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## Learning with the arts: what opportunities are there for work related adult learning?

Claire Manning

*University of Wollongong*, [claire@magnolialearning.com.au](mailto:claire@magnolialearning.com.au)

Irina M. Verenikina

*University of Wollongong*, [irina@uow.edu.au](mailto:irina@uow.edu.au)

Ian M. Brown

*University of Wollongong*, [ibrown@uow.edu.au](mailto:ibrown@uow.edu.au)

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# Learning with the arts: what opportunities are there for work-related adult learning?

Claire Manning, Irina Verenikina and Ian Brown

Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

## Introduction

Modern work-related adult learning needs to respect the unity of human beings as citizens, individuals and workers. 'People's competencies cannot be reduced simply to their vocational skills. Social relations, personal development and cultural and human values are important too' (UNESCO 1999, 3). This statement made at the UNESCO conference more than a decade ago is still highly relevant to today's workforce in Australia where creativity, inventiveness and effective communication skills are highly regarded by employers (Brown 2000). As stated by the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), 'generic skills are taking an increased importance in Australia and internationally' (NCVER 2003, 1).

The importance of the development of generic employability skills has recently been highlighted in the context of a UK study of mature age learners who 'engage in learning for a range of complex and diffuse reasons' and are 'wishing to extend their lifelong learning through the intersections of career and personal development' (Jackson and Jamieson 2009, 410). A lack of generic skills such as confidence, reflective learning and teamwork was found to account for 'barriers to accessing and sustaining training and employment', particularly in women who have been unemployed for a long period of time (Willott and Stevenson 2006, 441). Researchers in Hong Kong emphasise the need for a 'balanced and comprehensive learning experience in the academic, vocational, organisational, social service, arts and sports domains to prepare students for employment, for learning and for life' (Cheung and Wong 2006, 99).

What kind of learning can be offered to the adult learners who want to further develop and enhance their generic employability skills as part of their career development or their search for employment? While work-related learning is increasingly seen as shifting away from either work place or learning institutions as the only places of 'valid' learning (Burke et al. 2009) it appears to be timely to explore other possibilities for learning 'unmediated by educational institutions or practitioners' (Chappell 2003, 22). This paper aims to explore the potential role of the arts-related courses and what they can offer adult learners in their pursuit of work-related learning.

Literature indicates that learning with the arts can be beneficial for the personal, social and emotional development of people at various ages (Nolan 1996; Jones 2001; Catterall 2002; Deasy 2002; Kerka 2003; McCarthy et al. 2005). However, there is limited research into the role of the arts in relation to the benefits to work-related adult learning. (McCarthy et al. 2005).

The study reported in this article explored the perceptions and meaning of learning with the arts for nine adult learners who willingly undertook arts-based courses as part of their professional development. The study was qualitative in nature and included a series of three sequential interviews designed to capture the participants' reflective thoughts regarding their experience of learning with the arts and how they related it to their work. It aimed to explore the potential benefits of such learning for the workplace by placing the opinions of the participants next to the employability skills valued in modern workplaces as identified by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST 2002).

### Learning with the arts

Research into arts education in schools identified how arts-based learning can equip young learners with a range of skills useful for future work roles regardless of the chosen vocation (Catterall 2002; Deasy 2002; McCarthy et al. 2005; Seidel et al. 2009). However, there is still limited research into the ways that learning with the arts can assist the development of an adult learner's skills for workplace application.

A variety of ways were identified in which the arts can influence people (Nolan 1996; Kerka 1997; Haynes 1999; Jones 2001; Catterall 2002; McCarthy et al. 2005; Willott and Stevenson 2006; Seidel et al. 2009). The arts offer unique approaches for learning as they are able to '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' (Nolan 1996, 48).

The arts have the potential to stimulate creativity and innovative thinking through a variety of different processes and mediums (Haynes 1999; Jones 1999, 2001; Catterall 2002). Kerka (1997, 1) suggests that the arts and humanities can benefit adult learners by offering them alternative 'intuitive, relational, kinesthetic, visual and aural ways' of developing new understandings. According to Seidel and colleagues (Seidel et al. 2009, 18) arts educators believe that learning with the arts can 'foster broad dispositions and habits of mind, especially the capacity to think creatively'. McCarthy and others (McCarthy et al. 2005, 8) found improved attitudes and ability in all learning which included increased 'attendance, self-discipline, self-efficacy, and interest in school'.

