Digital Sabbath and the Digital Distraction

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Digital Sabbath and the Digital Distraction

Abstract

Upheavals in social media and communications are overturning education, at the same time, a group of art education graduates and their artist lecturers are using creative research to disrupt this turn by visualising the practice of Digital Sabbath. The Digital Sabbath practice aimed to explore the feasibility of switching off from technology and the impact of this practice on the participants, and those around them.

The *Digital Sabbath and Digital Distraction* exhibition results from a creative arts research project involving graduate art teachers and art education lecturers who communicate well visually. The project followed the experiences of nine participants (including the researchers) as they gave up access to digital technologies for a day a week over a three-month period, a practice known as Digital Sabbath (DS).

The participants' narratives (artefacts, journals and interviews) formed the stimulus for visualisations of the Digital Sabbath experience after a pre-intervention survey. Each researcher developed a series of works with participants, documenting the nature of their experiences and affective responses to the process. The researchers are creating a large collaborative piece that documents general themes from the project experience. The artworks produced for this research aim to communicate the findings of the research with a broader audience, and to incite discussion around our use of technology and its effect on our lives.

For many participants, the practice was incredibly difficult and small interactions with technology were often discussed as 'necessary'. Most participants discussed their use of technology, and in particular social media, as an addiction.

Introduction

Changes in social media, digital communications and a 24/7 presence are overturning visual art practice and arts education and effecting personal wellbeing. This paper discusses arts-based research (ABR) by a group of art education graduates and their artist lecturers/researchers who use creative research to disrupt these changes by visualising the practice of Digital Sabbath (DS). A DS practice involves unplugging from digital communications for a period of time, in this research, a day a week over a three-month

period. The DS practice aimed to explore the feasibility of switching off from technology and the impact of this practice on the participants and those around them.

The context for the DS research was education. As contemporary education contexts evolve, the stress early career teachers (ECT) experience can increase responsively, as new challenges overlay onto what is already a difficult professional context (it is well documented that attrition rates for new teachers can reach as much as 40% in the first 5 years) (Le Cornu 2013; Schaefer, Long and Clandinin 2012). ECT attrition is attributable to a range of variables, however stress emerges as a key driver. Stress is exerted by both workplace factors and constant exposure to others because of online immersion—email, social media (Ugur and Koc 2015) and a belief by participants that ECTs need to be available to others 24/7.

Seven art ECTs and two art education lecturers undertook a creative research project to visualise the effects of a DS experience as an intervention to improve resilience and wellbeing. All participants/researchers maintain art practices. The ECTs were self-selecting participants recruited from social media advertisements, who admitted to being stressed and addicted to social media. Following a pre-intervention survey, the participants' narratives (artefacts, journals and several video/phone interviews) formed the stimulus for visualisations of the DS experience by researchers. Each researcher developed a series of works, documenting the nature of their participants' affective responses and actual experiences with the process. Affective responses were defined as the emotional experiences and perceptions of the DS experience that shaped the participants' general psychological state throughout the process. This definition acknowledges the physical and psychological experiences that create affect (Ekkekakis, Hall, Vanlanduyt and Petruzzello 2000). Critical feedback on the evolving artworks was elicited in a private forum with participants on social media; an innovative use of social media to validate findings. The artworks produced for exhibition aim to communicate the findings of the research with a broader audience, and to incite discussion about our use of technology in contemporary society.

Background
With digital and visual culture infiltrating all aspects of contemporary life, there are opportunities to engage in ABR practice that acknowledge visual literacy within social media and other online domains. These platforms allow access to complex, nuanced and often visual forms in which experience and knowledge is both accessed and conveyed by 'everyone'. The challenge is to adapt creative, innovative and transformative research

methodologies that are reflexive of this culture and inclusive of participants. An emergent, multi-modal ABR approach may have transformative role to play in research (Burnard, Holliday, Jasilek and Nikolova 2018; Chemi and Du 2018) by engaging in a participatory research practice that relates an embodied, visual literacy to academic thinking and action in higher education (Burnard, Holliday, Jasilek and Nikolova 2018). Janinka Greenwood (2012) suggests that the use of arts-based approaches in research has developed from the 'desire of researchers to elicit, process and share understandings and experiences that are not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches' (p.2).

