

ARTS-BASED APPROACHES TO CREATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

For many arts educators a problem of education systems is that they place 'core' learning areas, for example English, Math, Science and Social Studies, above arts subjects that are thereby relegated to low-status electives, extra-curricular, enrichment or 'rainy day' programs considered fun and enjoyable but not key learning areas. Arts educators have long argued the importance of the visual and performing arts in the development of students in a myriad of ways that have intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual and social implications. There is now a new urgency to raising the position and status of the arts in education, for many believe they have a significant role in humanizing the world through developing citizenship and social consciousness by fostering tolerance, recognizing difference, developing diverse ways of thinking and creating a supportive social environment for learning. The paper makes a case for exploring the options for 'embedding in other subject areas' the methodologies and philosophies that have long been practiced in the teaching of the arts, and suggests that the multiple strategies needed for implementation include teacher training, professional development, expansion and integration of resources, frameworks for curricula and assessment, classroom facilities, and above all, a change in 'mind-set'.

...The problems of life are much more like the problems encountered in the arts. They are problems that seldom have a single correct solution; they are problems that are often

*subtle, occasionally ambiguous, and sometimes dilemma-like. One would think that schools wanted to prepare students for life would employ tasks and problems similar to those found outside of schools. This is hardly the case. Life outside of schools is seldom like school assignments...and hardly ever like a multiple-choice test.*¹

In Singapore there is an enthusiasm and support for the idea of the arts as a centerpiece of Singapore's vision of a Renaissance City as stated in the Ministry of the Arts and Education Report (2000) and Creative Industry Development Strategy Report (2000). These reports not only recognize the value of the arts in terms of enriching people's lives and its proven contribution to the economy but incorporates the notion of educating people and contributing to the development of 'creative and critical thinking' in Singapore. Reflections on the existing education system, community programs and general conscious raising campaigns focused on the arts are part of the strategy to achieve these objectives.

At this point a dichotomy emerges – there is government support for the ideal of 'creative and critical thinking', funds for a thriving and evolving arts scene, facilities in place and a strategic plan to make Singapore a Renaissance City and the arts hub of Asia, yet these objectives are not reflected in the current education system. Juxtaposed with these local issues is life in the global village that celebrates technology, materialism, brand names, MTV and the general McDonaldization of culture through the adoption of the music, signs, symbols and icons of the west. Yet in Singapore there are few opportunities for students to participate in arts electives and the creative processes associated with education through the arts are left to the imagination and resources of individual teachers.

'Justify my (your) art' is a catch phrase encountered at some point for every participant in the arts whether they be a professional, a student wishing to choose an elective subject, a pre-professional mitigating a decision to go on to further study with parents or

government bodies deciding on allocations of arts and education funding. Yet this question is not widely asked of those pursuing studies in such areas as economics, IT, science, math or similar 'reliable' empirical knowledge areas. Coupled with this is the idea that multi-interpretations, as are encouraged in the arts, are a sign of unreliability whereas they can be a case for further illumination and understanding - a fact well understood by the leaders in any field.

There are many arguments surrounding how Arts Education may respond to the 'justification' problem and three will be presented as part of this discussion paper. They are,

- Arts education
- Education through the Arts
- The arts as integral to life

Arts Education

In one sense this is the simplest category to examine. The justification phase is mainly over and the student is able to enjoy the wonderful and challenging experiences of making, creating and presenting art whether it is in a tertiary institution, an arts elective in a junior college, or part of an inter-disciplinary project in a primary school. Teacher training exists, there is a growing field of research and scholarship, a diversity of post-training opportunities, teacher resources and countless examples of work in all these areas from around the world. Arts education is fluid embracing innovation and is adaptable to creative activities on, for example, technology, integrated arts, inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural arts. Although curricula may be in place and modules for teaching approved, class tasks provide the opportunity for flexibility in teaching methods, parameters for assessment and the intrinsic enjoyment of the activity that can establish patterns for life long learning, engagement and participation.

Attending a performance, an art gallery or listening to music are all occasions where critical and aesthetic awareness comes into play and judgments are made. Various forms of thinking allow individual responses that are both sensually and knowledge based. If walking around the gallery for example, with a friend or colleague, or sitting a school exam on art theory, it is usually required to articulate thoughts, feeling, reflections and reactions in a literal form. This is the cross over point for justifying the arts in the education system and new questions emerge, for example, is choreographing a dance, composing a score or assembling a folio of art work of the same worth as writing an essay? This debate continues from university post-graduate courses² to the primary school and reflects a problem of having the confidence to implement what is by now a considerable body of research that clearly demonstrates the many positives of arts education.

