

THE ARTS IN THE CURRICULUM:  
AN AREA OF LEARNING OR POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY?

Joan Livermore

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Faculty of Education  
University of Canberra  
PO Box 1  
Belconnen ACT 2616  
Phone: (06) 201 2248  
Fax: (06) 201 5065

THE ARTS IN THE CURRICULUM: AN AREA OF LEARNING OR POLITICAL  
EXPEDIENCY?

The rationalisation of school curriculum in Australia into eight areas has had interesting repercussions in the arts. For the first time, the five distinct forms of artistic expression, namely dance, drama, media music and visual art have been brought together as 'The Arts' to operate as a discrete area of learning. The rather ambiguous status of design has been 'resolved' by coupling it with visual art. The formal consultative draft of the National Arts Curriculum Statement has now been released for public discussion, with development of the Profiles about to begin.

The effects of this grouping of the art forms into one area are many and varied. Arts educators have recognised the need to work together

1. politically - negotiating with national government, state ministries, and within school communities, and
2. educationally - seeking to define the essence of the arts as an area of learning, while maintaining the integrity of each form of artistic expression.

I will first of all deal briefly with item number one, as it provides a useful background to the current development of a national arts curriculum. Item number two poses some interesting problems, and these will be addressed in more detail.

## 1. POLITICAL ADVOCACY

### National Perspective

As recently as three years ago, the arts were not officially recognised in Australia as one of the key areas of learning. Arts educators at the time observed the introduction of national mapping projects in some subject areas and became increasingly concerned that arts subjects would forever be consigned to the fringe of education. The national professional associations in each of the art forms came together in the hope that their combined efforts would result in the inclusion of the arts in the National Collaborative Curriculum Project. The body that came into being, the National Affiliation of Arts Educators (NAAE) has contributed to the achievement of that aim, and in the process, has established itself as the peak national reference group for all matters that are relevant to arts education in Australia to-day. Contrary to general perceptions of the way artists behave, this has been a remarkably homogeneous and stable group, held together by common goals, and the realisation that its strength and credibility rely on its cooperative and collaborative mode of operation.

### State and Territory Education Departments

Within the state and territory ministries, the picture of arts collaboration is more patchy. Universal cutbacks in staffing have seen the departure of many specialist consultants in the arts, with the result that in most cases, one person has the responsibility of most of the arts subjects in one district, often for all levels of schooling. This situation has inevitably impacted on the quality of support for teachers, and on the provision of professional development programs. Increasingly, these tasks are falling to the professional associations which, in most cases, function through the voluntary efforts of elected officers. The

growing demands placed upon the associations have reached the point where they must set up full time administrations to carry out the work load.

### Schools

Within schools, comprehensive arts departments are emerging, removing the sense of isolation that used to be a feature of teaching in an arts area. In addition, this organisation has facilitated the operation of collaborative projects undertaken by combined arts departments, often with a multi-arts focus.

However, there is another side to the situation. Depending upon the manner in which a school has introduced the eight learning areas into its program, some arts subjects have found that their time allocation has been reduced to 1/5 or 1/8 of the curriculum. This assumes equity of time for each of the eight areas of the curriculum and equity of time for each of the five arts areas. In such cases, teachers feel that the arts are being marginalised even more than before. This situation has the potential to create friction and competition in departments where teachers are endeavouring to obtain sufficient time and resources to do their job effectively.

## 2. DEFINING THE ARTS CURRICULUM

Despite the unseemly haste imposed by the government agenda to finalise all documents by June 1993, arts educators are battling valiantly with the task of producing Australia's first combined arts curriculum statement of this type. To a certain extent, initial work was done in formulating Curriculum Frameworks documents in each state and territory. However, these Frameworks were made as flexible as possible to allow for a high degree of freedom in implementation in the classroom. The nature of the National Curriculum is far more specific and detailed, requiring clear articulation of the essential elements of learning in each arts area, and it is here where the holistic, subjective, creative, intuitive nature of the arts poses problems of organisation and interpretation. The main task of the National Curriculum writers is to produce a document that satisfies the requirements for clarity, definition, and accountability while retaining the essential characteristics of different arts experiences as encountered

by individual students at all stages of development.

