity and sustainability. The project continues to assist the fine art team to reposition the curriculum with a judicious approach to technology and with emphasis on physical lived experience, encounters with places and materials and on collaborative shared activity. In-landscape residencies will have an ongoing role at level 4 in Fine Art. We have found through the focus groups in response to this project, that these initiatives develop a cohort's creative community. The experience enables students at an early stage of their undergraduate study to foster robust and resilient strategies for sustained and thoughtful attentiveness.

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