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Putting Art to Work: How arts-based learning helps business survive and thrive

The MFA is the new MBA... An arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business. (Pink, 2004:21)

Introduction

Since Rob Austin, Harvard Business Professor declared ‘The economy of the future will be about creating value and appropriate forms, and no one knows more about the processes for doing that than artists’¹ (Adler, 2006:487) art and its relationship with management education has been the focus of growing debate and discussion.

As a consultant with 15 years experience in corporate learning and development and with a chartered status in Occupational Psychology I am now studying Fine Art at the Glasgow School of Art. With expertise in the business world and a new understanding of the art world, I have written this article to gain a better understanding of arts-based learning and explore the benefits of bringing artists into business organisations.

With reference to the pedagogy of arts-based learning, I will highlight the key challenges facing businesses today and investigate how the arts are playing an essential role in twenty-first century organisational development. The article will introduce a definition of arts-based learning and review successful examples of businesses using arts-based initiatives. Specifically, the Catalyst Project at Unilever and the RE:creation arts programme at Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC).

Finally, implications for businesses will be considered along with the premise that putting art to work in businesses will help those organisations survive and thrive.

¹ Quoted in an e-mail to author Nancy Adler and published in her 2008 article: ‘The Arts and Leadership: Now That We Can Do Anything, What will we do?’

**Why the Arts?
Why Now?**

"The corporate landscape is changing."

Daniel Pink presented the notion that an arts degree was more highly prized than a business degree in 2004 as a 'Breakthrough Idea' for the Harvard Business Review². But what has changed in the business world to make art graduates so valuable? There are three key factors to consider: the emerging business environment, traditional management education approaches and an awareness of the artistic process.

First, the corporate landscape is changing. To summarise Adler (2006) organisations now have to cope with global connectedness, the rise in power of the private sector, an increase in the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty in the business environment, advances in technology and employees yearning to find meaning in what they do.

In addition, Nissley (2010:9) notes that an economic downturn makes it harder for businesses to 'find ways to deliver value'. Thus, as the business environment becomes more diverse, employees have to find new ways to manage complexity and prioritise information. In meeting these challenges, people need a new set of skills.

However, traditional management education is not providing organisations with these new skills. Joan Gallos investigated the reasons for this shift and suggests that previous approaches to learning and development are based in scientific rhetoric and focus on the logical-rational paradigm. Marshall Young, Director of Oxford University's Strategic Leadership Course explains:

Modern Western culture implants a deep-seated assumption that equates thinking and language with logic and literacy. Logic and literacy are clearly important, but they are only part of the notions of perception and communication that an aesthetic perspective allows:

(Nissley, 2010:17)

² Pink further developed the idea that creative skills would become a valuable commodity in his 2005 book 'A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future.' New York: Riverhead Books.

"Arts organisations can teach a variety of skills not in the normal curriculum"

Thus, conventional development methodologies have focused on analytical skills and have tended to reinforce models of critical business thinking. However, with demand increasing for individuals with proven skills in innovation, creativity and adaptability, who better to learn from than artists and arts organisations?

Julie Muraco observes that artists are now essential to corporations.

Arts organisations can teach corporate America a variety of skills and processes that are not emphasised in the normal curriculum... these skills are desperately needed by corporate America's workforce to remain competitive in the global economy³

Nissley (2010:9)

I agree with Adler in believing that the rapid and powerful changes happening in the economy, our society and technology have created an ideal moment for the 'cross-fertilisation'⁴ of arts and business. Nissley goes further by speculating businesses must collaborate with artists in order to survive the economic downturn (Nissley, 2010: 18).

³ Muraco was speaking as the Senior Managing Director of NASDAQ Stock Market Capital Markets Group and a Board Member for Americans for the Arts.

⁴ Adler introduces this term on p. 487 of Adler (2008). The term is also referenced in Kerr & Darsø (2008) and Nissley (2010).

