The Arts as Productive Pedagogies

By

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The arts, as ways of apprehending and comprehending human reality and society, are of course important areas of knowledge in their own right. In spite of their often marginalised position in educational curricula world-wide, the evidence is now overwhelming that they are powerful instruments of pedagogy, that can augment, illuminate and unify the whole curriculum – including literacy, numeracy, natural and social sciences, technology etc – as well as vital co-curricular elements like the ethos and social relationships within schools and other learning contexts. This paper takes the Australian Productive Pedagogies model of effective schooling and analyses it in terms of how arts-based curriculum planning achieves all twenty key factors identified in the model. The principal source of examples will be from drama, which is seen as the integrating art form, and examples will also be drawn from dance, music, visual and media arts.

The arts, as ways of apprehending and comprehending human reality and society, are of course important areas of knowledge in their own right. In spite of their often marginalised position in educational curricula world-wide, the evidence is now overwhelming (e.g. Clegg 1972, Deasy 2002, Bamford 2006) that they are powerful instruments of pedagogy, that can augment, illuminate and unify the whole curriculum – including literacy, numeracy, natural and social sciences, technology etc – as well as vital co-curricular elements like the ethos and social relationships within schools and other learning contexts.

In 1979 the phrase ‘education for change’ was cut out of a proposed new education curriculum in Queensland. In 2006 it’s everywhere. IBM and employers forums are demanding from universities not professional skills and attributes, but creativity (another of yesterday’s discredited, taboo words) and teamwork, and communication skills. As the Harvard Business Review put it in 2004: “An arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business”. After Hong Kong rejoined China, its government set out a new education policy Learning to Learn, to replace the post-colonial obsolete British model, that had successfully given Hong Kong a literate population and a generation of engineers and business managers. Creativity, teamwork and communication skills, and more surprisingly independent thinking, feature throughout the document, and aesthetic skills are one of the five core sets of understandings. The problem is: how do you teach these things?

There are two answers, both surprisingly simple, and one leads to the other… only the education systems and their thinkers and managers find them hard to see, hard to break out of the paradigms of the last hundred and fifty years, even though they want to, since these were founded basically for the needs of a compliant workforce, an ambitious, competitive system of capital and commodity supply, and the logic of nineteenth century science and engineering. All these, education systems are still effectively structured to supply, and for them creativity, imagination and teamwork are not only surplus, but counter-productive.
The first answer is to look at how children actually learn, in the few years before schooling, when they are left to their own devices and the untutored ministrations of parents, friends and the people round them.

Children learn:
- Through all the senses
- Physically, emotionally and cognitively - all working together
- Through exploring and testing, trial and error and creative leaps
- By scaffolding on what is already known
- Collaboratively, through copying and social interaction
- By learning from everybody around, including peers & playmates, television, the people they see and meet, their surroundings
- By discovering and making sense of the external world through the worlds of social relationships and personal feeling & expression
- Through PLAY … experimenting with constructing order and meaning in consequence-free settings
- Through ART - through the artistry of play – musical, linguistic, visual & design, dance, dramatic play

Then we put them into schools, where we:
- Leave play outside in the playground - ‘None of that in here thanks’
- Focus on the brain and ban the emotions - ‘no tears’, ‘stop laughing’
- Restrict or ban movement and the body - ‘stop fidgeting’
- Restrict or ban language - ‘a quiet classroom is a good classroom’
- Restrict or ban social interaction - ‘Stop talking and listen to me’
- Replace collaboration with competition - ‘Who’s got top marks?’
- Replace their surroundings with - ‘the classroom’
- Replace exploring with THE curriculum - ‘This is today’s lesson’
- Replace playmates, people round them and television with - ‘teacher’
- Replace trial and error with right answers - ‘the teacher knows’
- Discourage creative and imaginative leaps – ‘that isn’t true’, that’s just fantasy’ ‘you mustn’t think that’, ‘that’s outside the curriculum’
- Transmit knowledge as - ‘new’ not scaffolded
- Ignore or marginalise the arts - ‘that’s messy/too noisy/disruptive/ nothing-to-do-with-learning-what-you-should-be-doing’

The inextricable kinship and interplay between play and art is outside the scope of this brief paper, except that
a. 20th Century elite artists like Picasso, Klee, Dohnanyi, Kodaly, Carl Off, Brecht, e.e. cummings, Martha Graham all recognized it and were willing to learn from children
b. There is a consistent train of good scholarship and developing praxis in the area over the last hundred years, from Dewey, through Arnaud Reid, Slade, Ward, Eisner, Greene, Best, Ross, Abbs, Swanwick, Ely, Sutton Smith – to Wright, Dunn, Creaser, Guss, Lindqvist, Golomb and Matthews among the host researching and writing currently.

