

ESTABLISHING A RESEARCH CULTURE : THE CHALLENGE FOR ARTS EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

ESTABLISHING A RESEARCH CULTURE : THE CHALLENGE FOR ARTS EDUCATORS

With a national arts framework in place and a move in most Australian states towards implementing national curriculum profiles, there is a heightened need for current research which can direct and inform arts education access, good practice, pedagogy and assessment.

A survey of recent AARE conference abstracts indicates a dearth of arts education presentations. This paper will examine some of the reasons for this, and report on a range of efforts to take up this challenge. In establishing a research culture, what are the inhibitory factors, the crucial decisions which need to be made regarding methodology, supervision and documentation, and how will the results be communicated and applied in a practical and creative education environment? Is it the responsibility of the arts education academic to undertake this research, or should teachers in the field be directed towards more formal evaluation and examination of their own practice? Is there a place for new technologies in communicating the outcomes and the recording of arts processes and product? The authors will illustrate these issues with current examples from various arts areas such as dance, music and the visual arts.

Introduction

With a national arts framework in place and a move in most Australian states towards implementing national curriculum profiles, there is a heightened need for current research which can direct and inform arts education access, good practice, pedagogy and assessment. The arts as described as one of the Key Learning Areas comprises dance, drama, media, music and visual arts (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) and thus encompass a broad range of knowledge, skills and experience. There are currently a range of research approaches being applied within this diverse group, but it is the concern of the writers' that there is a paucity of study aimed directly at arts education.

Arts Education research in the context of the AARE

One source examined by the writer's in endeavouring to investigate this focus area of research was the previous AARE Conference proceedings. The listing of AARE abstracts from the 1993 and 1994 conferences on the

World Wide Web enabled there to be an analysis of the number and type of papers presented relating to arts education.

The results of this survey illustrate a dearth of arts education research presented in the past two Conferences. In 1993 there were 318 conference abstracts listed. Of these 7 concerned arts education. These included 4 papers on visual art ("Children's developing beliefs about art as a basis for sequencing content in art education"; "On assessing competency in art"; "An epistemological framework for generating and evaluating concepts in disciplined orientations of Visual arts in education"; "A meta-dilemma in the ethics of qualitative evaluation"), 1 paper on music ("Building self-esteem of preschool children through a specifically designed music program"), and 2 papers on drama

("Exploring the effects of improvisational drama strategies on the oral comprehension skills of children with low socio-economic backgrounds"; "Using popular culture (drama) in the ABC television series "Finders Seekers"). Abstracts related to arts education represented 2.2% of the total in 1993.

In 1994 there were 486 conference abstracts listed. Of these, 8 concerned arts education, There were 2 papers on visual art ("The professional collaborative design process as a model for the teaching of visual design"; "INRC group structures in colour aesthetics") and 6 papers concerning music ("Developing classroom music programs for intellectually homogeneous groupings of students of differential musical ability in selective secondary school settings : implications for teaching practice in music education"; "Changing preservice primary teachers' attitudes to music : implications for music education practice"; "Australian children's playground singing games : implications for music education practice"; "Public school songs and the transaction of adolescent identity : reading the post colonial context"; "Early musical development : a new perspective on music experiences in long-day care settings for children under three"; "Singing the blues : transcending essentialist readings of culture"). Thus abstracts related to arts education in 1994 represented 1.6% of the total in 1994.

Such low percentages may indicate that little research is occurring in the area of arts education, but there may also be various other reasons for this poor showing. Factors such as the position of the arts in schools, the pressures within higher education institutions, the lack of suitable funding and discrepancy over the actual definition of arts based research all appear to have had impact on the production of documented research in the field of arts education.

The position of arts education in schools P - 12 with particular reference to Victoria

In a submission to the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee, Cross Arts Victoria (1995) reported the results of a survey conducted in Victorian primary and secondary schools on the current state of arts education. This report included three sections - arts education in primary schools, arts education in secondary schools and the choices made by secondary students at post compulsory level when studying for their Victorian Certificate of Education.

The results of the survey illustrate the differing positions of arts subjects in the school curriculum. Visual arts and music comprised the majority of time dedicated to the arts in primary schools - 70 - 80% of the time in government and independent schools and 50 - 60% in Catholic schools. Both dance and drama took up about 10% of time each (slightly more in the Catholic schools surveyed). "Quite small amounts of time" were devoted to graphic communication and media, although the authors point out that the broad tendency is for amounts of time in these two areas to increase with the age of the children (1995, p.3).