There is a range of changing understandings and activities that could be embraced under the umbrella term of 'the arts' (Costantoura 2000; Jones 2001; McCarthy et al. 2005). While the focus of this study is delimited to the experiences of adult learners with the performing and visual arts, it draws upon a wider range of literature including work-related arts-based learning with music and creative writing.

### The arts and work-related learning

In the United Kingdom, North America and Australia, the arts and business sector relationships have predominately focussed on philanthropy, sponsorship and social investment (Arts and Business 2004; Bartelme 2005; Australian Business Arts Foundation [ABAF] 2006). However, in recent years new relationships have evolved where artists and arts organisations have been

invited to share their creativity skills with the business sector in a range of ways (Bartelme 2005). New alliances have formed where arts-based approaches are used to support the development of creative solutions to business challenges (Beckwith 2003; VanGundy and Naiman 2003; Arts and Business 2004; Buswick, Creamer, and Pinard 2004; Hall 2004; Sandle 2004; Bartelme 2005; McQueenie 2005; Osburn and Stock 2005).

Literature reflects recent trends where a range of different arts techniques have been integrated into workplace training and development utilising arts disciplines such as performing arts, visual arts, music and creative writing (Hadfield 2000; Beckwith 2003; VanGundy and Naiman 2003; Bartelme 2005; Hall 2004; Seifert and Buswick 2005; Willott and Stevenson 2006).

The literature reports on attempts to utilise arts to foster creative thinking, promote new ways to understand leadership and strengthen collaborative communication skills within a variety of organisations, from large corporations to smaller institutions (Seifert and Buswick 2005). The business sector regularly reviews approaches to learning and development owing to the need to build both individual and organisational capabilities (Senge et al. 2005).

Performing artists have been engaged by companies with the aim to enhance communication, teamwork, leadership and organisational skills (Townsend 2003; Corsun et al. 2005; Osburn and Stock 2005). Organisations have made use of arts-based learning through mainly short workshops or one-off events as a way of finding different approaches to engage and motivate adult learners and build skills. Visual artists have offered organisations opportunities for their staff to develop creative problem-solving skills and strengthen interpersonal skills such as teamwork (Cohen and Jurkovic 1997; Hadfield 2000; VanGundy and Naiman 2003; Bartelme 2005; Hall 2004; Willott and Stevenson 2006). Music has been incorporated into building teamwork, improvisation and creativity skills training programs (Hadfield 2000; Zander and Zander 2000; Rostron 2003; VanGundy and Naiman 2003; Walzer and Salcher 2003; Harley 2004). There are reports that detail opportunities for workplaces to participate in arts-based learning around writing skills and storytelling techniques with writers and poets (Thompson 1998; Hadfield 2000; Bartelme 2005; Hall 2004).

As the different areas of arts-based training in the workplace grow, assessing the benefits of such learning, and what it actually can offer both individuals and workplaces, is necessary. As pointed out by Chappell (2003) it is important that researchers respond to the challenges presented by the increased organisational complexity of the vocational education and training (VET) system which has undergone significance changes to 'integrate all forms of work-related learning (public and private, formal and informal, structured and unstructured) into a modern VET system' (Chappell 2003, 25).

## The study

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions and meaning of learning with the arts for nine participants who undertook arts-based courses as part of their work-related learning. Additionally, the study aimed to analyse specific employability skills that can be drawn from the learning with the arts.

## Approach

The process of learning is not an abstract experience of an individual but it is situated in the context of a person's life and the relationship with other people (Vygotsky 1997). The quality of learning experiences also depends on the ways that learning is organised. To explore the participants' experiences of learning with the arts, a contextual model of learning developed by Falk and Dierking (2000) for their study of learning in museums, was utilised. This model provided a way to 'accommodate much of the diversity and complexity surrounding learning' (Falk and Dierking 2000, 10) and to distinguish its three overlapping contexts: personal, socio-cultural and physical. Personal context includes individual motivation, expectations and interest, as well as prior knowledge and experience. The interaction with the cultural environment and with people such as teachers, learning community and society, constitutes the socio-cultural context of learning. The importance of the physical environment for learning such as location, room layout, and space arrangements is captured by the notion of physical context.