That’s the second part of the answer: somehow open up the systems to bring play back
from the playground into the classroom, and bring art in from the margins to the middle of the curriculum. After all - apart from the benefits they bring of themselves to the education of the future - as Clegg, Gardner, Deasy and Bamford all emphatically show with hard figures, arts-rich school environments actually and spectacularly raise not lower both basic literacy and numeracy (drama raises literacy by up to 25%, music raises numeracy by about 6%), as well as providing a motivating and contextualized holistic learning environments for the other branches of knowledge deemed essential in schools.

Orthodox education systems have prepared the ground for it, and know very well in generic terms what’s needed. Most countries, like every state in Australia, are identifying the needs of effective curriculum and pedagogy. I very much like Queensland’s version, which they call the New Basics and the accompanying Productive Pedagogies through which the New Basics are to be taught (Queensland Dept of Education 2001):

The New Basics, to replace those old basics of read’n, ‘rit’n ‘n’ ‘rithmetic, are:

1. Life pathways and social futures
   Who am I and where am I going?

2. Multiliteracies and communications media
   How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?

3. Active citizenship
   What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?

4. Environments and technologies
   How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?

The twenty Productive Pedagogies comprise four sets of attributes:

**The first set – intellectual qualities:**

1. Higher order thinking
2. Deep knowledge
3. Deep understanding
4. Substantive conversation
5. Knowledge as problematic
6. Metalanguage (language about language and meaning)

To explain:

Teaching a topic or subject involves **higher-order thinking** which is transformative thinking, when students combine facts and ideas on the topic and synthesise, generalise, explain, hypothesise or arrive at some conclusion or interpretation. With **deep knowledge** they know the central, crucial ideas of a topic, and establish relatively complex connections, with **deep understanding** of the topic in a systematic, integrated or holistic way, to produce new knowledge by discovering relationships, solving problems, constructing explanations and drawing conclusions. There should be **substantive conversation** - interactions on the topic among students and with the teacher that are genuinely dialogue, and have intellectual substance about the topic - making distinctions, applying ideas, forming generalisations and raising questions. The students should be critically examining the **knowledge as problematic**, not as a fixed body of information, but rather as being constructed, and hence subject to political,
social and cultural influences and implications. The topic should give opportunities for **metalanguage** - explicit discussion about language, about meaning, technical vocabulary, and how the language is constructed - grammar and syntax. (EQ, adapted by the author).

**The second set: supportive classroom environment**

- Student direction
- Social support
- Academic engagement
- Self-regulation
- Explicit quality performance criteria

To explain:
The classroom should involve **student direction**, where students influence the specific activities or tasks they will do in a lesson, or how they will undertake them. There should be **social support**, an atmosphere of mutual respect and support between teacher and students, and among students, to make them feel free to take risks and try hard challenges, and that all students can succeed. There must be **academic engagement** where they are attentive and on task, showing enthusiasm for their work by raising questions, contributing to group activities and helping peers. There should be evidence of **self-regulation** – where the direction of student behaviour is implicit and self-regulatory – and there should be **explicit quality performance criteria**: frequent, detailed and specific statements about what the students are to do and to achieve.

**The third set: recognition of difference**

- Cultural knowledge
- Inclusivity
- Narrative
- Group identity
- Active citizenship

To explain:
**Cultural knowledge** involves the students understanding and valuing the diversity of beliefs, languages, practices and ways of knowing, with non-dominant groups given status, and **inclusivity** to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds are all actively engaged in learning. The teaching should emphasise **narrative**, knowledge and experience as causal and related, not as isolated facts. The school and classroom should be a supportive environment where **group identity** and identities are valued - both where difference is viewed positively and where there is a strong sense of community. Attempts should be made to encourage **active citizenship** with the students.

