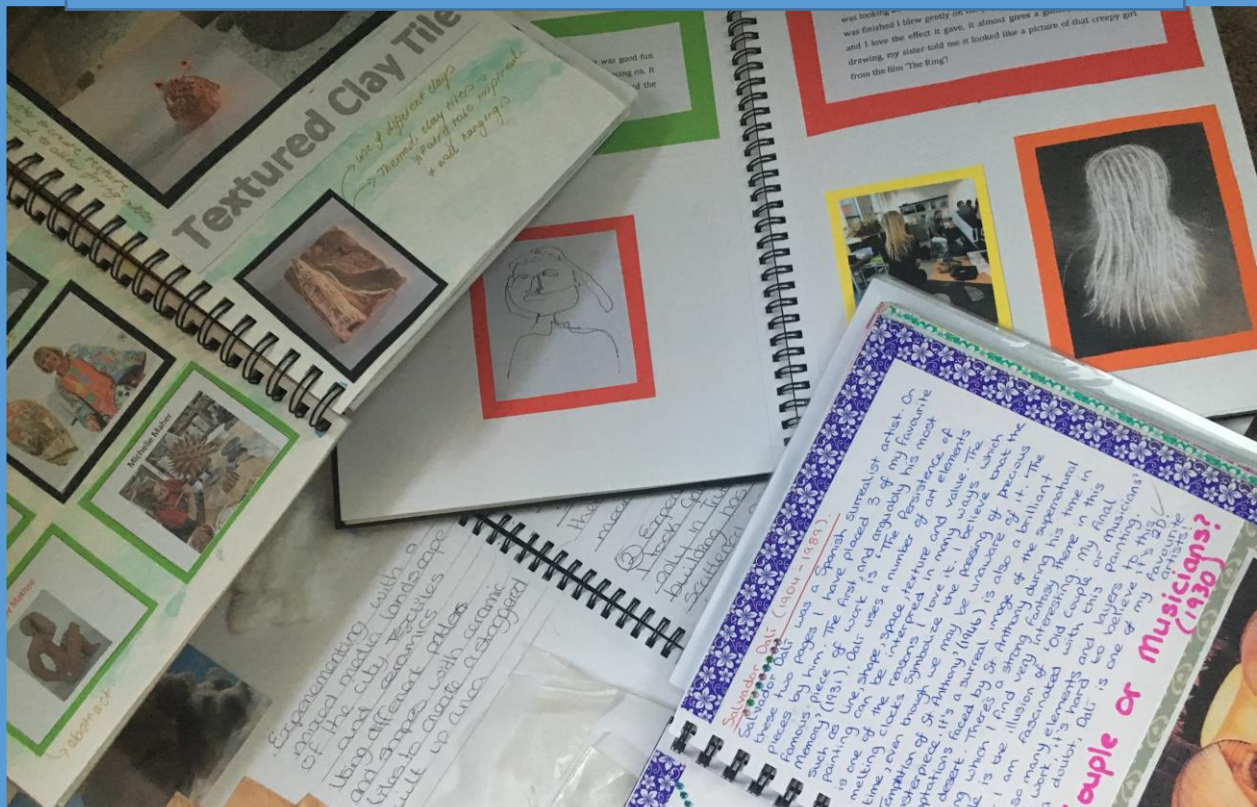


ANDREA CLEARY AND MÁIRE NÍ BHROIN

# APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ART EDUCATION FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS USING ART JOURNALS AS PART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Key words: art, education, journals, teaching, learning, reflection,  
process, creative, assessment.



# **Approaches to Teaching and Learning in Art Education for Primary Teachers, using Art Journals as part of the Learning Process.**

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## **Abstract:**

*It is generally accepted that reflection plays an essential role in learning. This practice paper describes and discusses the use of visual reflective journals by students in art education in DCU over the past three years. Although the art journals serve multiple purposes, in this paper we discuss three themes: Art Journals as a safe, creative, reflective learning resource for the student; journaling as a means of assessing student learning; and journaling as an avenue for honest feedback from the students on their experience of teaching approaches. Different forms of reflection are outlined and the distinctive nature of a physical as opposed to a digital journal is discussed. Our observations regarding the effects of journaling on student learning and our own teaching lead us to believe that this practice may have benefits for learners and practitioners beyond art education.*

## **Introduction:**

Jennifer Moon (1999, p. 14) states that “*The virtues of journal writing and keeping are often extolled by those concerned with creative, professional, personal and spiritual development*”, and Klug (2002, p. 1) maintains that “*A journal is a tool for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror to the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas*”. In this paper we discuss the use of journals in teaching and learning in art education as a safe, creative, reflective, resource which supports formative assessment of both learning and teaching. We believe this may be of relevance across the wider educational community.

