

The Role of Arts Education in Advancing Leadership Life Skills for Young People

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Abstract

This paper contends that the arts provide a foundation for the intensifying effort that leadership, creative aptitude and expertise are making to existing and emerging professions. Participation in arts-based (school and/or community) programs “have proven to be educational, developmentally rich, and cost-effective ways to provide students the skills they need to be productive participants in today’s economy” (Psilos, 2002, p. 2). In particular, this paper explores the relationship between leadership development in young people through their engagement with arts education experiences, specifically the capacity of the arts to develop the generic skills of communication, team work, problem-solving and creative interpretation-skills considered essential for productive participation in today’s economy and skills that augment leadership potential.

Introduction

The concept of leadership is usually associated with the business world and high profile personalities like Richard Branson, Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch. The attributes, characteristics and actions of such people are closely studied and form the basis of many hundreds of books on leadership available today.

There is no doubt, that studying the leadership style of influential leaders can enhance an understanding of the attributes of effective leadership and provide a broader repertoire to inform one’s own leadership capacity. However, business leaders are not the only ones who can provide insights about how to achieve effective leadership. More and more, recognition is being given to the leadership lessons that can be provided by those in the arts world who lead orchestras, dance companies and theatre groups. The latter was acknowledged by Bennis a well-known writer on leadership back in the mid 1980s, when he included a former conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, among his list of the top 90 leaders in the United States.

In a recent Australian business magazine article, Muldowney (2005, pp. 25-26) describes the relationship between conductors and orchestras ‘as a metaphor for business leadership’. She states that conductors like business leaders “must instruct, support, encourage, coach and occasionally push to get the desired results”. She goes on to share what various conductors of the Adelaide, Melbourne and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras consider the key elements of successful leadership. The latter include being able to communicate clearly, foster an atmosphere of respect, listen to and respect others ideas and views, have self-confidence and provide a persuasive vision.

Coupled with recognition of the link between the arts and leadership development is acknowledgment of the valuable contribution the arts and arts education plays in developing the skills required by successful citizens of an increasingly sophisticated,

knowledge economy. Florida (2002, 2005), in his recent publications tackles the theme of the emergent role of creativity in our economy and the impact of the 'creative class' in shaping how the workplace is structured. The creative class made up of resourceful, industrious, idea-creating professionals, apply their creative facility to solve complex issues. Florida includes people in jobs such as film, music, television, architecture, research and development, finance, advertising, law and health care as participants in the creative economy. In a recent interview conducted with Florida in Sydney he claimed that "the big challenge...is the class divide between the people who are participating in the creative economy and the people who are terrified of being left behind" (*The Sydney Sun-Herald*, 08/05/05).

Today's demanding workplace and knowledge-based and ideas-focussed economy expects young people to not only have certain scholastic abilities, but to increasingly demonstrate capacity in creative thinking, problem solving, flexibility, and communication. The conventional, hierarchical organisational structures of old, are increasingly being replaced with flattened arrangements, which demand decision-making and problem-solving competence from everyone in the 'organization' (Psilos, 2002, p. 1). Businesses are progressively requiring well-rounded, original thinkers and adaptable, confident and self-motivated knowledge workers to give them the edge in today's competitiveness market.

The arts sector in Australia has vigorously argued that arts education is fundamental to the nation's future. According to the comprehensive survey conducted by Saatchi & Saatchi Australia for the Australia Council (2000, p. 22), 85 per cent of Australians concur that the arts should be a central component of the education of every Australian child. Arts education advocates maintain the notion of Australia as a 'clever country', relies on offering arts education opportunities to young people to contribute to creative skills for the workplace and advance the development of a creative economy. It is clearly a theme that is supported by the Australian Democrats. In their *Cultural Plan* for Australia (2004, p. 1), they plainly articulate that: "[T]he creation and transmission of information, intellectual property and cultural products will be the cornerstones of economic development in the 21st century". The claim is made that Australia needs to invest more 'seriously' in cultural development and at the very least match budgetary expenditure in arts education with that provided to literacy and numeracy education. They see the arts as "central to the development of the kind of creative, responsive, collaborative employee that business values" (p. 4), and call for moving the Arts "from the periphery to the centre of public policy, in recognition that diversity, creativity and innovation are critical to our nation's future" (p. 1).

What is Leadership?

In simple terms, a leader leads and positions the course of action. They inspire, motivate, enthuse and guide people to help bring about change. Successful leaders are self-aware and aware of how others perceive him/her and adapt their leadership style to suit the situation. At all times, successful leaders share knowledge, allow scope for people to experiment and demonstrate initiative, and encourage people to develop their own leadership abilities. The major task of leaders, however, is to get results.

Anyone can become a leader. According to Bennis (1985), leaders are made, not born and everyone has the capacity to develop constructive leadership skills. This does not necessarily mean that everyone will ‘rise to the top’ to lead an organization¹, but it does mean that it is possible to enhance everyone’s capacity for leadership and apply this to their day-to-day activities and encounters.

