

Creating belonging: arts-based pedagogical strategies for first year orientation at FADA

By Prof Alison Kearney, February 2025



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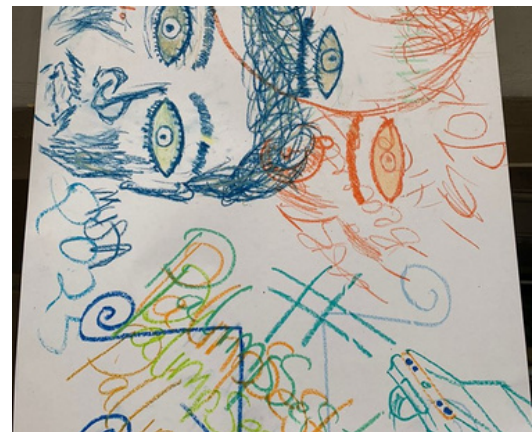


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University can be daunting for first year students, many of whom are “the first in their families” to come to university; come from impoverished environments where all the resources are spent on getting the registration fees, and not necessarily equipping students with resources and social capital to thrive or even be at university. The former big fish in a small pond, are back to being newbies in a bigger, fast paced sea. The classes are bigger, somewhat anonymous, and students are expected to be independent and self-sufficient. Many first years have travelled from rural areas to the universities in the urban areas, creating even more anxiety, feelings of isolation and social pressures, that are now part of the first-year experience. To alleviate some of these stressors, and to develop a sense of belonging and community amongst in-coming first year students at FADA, Prof Alison Kearney developed and facilitated a drawing workshop as part of the orientation activities for all incoming first years.

The workshop was designed so that first years from across the faculty would mingle across disciplines while completing a series of short, increasingly absurd drawing activities. The arrangement of materials created a ‘safe space’ where participants could meet and bond with each other and connect through overcoming a relevant challenge together. The absurdity of the tasks helped create a sense of fun, alleviate pressure, and ensured that no student had an advantage over others. In fact, the tasks were almost impossible to do well, so all students had to overcome their embarrassment of failing to draw well in front of others, who were in the same boat.

Drawing was chosen for several reasons: it is foundational for all areas of study in the faculty of art, design and architecture; it is easy to do with large groups of students, requiring minimal materials; and it is a subject that causes anxiety amongst students of all levels who are often embarrassed to show their drawings to their peers. Participants were asked to sit opposite each other along long sheets of paper. They were given drawing materials and then guided through 3-minute drawing tasks. Students worked together on the same surface, creating a series of 10m long palimpsests of images and text during the 2-hour session. The resulting long drawings were hung in the faculty buildings ‘central atrium, as a symbolic welcoming gesture. By hanging the completed drawings in the atrium, the first-year students had a presence in the space and were thereby included in the life of the faculty. This was also a means to introduce the first years to the other students, providing opportunities for engaging in different ways, including in social media.

Prof Kearney is currently researching the ways in which arts-based, and playful pedagogies exemplified by this orientation workshop facilitate a sense of belonging amongst first year students. Preliminary data analyses shows that students felt connectedness to a community, and maintained friendships formed during the orientation workshop throughout their first year of study. Amongst the key findings are that ‘leaning’ into the difficulties, by asking students to create something challenging together, and forcing them to interact outside of the uncomfortable comfort zones, helped them bond, and develop a sense of belonging. This newfound sense of belonging was cemented by sharing their work with the rest of the faculty through placing it in a prominent space in the faculty building for the first few weeks of term.

For more on this project, and other transformative teaching taking place at FADA visit: www.tripproject.co.za
For more on Prof Alison Kearney’s practice visit www.alisonkearney.co.za