## THE ARTS NATIONAL STATEMENT

An examination of the Arts National Statement consultative draft provides a revealing insight into the current approach to solving these problems of organisation.

### The Strands

The first statement introducing the five arts strands for study presents them as distinct areas of knowledge and experience. If one accepts the arts as one area of the curriculum it would be reasonable to expect that the rationale for grouping the subjects under one heading, must include a notion of some commonality between the various art forms. It is therefore interesting to examine the document and try to discover how this commonality has been defined. Under the heading The Arts as an Area of Learning there are sections describing

- \* Social and Cultural Perspectives
- \* The Arts in Australia
- \* The Arts as Symbol Systems
- \* Ways of Participating in the Arts
- \* The Arts in Schools.

In these sections the writers talk about the arts without ever stating clearly how the subjects were selected for inclusion. In the absence of any criteria it is difficult to understand why dance, drama, media, music, visual art and design were included while literature was left out.

While acknowledging the unity of the curriculum area, the entire document emphasises the differences between the art forms. In fact, its central organising mechanism is to deal with all components of the curriculum in terms of each separate arts strand, an arrangement that produces inevitable repetition. This alone appears to be a contradiction of the intentions of the fundamental curriculum structure.

My belief is that this mode of presentation has political/historical foundations as well as educational ones. The experimentation with 'integrated arts' programs in the '80's were seen to be such a disaster by arts educators that ever since, they have zealously guarded against a repetition. The cross-arts approach often resulted in superficial dabbling that did not promote effective learning. However, the insistence upon the discrete nature of each arts discipline, needs to be balanced by a recognition of the benefits of the collaboration that occur in multi-arts experiences.

## The Components

Another approach that has been explored is to use the common arts processes as the organising mechanism. These appear in the current document as 'components' and are classified under four headings: Transforming, Presenting, Developing an understanding of arts criticism and aesthetics, and Developing an understanding of past and present contexts. Each component is again described in terms of each art form.

Identification of the processes, and the terms used to describe them have been the source of countless hours of discussion. It is virtually impossible to come to agreement on suitable terms across the arts because there are so many different modes of artistic behaviour. For example: Presentation is an important aspect of the performing arts. This is not true to the same extent in visual art. The act of producing an art work can take numerous forms. It can include, creating, designing, improvising, composing, arranging, choreographing, rehearsing, directing. Similarly, the nature of the response can cover the full gamut from passive relaxation and enjoyment to detailed critical analysis. The terms that appear in various documents are always a compromise, and those used in the National Statement are no exception.

## AN ALTERNATE MODEL

In the assumption that the separation of art forms and processes is a less than ideal method of defining the arts as one curriculum area, I contend that there is some merit in investigating an alternate path. There is general agreement among arts educators that active participation in arts experiences is essential for children to acquire a comprehensive understanding of all the aspects of artistic expression. So, rather than beginning with the many different concerns of the educator, in such categories as arts processes, learning processes, social and cultural issues, technology and training for employment (which are the terms used in the National Statement), and then trying to express all of these in terms of each art form, I suggest that standard arts practice should be the starting point from which the education model is derived.

Arts activities are tied to the behaviours that surround the making of and the response to works of art. An examination of the relationship between the nature of the artistic product and the processes surrounding its generation and existence reveals links of 'cause and effect'. In other words, different types of art works require different methods of production and evoke different responses. The student creating a new work in the sound studio, using multi-track recording, is moving through the processes

of composing, playing, editing and presenting in a manner different from his/her counterpart who is composing music through a written score, to be played by live musicians in the school concert. Similarly, the creation, rehearsal and live presentation of a play in class follows quite a different path from filming a play on video.

It is apparent in the examples given above, that the context of each art work is fundamentally different. Issues of context and intent overarch every step of the generative process as well. It is only with a knowledge of the context that appropriate analysis and criticism of the finished work can be made. It therefore follows that arts processes only have relevance in terms of the way they serve the work of art with which they are associated.

Classification of arts products.