As articulated by Yudelowitz, Koch and Field (2004, p. 31), “leadership is a function, an activity, a way of doing things... Anyone can exercise leadership sometimes or to some degree . . . Any unit or organization can never have too many leaders”. Leadership, therefore, can exist in every person at all levels in one-way or another at different times in different contexts. It includes characteristics, attributes, skills and behaviours that can be learnt by all and developed early in life through encounters with parents, teachers and friends.

The Contribution of the Arts to Life and Leadership Skills

The arts play an essential function in the cognitive, social – emotional, aesthetic and physical development of all young people. They are a natural part of a young person’s life and are connected to it through home, school and community based experiences and activities. Saatchi & Saatchi Australia, for example found a strong relationship between individuals’ on-going involvement in and value of artistic practice and the level of parental encouragement they were afforded as a child (Australia Council, 2000, pp. 209-214). The report concluded that ‘a supportive family that encourages children to be involved in the arts and finds ways to help them do this outside of school’ had an enormous positive effect on the life-long attitude that person has towards the arts (Australia Council, 2000, p. 213).

Engagement with out-of-school arts activities includes both those encountered in the home, which as already commented on, may be affected by parental influence, and those that occur in what Heath (2001), describes as the ‘third environment’. This is the learning environment provided by the diversity of community organizations that serve a real and complimentary role to classroom learning. A national survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2003, found that 29% of young people aged 5 to 14 years (of a sample of just over 780,000 children), were involved in at least one community based cultural activity. The most popular was playing a musical instrument (17%), followed by dancing (12%). For boys the most popular activity was playing a musical instrument (13%), while dancing was the most popular activity for girls (24%). Children aged 9 to 11 had the highest overall participation rate (36%), in a cultural activity.

Philosophers such as Langer (*Philosophy in a New Key* (1942)) and Goodman (*Languages of Art* (1968) and *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences*, with Catherine Elgin (1988)) led the way in positioning the arts as important ways of recognizing and constructing knowledge. They viewed the arts as conveying knowledge in ways unique to them as subject areas—as representing knowledge founded in human

¹ Organization is used generically to mean any formal body of people and so includes inter alia: business companies, school classrooms, sporting teams, orchestras and so forth.

imagination and ways of thinking and feeling. More recently the work of Gardner and the Project Zero educational research group at Harvard University has shown how the arts draw on a multiplicity of intelligences and learning methods and how the arts naturally develop creative abilities.

Arts educators have long recognized the contribution that the arts make to the general education of learners. Learning in and through the arts can present varied and complex means for the acquisition of relevant, generic life skills such as time management, decision making, goal setting, personal planning, critical thinking, cultural awareness, self-directed learning, interpersonal skills and self confidence.² Some of the most recent research emanating principally from the United States, also comments on the positive relationship between engagement with both in and outside school arts programs and the development of life-long learning attributes (Fiske, 2000; Arts Education Partnership, 2002; Deasey, 2002). In the recently released *Arts Education Partnership* Taskforces' compendium on learning in the arts, claims are made that students with high levels of arts participation outperform "arts poor" students on virtually every measure. Individual contributions include inter alia, reference to: sustained involvement in music and theatre being highly correlated with success in mathematics and reading; a positive relationship between drama and problem-solving; disadvantaged youth who engage in after-school arts programs doing better in school and their personal lives than their peers; and links between listening to music and enhanced spatial reasoning. Related studies show that the arts: teach young people how to analyze, synthesize and evaluate information, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; how the arts offer distinctive opportunities for imaginative learning and creative expression; and engage young people in multiple skills.

A report of evaluations of four (two music and two drama), Australian school-based arts education programs also found evidence that participation in these programs had: a positive impact on young people's ability to plan and set goals; increased their overall engagement with learning; enhanced self-confidence; and improved their ability to work cooperatively with others. (DEST, 2004). These studies make a strong argument for the significance of student participation in arts learning, the positive relationship between learning in the arts and improved student achievement in other learning domains and the arts as fundamental to the development of essential skills that an individual needs in our 21st century economy.

Although the arts do not hold exclusive rights over the domain of creative endeavour, they do provide a very extensive basis of creative opportunities. The arts involve students in making, expressing, experiencing and/or interpreting something, by themselves and often with others. Arts educational experiences are often organised around problems, issues or themes derived from varied real-life situations, in which priority is given to active (rather than passive) learning and meaning-making transferable and connected to

² To highlight the inherently utilitarian outcomes associated with arts learning along with professional/technical skills and understandings is not to deny the importance or uniqueness of the creative processes and aesthetic experience basic to arts education.

authentic everyday life circumstances. The focus is not on finding the one ‘right’ answer, but rather on discovering various means to solve a single problem and taking and managing ‘risks’ along the way.