Art Education on the B Ed and PMEP programmes caters for just over 1,000 initial teacher education students annually. Foundation and Specialism courses are offered for between two and four years focusing on three main areas: creating art, appreciating art and teaching art. One of the principal aims in art education is to develop student confidence in their own ability to create art through experiential learning. This involves students working through creative processes, relating to the content as learners, but having to address both the process of their learning, and how this learning may impact their teaching of art. They record all of these in their art journal “an artistic process for recording personal insights with constructed images and personal reflections” (Evans-Palmer, 2018).

## Literature

We do not need to look too far to find evidence of the value of journal keeping. Apart from their historical value, the sketchbooks of Leonardo da Vinci with detailed notes on future inventions accompanied by sketches of ground-breaking designs show the development of creative ideas in visual form. The notebooks of Frida Kahlo, Yeats and others illustrate the multifarious thought processes involved in arts creation.



**Figure 1.** Art Journal pages of Leonardo da Vinci and Frieda Kahlo

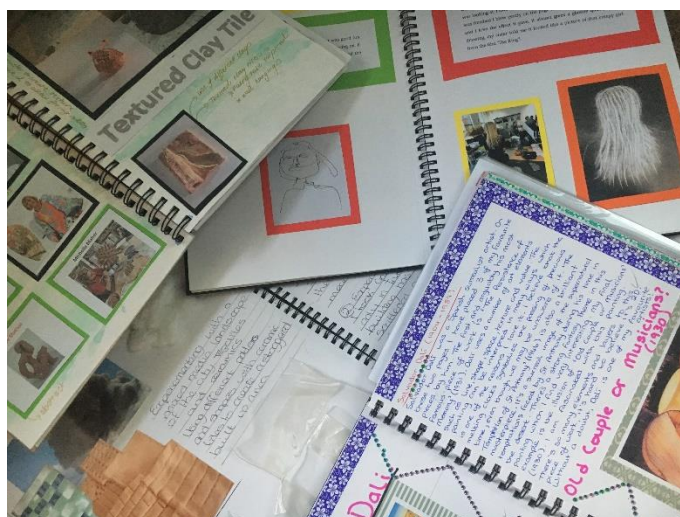
Wilcox (2017) and Evans-Palmer (2018) write about the art journal as a psychologically safe place for the student to explore new art ideas and techniques without the fear of public failure. Generalists often have poor perceptions of their artistic abilities (Daher and Baer, 2014; Duncum, 1999) and this safe learning environment is crucial to their progress.

“Because vulnerability is a part of art and art education, art educators should scaffold the act of embracing personal vulnerability when taking creative risks” (Willcox, 2017, p. 11). The research literature on the merits of writing journals for reflective practice includes work from among others, Moon (2004), Bains (2010), Cisero (2010) and Ottesen (2007). The journals of visual artists have been the subject of authors such as Gregory, (2008), DeVries Sokol (2015) and Stobart (2011). These, however, although beautifully illustrated, lack evidence of the raw messiness and sometimes tortuous journey of the creative learning process. Burnard and Hennessy are among the few authors who address the issue of Reflective Practice in Arts Education “*Personal reflection is central to the development of new awareness, knowledge and value shifts which lead to more effective practice in arts teaching*” (2006. p.3). Their book includes chapters exploring reflective practice as a source and resource for teaching, learning and research in Art and Design, Dance, Drama and Music which were written by arts

educators, artists and researchers. We wanted to explore the student experience of reflective and creative practice in the visual arts through the use of art journals.

### **How are the journals created?**

The students engage with physical notebooks, using handwriting and drawing and the use of printed images, and ‘other’ tactile materials. There is a sensory aspect to this which differs from the eportfolio experience which will be discussed later. Each student is required to document their work in progress, through the use of preparatory drawings, experimentation with media, photographs, and text. Images of the learning environment including art materials and workspace are also an important feature of the documentation.