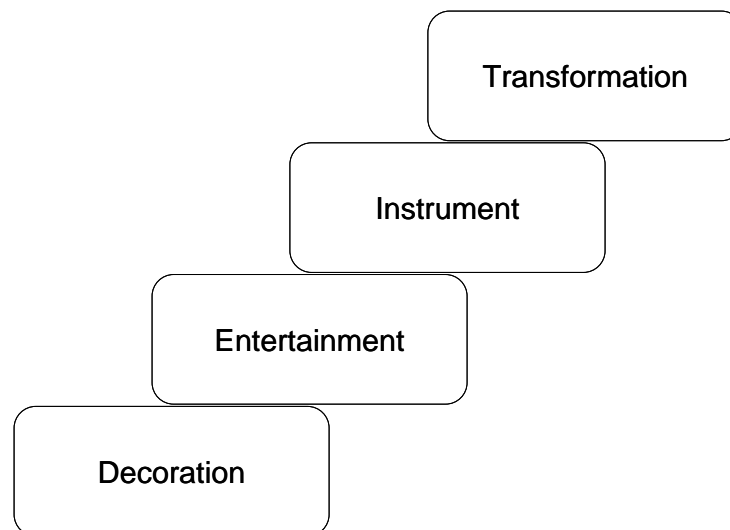
Artful Development

Initiatives which involve the arts act as powerful catalysts to fast-track learning, develop key organisational competencies and release latent potential in employees. What then, is arts-based learning? Professor Schiuma defines arts-based learning as:

“Any organisational and management intervention using one or more art forms to enable people to undergo an art experience within an organisational context, as well as to embed the arts as a business asset. It is primarily and fundamentally an experience-based process involving and engaging people both rationally and emotionally through either active or passive participation.”⁵

Schiuma (2009:07)

Arts-based learning has also been categorised into four levels by Lotte Darsø⁶, based on the purpose of the intervention and the impact on the people and the organisation.



⁵ Professor Giovanni Schiuma wrote a paper on behalf of Arts & Business, a UK non-for-profit organisation which ‘advocates the power of the arts to business and brokering creative business and arts relationships that bring benefits to all’. Website: www.artsandbusiness.org.uk. Schiuma’s 2009 paper was written in response to John Knell’s 2004 paper ‘Arts Works – why businesses need the arts’. Arts & Business noted that Knell’s paper concluded that it was not possible to adequately demonstrate the value, role and impact of arts-based initiatives and commissioned Schiuma to provide robust case study evidence of arts-based learning.

⁶ Lotte Darsø is a faculty member of the Copenhagen Business School and founder of the Masters Program in Leadership and Innovation in Complex Systems (LAICS). Her book ‘*Artful Creation – Learning-Tales of Arts-in-Business*’ (2004) is credited in every subsequent paper published in the area of arts-based learning. Therefore, although other descriptions of arts-based learning have been presented in the literature since, I decided to use Darsø’s model for its wholeness and simplicity.

In Darsø's model, 'art' encompasses all artistic practices including visual art, dance, drama, music, photography and film (Kerr & Darsø, 2008: 3). She describes how arts-based learning can happen at the individual, group and organisational level and how the depth and impact of each arts-based initiative increases from category 1 'art as decoration' to category 4 'art as transformation'.

"We hide behind the business code of language, a language stripped of passion"

So what do arts-based learning initiatives look like? In 1999 Unilever launched a new business strategy which required greater creativity and initiative from its employees. Seeking to establish a culture of entrepreneurship, Catalyst was introduced in 2000. Led by Alastair Creamer, the programme used 'visual arts, poetry, photography, playwriting, circus performance and jazz' (Buswick, et al, 2004: 4). Many of the classes were voluntary and each encouraged innovation and experimentation. Projects were run by a selection of arts organisations and artists-in-residence and although most ran separately, they were all co-ordinated to develop the skills and behaviours which would support the emergence of the desired culture of creativity and innovation.

*'We are in the business of branded consumer goods, and we believe bringing art and design skills into our environment helps us in advertising, marketing, new product development and gives us an advantage over our competitors'*⁷

(Kneil, 2004:23).

The impact on staff was audible. After taking part in a poetry session one manager said "we hide behind the business code of language, a language that's stripped of passion". Another, following a photography course commented "I learned what it means to take risks and why being courageous is part of making creative

⁷ Comments made by James Hill, Chairman of Unilever, in an interview with the Financial Times August 23rd 2003.

decisions”⁸. Buswick et al include many other comments from employees and while the project was not without its sceptics at first, the responses were universally positive afterwards.

