

## UWC ART & IDENTITY PROJECT, 2025

Fran Saunders

*Imagination is more important than knowledge - Einstein*

The 10-week Art & Identity extracurricular workshops I offered on Saturdays on campus over the second semester, 2025, were a response to the vision of your rector, Professor Robert Balfour – himself an artist and poet and aware of the cognitive and personal benefits of arts-based education.

*The future belongs to those who can think creatively, recognise patterns, and tell compelling stories – all capacities strengthened through art*

Daniel Pink – Author of ‘A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future’

A group of 16 participants were drawn from 113 responses to an open advertisement offering free participation in this initiative. The selection was made on a first-come-first-serve basis, and the workshops were to be held on Saturday mornings. The students represented diverse disciplines: Law, Linguistics, Natural Sciences, Economics and Management Sciences, Arts and Humanities and Linguistics. Very few of these students had been exposed to art education; some had never before picked up a brush to paint.

The intention was to use the time available to us (35 hours over 10 weeks) to inculcate new ways of thinking about art and to use the medium of artmaking to explore personal identity.

I introduced the following themes: *Why do we make art? Who am I? Self-portrait as story, Nature reflection, Responses in the moment, Patterns, Ordinary things, Mother tongue, Places of belonging* and *Alter ego*. I presented slides of work by well-known and lesser-known artists in each category to show a range styles, materials and techniques. We discussed the power of art as an additional language to express things that cannot be said in words and how the use of symbols plays into this. I found the group to be receptive, curious and attentive albeit somewhat inhibited at first, but by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> weeks the discussions increased in depth and the group offered honest and rich responses. I was amazed at how quickly they became immersed in the activities. We often exceeded the allocated time slots and the show-and-tell feedback at the end of the sessions became very rewarding.

Professor Matete Madiba oversaw the roll-out of the workshops in a most supportive way, and I was ably assisted by Anele Nikani, postgraduate person with great organisational skills, and his technical team Dipuo Thamaga and Solethu Ngapayi – both of whom participated in the art activities, to my delight.

It would not be fair to single out students in the course. Suffice it to say that I was privileged to gain insights into the lives of students who felt safe in the space and free to talk about themselves. We translated many of these discussions into art. What they achieved in terms of self-taught skills and exploration into symbolic expression was significant. Many of the paintings were conceptually rich; I felt these were simply waiting for a platform to come to life. What was once again more than obvious, is the value of this form of expression; the enthusiasm with which it was received and the immersive participation all reinforced what we know: humans are naturally creative. We have creativity encoded in our DNA. We love to make art and when we do, we feel alive.

Towards the end, I handed out a list and asked the students to consider what new insights they had gained. They ticked all of the boxes below:

- think divergently not convergently
- value mistakes
- reframe problems
- decipher complexity
- take conceptual risks
- work within constraints
- respond from a place of authenticity
- deconstruct problems and reconstruct solutions

We parted on a high but sad note. My Saturdays had become enriched by a group of familiar faces who showed me what the UWC way means. I will remember all of you.