Education through the Arts

This model offers suggestions for involving students in ways of thinking and knowing learnt from arts education paradigms and transferring these to other areas of curricula.

It could be argued there are few conclusive studies on the relationship between experience in the arts and academic achievement. It appears at some point there is a need to try to match what is fundamentally a social/philosophical concept of the benefits of arts education with studies of how the brain works to engage creatively with the world – essentially what is creative thinking and how does imagination work?

In his paper, ‘Breaking the Mindset’, Allan Snyder states:

It would appear that we are blinded by our mental paradigms – by our mindsets! We emphatically do not examine each situation anew logically considering all

*possibilities...we look at the world through our mindsets, mindsets acquired from our past experiences. Put simply, we are intrinsically prejudiced.*³

Snyder is interested in viewing the world differently - to break free from pre-conceptions, prejudice and 'mindsets' - to re-invent, re-visit and look again rather than accepting pre-existing theories. The conclusion is to develop 'multiple mindsets' to view more of the world and to view it from different lines of expertise.

Howard Gardner's 'Theory of Multiple Intelligences' identifies specific ways of seeing the world and how these may function in education frameworks – bodily-kinesthetic being one of them. In an area such as dance education naming this as a way of perceiving is a breakthrough. As a professional dancer for many years I understand the possibilities of bodily knowledge that is articulate and valid as its own language, connecting mind, body and spirit. A story from US dance educator Sondra Stamey Sluder adds to this:

*I was denied dance as a youth because it was not a part of the education system. This has not changed very much over the years. Art is still extracurricular, tagged on as an elective, mainly in the form of music and visual arts. Children's minds are the focus of education, producing disconnected children and adults as the body and spirit are left undeveloped.*⁴

The body is rarely included in any form of 'core' study areas –students still learn Shakespeare in English classes by reading the script at their desks. This is a heresy both to the Bard and to the students who should be reveling in playing tumbling jesters, rampant kings, ardent lovers and tortured ghosts. Problems here are complex including curriculum that demands high scoring outcomes based on restricted assessment methods, teacher confidence and time to try out new strategies, lack of support within systems and lack of resources to help change 'mindsets' or even the approval to take a new approach by participation in activities that take on 'multiple-intelligences'. In the arts, it is assumed that if you cannot dance it is hard to teach dance, if you cannot play an instrument it is

hard to inspire students to play themselves. Much of teacher training seems to focus on the ‘theory’ rather than the ‘doing’ thus excluding enjoyment of new experiences, confidence building and empathetic ways knowing and seeing that are then transmitted to the students.

In my experience of training primary school teachers at the University of Canberra to incorporate dance into primary school education, I emphasized drawing on the students’ experiences in other fields and developing creative strategies from these to work with the children. These may include skills such as playing a musical instrument, sports, community service and attending community enrichment classes. The trainee teachers at this university were part of the Physical Education program and in Australia and New Zealand this is the group that typically are responsible for teaching dance from kindergarten to pre-tertiary level at the majority of public schools. Many were footballers, rugby players and sports stars and taking on a module in dance was a challenge. Inevitably they surprised themselves with their creativity and ability to work through modes of thinking and behavior that had been reinforced right throughout their schooling— most had chosen sport not the arts as electives. This preconditioning is a problem to diversification and some methodologies for working is helpful - here the arts have much to offer all subjects.

To begin all arts subject outlines depend on three aspects - creating, presenting and appraising.

Creating

As a general concept this incorporates the notion of a process rather than product orientation for problem solving that includes experimentation, improvisation, defining, selecting, and the incorporation of a range of skills. In this process what may be termed ‘breathing time’ is essential – this gestation allows ideas to

evolve. Learning to seek better questions not simply answers is an essential element in this process.

Presenting

Multiple outcomes result from the creation process and individuals or groups come to solutions via different routes – they may present them in various ways and this should generally be included as part of the task requirement. For example an oral presentation, a video, a folio of drawings, a dance or a piece of music may be presented - there are some excellent examples of dance pieces showing a science experiment or a mathematical formula. Presenting can encompass cooperative, collaborative approaches and include group assessment – this is ultimately reflective of how society, business and work places operate.

Recognizing that there may be no answers is part of the process; however the process itself is a valuable learning experience.

Appraising

Appraising can include a variety of parameters that can incorporate summative and formative assessment, teacher and peer assessment. Problem solving offers multiple choices, strategies and creative solutions with rarely a right or wrong answer. Appraising should incorporate the appreciation of difference, the imaginative way that students address the task and the methods they employed

These methods can incorporate both short activities or lead to long term projects and explorations with a developmental focus and time orientation towards self-learning. Inherent in these strategies are opportunities for non-linear time frames, lateral and parallel teaching methods where ‘connectedness’ is elemental and team teaching encouraged.

