

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF ARTISTS IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The relationship between professional artists and education, whilst established, is not flourishing. Advocates of the arts in education have long sought to convince of the value of this relationship. This article proposes a re-evaluation of the potential value of the professional artist working in teacher education.



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Advocates of the arts in education in Britain and elsewhere have long sought to convince us of the importance of there being a relationship between professional artists and education. In Britain, projects such as the *Arts Education for a Multicultural Society* (AEMS) Project set up in 1987 and the *Arts in Schools Project* (1985-9) both responded to and promoted this view (see also Sharp & Dust, 1990). Additional research advancing and exploring the creative human nature (such as that compiled by Vernon, 1970) has been used within such arts education projects as a rationale for greater value to be placed on the arts in education and on the role of artists within this. Yet the relationship has often been misunderstood by artists and by those working in education alike; historically, in Britain at least, the practice has not connected fully to the theory.

In this article I examine this situation and propose a re-evaluation of the potential value of the professional artist working within initial teacher education.

The dominant model of the artist in Britain

What constitutes "the arts" alters in different locations and times and for different groups of people as well as for different individuals. Consequently we do not have a common understanding of what is meant by the labels "arts" and "artist". In Britain making a mask would be considered a craft but performing in one an art form – in

Bali no such distinction would exist. To develop an understanding of the arts it is evidently necessary to make explicit the way context – that is to say history, culture and the state – shape the relationship between the arts and society.

In Britain we have a prime example of the cultural and political heritage which has shaped our understanding and experience of the arts. Recently £55 million of national lottery funding was allocated to improving the fabric of the building of the Royal Opera House (Arts Council press release, 20 July 1995). The Royal Opera House is located in London and presents a programme of largely traditional opera attended by a wealthy minority of the population. From this example we might propose a state view of the arts – the “high arts”. State approved arts according to this example constitute historic material and proven art forms and are largely erudite in nature. They are significant only in the lives of a particular group of the population, the privileged elite, and fulfil a role in reaffirming established values of history, class, culture and education. A wider study of state subsidised arts would broadly confirm this view.

Over the centuries, patronage and censorship by the elite has undermined both the possibility of a broadly inclusive definition of the arts and a common involvement in the arts in Britain. Little wonder then that, as a general populace, the English do not acknowledge the arts which happen in our art houses as possessing great significance for us in our daily lives (Willis, 1989; 1990).

The dominant model of the artist in our context is one of paid professional, funded by state subsidy and focused on personal creativity within their own separate discipline. This model presents the artist as a higher being, an ideal to which we might aspire but not attain (Williams, 1960, 1961; Pick, 1968). Creativity and artistic expression is then the rare province of the artist. Understanding of artistic expression is only for the educated few. The artist is thereby separate from society, perhaps commenting on but certainly not interacting with the common people or their needs (Owusu, 1986).

Britain is not alone in having little tradition for communal publicly funded arts by the mass population. This is the dominant model also in America (see Pick, 1986) and can be found in other countries where the dominant model for theatre is a literary rather than a performance one. Although this is the dominant model for theatre and the arts, it is not the only available model. In recent years theatre theorists and practitioners such as Eugenio Barba and Richard Schechner have proposed alternatives from both Western and post-colonial perspectives which still embrace the idea of a professional artist but which focus on community models of theatre – theatre for the people, of the people and often with or by the people (Neelands, 1994; Owusu, 1986; Schechner, 1993).

Alternative models

As I have suggested there are models, historic and contemporary, which view the arts differently (for a fuller account, see Neelands, 1994). These models harness the potential for the arts in society and acknowledge that the arts describe an important human impulse. This is the impulse to recognise and to mark our experiences and understandings in whatever forms speak to us, abstract or literal, physical or mental. It

is the impulse to use and witness sensory forms which express and transform experience. It is an impulse which reminds us of our own creative potential.