An examination of the current (eight) Australian Arts syllabus documents published by each of the states and territory education authorities, reveals remarkably similar rationales and expected student learning outcomes. All contain three common broadly based ‘purpose’ themes, namely: recognition of both the aesthetic and functional purpose of the arts; the arts as significant aspects of everyday life; and the unique contribution of the arts to lifelong learning. There is an expectation that students will all achieve a range of Arts learning outcomes that involve them in: creating and presenting ‘original’ works to express and communicate a range of ideas and feelings; identify, interpret and transform artworks; use a range of skills, techniques and technologies; respond to, reflect on and evaluate the ways in which artworks are made and used; and understand the role of the arts in cultural and historical contexts. Central to arts education processes then are communication, team work, problem-solving and creative interpretation. These constitute life and leadership skills identified earlier in this paper as critical for fruitful membership in today’s knowledge economy.

Some Leadership Behaviours Developed Through Arts Education Experiences

Evidence of the role of the arts in preparing young people to be productive citizens of the knowledge economy with life and leadership skills are evident in small, daily arts-making activities and from the earliest levels of involvement with formal education. For example, presenting five year olds with tasks such as: to create a dance to accompany a known song; to organise their invented sounds into a simple composition; to design graphic symbols to represent sound sources they have been experimenting with – these all include engagement with authentic life and arts specific skill development. Temmerman (1995), working with children aged from four to nine, in the United States and Australia, revealed that whilst the arts do not necessarily hold any exclusivity over the development of some of these skills, they do appear, more than any other teaching area to provide learning environments in which risk-taking is encouraged, leadership and creative self-expression (that enhances self identity and builds both self-confidence and a sense of cohesive community) are genuinely commended.

The arts are essentially about *communication*, about expressing ideas in songs, instrumental pieces, dance, photographs, sculpture, paintings, mime and so forth. However, the latter represent the end product of the creative process. So much communication work is done during the processes leading to the end production. The aforementioned requires participants to engage in a host of leadership behaviours. These include possessing a measure of empathy towards others, which extends to listening to and acknowledging other people’s perspectives, being able to instil trust and trusting others and treating others with respect. On some occasions it calls for a shared goal to be arrived at through input from all ‘players’, whereas at other times, it calls for someone to stand up and set the direction. At all stages of the process, however, constituents share knowledge, allow scope and time for people to experiment and demonstrate initiative,

and encourage different individuals to take leadership over certain components of the production process.

Another essential and inevitable part of most arts activities (perhaps less so in the visual arts), is *working with others and in teams*. It involves an interesting blend of being able to work co-operatively and arrive at negotiated aspirations but also being able to take direction. Choirs, dance groups and orchestras especially, at various times, depend on unmitigated compliance from their team members. However, more often than not, arriving at the end production phase is contingent on the group members setting goals cooperatively, working through any conflicts and supporting colleagues. Leadership, therefore, does not reside in a single person; rather it exists at different times with different people. Distributed leadership creates teams of leaders who work across the production rather than individuals working separately toward the end product. Arts experiences encourage young people to engage in risk-taking, imaginative self-expression, to make choices that are mindful and sensible but at the same time demonstrate courage. Courageous decisions can be taken because of the mutual trust and respect as well as strong relationships that are forged over time. Performance activities for example, provide opportunities for young people to learn to cope in challenging, tense and/or uncertain situations and simultaneously to support others in the process.

Creative interpretation occupies a central role in the arts and relies on the possession of a mix of confidence and intelligence. Art makers and performers are expected to interpret information whether it is bodies of choreography, musical scores, graphic designs or dramatic plays in new or different ways. The interpretation stage is preceded by extensive information collection from as many varied sources as possible such as: recordings, art galleries, video and television footage, magazines, newspapers, the internet, interviews. This information is then analysed and the knowledge gained, along with judgements made about the data, ideas and concepts is applied to the process of interpretation. The entire process commands the ability to deal with ambiguity, to come up with imaginative and innovative responses and to maintain contextual flexibility. It requires the ability to adapt and to call on a repertoire of behaviours depending on the situation. It means continuously evaluating the situation to determine what is and is not working and accordingly make considered decisions or decisive judgement calls based on facts and information after weighing up multiple options.

The process of arriving at the final interpretation also entails a considerable degree of *problem solving*. There are creative questions to solve such as: how do I best create that sound? Which materials should I use to acquire that image; along with more generic problems including how to best deal with culturally sensitive material, how to organise rehearsal schedules with due consideration being given to the needs of all participants, and how to manage the performer who is not 'pulling their weight'.

The aforementioned are purposeful real -life skills. Young people presented with and encouraged to address such issues strengthen their preparation for living and working in an increasingly complex and changing world. It demands they position the course of action, which includes persuading people to do things differently and to help bring about

change. It relies on consideration of reasonable and rational responses along with the unfounded and untried, the embracing of new ideas and of asking the question ‘what if?’ It is about not only having a vision, but also having the capability to render it a reality and leading by example.

A Concluding Comment

Young people are living in a socially, culturally and economically fast-changing society. The world of work they will enter demands more than ever that they demonstrate facility with creative thought and action and exhibit capacity for leadership. The challenge for teachers is to create classrooms that support students’ acquisition of the life and leadership skills that will help them do well in a progressively more complicated world and future. The arts possess the capability to perform a valuable role in meeting this challenge.

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