**Figure 2.** *Student journals*

The development of the use of Reflective practice relating to both creating and teaching art is an integral part of student engagement in the visual arts. They are encouraged to reflect on the experience from their personal point of view, for example: their growing understanding and appreciation of the creative process; the links between creative thought and action; the development of skills and technique; their feelings about engaging in a group project; the challenges of the workshop; and the adaptation of ideas for teaching in the primary classroom. We ask our students to observe and acknowledge the originality and creativity in each other and this extends to our appreciation as educators of the different approaches shown by students to reflective practice as recorded in their journals. Students are often challenged by these requirements, an issue we return to later.



## **Context**

Art notebooks had been used in art courses prior to this but not in a systematic way. Students who study the Major and Minor Specialism in Visual Arts have the benefit of generous contact hours and smaller group numbers. Recent challenges, however, saw a decrease in contact time for the Foundation Art Courses and paradoxically an increase in group sizes. This resulted in much discussion around the most effective use of our time with the students. In a workshop environment which used to lend itself naturally to dialogic formative self and peer assessment during practical art-making, the combination of larger student numbers and less time have opened up the need for us to ‘know’ and explore in another way the perceptions of our students, and how they are translating and assimilating course material. We hoped the art journal would fulfil this purpose as well as being a safe, creative learning resource for the students.

The four members of the Art team are cognisant of the experiences of students in school settings, and we strive to enable our students to respect the rights of the child to be creative, engaged owners of their art. The reflective art journals allow the students scope to visualise how they might engage children in a similar activity to the one they themselves have experienced in college workshops. Some students insert photographs of art completed by children which has been successfully adapted for a particular age group.

## **Multidimensional nature of reflection**

According to Hennessy (2006) reflection is multidimensional and involves using psychological, philosophical and educational lenses. We would argue in our case that reflection using tactile art journals also involves a sensory lens. Hennessy outlines the main characteristics and forms of reflection as:

- Reflective Thinking (Dewey, 1933) *Distinction between routine thinking and reflective thinking, evaluative*
- Critical Reflection as a form of Judgement (Schön, 1983, 1987; Gouge and Yates, 2002)
- Reflection as Self Knowledge (Jonassen et al, 1999)
- Reflection as a Form of Conversation (Falk et al, 2004)
- Reflection as an Agent of Change (Stenhouse, 1975)

- Reflective Processes as ongoing
- Reflection as Professional Practice (*the manner in which we engage with handle and reflect on the challenges associated with our professional practice: art making, arts curriculum and pedagogies*)

And we would add

- Reflection as a vehicle for creativity (*something we noticed during the teaching and learning process in visual arts and which we discuss later*)

At the beginning of this paper we mentioned that we would discuss the use of journals in teaching and learning in art education as a safe, creative, reflective resource which supports formative assessment of both learning and teaching. Having examined the journals over the past three years, let us look first at what we noted in relation to student learning. We will then discuss something which we did not expect: what we learned as educators.

### **Art Journals and the Student**

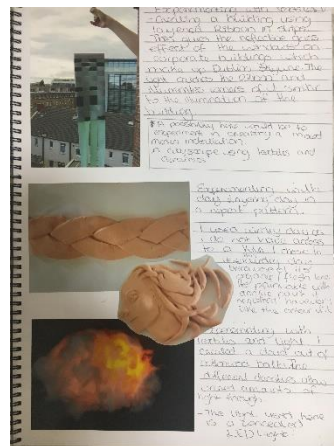
In general students were positive about the value of journaling in creating art and in learning to teach, a finding supported by Bains et al (2006).

#### *Journals as safe*

Students felt free to experiment without the fear of public failure. In the Art Specialism, lecturer and student viewed the art journal together taking time to notice detail and to discuss technique, content and future possibilities. This helped create an environment where it was safe to take creative risks “*I believe in myself more because of the encouragement (I received) when showing my ideas*” (Student reflection 2017).