## Participants and settings

A variety of settings that offered arts-based learning for work-related purposes were considered for the study. These included workplaces that used arts-based learning; arts-based enterprises that offered workplace training that incorporated drumming, medieval music and fun team-building activities with visual arts materials and techniques; and tertiary institutions that offered arts-based programs. The choice of two organisations (a performing arts-based course and a workshop in a visual-arts setting) was made on the suitability of the schedules, accessibility of the course content and the willingness of the organisations to participate in research.

The participants were chosen from the group of people who signed in to participate in one of the courses and indicated at the entry that they did so for work-related purposes. Nine participants, two male and seven female, aged from 20–50, who were invited through the course providers agreed to participate in the study. The participants' demographics would be best described as middle-class, professional, white-collar workers. Workplace roles included human resources manager, learning and development manager, a marketing executive, an accountant, a research analyst, an information technology specialist, a graphic designer, a management consultant and an occupational therapist. Accordingly, the scope of this research is limited to the experiences of the group of participants who were available for this particular study.

## Performing-arts course

Six participants were involved in the performing-arts courses provided by the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA). NIDA is a major theatre school in Australia and for over a decade it has developed a performing-arts learning program catering to the corporate sector. NIDA acknowledged that communication is performance and developed a comprehensive range of courses to meet the needs of different people wanting to build confidence and expertise in communication skills (<http://www.nida.edu.au/>). The two 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 the audience and presentation as performance.

### Visual-arts course

The University of Western Sydney Continuing Education Unit offered a four-day course called 'Creative Escape', composed of a variety of creative experiences including art lessons, walks, tours and demonstrations. Although the main target audience was semi-retired people with an interest in the arts, the coordinators identified three participants who attended the course for work-skill development and were sponsored by their workplaces, and who agreed to participate in the study.

### Method

A qualitative method was chosen to explore the experiences of a small group of participants. A series of three sequential semi-structured interviews with the participants was conducted to capture their experiences of learning with the arts. Qualitative interviews allowed obtaining in-depth information about participants' perceptions, thoughts, beliefs and feelings about the topic (Creswell 2007). To understand the methods of delivery of the courses, semi-structured interviews with course providers and review of the documentation were conducted. Additionally, one of the researchers attended both courses prior to the commencement of the research as it was believed that direct observation of the participants during the course would be intrusive.

The main data source was the participant interviews. Each participant was interviewed in a sequence of three interviews: prior to the course (pre-interview), straight after (post-interview) and four–six months later (follow-up interview). In the pre-interviews, which were undertaken face-to-face at the participants' workplace, the participants were asked to share their experiences and understandings of work-related learning and their expectations of learning with the arts. The post-interviews were conducted over the phone and captured the participant's immediate thoughts about the value of this style of learning for their professional and personal development. The follow-up interviews, which again were conducted face-to-face at the workplaces, were designed to capture a longer term perspective, where the participants were asked to reflect on the relevance of the acquired skills for their workplace and life away from work. They also were questioned about whether this type of learning had motivated them to undertake future learning opportunities and whether future learning would involve any aspects of the arts. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and the transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking (Creswell 2007).

### Findings

The data was analysed in two ways. Firstly, the participants' experiences of learning with the arts were explored using thematic analysis of the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). Secondly, the potential benefits of such learning for the workplace were analysed using the employability skills framework (DEST 2002).



## The experiences of learning with the arts

The analysis of pre-course interviews indicated that all NIDA and Creative Escape participants had some prior knowledge of, and experience with, different areas of the arts. Learning for both professional and personal reasons was significant for all participants and they anticipated that learning with the arts would be useful for their work. As pointed out by Smith and Blake (2009), adult learners' ideas about work-related learning can be different depending on the context of their previous learning experiences. Attendance at these particular courses was prompted by recommendations from work colleagues, family and the media.

The personal expectations prior to the NIDA course were similar for all the participants as they were interested in developing their communication, personal and interpersonal skills for work purposes. The skills mentioned by the participants included 'self-confidence', 'new skills and advanced techniques in communication forums such as formal presentations and team meetings', 'to communicate more directly', 'how to engage an audience, how to talk on your feet and be interesting'.