The options for re-shaping teaching and learning may not only lie in the methodologies and practices of arts-based education but also in the inclusion of epistemic approaches that recognize and value difference. Citizenship education can cross age groups and class divisions taking the habitus into account - it should encompass the realities of shifting cultural dynamics such as migration patterns and not be separated from these contexts. Western education paradigms are often simply 'transferred' into another culture in a 'post-colonial' system that does not take into account local identities and traditions.

In the Asia Pacific for example, the arts are holistic and integration is the predominant tenet in arts practices and training. For educators, the study of such forms can provide insights into inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning while the 'compartmentalization' of distinct areas of study negate these possibilities and contributes to rigid frameworks for inquiry. There is a need to develop parameters for assessing multi-dimensional tasks where there may be many solutions that reflect that 'doing' is a knowledge path acquisition. For example, you only learn to drive a car by 'doing' and this cannot be replaced by the acquisition of knowing how the engine works. Similarly, for a professional dancer or musician- knowing does not necessary mean verbal articulation.⁵

The Arts as Integral to Life

The last aspect is one that is not prominently represented in the literature, possibly as its lessons are not seen to be applicable to general education systems in the modern world. This model appears in schools set up in third world countries, refugee camps, institutions and in general, situations where it is accepted that the arts have a healing as well as educative role. Similarly it is often considered an appropriate means of introducing western-based education systems to communities that are at the crossroads of two cultures. Teaching and learning largely occurs through arts practices and storytelling incorporating epistemic ways of seeing and knowing.

Several years back an opportunity to teach at schools in remote Australian Aboriginal communities in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory provided a rare experience and raised many questions and answers about the nature of multiple cultural identities and the ability to move between these. For example, children in school at Rammingining were absent from classes for ritual occasions – particularly the boys at the time of their initiation ceremonies. The ritual preparations and stages involved in the education of the young boys, typically 7 to 11 years of age, were taught alongside their ‘non-traditional’ education until the implementation of the cultural protocols that necessitated separate them from the women and the non-initiated. After the ceremonies they returned to school and carried on as normal in class although they had ritually progressed to another stage of life outside the school. Similarly they were able to do both traditional dance and rap dancing copied from a Michael Jackson video or be a practicing Christian while at the same time participate in a traditional smoking ceremony for ritual cleansing of a house where someone had died.

These instances point not only to a capacity to take on and function with different cultural ‘personas’ but to move between these fluidly. (It is certainly acknowledged however, that many do not cope with this divide, particularly in urban centers where there is constant confrontation of ideas, lifestyles, aspirations and possibilities). Teachers in remote communities must maintain and enhance links with the local community and work alongside local elders – more than this they must work extremely hard to find the relevance and connectedness between non-traditional and traditional learning. For instance, in response to a field excursion for senior children at the Yirrkala school one child, Bambuyna wrote;

*Looking and learning about plants, nuts, roots, trees, flowers and leaves. We learnt about seasons, shapes, colors, sizes, what they used for, how to taste and which moiety they belong to. They also relate to song and dance and also the painting.*⁶

Two pertinent aspects of this story to teaching and learning in education curricular are the storytelling basis of the learning and the shared learning between the teacher and the student. The child automatically related the lesson to the artistic practice that is the basis of Aboriginal society.

Some conclusions

In her recent address titled 'Fluid Culture: Frozen Art Education' at the InSEA World Arts Educators Congress, New York, 2002, Kapila Vatsyayan, spoke of,

...the possibility of 'community ritual' through involvement in the arts whereby shared beliefs, commitments and social vision can result in a 'mental map of peace.'⁷

A predominant theme of this conference was the essential role of the arts in humanizing a fragmented world. The visual arts, music, drama and dance provide a rich opportunity for students to explore society and the self in both diverse and distinct ways via individual and group projects. In this scenario many ways of seeing and knowing are not only an acceptable outcomes but are required. Reflection can be articulated through a variety of means including for example, a visual, movement or written response and combinations of these embracing student identity, gender, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. Many solutions to problem solving should be celebrated and encouraged empowering students, giving ownership to ideas and creativity and socialization through the appreciation of difference.

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¹ Elliot Eisner, *The Kind of School We Need: Personal Essays* (Heinemann, NH, 1998), p.84

² Burrige, Stephanie. 'Artist And Analyst? The Impact Of Aboriginal Dance On Twentieth Century
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³ Snyder, Allan 'Breaking the Mindset' Keynote address, '*The Mind's New Science*', *Cognitive Science
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⁴ Stamey Sluder, Sondra. 'Her Story'
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