#### *Journals promote creative thinking and experimentation*

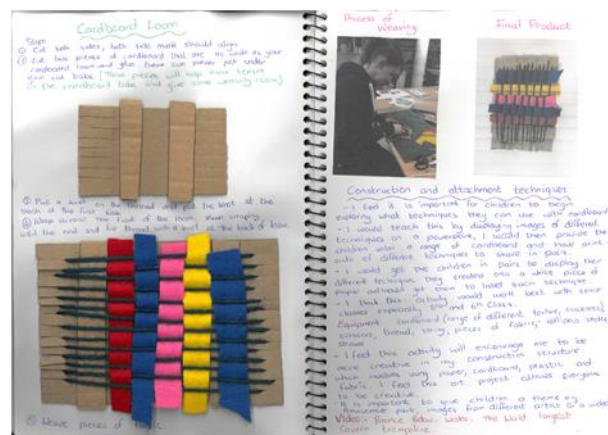
We believe that art journals can provide a creative learning resource for the student. The tactile nature of drawing and writing in the art journal seemed to stimulate the creative process in art making as exemplified by the following quotes from students “*I don’t like to throw any of my preparatory (work) out especially when I am learning to do something different or experimenting*” “*I tried all these different mediums, a lot of my prep work is done here...I make the notes*” “*I make my mistakes here but they’re not really mistakes. I feel free to try (experimenting)*” (Students’ Reflections, 2017). Lecturers note that not all students attain this level of creative freedom with their journals.



**Figure 3** Page from student art journal illustrating the creative process

Figure 3 shows a page from a student’s journal in which she is working through the creative process. Variations on the word “experiment” appear four times and relate to her exploration of fabric and fibre and clay as possible media for creating art inspired by Dublin City.

Referring to colourful satin ribbon, she writes *“This gives the reflective glass effect of the windows on corporate buildings which make up Dublin’s skyline”* (Student reflection 2016).



**Figure 4** Page from student art journal showing creative media exploration

### *Journals as reflective*

Some of the most outstanding pieces of feedback concern the tone of the reflections. Students reveal the relief of being able to enjoy Art, as in some cases they previously felt unable or not “good enough” to create art. Art Journals often reveal the enjoyment of learning something

completely new, and learning something new about themselves, enjoying the process of engagement as being relaxing and completely different to the other subject areas. One student recorded *“It was a new experience for me not to have a plan/ blueprint and just dive in with (creating) the structure, but I was so pleased with the finished piece and enjoyed the freeing process”* (Student Reflection, 2016).

Students express how they feel about the exercise, more freely in the written form of the Art Journal, than you might hear expressed in class. Perhaps that is also rooted in the pressures of time within a class. One student recounts how she *“lost all track of time being intent on maintaining symmetry and rhythm”, “being absorbed in creative work for no other reason than creating a symmetrical image was so relaxing”* (Student Reflection, 2016). The word “relaxing” when used in conjunction with art-making can seem contradictory and misleading about the effort involved in the creative process. However total absorption in the art process can lead to a state of mindfulness which lowers stress, increases feel-good endorphins and leads to a healthier mind-set (Fogo, 2017).

#### *Journals highlight the importance of process and collaboration*

The connections students make in the journals between the process of making with others and engaging with materials without focusing too much on the end product illustrates a seminal part of our pedagogy. The nature of reflection in relation to the use of collaborative practice, certain materials and contexts for example, creating environmental art outdoors can unearth really rich connections across curriculum, linking with, SPHE, geography, science and maths.

Indications from one module which specifically focused on the process of art making and the possibilities for making connections across curriculum through art, emphasises the potential the reflective practice has on harnessing these thoughts as a resource for future planning. In fact one student used her art journal as part of the data for her final year action research project (ARP) which explores what meaningful outdoor art education looks like and how she could use the outdoors for teaching construction in art education with fifth class in an Irish primary school.

The journals reveal that students generally value collaborative group art projects *“at first, I felt nervous about contributing to a group art-piece because I didn’t consider myself good at*



*art but when I saw how everyone's drawing added to the overall artwork I began to enjoy it."* and *"I felt I learned from the others in my group"*.

The strength of collaborative learning features strongly when interacting in groups, through peer evaluation of notebooks and through observation and reflection on the work of individuals within the class setting. This is often mentioned in the art journals and the practice of photographing the whole group's work as an additional helpful resource has become standard practice. This reinforces the art journal as a valued resource for future teaching and learning.

