

Hidden Treasures - work related learning using the arts

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Abstract

There are a number of personal and social skills that are highly regarded in workplaces today. This research explores the ways that the arts and learning with the arts can motivate adults to learn and build the skills needed to succeed at work. Through several case studies it unfolds the learning experiences of adults who undertook work related learning courses, which utilised the skills, techniques and environments offered by the performing and visual arts. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the participants' perceptions of learning with the arts and their understanding of its value for their personal and professional development. The application of the Contextual Model of Learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000), to analyse learning with the arts through a personal, sociocultural and physical context, provides a framework for this study.

Introduction - Why the arts?

This study explores what the arts can offer industry, business and workplaces as an alternative learning focus. The arts are a unique medium for learning and as Nolan (1996 p.48) contends the arts can:

destabilise fixed ideas and existing identities; help find new ways of seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling; allow new identifications to be made between people and help us move into a different space where different rules apply: the rules of rhythm, colour, line, form, movement, melody and harmony. And to find from those experiences new ways of experiencing our communities, our neighbours, our society.

The arts have the potential to stimulate creativity and innovative thinking through a variety of different processes and mediums (Nolan, 1996; Boughton, Eisner & Ligtoet, 1996; Jones, 1999; Catterall, 2002; Kerka, 2003). The arts may be able to offer workplaces a variety of ways to tackle new and existing learning challenges.

Creativity, inventiveness, teamwork and communication skills are highly regarded in the workforce today (Brown, 2000; Cross, 2004). Recent research into multi-arts learning in the USA (Catterall, 2002) has identified a variety of skills that could be developed from using the arts for learning. These skills include creativity and creative thinking; self-confidence; risk-taking; empathy for others and collaboration skills; leadership; higher order thinking skills and ownership of learning (Catterall, 2002).

Defining the arts

Miller (1991) states that when asking the general population to define the arts you can expect to get a variety of responses and some confusion. Miller's (1991, p108) definition of the arts embraces the complexity:

The arts, we find, form a very curious part of our culture. They are a bit like a religion: in theory they're held in great esteem. They are trotted out on important occasions, people dress up for them, and they're treated with cautious reverence.

What makes the arts so mysterious is the diversity of all the different areas that can be embraced under the umbrella term of the arts. Some of the main areas that are most recognisable in the arts include the fine arts, the applied arts and the decorative arts. The fine arts have evolved to include painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music (Chilvers & Osborne, 1997). Applied arts relates to well designed and aesthetically pleasing works that are also functional including ceramics, furniture, woodwork, metalwork and textiles. (Chilvers & Osborne, 1997). Decorative arts are defined as the decoration or embellishment an object that has a practical purpose (Clarke, 2001).

There appears to be an ongoing struggle between the formal perception of the arts and a more current view, which attempts to include modern forms of artistic expression such as fashion design, graphic design, film, television and music videos (Australia Council, 1998; Jones, 2001). The diversity of definitions and debate about the many areas that have been associated with the arts over the years provides an understanding of the way indigenous cultures view the creative elements of human nature. Nachmanovitch (1990) refers to the Balinese who, when questioned about the arts, respond by stating "We have no art. Everything we do is art." (p19).

While this study recognises the variety and the diversity offered by all understandings of the arts this investigation is limited to learning with the performing and visual arts. The literature on the learning benefits of the arts also seems to draw on this more traditional interpretation of the arts.

Benefits of learning with the arts

While there are different debates about how to define and what should be included in the arts, there is a common agreement concerning the benefits the arts can bring to society:

They can celebrate both tradition and change. They link the past to the future. The arts and education in and through the arts, can celebrate traditional values and they can reflect and encourage development. (Jones, 2001, p9)

School environments have successfully used art processes in non art education areas to enhance general learning (Catterall, 2002). Kerka (1997) argues that the arts and

humanities can benefit adult learners by offering them alternative ‘intuitive, relational, kinaesthetic, visual and aural ways’ of developing new understandings (p.1). Aspin (2001) suggests that the arts also offer various ways of reflection upon, reconstruction and distortion of the real life situations, which allow people to re-evaluate their experiences.