**The fourth set: connectedness**

- Knowledge integration
- Background knowledge
- Connectedness to the world
- Problem-based curriculum

To explain:
Lessons should have **knowledge integration** with material from a range of subject areas interwoven and integrated. There must be opportunities for students to use their
own background knowledge and experience to bring to the topics, skills and competencies they are studying and acquiring. The learning should have connectedness to the world - to competencies or concerns beyond the classroom, in the wider social context within which students live. There should be a problem-based curriculum where students are presented with specific practical, real or hypothetical problems (or sets of problems) to solve.

Perhaps the only depressing element of the Productive Pedagogies is the teachers’ handbook, given with in-service training to every teacher in Queensland. Each productive pedagogy is illustrated with an example of a lesson where that particular attribute is foregrounded. A good idea, but the lessons are usually uninspiring in their pedagogy, and the arts are almost entirely absent: visual arts and music make very fleeting and peripheral appearances, but drama (pedagogically the most integrative art-form) and dance are entirely absent. It is not difficult to demonstrate that in any good arts lesson most of the twenty productive pedagogies are present, and sometimes all twenty.

To give an example from experience, from a conventional school curriculum: the author was expected to teach The Industrial Revolution to two classes of twelve year old students.

Productive pedagogy, as any good teacher knows, is largely asking the right question in the right way. If you ask a group of twelve year old students what they know about the Industrial Revolution, they will say (and believe) they know nothing, as I found out from the first class, whom I therefore proceeded to bore thoroughly by telling them all about it, with copious blackboard notes and overhead transparencies of Stevenson’s Rocket, in which to my surprise they were not very interested. Fortunately for me, I had another class to teach this subject matter to, and time to revise my pedagogy. This group I split into pairs, and asked each pair to look around the room and make a list together of objects that could not have been there had they been sitting in this space three hundred years ago. When most of them had identified at least ten, we shared their findings, briefly. Next, I asked one in each pair to select one, and be an expert on it: to think of everything they knew about it – how it worked, what it was made of, how manufactured, where purchased, and so on. Their partner was to pretend to be a person from a village three hundred years ago, who had suddenly and unexpectedly time-warped into this room today. The task for the ‘modern expert’ was to take their time-traveller partner over to ‘their’ object and explain all about it, to make them feel less scared of the unknown. The traveller was not stupid, but knew absolutely nothing of anything that had been invented in the last three hundred years, and was to stop and question any words or statements they did not understand. The students scattered round the room, and the ‘experts’ discovered just how hard their task was, linguistically and conceptually. The ‘travellers’ equally quickly realised that they actually had the power, and enjoyed using it, as the volume of enjoyable frustration rose round the room. Back together, they all enjoyed sharing the bizarre explanations that had arisen as the ‘experts’ tried to explain electricity and plastic and fluoro lights to pre-industrial villagers. I then gathered the students into larger groups, to give us snapshots – frozen pictures that could come to life - of life in that village three hundred years ago, including family, and work and children. Though no historical context had been specified, they quickly and effortlessly demonstrated a range of practices, from a variety of cultures and historical stereotypes, but all accurately pre-industrial. Then I asked the original question, in a different form: ‘From what we’ve been doing, what do you think
the words *Industrial Revolution* might mean’? Within three minutes discussion the
students had created a shared picture of the change from manual labour in villages to
machines in mills and factories, about new inventions, about child labour down the
mines, about steam engines and jets, about unemployment and emigration, even about
Watt and his kettle and Benjamin Franklin – together with a brief debate about whether
electricity had been invented before or after the Revolution. I provided only some
focussing questions, and no rejections – the students had pooled all the knowledge.
A discussion about children’s lives before and after the Revolution arose, and I led a
circle game with the students identifying the games and toys we have now, and those
that children might have had then. Following that, I showed them a poster advertising
for child employees in a toy and game making factory, at the start of the Industrial
revolution, and for the next four weeks, throughout the English, Social Studies and Art
and Library lessons we set up and played the workers in this factory, till we had created
a range of games and toys and books and writings that represented the period of the
Industrial Revolution. I use the term ‘we’ as I too took a role as a child labourer, ‘Billy’
nominally their supervisor, but unlike them unable to read, which gave them command
of the available knowledge and a real status advantage. We finished the unit by
displaying all the students’ artefacts and writings, dressing up as Victorians, and
inviting the neighbouring classes to come and be escorted round the Great Exhibition of
1851, which symbolically was a concluding celebration of the Revolution, including
their songs and dances – see below.