In classical Athens, the arts were the forum and means by which citizens debated with the state how best to live. They were viewed as an integral part of citizenship. In such a context the arts embodied inspiration and criticism, embraced idealism and revolution and recognised that such oppositional qualities are the nature of humans (Pick, 1988). Today we have to journey abroad for such dominant models. In pockets throughout the world and extensively in Africa and Asia there are models of the arts integrated in form, function and in life (Schechner, 1993). Here there are no dividing boundaries between the arts as diversionary, cultural and educational; or between the disciplines which we in the West perceive as drama, dance, music. The arts are natural aspects of daily life embracing civilising and anarchic impulses in communal ritual. A common quality of such a model is the explicit relationship and frequent interaction with spectators. Often there is a blurred division between performer and (the more appropriately named) participant and the role is a shared one, personal art making merging with public arts. These features are to be found both in Ian Watson's conception of third theatre (Watson, 1993) and also in Kwesi Owusu's post-colonial conception of orature (Owusu, 1986). The arts and the artist are held in regard by the community and frequently by the state. The artist is a special citizen to whom the community refer (Schechner, 1993; Barba, 1995; Christoffersen, 1993). She or he facilitates a context for fellow citizens to share, mark and process their life and its experiences.

There are artists in Britain today who, despite obvious difficulties, follow similar models. They operate their own value-systems autonomously and in localised contexts. "Experimental" artists, Artists-in-Education Companies and artists who work within community contexts may fit such descriptions (Sandford, 1995; Jackson, 1993). Certainly integrated art forms and socially challenging art works exist on the edge of the public arena, outside of significant state support, outside the art house. Such a model guides artists who are forging new forms and material, or who explore and express the cultural change of our lives. It guides artists who challenge and re-conceive established boundaries between artist and spectator, re-framing the spectator actively as participant. It guides artists who prick unconscious needs to celebrate, to mourn, to explore, to play. Above all it guides artists who view the central role of the arts as an integral forum for exploration and discovery about the business of living.

Such artists introduced into the educational context propose a socially and personally significant model for the arts and challenge an elitist one.

The role of the arts in education

As I have suggested, contemporary and flourishing views of the arts in education, as of drama-in-education, do not reflect the dominant model for the arts in British society. In the absence of a useful model, we have allied ourselves to alternative ones and adopted many similar principles. The argument for arts education has been propounded eloquently and frequently. It advances that the arts are fundamental to education just as they are fundamental to society (Robinson, 1982; Rogers, 1995).

Regardless of the actual experience of the arts in society, arts education entitles pupils to an experience of the arts as a vital and vibrant forum for debate and creativity. Such a view recognises the human need to process, connect and translate the various disparate elements of our lives. At its best it is a form of ritual which integrates ourselves with ourselves personally and communally (Schechner, 1993).

The dichotomy between dominant and alternative models of theatre is also to be found in the discourses of drama. We can recognise that the "process versus product" debate and our own "theatre versus drama" debate which have plagued us over the recent decades relate to the "high" and "low" art divisions in society.

The state priority in Britain for finished "high" art which entertains, speaks to and affirms the values of a minority of the population is evident in the shaping of educational curricula over recent years. For this body "the arts" describe an historic known area and education should focus on learning about and using these ("high") arts as models. The Arts Council's *Drama in Schools* (1992) and Hornbrook (1991) both propose an emphasis on the studying of plays, advancing a literary rather than an experiential performance model for drama teaching. In this context, processes and creativity both lead towards and stem from the model of a product, hence the focus and label of "product". Implicit in such an approach is an acceptance of the dominant model because of the way an emphasis on outcomes constrains and shapes the creative process. Process here is focused on achievement rather than experience, on following expected pathways rather than finding your own way. It does not entertain conflicting approaches which might question and undermine the status of existing ideology.

Alternative views presented by educationalists which have earned the label "process", have asserted the centrality of experience as a vehicle for learning about the nature of an art and about learning in general. These views connect with a model for the arts such as the African. They allow for inner, personal sources to influence creativity as well as (and sometimes in preference to) external sources. Ross recently argued the vital importance of the point in discussing the problems with music education (Ross, 1995). Educational drama since Slade has developed along the lines of facilitating expression and understanding, of *making connections*. These views are clearly rooted in models of the arts as integrated, socially and personally significant fora for experiencing through involvement and through witnessing.