Creative Escape participants attended for both professional and personal reasons and wanted to re-engage with their own creativity. In the pre-course interview one participant described work-related learning as something that can 'bring more meaning' to work. She felt that by doing this course she would go back to work with a 'fresh' focus.

The expectations of the participants in relation to social and physical contexts of learning were similar for all the participants. They appreciated the possibility 'to get away from all the different aspects of the everyday work role', and 'learn from other people'. They also appreciated the experience being structured in a way which is different to 'lecture style' and which includes physical involvement and a variety of hands-on activities.

The post-course interviews demonstrated the ways in which the participants' expectations of work-related learning with the arts had been met and in some cases exceeded. There were a number of factors that maintained participants' motivation. The performing-arts learning experience at NIDA was described as 'inspiring', 'liberating', 'challenging', 'powerful', 'releasing', 'confidence building' and 'revealing'. A typical response was as follows:

*It was quite a worthwhile experience from my point of view in terms of my own personal aspect as far as creativity goes and also professionally it's just helped me to look at different ways for interacting and presenting creative activities to people. I've been quite surprised since I've been back at what an impact it actually had. Which is very good because sometimes other courses leave you thinking 'that's a waste of time'. (Kate1, age 47)*

Creative Escape participants also found their workshops inspiring and well designed, offering them a learning experience to break down the barriers, review and develop their creative abilities.

The socio-cultural context of learning (Falk and Dierking 2000) was important for the participants' experience: 'people can learn off each other, bounce ideas, share experiences, and enrich the learning in that way' (Ted, age 39).

All the participants in both the courses acknowledged a positive impact of interactions with tutors, peer learners and workplace colleagues when learning. Tutors' facilitation techniques, positive reinforcement, challenging tasks, sufficient tutor attention as well as interaction within a small-sized group were important features of the courses under investigation. The opportunity to share experiences with peer learners and the opportunity to try out new techniques such as inspiring the imagination when presenting was important to all NIDA participants:

*It was such a broad range of skills, just seeing the quality of some of the other people's outputs was really quite extraordinary, inspiring and kind of mind expanding as well. (Marion, age 49)*

*Good to reflect on it and there was a wide range of people there so they had to be covered. It was interesting watching the others learn. (Andrey, age 50)*

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. The participants also understood the potential of learning with other professionals and described the beneficial aspects of learning about different workplace cultures:

*I suppose it has and probably one thing I've taken is that maybe if you want to learn it is good to learn from different fields and from people, like learning from NIDA they are all experts in the voice and different strategies which is probably a lot more fun and interesting than learning from a business expert who, I don't know, just decided to train the corporate world and probably does a whole series of stuff. (Anne, age 24)*

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. Several participants shared how they had become more assertive and confident with their communication in the workplace:

*Of all the subjects that could be taken out of the professional teaching of actors that it was about 60 per cent of the program was on voice. Which was fantastic. (Dave, age 41)*

*So you could go somewhere else to speak on the content of how you put a presentation together but at NIDA it is the 'well how do you get up and do it so that your message gets across' approach. And I just found that very relevant. (Beth, age 35)*

Back in the workplace, the participants who were involved in facilitating their own meetings and training 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 individual learning and development. Therefore new ideas and skills developed during this arts-based learning were shared and embraced enthusiastically back in the workplace.



The physical contexts of learning (Falk and Dierking 2000) such as learning space, physical activity, body awareness exercises and communication style experienced in the design of the NIDA and Creative Escape programs appeared to be critical to the positive evaluation of the learning experiences:

*... in terms of workplace learning probably one that does, is almost reinforced is the importance of activities and energy. So we were always active in the program and that was good. That's not so much new as just emphasis that it is an important method of adult learning. (Dave, age 41)*

*I was trying to work this out. The NIDA context is very much the body awareness side of the presenting rather than the content element. (Beth, age 35)*

In post-course interviews all participants commented on the experiential design of the courses and how beneficial it was to be fully engaged in the learning.

*I think it was the combination of the intellectual and the doing, you know the physical side of it, there was a good balance of learning techniques which you had to tuck away in your head and remember to do but also things like the breathing and the work we did with the masks and you know they really try to get the balance between the intellectual input and the physical, the doing. (Ted, age 39)*

Learning away from the office was important to all participants and therefore they found that the NIDA and Creative Escape learning spaces promoted creativity and were very different from their usual workspace. This allowed them to become completely engaged in the learning experience without any distractions.