#### *Assessment and Feedback, Competence and Confidence*

Student appreciation of praise or feedback given in class, which we do on a continuous basis as part of workshops is often recorded in the journals as a key learning experience, and emphasises to the educator the importance of the quality of the feedback, modelling explicitly the connection between the learning objectives and the development and assessment of the workshop. Art lends itself to this form of dialogic formative assessment (Eisner, 2002; Hickman, 2007, Ní Bhroin, 2015).

Students are asked to comment on how they engaged with art activities, challenges they encountered and how they might adapt and incorporate these activities into their teaching. These reflections provide an avenue for self-assessment not only of their own art-making but also of their confidence and competence to teach art. However, the quality of both art practice and ideas for teaching art varies quite a lot, something which we as educators noticed both during art lecture/ workshops and when assessing the art journals.

#### **Art Journals and the Educator**

We looked at the art journals as a means of assessing student learning and creative achievement but we ended up with two unexpected benefits which we discuss at the end of this section.

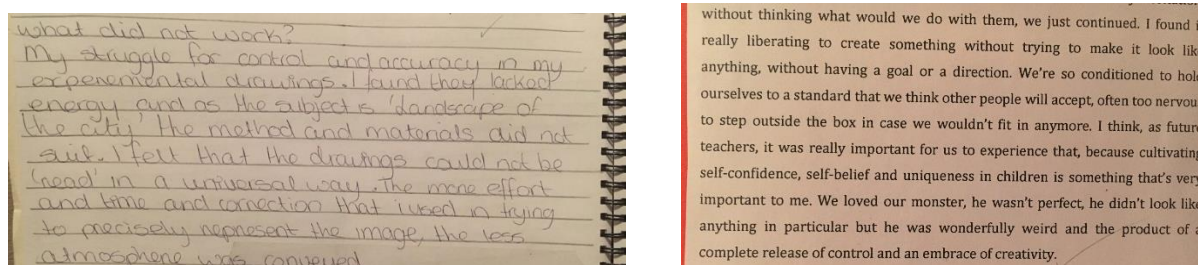
#### *Assessment of student learning*

We found that the art journal provided a tangible comprehensive means for assessing student learning, a view supported by among others Abrams, 2018; Bain, 2006 and Ryan, 2013. Although it is also vital to see and assess the original art created by each student, the journal

provides an insight into the deeper levels of learning associated with the process and future application of what they have experienced. We mentioned differences in the quality or standard which results in the traditional bell curve but *“like democracy, grading on a curve may be the worst possible system except for all the alternatives”* (Volkh, 2015). This difference becomes apparent in the journals and provides a reliable and fair means of assessment.

#### *Assessment of teaching/ Feedback from students*

An unexpected bonus and one of the prompts for sharing this practice with our wider academic community, is our appreciation of the richness of feedback we receive on our teaching approaches, through student reflective practice and creation of their Art Journals. Previously we relied on personal reflections on our own teaching, our observation of student engagement and the artefacts created through this engagement. Now we have a valued resource in the feedback given to us in the Art Journal which again influences future practice. This feedback tends to be refreshingly honest, perhaps because of the emphasis we place on students reflecting on the challenges they encounter in the art lecture/ workshops.



**Figure 5** *Art Journal images of feedback to lecturer*

#### *Sharing of ideas /Collaborative practice among staff*

A second unexpected bonus is the sharing and discussing of student journals which is a worthwhile learning experience for all of us. Each team member designs their course within the framework required by the DES and the NCCA, and thus each lecturer has a different set of references and art samples. The variation results in rich exchanges and sharing of particular interventions that are successful and perhaps not so successful.

## Issues and Challenges

### *Understandable desire for perfection/ Scaffolded Outline*

Our students have an understandable desire to create the perfect journal as a finished work of art. They are not alone in this as exemplified by *An Illustrated Life: Drawing Inspiration from the Private Sketchbooks of Artists* (Gregory, D. 2008), a collection of sketchbook pages submitted by professional artists and criticised by some for being too perfect.

There is an inherent conflict between creating something for assessment and working through the messiness of creative thought which is what an art journal is all about. This contradiction between the students' perception of what is valued and the true nature of a working journal may be offset by showing samples of working journals rather than perfect products when introducing the art journal to students in the future. Consideration may be given to allocating certain pages for rough work, or process for example brainstorming or mind-mapping.