Such divides should not surprise us. In the west, we are conditioned to respect the head over other parts of the body so our response to both the arts and learning is, focally, in relation to the mind. There is evidence of this in British actor training which is founded on psycho-technique (for the integration of mind and body we have to journey abroad for models).

We have learnt to be suspicious of that which we cannot rationalise. We have lost touch with our intuitive and instinctive natures which integrate the psyche and the body. The decision by the British National Curriculum Council (N.C.C.) to place dance within Physical Education on the basis of its apparent physical form is a case in point. It is a decision which at best constrains, at worst prevents, a realisation of dance's potential as a holistic form embracing a spiritual dimension.

In this light it is unsurprising that a dichotomy has existed between “product” and “process” both within formal education and wider arts practice. Policy statements about the arts in education typically describe aims to enable learning *through* and *about* the arts.¹ Dissension occurs over whether these two roles are integrated or distinct and if distinct which is the primary aim – Is it more important to employ the arts in realising learning potential or to learn about the arts?

One of the achievements of the *Arts in Schools Project* in Britain (N.C.C Arts In Schools Project, 1990) was to facilitate a dialogue between “making” and “appreciating” and to use this dialectic to frame the work of arts education. Potentially there was opportunity within the project to reconnect and integrate the work of educators with the work of professional art-makers. Certainly during these years there was a more widespread interest in the educational potency of the arts, focused on engagement with the *experience of art-making*. The impact of this project was undermined by a hostile climate of educational legislation over curricula, management and funding fuelled by dominant economic imperatives. In economically respectable terms, the arts are slippery customers of accountability; they are apparently expensive and are fora for subversive developments. Such legislation reflects a desire to control and to limit. Regarding the arts, it suggests a fear of the potentially transformational and empowering effects.

In our daily lives we experience the intangible which affects us corporeally and impacts upon us wholly. Our informal education embraces all our senses, capitalises on all our processing, proves divisions to be fallacious. Research during this century into learning has emphasised the importance of experiential approaches to teaching and learning, highlighting the holistic nature of understanding and education (e.g. Jerome Bruner, James Britton, Lev Vygotsky).

In every effective example of arts practice and art in education there is a natural integration of all these divisions. Oppositional and dialectic qualities within such “divisions” are recognised and embraced. Any educational process, “formal” or “informal”, “artistic” or “scientific” is about discovering, without closed criteria, what can be learnt. There will of course be objectives and intentions, but there is always chance, always the unknown. Penicillin, for example, was discovered through chance and an open mind as to what might happen. Learning is always about and through, focused and open, shifting at times more one way than the other. Facilitating and responding to both the known and the unknown in the context of an increasingly structured education curriculum is a demanding task for the best teacher, regardless of how committed s/he is to such an ideal. And yet, this is the process in which a professional artist is constantly engaged as s/he works with known and new techniques, people and media, to uncover and discover, to realise both the known and the unknown.

That there should be an ongoing dialogue between those involved in art-making in the professional and educational domains is therefore vital. We have long recognised the need to work with a re-integrated version of the arts and art education. At its most vibrant *The Arts in Schools Project, 1985-9* was developing a commonplace acceptance of the integrated role of artist and educator within society. But at the moment we still have a way to go.

Bridging the gap: The artist as social politician and educator

Within all cultures there are two strands of arts practice – one responding to cultural, historical and politically desirable representations of an art form, the other responding to personal and communal needs to explore and integrate the various elements and experiences of our changing lives through whatever media is available. Artists in most cultures are therefore familiar with working traditionally and innovatively. In their working life they straddle this potential conflict – an outsider to established institutions, they operate both within and without such frames and harness the potential of both contexts operating as a commentator, conscience or even prophet.

This duality reflects the various tensions of arts in education. It also offers a model for dealing with such tensions. The artist is both cultural historian and cultural innovator; both politician and ingenué; adult and child; social commentator and individual artist; expert and novice; technician and creator; servant and master. Such duality is necessary to the professional artist – it is their medium. They are expert in marrying conflicting elements: in accommodating political demands within their artistry. They are professional masters of imaginative solutions.