It appears that artworks fall into two main categories:

1. Fixed, stable, finite - e.g. visual art  
media art (a technically produced  
representation of visual image and sound, incorporating elements of dance,

drama, music and visual art. Meaning is portrayed through technical construction and manipulation of composition elements.)

2. Ever changing through interpretation, influence of environment, and audience response -

e.g. performance art

For the sake of brevity and to encapsulate a sense of style and rhythm, the two categories could be labelled:

1. Art-E-fact

Visual art

Media art

2. Art E-vent

Performance art:

dance

drama

music

visual art

media art

Each category includes products in either a single art form or in combinations of art forms. The products in each category share basic characteristics.

Media art as an artifact can include film, video, photography, print, computer art and music, audio tape, CD, and pre-recorded radio and TV. Live transmission of an event via radio or TV is performance art, but the

recorded version becomes an artifact.

### 1. Art-E-fact

- \* The audience is removed from the act of creation.
- \* The artwork is often brought into being in the studio.
- \* The artwork is portable, therefore the audience has a greater degree of control over its use and selection of the environment in which it is experienced.

Features of the process of creating an artefact are:

- \* Unlimited time frame for bringing the work into being.
- \* Opportunity to observe effect, reflect, change, achieve the exact result desired.
- \* The script/score/plan is subject to constant revision throughout the working process. It is finally discarded when the product comes into being. It has no further use.
- \* The artistic product leaves the creator in its final form to be accessed later at will by an audience.

### 2. Art E-vent

- \* Each event is a new and different expression of the initial creator's vision.
- \* It exists in a single time frame.
- \* It is not tangible, portable.
- \* The live performer and audience must be present in the

same venue at the same time.

Features of the process of creating an art event are:

- \* There is a dynamic interaction between the initial creator, the interpreting performer and the audience reception, which is all part of the creative act.
- \* The art work must be brought into existence (recreated) every time it is experienced.

- \* A detailed script or score is preserved for re-creating new performances. Nevertheless, it is subject to the performer's interpretation.
- \* Factors of design, structure and sequence must be 'pre-visualised' before the event. Once the performance is in train there is no scope for alteration or adjustment.
- \* The performer's persona has considerable influence on audience response. Showmanship and virtuosic performance skills are a part of the creation.
- \* The character and mood of the audience have an impact on the presentation of the performance. Differences in the delivery of the art work, new shades of meaning and interpretation grow out of the audience/performer interaction at each event.

The differences between the two types of art products are epitomised in the discourse surrounding them. Analysis and criticism of fixed art works can address in detail every facet of its design and form, and aesthetic impact. It can explore subtle shades of meaning because the art work can be re-visited time and again, always in its original form.

The discourse surrounding performance art always deals with a different product. The critique for last night's performance in Sydney is not relevant for next week's performance in Melbourne, except in terms of the structural elements, embodied in the score or script. Critical analysis, or the unfolding of new shades of meaning in performance works is just as likely to be expressed in a new interpretation via performance as it is in written text. Analysis of structure may rely on theoretical schemas expressed in particular styles of notation.

The model proposed above contains two clear strands of learning in which there is internal consistency in the way that the processes relate to an art work. Each of the strands can be enacted within each of the arts areas.

## SUMMARY

Children in classrooms paint pictures, dance and sing, play and act for reasons that are relevant to them. In other words, they participate in artistic endeavour for a purpose, and the processes vary accordingly. A curriculum document must express the holistic nature of children's engagement with the arts. The way in which arts learning has been organised in the National Statement could, in effect, deconstruct and decontextualise the arts processes, rendering them meaningless.

I strongly advocate the 'two-strand' model, taught within each of the discrete arts areas, as a more coherent and consistent mechanism for organising arts learning in one area of curriculum.

Classification of arts products.

1. Fixed, stable, finite:

visual art  
media art

2. Ever changing through interpretation,  
influence of environment, and audience response:

performance art

1. Art-E-fact:

Visual art  
Media art

2. Art E-vent:

Performance art:  
dance  
drama  
music  
visual art

respons to carry out the work load.  
subjective, creative, intuitive, reflective

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time frame for bringing the work

all of which are characteristics of different arts experiences as encountered by individual students at all stages of development.

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