At the recent Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools National Conference held in Perth, Western Australia (27-28 September 2018) distinguished Key Note Speaker Professor Ted Snell (2018) urged conference participants to look for opportunities to engage with 'Academe' to make the visual arts more visible across the university. He noted that collaboration and engagement with others in the university context did not necessarily equate to a dilution of the visual arts as a discrete identity and might in fact bring strength to practice-led and arts-based teaching, learning and research endeavour. In this paper, we respond to Snells' (2018) entreaty 'to make the visual arts more visible' through our trial of a multi-modal arts education research project.

In arts education settings, Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) theorised the need for research practice more closely aligned to the discipline focus. Arts-based education research (ABER) emerged as a distinctive innovation for 'the betterment of educational policy and practice' (Barone and Eisner 1997, p. 96). Barone and Eisner (1997) observed that ABER offered greater insight than traditional modes and 'is in engaged in for a purpose often associated with artistic activity' (p. 95) in an educational context defined by certain aesthetic concerns that 'infuse the inquiry process' (p. 95) with gravitas. ABER anticipated a context where community, work, experience, practice and research related to the arts would routinely intersect to allow a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of arts education contexts. Furthermore, extending to a wider dissemination of the research, the creative outcomes allow for wider translation of the research findings, and may encourage the general public to engage with the research. However, firstly, we will ground this research in the literature as part of a multi-modal approach.

Literature review
Digital Media
The use of digital media is written about in many contexts, from its inclusion as a learning tool to the psychological effects of digital and social media on wellbeing and tertiary student

and preservice learning. Both the benefits and limitations or challenges have been discussed and theorised, and largely support the emerging findings of this study.

Addiction to social media and digital technology and compulsive behaviour is investigated in university students and the wider public by many studies, which often include comprehensive literature reviews beyond the scope of this short paper. Çam and Isbulan (2012); Hawi and Samaha (2017); Ehrenberg, Juckes, White and Walsh (2008) work with university students and preservice education students to investigate self-esteem and life satisfaction and the functionality of their physical social lives with increasing social media use. Hughes and Burke (2018) recruited social media users to inform a study on the impact of overnight smartphone use on wellbeing. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) investigate *phubbing*—phone snubbing and its consequences (both overall and to wellbeing) and have conducted an extensive literature review on smartphone addiction and its consequences in both children and adult students. Phubbing and its role in relationships is also well theorised in both students and the wider public, see Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016); Roberts and David (2016); Wang, Xie, Wang, Wang and Lei (2017); McDaniel, Galovan, Cravens and Drouin (2018); Ugur and Koc (2015).

Resilience
ECT retention/resilience and its issues are discussed by Schaefer, Long and Clandinin (2012); Le Cornu (2013); Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce and Hunter (2014); Kelly, Reushle, Chakrabarty and Kinnane (2014). These issues include relationships; school culture; teacher identity; teachers' work; and policies and practices (Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce and Hunter 2010). Burnout and isolation are often felt by teachers (Fetherston and Lummis 2012; Paris, Boston and Morris 2015); this is exacerbated by the 24/7 access to work through digital technologies. There is also some theorising around using digital/mobile technology for teacher development including Baran (2014) and in a Western Australian context, Herrington, Herrington, Mantei, Olney and Ferry (2009).

There appears to be a gap in the knowledge on social media use in Australia and specifically on ECTs or teachers in general. However, Çam and Isbulan (2012) discuss social network addiction in teacher candidates. Acarli and Sağlam (2015) research pre-service teachers and their intentions for using social media as a learning tool. Guy (2012) discusses the use of social media in more general academic practice with an emphasis on its use as a learning tool.

Social Media

The community function of sites like Facebook promote informal interactions with society, as users can contribute in unplanned ways that are dependent on the posts and interactions of others (Greenhow and Lewin 2016; Neier and Zayer 2015). In this way, social media is an authentic learning context for users–as they learn about others but also about themselves through their interactions.

The ability to connect with anyone, anywhere in the world is both appealing and problematic. There are potential pitfalls when using social media. The esteemed position of making an online post 'go viral' is something that Burbules (2016) discusses. The wide-reaching impact of a post is often exhilarating, but often cannot be undone (Burbules, 2016). Another pitfall is the 'flattening effect': 'reducing different sources and different purposes of writing or expression to a common media format; this can interfere with critically assessing the information received' (p. 563). The flattening effect alters the presentation of information, it can also alter an individual's behaviour, where they may agree with the masses rather than developing their own viewpoints. Can ABR/ABER approaches disrupt this?