The professional artist who consciously engages in these dilemmas, offers an excellent model for our work as arts educators. This model reflects the full range of experience we desire for ourselves as teachers and for the students we teach.

Such artists harness the potential of both product-focused and process-focused work by moving between the different approaches each suggests. Sometimes it is important to explore completely with no set agenda. At other times it is important to explore a fixed agenda to discover what potential is within. And there is a point at which it is important to shape and hone material created. Likewise in education we use all of these approaches in our work in the arts.

- We are exploring different ways to understand and experience the “known”. (How do we teach an examination syllabus, or text?)
- We are exploring different ways to discover what is implied within what is known. (What can we discover which we had not seen before?)
- We are exploring what is personally and communally significant. (How do our own experiences and memories connect with this?)
- We are looking for new points of departure for our own creative work. (What new and original ideas does this suggest to us?)

In short we are making explicit what is implicit, enabling students to recognise the hidden and, armed with these insights, to choose their own way. We do this by unpacking what is within an apparently “known” form, refusing to recognise the term “known” as a synonym for “closed” or “safe”. As such the creative journey is always the key.

The professional artist who embraces conflict as a vital and necessary part of being and who journeys in their craft to explore and discover a new synthesis is central to revitalising the arts in education.

Artist as Shaman; Teacher as Shaman

The model of artist which is evolving as significant to us is one who embodies the age-old ideal of artist as shaman, a spiritual guide and healer to whom a community refers for guidance in their lives (Schechner, 1993; Vitebsky, 1995). Shamanistic artists practice art organically for and in response to the perceived needs of their social group. (This is a familiar idea, for instance, in Australian Aboriginal cultural practice). Their sources are grounded in the culture of their particular society. Such artists not only harness oppositional states of tension but transform them into a new perspective. They do not just comment or act as conscience for society but as prophet for, through the duality they embrace, they create a third perspective – the possible.

Whilst the dominant model for the artist is one who demonstrates to a passive audience, the shamanistic artist is one who initiates communal “play” – playing, dancing which releases and transforms.

Through seeking interaction with their spectators / participants they propose an experiential and journeying model to the arts, to learning and to life. They are the equivalent of our best models of the teacher, themselves also a shaman for their students. The teacher, like the shaman, regulates, attends to needs of and socialises their students. They prompt learning and journeying of the whole person, individually and communally (Vitebsky, 1995).

As on any journey in learning and in the arts we need direction. The teacher and artist do this by providing tools, suggesting ways of working and guiding us to recognise our own abilities. The shamanistic artist has a particular role to guide us to re-find, to trust and to use our intuition – our inner guide. Because the shaman is in touch with their own intuition, their spiritual nature, the guidance they offer presents intuition as a positive and important guiding force. Carran Waterfield, a British artist whose work has been significant in developing my own research, attributes much of the significance of her work to shamanic principles. My own studies of her work as performer and artist in education point towards a “logic of intuition” at the heart of an almost trance-like commitment to a very physical form of work.²

Underpinning the shaman-artist are elemental principles such as the principle of opposition – by embracing and exploring opposite extremes a new element is created. This is clearly central both to the work of artists and life generally, seen on a simple level in colour mixing. Through mixing red and yellow we discover that, when combined, two apparently polar primary colours make a new colour – orange. The principle behind creating colour belongs to this principle of opposition. Experiencing this principle is allied with invention albeit on an ordinary level. Creativity empowers us because we discover something new and, because it happens through us, we are central to creation. By facilitating the frame of the creative process, the teacher and artist recognise (and harness) creativity as the essential context for intuition and discovery.

This is the role we are training our arts specialist teachers to fulfil – to harness the potential of the arts to educate holistically. This is therefore the model which must inform those of us involved in initial teacher education in the arts.

Embracing opposition; Desiring disturbance

There are numerous liaison schemes and related publications concerned with developing the relationship between artists and education (see especially Sharp & Dust, 1990). Centrally their work has related to the area of effective communications – articulation and evaluation of intentions. And these are undeniably important foundations for any such relationship. But in the current climate this has led to a focus on measurable outcomes – learning new measurable skills. Such an approach cuts off the true and potential significance of the artist in education. Effective communication and liaison is a vital foundation, and it is only that.