The arts in work related learning

Researchers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Kearns, 2001) have identified a range of skills important for workers in the future. The Employability Skills Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) was developed to assist in supporting the professional development and work related learning initiatives designed to ensure the employability of any individual through out their working lives. These skills include communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, life-long learning and the use of technology. It also included personal attributes such as enthusiasm, reliability, positive self-esteem, sense of humour, motivation and adaptability.

The key for connecting learning with the arts to work related learning involves the many areas identified as employability skills which match the potential skills offered by learning with the arts (Catterall, 2002). Catterall’s (2002) findings about skills developed through learning with the arts include most of the social and interpersonal skills outlined above in the Employability Skills Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

Evidence can be provided that learning with the arts has been used by workplaces where music, visual arts and performing arts have been incorporated into work related learning programs. Music has been used to inspire and motivate teams and improve communication skills. (Harley, 2004; Muqbil, 2002; Rostron, 2003). Music has also been used to encourage improvisation, innovation as well as management and leadership skills (Walzer & Salcher, 2003, Rostron, 2003)

The visual arts have been used successfully as ‘ingredients of inspiration’ in training design (Cohen & Jurkovic, 1997, p.2). The performing arts have been used to develop leadership, communication and management skills (Townsend, 2003).

It appears that the arts do have a role to play in developing the interpersonal and social skills needed for all workplaces today. This research looks at what individuals experience when developing work related skills with the arts.

Research design

In this research study a number of cases provided a picture of what is experienced when work related learning involves aspects of the performing and visual arts. The research highlighted and reinforced some of the benefits that learning through the arts could bring to work related learning, such as increased motivation to learn, creativity, innovation, communication and interpersonal skills. The case studies included a variety of data sources such as: semi-structured participant interviews; semi-structured interviews with a

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key people from the arts learning providers; participant reflection of learning experiences (modes of learning inventory); review of documents from the arts learning experience and the researcher's experience as a participant on arts learning programs.

The participants of this study represent a diversity of workplace roles. Participants included human resources managers, training facilitators, a marketing executive, an accountant, a research analyst, information technology specialist, a graphic designer, a consultant and an occupational therapist. Participants interviewed worked in both the public and private sector and had a range of work and life experiences. The cases chosen for this paper were involved in work related learning conducted in a performing arts setting and a visual arts setting.

Performing arts cases

Six participants were involved in the performing arts learning courses, provided by NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Arts). NIDA is the major theatre school in Australia. For over a decade NIDA has developed a performing arts learning program catering to the corporate sector and offering different programs both nationally and at NIDA's main facilities in Sydney. NIDA acknowledges that communication is performance and develops a comprehensive range of courses to meet the needs of different people wanting to build confidence and expertise in communication skills (NIDA, 2004).

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As a way of offering the community access to this publicly funded performing arts learning facility the Corporate Performance Program was designed as part of NIDA's Open Program.

The two NIDA programs chosen for this research were Corporate Performance and Women in Business. These programs gave the participants an opportunity to look at the key elements of corporate performance and communication such as physical presence; rehearsal process; reaching your audience; see yourself as others see you; presentation as performance and masking (NIDA, 2004). Five of the participants attended the Corporate Performance Course and one of the women attended the Women in Business Course.

Visual arts cases

The University of Western Sydney (UWS), like many other Australian universities, run continuing education programs where shorter courses are designed to run alongside the traditional university study program. In 2004, the UWS Continuing Education Unit offered a new course, Creative Escape (Creative Escape, 2004). This four-day program comprised of a variety of creative experiences including art lessons, walks, tours and demonstrations. Workshops were designed to meet all levels of experience. There were a variety of courses exposing participants to many visual arts mediums including acrylics, pastels, watercolours, oils, paper making, collage, life drawing and botanical illustration. There were also tours of the local artist trails and history of the Hawkesbury area (Creative Escape, 2004). Participants working in the different arts mediums were also encouraged to interact with other groups to get a full experience of the many different aspects of Creative Escape.