The follow-up interviews demonstrated that several months later the participants still found most of the learned skills useful in their workplace. All the NIDA participants reported that they actively used, further refined, and 'drew regularly on' techniques of public speaking and work-related communication. They referred to, and explained in detail, the techniques such as 'the breathing', 'taking command of the situation, of the room', 'communication with others by reflecting on the knowledge of the process', 'better organisation of thought including aspects like running an argument', 'controlling facial expression when struggling to look confident', 'running a discussion or getting a point across', 'getting people's attention' and 'the storytelling forma'. They also referred to becoming 'more comfortable in front of a group', 'taking a more assertive approach in meetings' and being more confident in all public speeches.

Creative Escape participants still spoke enthusiastically about their experience and reported that they still applied, or tried to apply, some creative skills to their work. They referred to 'creative thinking', 'taking an unexpected and a broader holistic approach to work', 'embrace new experiences' and better understand and develop their own abilities:

*Arts sometimes take you to spaces you didn't even know you had the capacity for and they're the most memorable breakthroughs. (Marion, age 49)*

All the participants still spoke highly about their positive experiences of learning with the arts and confirmed they would not hesitate to recommend it to others. As stated by one participant

*...arts lead to a more rounded development of the whole person as opposed to most work-related learning I had experienced that focused on a particular objective. (Marion, age 49)*

### Learning with the arts and employability skills

When reflecting on their experiences of learning, during either the NIDA or Creative Escape courses, the participants felt that they developed a number of valuable work-related skills. To find the potential benefits of learning with the arts for the workplace, the data were analysed through the employability skills framework (DEST 2002, 2006; Precision Consulting 2007; Matters and Curtis 2008). The framework was developed by DEST to 'assist in identifying what is expected of workers when they are seeking employment or when developing professionally within existing employment' (DEST 2002, 2).

The generic skill areas of professional development, identified by DEST (2002), included communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, lifelong learning and technology. The analysis of the data through these categories indicated that both NIDA and Creative Escape learning experiences were consistent with the categories such as communication, team work, initiative and enterprise, self-management and lifelong learning (DEST 2002).

### Communication

The NIDA participants referred mainly to the three aspects of communication identified by DEST (2002): speaking clearly and directly, listening and understanding, and persuading effectively. The following comment was typical:

*...you need to ensure, you know, your intent for each stage of the presentation. Do you want to surprise, inspire, challenge as well as passing on information? (Ted, age 39)*

Four of the NIDA participants talked about their increased confidence when communicating in the workplace and how this enabled them to be more assertive with colleagues. Two participants shared the benefits of developing persuasion skills in relation to presenting an interesting and compelling message when communicating with work colleagues and external clients. Another participant discussed the way he developed better speaking skills by understanding more about how the body and voice work as was evident in the post-course interview:

*Particularly the voice, vocal variety, power of the voice. What I was really interested in at NIDA was out of the two days how much time was spent on voice. Of all the subjects that could be taken out of the professional teaching of actors that it was about 60 per cent of the program was on voice. Which was fantastic. In other words that would be the best thing that they could teach us professional people. (Dave, age 41)*

Creative Escape courses offered a variety of visualisation and reflection exercises, which enabled participants to develop listening and understanding skills as the group shared detailed explanations of images they had created.

### Teamwork

Both the NIDA and Creative Escape courses provided participants with numerous structured group activities where they were able to give and receive feedback and share their experiences with others. For example, NIDA sessions such as seeing your-self as others see you were mentioned as valuable. Additionally, the experienced tutors whose skills provided positive reinforcement and feedback throughout the courses were mentioned.

All the participants mentioned the benefits of meeting with people from different backgrounds, a variety of industries and range of ages. The diversity in the learning groups assisted in building skills in understanding and appreciating differences in other people. Some of the NIDA participants attended the course with a workplace colleague and continued discussing and building their skills together back in the workplace:

In a session recently where he was speaking and I was able to, just between him and I, give feedback on how the thing that he was consciously doing on the program for example. I just kind of reminded him to do those things because they really worked for him. So hopefully he found that helpful and I'd like to think he'd do the same for me. It is quite handy having someone else go, who then hopefully will be in a situation where they are observing you and then you can keep the feedback going. (Julie, age 31)

### Initiative and enterprise

The initiative and enterprise skills outlined by DEST (2002) included adapting to new situations, being creative and generating a range of options.