As I have argued, the value of working with artists is in learning how to manage conflicting elements and recognise their potential. The artist is past master at this. This is transferable learning and can inform all areas of life and learning. Working with an artist as model and guide facilitates “knowing” by experiencing; connecting existing understandings and experiences with new ones; understanding physically as well as psychically; trusting to intuition as well as to intellect. The success and achievements of artists in education rests on the ability of the artist and/as teacher to enable children to realise their own creativity, for it is within the act of creation that connections and discoveries are made.

It will be important to develop an explicit framework for artists and teachers which describes the models discussed to date. The points below provide a summary of the significant potential of the artist in education.

Each point is vitally and essentially oppositional and will cause disturbance. The central aim of a framework will be to embrace and celebrate the tension and duality of the artist in education and thereby to move towards integration of aspects which are currently dividing and undermining the real potential of the arts in education.

- ***Living on the edge***

The artist typically lives outside of the structures which embody the rules and constraints of established society preferring different values. From this position s/he comments on social practice in the public world from his/her own. For teachers and students working within establishment structures in formal education the artist is a vehicle for questioning existing values. They can deepen student understanding of the nature of society and offer alternative ways of thinking and operating.

- ***Juggling with conflict***

The artist negotiates between constraining social frames and personal artistic visions as a way of life. This role offers a model for teachers and students addressing the similar issues, particularly personal freedom and the framework of school as institution.

- ***Shifting ground – artist as fellow***

The artist is both “expert” and novice as artist – experienced and trained in their craft but always seeking out new ways to develop their craft. Living in this state causes the artist to be sure about key elements of their craft, but humble and open about new approaches and ready for new discoveries. Vulnerability combined with expertise on the part of the artist are vital role models for students and teachers. Typically this

creates a different relation with students because artist and students embark as fellow explorers.

- ***The logic of intuition – Re-finding the child***

The artist has to construct a framework for work which facilitates both structure and freedom, direction and exploration, adult and child. Both are essential. This dilemma is central to all work in the arts and typifies the task of teaching and learning in the arts. The logic of intuition guides the artist and integrates opposites. Trusting to intuition, the inner child, is vital for arts teachers and students currently directed towards measurable and external evaluators and guides.

- ***Stretching the boundaries***

The artists' key way of working is exploring and testing existing "boundaries" of form and content. In so doing they experience and learn about existing forms and content and discover new territory. For students this addresses the need to understand existing forms and to use these as models for their own work by adapting or rejecting them. This is very important to arts education.

- ***The creative process is the focus***

The artists' work is the act of creation. They know that it is the forum. This is because feeling creative is central to both one's self-esteem and capability as a person and as an artist. As facilitator of creativity the artist is vital in arts education.

- ***The model of the shaman***

A shaman-like role is often apparent in the work of artists who exemplify the points above. They are both guides and seekers of meaning in personal and communal lives. They are artists who, following holistic principles, are concerned to use their skill for the community, for personal and social transformation. As I have suggested, they represent the ideal for the arts specialist teacher and provide a model for initial teacher education.

The fertility of the artist in initial arts teacher education

If we are to facilitate the potential of the artist-as-educational model, we must recognise all of the roles artists have in society and embrace the duality they describe. For it is only in experiencing this oppositional state that we can recognise the interdependent and integral nature of apparently separate aspects. We need to harness the shamanistic qualities of the artist by deliberately seeking out relationships with artists who acknowledge their shamanistic role. Through a model of a practising artist who embraces broad educational intentions, the divisive myth of the arts in education as "product or process" can be dispelled.

But why particularly initial teacher education? The fertility of this relation lies in the peculiar position of the student-teacher. The student-artist looks to the artist for new skills and for a model of working practice. Working with an artists provides a new model and a new forum for synthesis of their experience to date. The student-teacher is equally interested in the mode of delivery as the practice presented; is equally interested in the implicit as in the explicit agenda. Duality is also their medium. If the framing of the experience student-teachers have with artists allows for

making explicit the dualities and roles of the artist, we have a rich resource for arts training.