Some of the problematic tasks that the students **played** through included:

**Drama and language:**
- The whole unit was drama-based, using sustained role-play where the
  students were constantly in role as factory workers.
- In these roles they practised negotiation, discussion, presentation,
  explanation.
- They wrote handbooks for their inventions, diaries as factory workers
- They kept ‘family’ scrapbooks and a ‘store’ of letters and news-clippings
  that might be discovered three hundred years later in your family attic’.
- At the ‘Great Exhibition’ they presented a collage drama of their work and
  domestic lives.

**Music & media:**
- The students collected or invented sounds that might have been heard in
  the village three hundred years ago, recorded them and used them to make a
  background soundscape to their living images
- They then incorporated them in a musical soundscape that evoked the
  period and the atmosphere of the village.
- Then they did the same for the factory, incorporating a video collage of
  machine images.

**Visual arts and poetry:**
- The students looked at a nineteenth century ‘alphabet of flowers’ for rich
  children.
- They designed their own ABC for working children in the ‘ragged
  schools’, creating a picture and a verse illustrating each letter.
- They designed the layout and cover too.
Design, technology, maths and writing:
• The students were shown a picture of men in a tavern gambling on the number of rats that a terrier dog could kill in a given time, and learned that Billy’s young brother brought in a few pence to the family income by supplying the rats:
• They designed a clever rat-trap that would catch rats and keep them alive for several days. It had to be made of very cheap materials.
• They drew a scale model, and then make one that can be assembled from a small package.
• Design and write an instruction leaflet for how to put it together and use it, both for children who can read, and children who can’t.

History, Visual arts, Music and English:
There was bitter argument about the need for child labour: keeping them off the streets when their parents were working and keeping the factories economic versus the need to give children childhood and educate them.

The students were asked to read part of the Leifchild report on child labour, and use some of its findings in their arguments and graphics:
They had to take one side of the argument, and prepare:
• a speech to give at a public rally
• a poster for your side
• a cartoon attacking the opposition
• a marching song to inspire the rally

Dance, drama, music and science:
A music lesson on rhythmic work songs (including sea shanties and Afro-American work-songs) was tied into this unit
• The students learned to sing industrial revolution mill-songs ‘Keep that wheel a-turning’ and ‘Poverty poverty knock’.
• From this the students explored the rhythms of machines like looms and steam engines
• They developed dance sequences based on the rhythms and the human stories attached to the industrial revolution.
• They wrote and rehearsed a work shanty with appropriate movement sequences.

It does not take a lengthy analysis of this sequence of work in terms of the twenty productive pedagogies to realise that in most lessons all twenty of them were operating, and that play and art were both in the forefront of the whole curricular project.

There were other radical pedagogical factors at work in these lessons too, some of which would be uncomfortable to many orthodox teachers. One of these has already been alluded to: that the children were placed in positions of empowerment and knowledge rather than ignorance – given a ‘mantle of the expert’ rather than treated as ones who did not know and had to be informed. Another concomitant of that is that the students were in charge of much of their learning, which for many teachers would be a difficult position, potentially reducing their own status by making the children to a large
degree independent learners. A third was that much of the learning was collaborative, with the children working in groups and peer-teaching each other – supplying the knowledge that each other did not have, and the ideas and skills to complete the task. This goes against the ethos of individual competition, but more significantly also challenges the notion of the teacher as the only source of knowledge, expertise and teaching in the room.

All of these show that both play and art are immensely productive as pedagogical tools, but that they are also subversive to orthodox systems of authority… which is perhaps why in traditional educational systems they have tended to be marginalised or completely absent. And turning the systems around to welcome rather than repel, despise or fear them is a matter of strategy, beyond the scope of this paper.


References: