

**Engaging with art and learning democracy: A
study of democratic subjectivity, aesthetic
experience and arts practice amongst young
people**

**Submitted by Jane Louise McDonnell to the University of
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Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of art in the relationship between democracy and education, challenging the apolitical perspective that has often resulted from the application of instrumentalist approaches in the field. Rather than viewing arts practices as a neutral means of teaching democracy, I have built on Biesta and Lawy's concept of 'citizenship-as-practice' (2006) to investigate how the arts are implicated in the ways young people learn democracy across a variety of contexts. Specifically, the objectives for my empirical research were to add to existing knowledge about young people's democratic learning in arts contexts, and to explore the significance of young people's more general engagement with art and culture for their democratic learning. The terms of the study were conceptualised via a theorisation of the relationships amongst democracy, education and art based on the work of Mouffe (2005; 2007), Rancière (1999; 2004; 2006; 2007) and Biesta (2006; 2010). The research was conducted as an interpretative study with two sets of young people recently engaged in the arts, using an adapted version of Charmaz' (2006) approach to grounded theory. The findings of the research indicate that the young people's engagement with art contributed to their experiences of being able to act democratically or not in a number of contexts, and that it sometimes enabled them to make the imaginative leap necessary in order to learn from the experience of becoming democratically subject. The research suggests that the most fruitful way in which democratic education can 'make use' of the arts is not by teaching democratic citizenship, but rather by supporting young people as they reflect on and respond to their experiences in arts and other contexts, and by taking seriously the democratic potential of all aspects of their arts engagement.

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Table 1: Summary of research

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