The forum for the artist in education is the process of creativity. We are, typically, unconfident about our own creative potential regardless of particular technical prowess. A project therefore which focuses entirely on the creative process with the kind of artist I have described to date addresses this need. Student-teachers so engaged typically express a great sense of empowerment, transformation and importance both as creative human beings themselves and in their view of their role as arts teachers.³ Awakened to this potential through a personal experience of creating guided by an artist, the model of and involvement of artists in their own work will be part of their own definition of the arts as student and as teacher.

Through creating with such an artist, the student-teacher is offered a new frame in which to re-consider the role of the arts in society and in formal education. Such an experience should disturb their existing understandings and instigate reflection. After a recent devising project⁴ led by shamanist performer Carran Waterfield, participating drama education students expressed the importance of the work to themselves. The following comments taken from student writing and interviews conducted both a month and a year after the project summarise the most typical responses: 'Through her workshops we were brought to challenge our assumptions, our own attitudes and our values. This was the true value of her work'.

For this student the creative process had prompted recognition of the various constraints he had accepted and allowed to shape not only his art making but his whole mind-set. Another, entrenched in the priority of measurable outcomes pervading educational institutions, reflected with delight: 'It was a search, an investigation, not just a technique or an end result'.

The experience enabled a third student to formalise her understanding of communal ritual performing as an individual *and* as part of a whole: 'I felt I was experiencing a real importance and unity and yet this was part of us'.

Such experiences were fully grounded in initial teacher training through a frame which encouraged informed evaluation and opportunity to build on the experience – the potential for wholesale and ongoing change is evident. At the moment, the institution of initial teacher education, itself shaped by dominant establishment views, lags behind contemporary developments in the arts which are being addressed within the school, within further and higher education arts courses, and which are evident even in parts of mainstream work (Waters, 1994). There is an overwhelming need for change at the root of the teaching profession in the way the arts can and do educate for life. The artist framed within initial teacher education is that agent for change.

Through creating a framework for the artist-in-education, one which recognises and embraces the disturbing, oppositional and innovative aspects of an artist, we can begin to realise the potential of such liaisons. If these were to constitute a core element in initial teacher education programmes for the arts, we would be harnessing both existing and future potential for the arts to operate significantly in education and in society.

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Textnotes

1. School policy statements about the arts often refer to the N.C.C. Arts in Schools Project's Arts 5-16 where the role of the arts is proposed to promote 'learning in and through the arts'. Whilst it describes these as complementary roles which might combine learning about aesthetic and technical qualities with an area of personal and social interest, it pinpoints the roles of such approaches as:

- to develop the concepts and skills which will enable young people to use the process of the arts;
- to widen their knowledge and understanding of the arts;
- to develop their critical sensibilities (1990:37);

There is a clear emphasis here on the acquisition of knowledge and skills proposing, it might seem, the directing of learning *in* to enable learning *about*.

2. Carran Waterfield operates as an artist on the edge of many "known" performance forms in Britain. Hers is a ritual form of theatre which communicates directly on a gut level as well as possessing great and varied resonance for spectators and participants personally and communally. Her paradoxical approach integrates and encourages intuitive freedom with rigorous physical training. Carran has found comrades and support in developing her own self-directed training with the actors of Odin Teatret and Eugenio Barba. She performs in both schools and performance venues internationally and teaches her craft in schools also. She has worked for the past two years as artist-in-residence at Warwick University. (see also "An Artist's Search for a Performance Form: Carran Waterfield and the Logic of Intuition". NTQ, forthcoming).
3. At Warwick University, students enrolled as drama specialists on the B.A. (Q.T.S.) course work with artists as a regular aspect of the course. The second year course seeks to explore drama by placing students in the margins between drama and other performance forms. Within the course, students work with artists who themselves work in integrated art forms on a devising residency. The role of the artist is framed both as a model of artist-in-education under scrutiny and as the facilitator of creativity – a provider of processes and tools. The artists work to facilitate the students' devising, using their approach to their performance form as model. The artists are drawn from a wide range of cultural traditions.
4. This residency, described in #3 above, occurred in Spring 1994.