In the secondary school, a similar pattern was found. Visual arts and music were found to be dominant across government, independent and Catholic schools. They were the subjects most consistently found to be compulsory. The following figures show the percentage of students from the three sectors surveyed taking arts subjects :

Dance : Year 7 - 6.2%; Year 8 - 5.2%; Year 9 - 3.3%; Year 10 - 1.3%

Drama : Year 7 - 55%; Year 8 - 44.8%; Year 9 - 26.7%; Year 10 - 22.2%

Graph Com : Year 7 - 26.1%; Year 8 - 27.6%; Year 9 - 37.8%; Year 10 - 31.5%

Media : Year 7 - 0%; Year 8 - 5.8%; Year 9 - 12.4%; Year 10 - 11.6%

Music : Year 7 - 84.7%; Year 8 - 70%; Year 9 - 27.6%; Year 10 - 12.4%

Visual Arts : Year 7 - 96.5%; Year 8 - 83.8%; Year 9 - 62.8%; Year 10 - 47.4% (1995, p.9)

In Years 11 and 12 within Victoria, all subjects except English are nominally elective, however the capacity of the schools to offer a broad range of subjects varies, and considerations of requirements for tertiary study and concern about academic status of subjects affect student choice. At Year 12 the percentage of students taking arts subjects from the three sectors surveyed were as follows : Dance - 0.3%; Drama - 4.3%; Graphic Communication - 11.8%; Media - 4.4%; Music - 3.6%; and Visual Arts - 16.2% (1995, pp.8-9).

There are historical reasons for the strength of such subjects as music

and the visual arts. Their status and level of resourcing in schools Australia wide have been firmly established for some time. However, even these traditional areas of arts education suffer a significant "drop off" of student enrolments at the post-compulsory level. One reason for the poor showing of dance in all levels of schooling, is its previous association with physical education. The recent inclusion of dance under the arts umbrella (for example in the Victorian Arts Framework which was published in 1988) illustrates its status as a relative newcomer to the arts in schools.

It remains to be seen whether the implementation of the Arts Curriculum and Standards Framework (1995), which is the Victorian response to the Arts National Statement and Profile (1994), will change the relative disadvantage of subjects such as dance. Concern is expressed in the Cross Arts submission (1995) that the grouping of the six arts subjects,

...particularly in times of increasing economic constraint, could tempt curriculum and administrative personnel in schools to view the arts as a single curriculum entity rather than as a collection of related but discrete studies (p.21).

The relatively low participation rates in the arts in schools reflect a number of pressures. The need for good teachers to provide the impetus for further arts education offerings is one issue, as is the problem of an already crowded curriculum at all levels of schooling. Since some see the arts as less than essential in the curriculum, this "frill" status means that the arts are the first subjects to be cut or compromised to accommodate other demands in the timetable. As pointed out by two prominent arts researchers,

National curriculum policy promotes eight key learning areas in an equitable manner but definitions of equity are lacking...On the surface, declaring the arts as one of the eight Key Learning Areas for the compulsory years of education K - 10 may appear to be assigning curriculum equity and value for arts education ...(but) If a school does not actively encourage and value the arts in real terms the timetable and school organisational structure can serve to diminish the role of the arts...time (is) a controlling resource (Kendall and Mauragis in Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts

Reference Committee, 1995, p.87).

These are matters of particular concern, and the links to appropriate arts education research are worth pursuing. The Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Review Committee Report (1995) points out that the squeeze on teacher training courses, particularly the arts in teacher training courses, seems to be the exact opposite of what is required to break the cycle of neglect in schools.

The low status of arts research is a concern, "because research into the nature and outcomes of arts education is necessary to counter the vaguely held belief throughout the education system that the arts is not a 'proper' subject" (1995, p.167).

Higher education factors

It was interesting to note that all types of witnesses in the Senate inquiry into Arts Education (1995) made mention of the urgent need for arts-related research, despite the poor general status of the arts in the university sector.

There are many areas in the arts requiring research. Ongoing research is required into occupational health and safety in the practice of the arts; into child development and how children learn in the arts; into curriculum design; into methods of evaluation, assessment and reporting; into classroom practice; and into arts practice in contemporary society (NAAE, 1995, p.285)

Many arts education offerings at a higher education level have previously been facilitated by colleges of advanced education. There have been major reforms within the higher education sector generally in the last decade and the advent of amalgamations to form what was termed the Unified National System (1987 - 88) have had the most impact on course provision and funding mechanisms. "The burden of the evidence given to the [Senate Committee Inquiry into Arts Education] was that these reforms have affected arts teaching detrimentally" (Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee, 1995, p. 142)

The Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee Report on Arts Education noted that,

better teacher training is crucial in breaking out of the cycle of neglect in arts education. If the ramifications of the Unified National System are causing problems in teacher training, this is a matter of great concern (1995, p.146).