The students requested an outline of journal requirements which indicated their uncertainty about how to approach creating an art journal. We had reservations about prescribing what went into the journal but decided to give an outline as a scaffold only and to encourage them to personalise their journal to reflect their own learning journey artistically and educationally. Some but not all of the students seem to be successful in doing this but there is a long way to go. Students like to be given an outline but we want to encourage and provoke individual contributions and seek evidence of independent thinking.

Students are provided with the assessment criteria but we wish to avoid teaching to the test. The challenge is to have learning outcomes which are open enough to allow for creative thought and expression, yet specific enough to ensure acquisition of the necessary skills and techniques in order to create and teach art.

### *Varying levels of engagement*

Another challenge we face is a lacklustre level of engagement with the journaling process shown by a very small number of students. This occurs at all ends of the artistic ability spectrum. Occasionally an artistically gifted student presents an art journal which does not reflect their true ability. Other less artistic students who may have different priorities present hastily compiled offerings. Students can be strategic regarding credit ratings.

On a positive note, the majority of students, gifted or otherwise take pride in creating their art journals. We have seen some less artistically gifted students who create a beautifully presented journal which is truly reflective about both creating and teaching art. We believe that the art journal creates a fair assessment component.

#### *Rising popularity of eportfolios/ eLearning/ Tangible nature of visual arts*

Another challenge is justifying the use of a manual journal in our increasingly digital age. As a team we have varying levels of engagement with digital media to create art within our modules. Digital portfolios have become a feature of the B Ed programme and students digitally document the art process which is a useful tool in various teaching and learning contexts. However there is unanimous agreement in the art team on the value of a physical hard copy of the journal as opposed to a purely digital portfolio. We believe that the handwritten and hand drawn and the combinations of printed image with arrows linking images to reflections or recording of process all help to deepen the level of learning taking place (Evans-Palmer, 2018; Mangen and Velay, 2011; Wilcox, 2017).

The tactile nature of the art journal with for example scraps of fabric and other textured materials as well as small coloured experimental drawings or paintings provides a unique, sensory forum for experimentation. Sketches, drawn and redrawn in various media help with the creative process. This is not possible in an eportfolio. It may be compared to the difference between looking at a digital image of the Statue of Liberty and looking at the original.

#### *Our own Reflective Art Journals*

As artists we are familiar with keeping art journals. However, although we reflect on our teaching individually and collectively we don't usually keep written reflective journals. As part of a previous research project, one educator began recording the process of keeping a Visual Diary, as part of a group field trip. The experience proved valuable during and after the field trip. Reflections captured during the project were handwritten highlighting the instinctive need for the educator to write as a means of processing thought. These handwritten notes were photographed and the digital images proved to be an efficient way of sharing purposes on collaborative projects. However it became difficult subsequently to dedicate time to further written reflection which brings to the fore the issue of time and the expectations we have of students.

## Conclusions: Looking to the Future

Ottesen (2007) writes of reflection in education as leading to teachers as self-monitoring, teachers as experimenters, teachers as researchers, teachers as inquirers, teachers as activists. We would like to add *teachers as creators* to that list and we hope that the use of art journals in art education will help our future teachers to be the best they can be as art educators. We believe the journaling process helps students internalise basic art concepts, develop a unique artistic identity and provoke an experimental and enquiry and process based approach to art-making. All of these will hopefully impact positively on their teaching.

We have seen how the practice of students creating art journals provides a safe, creative, reflective learning resource and enhances teaching and assessment. We have discussed how the tactile nature of hand-writing, drawing, experimenting with media and establishing visual connections helps students reflect on the learning process. We have shown examples of students' beliefs that working in the art journal aids creativity in art making. Finally, we have mentioned how students record art activities and adapt them for future teaching. We believe this practice paper paves the way for future research into the topic of journaling in art education.

“Now I know I’m no Monet and I don’t expect any masterpieces but I’m determined to embrace this, to let myself enjoy this, to do all the things I didn’t get to do when I was little and to make sure that the children who come into my classroom will have the space to create, to play and to express themselves” (Student Reflection, 2017)

With reflections like this the future for art education in primary schools looks bright. The journaling exercise gives our students what Evans-Palmer (2018, p. 24) describes as “a tangible artefact that visually demonstrates artistic identity, having developed knowledge and skills in the process”

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