All the participants appreciated the opportunity to understand and stretch their own creativity which was provided by both learning environments. A Creative Escape participant's comment was indicative:

The tutor taught us a whole range of different techniques of the layering, putting the shadows in it and building it up in layers, which was good because I think just with my own personality, I expected it to be perfect from the beginning and with this process it doesn't really get to that stage till right at the end and there are so many processes you go through before you get to that point. Because I was starting out and then giving up before I got even close to the end. (Rose, age 23)

Similarly, a NIDA participant said he appreciated developing skills that enabled an individual to find creative ways to inspire the imagination when communicating and presenting and for him this added a new element to his understanding of public speaking. It was much more than just simply downloading information.

A Creative Escape participant stated she enjoyed discovering the unexpected aspects of engaging in a learning experience that used the arts. She referred to a new, creative way of looking at techniques of visualisation and collage, which she gained at the course and transferred to her work with young adult learners.

## Self-management

Self-management referred to evaluating and monitoring one's own performance, having knowledge and confidence in one's own ideas and taking personal responsibility for professional development (DEST 2002).

Self-management skills were mentioned as another of the beneficial learning outcomes by NIDA participants. Four of the participants mentioned how they regularly incorporated, in their day-to-day tasks, the skills and techniques to maintain the self-confidence they had gained at the NIDA course. Techniques included control of breathing, ways to gain and maintain the attention of the audience throughout a presentation and awareness of unconscious messages shared through body language. One participant provided the example about how she became aware of her rigid shoulders through the NIDA course and recognised how this type of body language could highlight nervousness of a presenter and distort the message being presented.

*The walking exercises my partner kind of emphasised that I walked very stiff, rigid kind of shoulders and I never realised I was so rigid in the shoulders before. (Anne, age 24)*

Two participants mentioned a long-term effect of becoming more open to feedback since attending NIDA. They developed a better understanding of how the different aspects of communication and presentation worked in a variety of situations:

*To inspire the imagination was probably the big takeaway for me. It was the revelation that you're not there to download information you are there to engage the imagination and to think about what you want to do to them at each stage of your presentation. Yeah the skills to engage the group throughout and change tack when you need to ensure, you know, your intent for each stage of the presentation. Do you want to surprise, inspire, challenge as well as passing on information? (Ted, age 39)*

All the Creative Escape participants reported that they gained more self-confidence in their creativity skills during the course. While they all came to their sessions with different levels of experience and expectations, the approach of the Creative Escape tutors provided a way of looking at their own work from a more positive, process-oriented perspective.

## Life-long learning

All of the NIDA participants referred to their enthusiasm for learning and explored ways to continue to develop their work skills. The participants spoke about how they had applied a range of the NIDA skills back in the workplace and how they were managing their own learning by continuing to use these new skills. They also shared the NIDA communication tools with their work colleagues. All the participants mentioned their enthusiasm for ongoing learning and how this experience at NIDA had confirmed their ideas about the performing arts and how they can provide a productive approach to learning:

*...extensively now in a lot of the other things we do. Even these workshops over in the UK and the ones we ran here had people in the business giving*

*case studies. And we asked them to frame their case study around the classic storytelling format. Which was great, worked well. (Ted, age 39)*

*Well I think it was great and I'm very encouraging to others to go. I rang one of my colleagues on the way home that Friday night. He and I tried to get there together and it didn't work out so I left him a message saying, you really need to make time and it's really worth it. (Dave, age 41)*

All the Creative Escape participants shared how previously they had regularly attended learning programs for both personal and work-related reasons. With a variety of knowledge and experience in the visual arts, they all found they were able to develop their skills further as a result of their participation in the Creative Escape course:

*I think it's just in terms of design, just coming at it from a different perspective to what you saw before because things get really stale if you are just designing something that has been designed before ten different times, and slightly altered each time, and every now and then you need to be able to get in there and go 'no we need to scrap that completely and start fresh' and that's what I've been doing a little bit more of as well. Especially with new customer designs as well, I bring in new ideas with that and give them new ideas because of the new perspectives. So I've put that into my work. (Rose, age 23)*

Both the NIDA and Creative Escape courses appeared to have reinforced the exist-ing lifelong learning skills of participants by offering them a productive and enjoyable learning experience that gave them useful skills they could use and share in their work and personal lives.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study explored the perceptions and meaning of learning with the arts for a small group of adult learners who undertook arts courses as part of their work-related learning. The participants described learning with the arts as being enjoyable, engaging and motivating. Those who participated in this study were involved in learning that met their expectations and assisted in work-skill development. Along-side their individual learning achievements participants reported that they were using and sharing the learned skills back in their workplaces six months after completing the learning.