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The main target audience was semi-retired people with an interest in the arts, however, the coordinators found many participants attended for work related learning reasons.

Three women attending Creative Escape for work development reasons agreed to be involved in this study. Two participants attended the Through a Looking Brush collage and reflection workshop and the other participant attend Contemporary Acrylics.

The contextual model of learning

The culture of learning in the workplace can be observed through three different lenses - the personal, the sociocultural and the physical. The Contextual Model of Learning, developed by Falk and Dierking (2000), provides a framework that develops an understanding of learning within these three contexts. When developing productive strategies these three contexts overlap and create a complex understanding of learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

The factors that relate to the personal context include motivation and expectations; interest, prior knowledge and experience, and choice and control (Falk & Dierking, 2002). The sociocultural context of learning relates to the understanding that 'humans are inherently social creatures' (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p.2). These include learning within group, facilitated mediation by others and cultural overlays. Physical context incorporates the factors of advance preparation, setting, design, and subsequent reinforcing events and experiences (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p. 2). These factors involve creating a familiar learning environment where individuals feel comfortable within the setting. This comfort enhances the learning experience and encourages learners to revisit the space to build on their learning over time.

The Contextual Model of Learning was used in this research to analyse the participants' perceptions of their learning with the performing and visual arts.

Personal context

Most human learning is self-motivated, emotionally satisfying, and very personally rewarding. Humans are highly motivated to learn... when they are engaged... when they are freed from anxiety, fear and other negative mental states; when they have choices and control over their learning; and when the challenges of the task meet their skills. (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p.32)

For the NIDA participants the motivating factors that helped them sign up for a NIDA course included recommendations from work colleagues, family and the media. During the performing arts learning there were a number of factors that maintained motivation. They found the performing arts learning experience to be inspiring, liberating, challenging, powerful, releasing, confidence building, revealing and these aspects assisted in maintaining their motivation throughout the course. Creative Escape participants also found their workshops inspiring and well designed offering them a learning experience to review and develop their creative abilities.

The expectations were similar for all NIDA participants. They were interested in developing communication, influence, presentation and other interpersonal skills. Creative Escape participants were attending for both personal and professional reasons. They wanted to re-engage their own creativity as well as finding new ways of using visual arts techniques in their different workplaces.

Both NIDA and Creative Escape participants had prior knowledge and experience with different areas of the arts. Learning for both personal and professional reasons was significant for all participants and most of them ensured that they took advantage of all learning opportunities offered to them. They understood their preferred learning styles and undertook a proactive approach to their ongoing learning and development.

Sociocultural context

. . . learning is both an individual and a group experience. What someone experiences and learns, let alone why and how someone engages in such experiences, are inextricably bound to the social, cultural and historical context in which that experience and learning occurred. (Falk and Dierking, 2002, p.1)

A majority of the research participants attended the NIDA program with a workplace colleague and they all understood the positive and negative aspects of learning with peers. The participants discussed that some of the benefits of learning with others included support and shared understanding when learning with work colleagues. This shared understanding assisted the application of new skills back in the workplace. Another positive aspect revealed after these participants completed the course was the opportunity to find out more about a work colleague by observing them in a different setting. The Creative Escape participants attended their programs without workplace colleagues.

All participants looked forward to learning with people from other organisations. Interacting with people from other workplaces allowed the opportunity to learn about other industries, take risks with learning and form new networks. Taking risks appeared to be easier when learning with people from other companies. Past experience had shown if something does not go as planned when learning with work colleagues there is the possibility of negative implications back in the workplace.

Many of the participants were involved in facilitating their own meetings and training back in the workplace and commented that they gained a great deal from observing the NIDA and Creative Escape tutors and the successful strategies they used.