Arts-based Research Approaches

Arts-based research (ABR) refers to 'the use of any art form(s) at any point in the research process, whether for generating, interpreting and/or communicating knowledge (Knowles & Cole, 2008)' (Parsons and Boydell 2012, p. 170). ABR may create and represent data and is often part of a multi-modal approach that includes interviews, surveys and journaling to convey affective responses and articulate multiple meanings as well as appealing to a wider audience/viewers (Leavy 2015).

ABR is a multi-modal, contemporary research methodology that is more evocative of visual phenomena than words alone and has relevance in this increasingly visually literate world 'to explore, describe, evoke, provoke, or unsettle.' (Leavy 2017, 191). Arts-based education research (ABR/ABER) is theorised in the higher education sphere by many authors (Burnard, Holliday, Jasilek and Nikolova 2018; Barone and Eisner 1997; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis and Grauer 2006; Knight and Cutcher 2017; Hickman 2007; Rolling 2010; Barone and Eisner 2011). The relationship between art and research embodies how the visual is brought into relation with systems of academic thinking, thought and action (Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013). In an education context, Lisa Kay (2013) conducted a similar multi-method arts-based project involving art education pedagogy and at-risk students using ABR to present research findings through exhibition; however, case studies were not presented alongside this work.

Research Process

A case study from the chief researcher (CR) is used to discuss the method for this research. Overall, both researchers worked similarly by cyclically referring to the multiple participant interviews to identify key phrases and feelings that formed the basis of artworks. The works were critiqued at subsequent interviews or online before being refined and discussed further.

The process for data collection/analysis within the CR's participant group was collaborative and ethnographic as the researcher undertook the DS practice simultaneously with the participants and drew on this experience. However, both researchers, and the participants had lived experience of the DS practice, allowing for a temporal quality to the data collection and creative work generation. The initial interview with participants focused on technology use and teaching experiences, and the effect on their lived experience, while giving the researcher an insight into each participant's art practice.
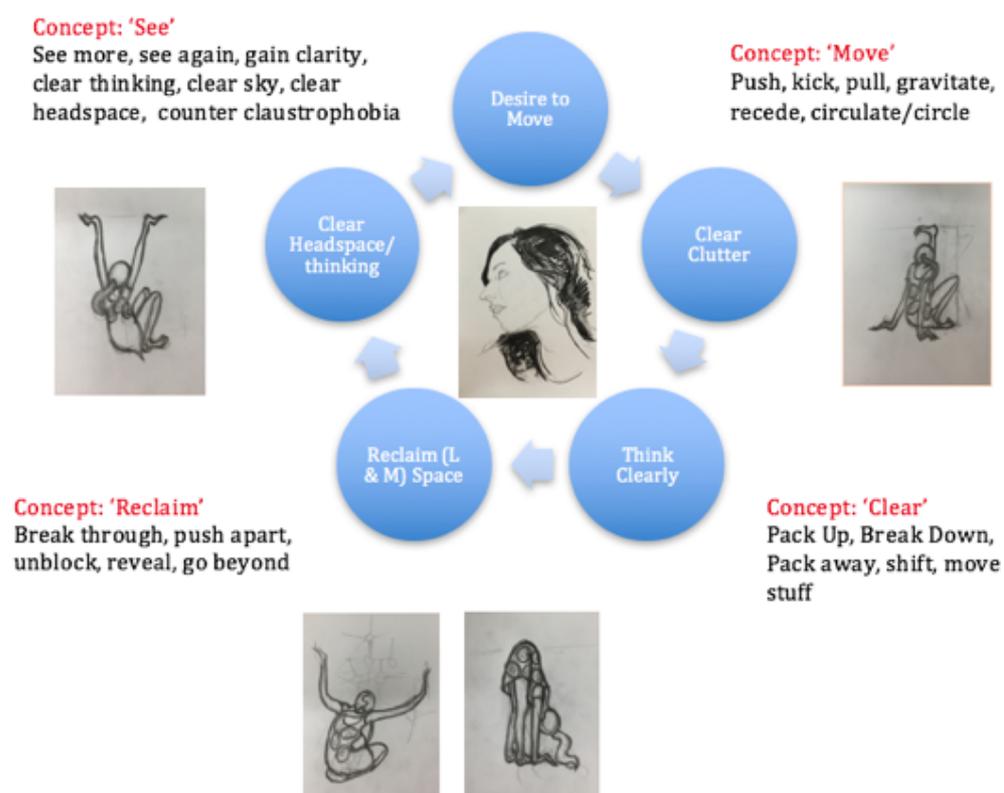

Figure 1: Graphic Representation of key words/concepts extraction from interview material and field notes to be confirmed by participant on social media forum/interview, Lisa Paris, 2018.