While the scope of the study is limited to a particular group of participants, and its results cannot be generalised, it opens the way for further research. It highlighted the potential of the arts to develop a number of generic employability skills by providing an alternative learning approach in an attempt to build skilled and productive work-forces. Learning with the arts offered individuals the opportunity to develop work skills through creative and experiential design. The arts also provided participants with the opportunity to build and develop confidence in their existing skills and abilities.

Arts-based learning environments can be suitable to a number of adult learners as they are experiential and creative in nature (Beard and Wilson 2002). While the provided experiences are challenging, they are enjoyable and free of stress

(James 1999). Adult learners need to be stimulated and motivated to embrace ongoing learning and the arts can offer a vehicle for this type of learning.

The analysis identified a range of work-skill development opportunities as a result of learning at NIDA or Creative Escape. While the NIDA performing-arts learning environment was designed to develop communication skills (NIDA 2006), the analysis revealed that there were also opportunities to develop other skills that are valued at the workplace such as teamwork, self-management, motivation for lifelong learning as well as initiative, enterprise, planning and organising skills. Creative Escape was designed to develop skills in a particular visual-arts medium and while there is no indication that the workshops were designed to build work-related skills, the participants reported that the workshops provided more outcomes for work-related purposes than they had anticipated.

This study aimed to capture the personal perceptions of the participants and while this provided a great deal of information, the discussion was limited to the participants' reports of what they felt they had learnt and achieved when learning with the arts and did not include subsequent evaluation of their performance by superiors back in the workplace. The literature reviewed presented success stories in creative approaches to developing work skills; there was, however, agreement that ongoing assessment of learning with the arts was needed to ensure it was not merely a fad (Hall 2004; Bartelme 2005; Osburn and Stock 2005). The study highlighted a need for ongoing review of the effectiveness of work-related learning that incorporates the variety of approaches and mediums afforded by the arts.

An area of consideration is that all the participants in the study were already interested in creative learning and the arts and this might have affected their reflections on the learning. The experiences of learning with the arts might be different for participants who were not initially interested in the arts. There was however, evidence from past observations by one of the Creative Escape tutors that some participants, who were initially reluctant to be involved owing to lack of confidence in their artistic abilities, reasonably quickly overcame self-imposed barriers to learning with the arts.

Arts-based learning provided adult learners with the environments that took into consideration the personal, social and physical contexts of learning. For example, the adult learners involved in this study had a preference for learning away from the workplace and benefited from learning in arts environments that encouraged creativity.

This study provided information for further investigation into what learning with the arts could offer in terms of work-related learning. There is evidence from this investigation that the adult learners involved acknowledged the benefits of learning within the arts environment for their individual and professional development and the analysis found that there was the potential to build generic vocational skills when learning with the arts. Evidently, the findings cannot be generalised considering the small number of participants, their demographics (middle-class, professional, white-collar workers) and their initial experience with arts. The favourable response by these experienced adult learners with high expectations of the learning undertaken does, however,

provide encouragement for further investigations. The findings indicate that for people who are seeking new employment opportunities or alternative work-related learning contexts, the arts could be a useful starting point to explore. For example, this kind of learning might be beneficial for some women who have been unemployed for a significant period of time and might be lacking in self-confidence in entering specialised professional training and employment (Willott and Stevenson 2006).

The arts have a wide range of resources available when developing learning programs and could provide a significant variety of learning opportunities to meet the needs of adult learners who demand diverse learning opportunities. The arts have the potential, if incorporated appropriately, to offer a range of work-related learning options to engage adult learners and assist in building valuable work-related skills.

\*Note

1. Pseudonyms are used for all the participants.

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