Both the NIDA and Creative Escape participants worked in organisations where the culture encouraged and supported personal learning and development. An important element of work related learning was the idea that there were two main stakeholders – the individual learner and the organisation where they worked and any learning undertaken should provide benefits for both. Therefore new ideas and skills developed during this

learning were shared and embraced enthusiastically back in the workplace. The participants also understood the potential of learning cultures in other industries and were confident that they would benefit from learning in a culture different to where they worked.

Physical context

The architecture and “feel” of a building or natural setting, the way learners are oriented, the design features which guide learners through the experience and the sights, sounds and smells, strongly influence learning. (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p.1)

The learning space, physical activity and communication style in the design of the NIDA and Creative Escape programs appeared to be critical to the positive evaluation of these work related learning experiences. All participants commented on the experiential design of the courses and how beneficial it was to be fully engaged in the learning. They felt confident to take risks and found the learning fun and enjoyable. All participants enjoyed learning away from the office and found both the NIDA and Creative Escape learning spaces promoted creativity and were very different to their usual workspaces. This allowed them to become completely engaged in the learning experience without any distractions.

There were many subsequent reinforcing events and experiences for both arts learning experiences. NIDA participants embraced performing arts skills such as visualisation and breathing finding they were immediately applicable to the workplace and to their life in general. Some participants were more assertive and confident with their communication and open to messages about how they communicated in the workplace.

The Creative Escape participants undertook ongoing visual and creative arts learning courses in a variety of contexts in the six months following the workshop. At these ongoing learning opportunities they tested one of the major lessons gained at Creative Escape. All three of the participants discovered they were critical of their abilities when developing their creative skills. At Creative Escape they acknowledged their creative abilities and ensured this new positive attitude, and new found confidence, was part of their ongoing learning and arts learning experience.

Discussion and conclusion

The similarities in the Employability Skills Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) and the skills developed when learning with the arts (Catterall, 2002) show that the arts have some social and interpersonal skill development opportunities that would be helpful in work related learning situations. The preliminary analysis of the data collected shows the benefits of well-designed learning experiences based on the performing and visual arts. The common themes emerging from the data to describe an arts learning experience include experiential, fun and enjoyable, taking risks and learning from mistakes, learning from others, revealing, confidence building, time efficient, powerful,

challenging, rewarding, liberating, inspiring and makes valuable connections between different contexts.

All the participants seemed to identify the similar characteristics of the personal, sociocultural and physical contexts of the learning experiences provided by NIDA. The personal context included body awareness including breathing techniques, visualization and assertiveness through growing confidence in personal communication style. The sociocultural context included facilitation techniques, positive reinforcement and the opportunity to “inspire the imagination” when communicating and presenting to colleagues and clients in the workplace. The physical context offered by NIDA created a safe environment, away from the workplace, where individuals were fully engaged through out the course. There were also ongoing reinforcing aspects common to most, which included further reading and incorporating learning on an ongoing basis. Some participants were planning future learning with NIDA and most recommended the course to peers or shared some of the techniques and skills with workplace colleagues.

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For the Creative Escape participants the personal context skills developed included visualization, experience with different mediums and techniques, self-awareness to be less critical of one’s own work, encouragement to think more broadly when being creative and learning to trust an unfamiliar process. The sociocultural context was significant to Creative Escape participants. They were motivated by the variety of outputs of the other people attending the workshops and they found the feedback they received for their own work from others valuable to their ongoing learning. Comments that the different tutors made also had an impact on the participants. The visual arts learning participants had similar responses to NIDA participants about the physical context of the learning environment including being away from the workplace and in a learning space that was peaceful and grounding where they could become fully engaged in an arts learning experience.

The data suggests that the performing and visual arts can offer work related learning experiences that are experiential, challenging and enjoyable which are key elements when trying to engage adults in building their professional skills on a continuing basis.

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