The researcher inductively explored participant data through multiple readings (Figure 1). The first creative work based on key words and phrases summarised feelings for the DS experience and was interpreted as a concept sketch (Figure 2 far left) shown to participants to start the next interview. This conversation started with an explanation of the sketch (Figure 2) and the inductive analysis of the last interview. The participant had the opportunity to engage in dialogue, to confirm/amend the visual interpretation and to suggest modifications to the work. The sketch and accompanying dialogue became a triangulation and member checking process, where the research material was reviewed to ensure its credibility (Janesick, 2000). This process continued throughout the DS experience, supplemented by participant source materials (images/written journals) that provided additional information to support interview materials and inspire new works (Figure 3).
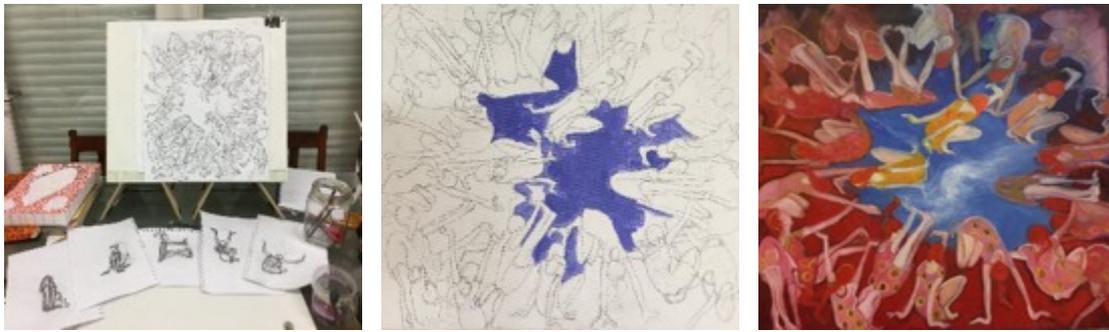
Figure 2: Work in Progress–field notes/sketches, stages for critical feedback, emergent artwork, acrylic and pencil on paper, reflecting feelings of feeling buried under stuff; moving; breaking out/through expressed by participant L, Lisa Paris 2018.

Figure 3: Illustrative 'works in progress' synthesised from Group One interviews using arts based methods - Participant M (far left) experienced anxiety from unresolved past personal issues, noting she could not 'turn my thoughts off'; Participant L (middle) spoke about sifting and sorting (literally and metaphorically), spending time with her cats and driving people around in cars; Participant C (far right) spoke about simply getting outside, looking up at the sky rather than down at her phone. Each work is Oil on Canvas 40 x 40cm.

The researchers followed a similar process, however, reflective/ethnographic journal writing replaced the interviews. Key words/phrases and concept sketches were generated from inductive analysis (Figure 1) and the researchers employed critical friends/colleagues in the member checking process. The researchers posted a reflection of each week's experience to social media for wider community comment which then fed into the creative work. Figure 4 shows Case Study F's in-progress creative works series, constructed on the CR's DS experiences.

Figure 4: Case study for Participant F–reflecting the researcher's interest in landscape and both literal and metaphorical experiences with the DS, Julia Morris, 2018.

The overall composition of the works was discussed with participants; the concept of the circle (a lens or cycle of time) being important in addition to the coloured background (to unify disparate experiences that occur within each individual's DS) for this researcher. The first work for participant F (far left Figure 4) inspired by Yosemite was a reflection on the perceived challenge that the DS practice would bring on a generation Y individual who is immersed in technology, both professionally and personally. Words and phrases such as *hurdle*, *challenge, falling into something I'm unsure of* that documented the participant's experience of feelings about the DS process were used to guide the creation of this work. This was contrasted in later works. The street scene (4th from left Figure 4) is a literal depiction of a DS experience in South Western Australia, and a departure from the natural landscape. This rupture in the subject was symbolic of a 'failed' DS (Figure 5):

Figure 5: Case study F's journal excerpt—a demonstration of how a 'need' for technology on DS time was documented in the data, the impetus for a different composition to the other works, Julia Morris, 2018.