The shift from pedagogy and practice to scholarship and research has been felt within all disciplines of tertiary arts education, and there has had to be constant adjustment of courses to conform to the restriction of contact hours in many skill-based areas. Academic staff are under constant pressure to produce quality teaching whilst publishing research of international significance. Some have also felt the added stress to improve their academic qualifications.

Whilst undertaking further study, tertiary arts educators themselves have had to embrace a range of additional research skills, which go

beyond their current practice in the creative pursuit of specific arts outcomes. Many lecturers are practicing artists who have seen their 'art' as research, but who have had little training in some formal academic research methods. Reskilling in this area has become a

professional development priority for many universities. However, there are some instances where there has been difficulty with the definition of research, and what exactly constitutes a 'publication' of new knowledge in the field.

Finding funding specifically for arts education research projects has been a constant dilemma since much of the assessment decisions for monies from bodies such as the Australian Research Council, are seen as conforming to a science-based model. It is from within this range of inhibitory factors that a profile of disadvantage for arts education emerges at the higher education level.

It is the writers' perception that it is these factors together which have had a detrimental effect on the time, skills and funding which tertiary arts educators have had to direct towards arts education research.

Further inhibitory factors.

A number of inhibitory factors affecting arts education research were identified in the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee Report (1995). Although a particular need was seen for research about arts education, its characteristics and outcomes, at all levels of schooling, factors were identified that made such research difficult. It was emphasised in the Report that there was "an urgent need" for more arts related research. The importance of this was "... because it may dispel some of the prejudice that the arts suffer in school as a result of the difficulty of defining and measuring the educational outcomes of 'creative' activities" (1995, pp.160-161).

The lack of research was also cited as a factor affecting declining arts content in teacher training courses which was seen as exacerbating the problem of neglect in schools.

A teacher from the Education Department of Western Australia makes a forceful comment in this regard when she states,

If I were to make one recommendation to the Senators it would be that we must come up with concerted strategies to break the vicious circle whereby students from deprived arts backgrounds become inadequately trained teachers who are not equipped to teach arts in schools, thereby perpetuating the cycle! Everyone deserves at least one good aesthetic experience in a lifetime! (Whitehead in NAAE, 1995, App 4)

The strong message that arts related research is needed was countered by the recognition that there were factors inhibiting such research. These were interrelated and included funding, the definition of 'research', and the status of education and arts faculties in the university sector.

The issue of funding was cited in many submissions to the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee as a factor inhibiting research in arts education. The difficulty of attracting private research money was raised as well as the perception that "... arts research falls between the two stools of the Australian Research Council and the Australia Council..." (1995, p.158).

The difficulty of attracting funding is linked to the additional problem of the sites where arts education research is likely to occur, that is the universities. Research on arts education needs to be placed

in the context of research concerning education generally. Since most education research takes place in universities, the apparently low status of Education faculties (as well as Arts faculties) in university politics is of concern.

Most educational research in Australia is conducted within higher education institutions and financed from general operating grants. In that setting the resources for research are heavily dependent upon the number and composition of enrolments in education, and the operating grants provided to education faculties. In part, the latter is dependent on the relative academic standing of education compared to other disciplines. During the 1990's, education is likely to be an area of relatively slow enrolment growth in higher education (National Institute of Labour Studies, Study of the Labour Market for Academics, Canberra 1990), so there is little prospect of substantially increased operating grants to education faculties from this source. (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Educational Research in Australia - Report of the Review Panel, 1992, p98)

Ability to attract funding is also related to the definition of 'research'. The Australian Research Council (1993) defines research thus -

- *It contributes to our understanding and knowledge through conceptual advances and discoveries; and/or
- *It leads to practical outcomes of importance to the research endeavour itself and to applications of social and economic value...

In calculating the 'research quantum' ... the Commonwealth uses the OECD definition of research -

Research and experimental development comprises creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.
(DEET 1994, p11)

In considering these definitions, the Senate Report acknowledges that arts research may not fit happily within them. Further, questions such as the following are asked.