Like Catalyst, RE:creation is another excellent example of an ‘art as transformation’ learning initiative. Accountancy firm PwC was undergoing fundamental changes to the organisational structure due to new regulations being introduced into the accountancy industry and the business commissioned a programme for 750 employees. The programme delivered on four key business objectives: to help PwC attract and retain the best people; to create a culture of creativity; to challenge people to think and act differently and to support employees in adopting new work practices.

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We spend most our daily lives in each other’s company; it’s very powerful to begin to have a sense of the full resources of the team in human terms.”

The MAP Consortium developed up to 20 bespoke art projects to transfer learning over an extended period of time. Projects included visual arts projects to challenge thinking styles, film making to promote team-working and gallery visits to aid communication. One project took staff ‘off-site’ to a drama studio where rehearsal room techniques were used to develop collaboration and preparation skills before client presentations.

One of PwC’s partners commented “I know it sounds strange but I think the significant thing is that we have become more human with each other. We spend most our daily lives in each other’s company; it’s very powerful to begin to have a sense of the full resources of the team in human terms.” (Schiuma, 2009: 31)

⁸ Both these comments were taken from Buswick et al (2004).

In her book *Artful Creation – Learning-Tales of Arts-in-Business* Darsø evaluates the impact of arts-based learning programmes (including Catalyst at Unilever). She concludes that art can demonstrably transform businesses, particularly when given the opportunity to align and inform the strategy of an organisation and change people's attitudes.

However, such transformations do not happen in one day and as a result, Darsø advocates a partnership approach where arts organisations become trusted advisors of the business and deliver multiple projects over a period of time.

Implications for Business

Encounters with the arts are transformational: they engage learners and bring people in closer touch with themselves, with the world, and with new possibilities.

Joan Gallos

What does the growing interest in arts-based learning mean for businesses? In an economic downturn, the first implication must be that businesses have an opportunity to survive difficult trading conditions, attract and retain the best people and internalise skills, behaviours and beliefs which they need to build an organisational culture which allows them to thrive in the future.

Furthermore, although many artists already work with businesses, I believe there remains a real gap between the two communities in terms of language, awareness and levels of respect. To paraphrase Knell (2004:45), arts-based learning has the potential to break down barriers of ignorance and build up a common currency of appreciation. In doing so, businesses would learn to recognise the value and skills of artists and the artistic process and partner more strategically with arts organisations and gain the most possible from that collaborative relationship.

Imagination is an expression of the human passion for possibility and a powerful source of hope, promise and creative action. (Gallos, 2008:43).

For me, the most important implication for business is that arts-based learning is transformation, not only at the organisational level, but at the personal level. When people are given the opportunity to experience art, they rediscover what it is to be human. The world of business has changed, more than a century of automisation and technological advances has created a multitude of 'knowledge-based' jobs which strip employees of significance. David Whyte⁹, poet and consultant, recognises that people yearn to derive meaning from what they do at work and bringing artists into the business and involving employees in creative processes achieves this aim.

⁹ David Whyte is mentioned in Adler (2006); Gallos (2008) and Nissley (2010).

Conclusion

In an economic downturn employee development and training can be early victims of organisational spending cuts. Yet, this brief review of arts-based learning suggests that businesses *need* the arts to survive in a world of unprecedented change.

Unilever and PwC have already benefited from bringing artists into their organisations and the exponential growth in arts-based learning further suggests corporate leaders realise the value of 'arts-inspired creativity as a means to realise the upside of the downside' (Nissley, 2010: 17).

So will putting art to work help businesses survive and thrive? It is true that not all artists and art organisations will have the fluency to communicate in the business world. Therefore, it will not be as simple as rounding up artists and putting them in the nearest office. However, there are a growing number of individuals with 'unusual' careers, like my own, which make them experts in two worlds: art and business. These people have a huge amount to offer and I do believe the right partnerships will deliver transformational results.

As Einstein observed "the world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation". The time is right for artists to transform business and re-introduce meaning and significance into the workplace.

I conclude that stronger alliances between artists and businesses, provide a wonderful opportunity for art to move beyond simple 'decoration' and truly transform individuals, the economy and our broader society.

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Find out more

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