The researchers' challenge in this project was to interpret key content and narrative (Figure 5) faithfully/authentically into creative works (Figure 4). Each researcher had a well-established visual practice but recalibrated their preferred past ways of working to devise a new approach aligned to the 'voice of participants' as the focus of the work.

Figure 6: Example of CR's own practice - *Magnolia*, 2017, charcoal and pencil on paper, 42x29cm.

Magnolia (2017) (Figure 6) is an example of the researcher's personal arts practice with a different aesthetic quality to the research works (Figure 4). Geometry is apparent in both compositions; but the portrayal of subject is quite different. The research works in this study were co-constructed through dialogue with each participant, and resultant shared creative decisions. The documentation of qualitative data emerged from a shared space where the researcher's practice was shaped by the participant's aesthetic. This process was important in co-constructing knowledge with the participants, and in recognising that the creative works were about the translation of knowledge with a wider community (Leavy 2015).

Discussion
The authentic process of ABR/ABER can encompass the consideration of the work of other arts practitioners engaged in exploring similar (or different) questions and at times we 'springboard' from what is 'known' into what is ephemeral/unseen/unknown (Leavy 2017). The creation of exploratory writings, mark making, visual motifs, drawings, compositional sketches, construction plans, colour notes, visual and verbal mapping of the project

elements to ideas (our own and others) (Figure 1 and Figure 2) is generally supported by journal or annotation observations (Figure 4). Sometimes we work on 'series' projects where a number of creative works each convey a part of the 'whole' (Figure 4), whilst at other times we create individual works that function as discrete objects of our (researcher and participant's) voice (Figure 2). We seek to 'communicate/speak' through these artefacts both to others and to ourselves but the process may be intensely private, unless the collaborative process from the 'generation of ideas' to execution is documented/shared in a manner that would allow others to replicate it as a 'way of working'. This private process is unlike what happens in the unruly public space of the social media environment, where visual content is posted to Instagram/Facebook (and others). There is tacit approval and invitation for the viewing public to both comment on/discuss and help shape the shared material on social media; a surveillance phenomenon that can be positive and negative, and intensely interrogated (Burbules 2016; Greenhow and Lewin 2016; Neier and Zayer 2015). The private becomes the public and ownership of content shifts from individual to collective–sometimes with unexpected or unintended consequences (Burbules 2016). The 'voice' of the individual is just one of many and it is not privileged.

Within an education research context, this project documented similar wellbeing issues to the literature. Participants cited addiction to social media (Çam and Isbulan 2012; Hawi and Samaha 2017; Ehrenberg, Juckes, White and Walsh 2008) and burnout and isolation (Fetherston and Lummis 2012; Paris Boston and Morris 2015). The visualisation process provided opportunities to show changes in behaviours related to technology use (Figure 1 and 4) and increased participants' awareness and agency in relation to technology. This awareness is not to say that there should be a blanket 'ban' on technology like in the DS study, as it was also used as a positive tool within this study. Yet with more digital awareness comes agency for the participant, and this is a positive emerging finding from the study.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for the use of a multi-modal arts-based research methodology, grounded in the literature, to enhance the accessibility of research findings and to convey visually, impactfully and accessibly the 'voice' of participants. The DS project with its creative outcomes, showed that adherence to DS practices was difficult. However, a sense of empowerment and agency leading to behaviour changes was gained as a result of the critical focus of the DS and digital media use in general.

The ABR/ABER approach was multi-modal and had creative, research and therapeutic implications and was a successful methodology to engage visually/emotionally to collect, interpret and disseminate the data. In this research, the shifts in our preferred ways of working (including digital technology access) were small and risky, but important in ways of working and innovating within arts education research and as stress intervention tools in ECT resilience. We advocate it is not only appropriate but essential that the language of the arts be used to describe arts education experience/research because words do not always adequately convey experiences like those in the *Digital Sabbath and the Digital Distraction* inquiry. The arts can function as knowledge transmission devices in education research and there is great potential in developing interdisciplinary work that speaks to global issues.

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