To what extent are granting decisions affected if panels imbued with scientific methodology do not sufficiently recognise that creative works may be the vehicle for investigating research questions? To what extent are arts affected by the problems of deciding the relative merits of completely different types of research activity in different disciplines? If some arts activities don't fit the current definition of research, should the definition be expanded or should the arts go their own way? Is there a risk that trying to make arts research fit the definition will subvert its distinctive character? (Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee, 1995, p.163)

Four recommendations were made by the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee which address these constraints to arts related research. Recommendation 22 states that,

The Commonwealth should update the Relative Funding Model now and each five years to ensure its continued accuracy, and should use the information as one of the inputs to ongoing recalculation of the allocation of Commonwealth funding among the universities (1995, .157).

Recommendation 23 also concerns current funding arrangements.

The Commonwealth should investigate the general question of whether current research funding arrangements have the effect of discriminating systematically against particular disciplines in unintended ways (1995, p.163).

A further Recommendation acknowledges the situation and asks that energy is spent on finding solutions via a working party to address the problems of university research in the arts. Such a working party would need to examine an appropriate definition of research in keeping with Australia's goals for cultural development, and any evidence of systematic discrimination against the arts in the designation of funds.

The final Recommendation focuses on the research quantum.

The Commonwealth and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee should investigate whether there are any biases in universities' behaviour in supporting research, biases that could be attributed to the 'research quantum' arrangements; if so, whether the biases affect particular disciplines systematically or specifically disadvantage the arts (1995, p.167).

The Senate Report constantly recommends that there is a need to suggest remedies to any problems which are occurring within the tertiary sector as regards arts education research. However, there is little which points to the nature of these solutions.

It is clear to the writers' that the problem extends beyond the factors outlined above. Once an arts educator begins their research, there is a need to decide on the appropriate methodology which will adequately address the research questions. Adequate access to both quantitative and qualitative models of research in arts education is one hurdle. Then there is the identification of suitable collegial advice, and in the case of those studying for higher degrees, the need for appropriate supervision. The lack of arts education research is perhaps a reflection of the lack of arts education personnel in universities. For example, in the case of dance education, there is only one doctoral supervisor currently available in Australia, and they have just begun enrolling PhD students in 1995. This points to a lack of choice, paucity of role models and restriction of the type of research undertaken in this arts education field alone.

At a seminar on music education research held at the recent Australian Society for Music Education Conference (1995) the panel identified the need for more research in the field of creative thinking. It was pointed out that by increasing decision making opportunities in all aspects of music education via this research, there would be a reciprocal increase in music making and music 'taking'. This sentiment was further supported by the panel's chairperson, who asked that researchers discover how to foster creativity rather than simply ask what creativity is (B. van Ernst, personal communication, July 1, 1995)

Dissemination of the results of arts education research.

Methods of documenting post-graduate research traditionally have taken the form of a dissertation or thesis. It is the experience of the writers' that the advent of new communication technologies and the plethora of interactive multimedia software resources now available in education have raised high expectations about alternative ways of

looking at teaching environments and learning issues.

Arts education research in some fields (such as music, the visual arts and dance) is currently exploring this alternative medium for classroom/teacher interactions, simulations and illustrations of art works. The recent developments in computer technology and the convergence of hypermedia and compact disc technologies have now made it possible to access and manage a wide variety of media in ways which were previously impossible. How applicable are these forms of documentation to the content of arts education research and its application to the school environment? This question relates to the definition of arts research alluded to above, and to the mode of access to the results of that research for arts educators in the field.

This also raises the question who undertakes the research? The distance sometimes felt between tertiary institutions and schools is magnified when addressing issues of concern and opportunities for change that research can produce. Maybe it is the classroom teacher in the arts who should be encouraged to become involved in action research to further inform their own practice? If it is the tertiary student or academic who intends to examine arts education issues via their research, how can they ensure the results of such research impact on the quality and quantity of arts education experiences available to students P - 12? The researcher must endeavour to reach their target audience with the results of such research in a palatable form. It is the writers' belief that there are substantial implications for the role that arts education research may play in affecting the practice of arts educators.

The challenge for the future.

This discussion merely identifies an area of need as regards research in education. The dearth of arts education presentations at recent AARE Conferences is just one symptom of the problem. Reasons for the problem are many, and the inhibitory factors currently impacting on researchers in the field are diverse and pervasive. However, the firm foothold that the arts now have within the national curriculum initiative will provide the impetus needed to enhance and expand arts education programs.

The challenge for the future is to continue to develop a functional and supportive research culture which addresses ongoing issues of concern within the diverse field of arts education.

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