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Learning with the arts: palettes, performance and employability skills

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This research explores the ways in which 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 unveils the learning experiences of adults who participated in courses, which utilised the skills, techniques and environments offered by the performing and visual arts. This paper presents an analysis of the participants’ perceptions of learning with the arts by applying the Employability Skills Framework developed by the Department of Education, Science and Training in 2002 which identifies the skills valued in the workplace. With the emergence of learning with the arts in work related settings the findings provide details on whether the arts assist in the development of employability skills.

Rhizome 1, 185-201 (2005)
Introduction

What do the arts have to offer industry, business and workplaces as an alternative learning focus? The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and meaning of learning with the arts for a number of people who undertook arts courses as part of their work related learning. 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 other interpersonal skills. The data provided in this paper was analysed through the prism of the ‘Employability Skills Framework’ that identified a range of generic skills important for the professional development to ensure the employability of any individual throughout their working lives.

Recent reports by Catterall, Deasy and Fiske have identified many ways that learning with arts assist school children to increase their motivation to learn and to develop academic, social and life skills. The arts have also been used with adults in community development environments. As outlined by Williams, this provided opportunities to develop personal, social and political awareness through the development of interpersonal skills such as communication and understanding. Graham-Pole presents examples of the successful use of arts in healthcare environments to assist both children and adults to deal with their illnesses through creative approaches to learn about what is happening physically and emotionally. However, with a range of benefits presented in a variety of learning environments, there is limited research on the impact of the arts used for work-related learning.

What do people learn from the arts?

According to Catterall, Jones, Kerka and Nolan the arts have the potential to stimulate creativity and innovative thinking through a variety of different processes and mediums. The arts are a unique medium for learning and as Nolan 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.

When investigating the use of the arts in adult learning environments there was agreement in the range benefits the arts can bring to society. As Haynes states
the arts are:

*Identified as a humanity, designed to make us aware of and sensitive to the varieties of human differences as expressed through the arts.*

Jones\textsuperscript{13} links these benefits directly to learning processes by describing the role of the arts:

*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.*

Catterall\textsuperscript{14}, Deasy\textsuperscript{15}, and Fiske\textsuperscript{16} explained that school environments have successfully used art processes in non art education areas to enhance general learning. Kerka\textsuperscript{17} 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. Aspin\textsuperscript{18} 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.

Initial research into the impact of arts on learning as a whole, as opposed to simply looking at arts education as a single subject area, was undertaken in the USA in the late 1990s and findings were outlined in the *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* Report.\textsuperscript{19}

The findings of this report related to the school education system and how the arts assisted the learning development of students, from young children to adolescents, in many aspects of their schooling. Catterall\textsuperscript{20} listed some of the *cognitive capacities and motivations to learn* from multi-arts programs to include skills that could be also related to workplace skill development. These included skills such as creative thinking, achievement motivation, self-confidence, risk-taking, empathy for others, self-initiating, ownership of learning, collaboration skills, leadership, higher order thinking skills, creativity, engagement and attendance.

Brown\textsuperscript{21} and Cross\textsuperscript{22} identified creativity, inventiveness, teamwork and communication skills as highly regarded in the workforce today. Therefore the arts may be able to offer workplaces a variety of ways to tackle new and existing learning challenges. The Employability Skills Framework\textsuperscript{23} assists in developing an understanding of the skills required in the modern workplace.
Employability skills framework

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) developed an 'Employability Skills Framework', which assists in identifying what is expected of workers when they are seeking employment or when developing professionally within existing employment. The 'Employability Skills Framework' outlined two main areas that assisted in assessing employee capabilities - personal attributes and generic work related skills.

Firstly, there are the personal attributes that contribute to overall employability and include the following attributes – loyalty, commitment, honesty and integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, commonsense, positive self-esteem, sense of humour, balanced attitude to work and home life, ability to deal with pressure, motivation, and adaptability.

Secondly there are the skills that need to be developed to ensure ongoing employability. The eight skills include: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, lifelong learning and technology. Each of the eight skills outlined in the 'Employability Skills Framework' have a range of specific areas identified as elements that provide a more comprehensive understanding of what contributes to building the eight skills areas. More details on the elements related to each skill are outlined later in this discussion.

The study

A review of literature found that there appears to be limited research into the effectiveness of using of the arts for work related learning. However, there is literature that presents information on the emergence of music, visual arts and performing arts incorporation into work related learning programs. Muqbil describes how music has been used to inspire and motivate teams and improve communication skills. Music, as outlined by Harley, Rostron, Walzer and Salcher, has also been used to encourage improvisation, innovation as well as management and leadership skills. Cohen and Jurkovic discuss ways in which the visual arts have been used successfully as 'ingredients of inspiration' in training design and Townsend states how the performing arts have been used to develop leadership, communication and management skills.

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and meaning of learning with the arts for a number of people who undertook arts courses as part of their work related learning. It was developed to capture their perceptions, motivations, emotions and reflective thoughts regarding learning with the arts and how they
related it to their work. Qualitative methods such as interviewing and reflection offered the research process a way to capture a wide range of ideas. The data gathered from a variety of sources such as: semi-structured participant interviews; semi-structured interviews with arts learning providers; participant reflection and a review of arts institutions documentation.

The main data source was the participant interviews. Each participant was interviewed in a sequence of three interviews: prior to their experience of learning with the arts, straight after it and four to six months later (pre, post 1 week and post 4-6 months). Interviews prior to the arts learning were undertaken face to face at the participant’s workplace, the second interviews were done over the phone and the final interviews also took place face to face at the workplaces. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed and sent to the participants to check.

In the pre learning interviews the participants were asked to share their experiences and understandings of learning, work related learning and the arts. The second interview captured the participant’s immediate thoughts after learning with the arts. The participants reflected on the learning experience; shared insights about the value of this style of learning and identified any problems related to this approach to work related learning. The third and last interview was designed to capture a longer-term perspective. During the final interview the participants reflected on their experience of learning with the arts and shared successful application of skills and techniques back in the workplace and also their life away from work. They discussed whether this type of learning had motivated them to undertake future learning opportunities and whether future learning would involve any aspects of the arts.

The participants:

Performing arts cases

Six participants were involved in the performing arts courses, provided by National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA)\(^3\). NIDA is a major theatre school in Australia and for over a decade NIDA has developed a performing arts learning program catering to the corporate sector.

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\(^2\).
Visual arts cases

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) Continuing Education Unit offered a four-day program comprised of a variety of creative experiences including art lessons, walks, tours and demonstrations called 'Creative Escape'. There were a variety of workshops exposing participants to many visual arts mediums including acrylics, pastels, watercolours, oils, paper making, collage, life drawing and botanical illustration designed to meet all levels of visual arts experience.

Although the main target audience was semi-retired people with an interest in the arts, the coordinators found some of the participants attended for work related learning reasons. Three women attending 'Creative Escape' for work skill development agreed to be involved in this study.

Findings

The results of the interviews provided a rich picture of the participants’ experiences of their work related learning with the arts. Manning provides an analysis of these experiences, from personal, social and physical perspectives, where participants described work related learning with the arts as enjoyable and productive. This paper will focus on the analysis of the participants' perceptions of the outcomes of their learning with the arts, that is what did they feel that they learnt during the courses? What skills did they develop? And how do they relate these skills to their work place?

To achieve this an analysis of the interviews was undertaken using 'Employability Skills Framework'. The interviews were analysed to identify all the learning outcome comments, which related to work skills, as identified by DEST including: communication, teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self management, life-long learning, problem solving, planning and organising. It is important to mention that the 'Employability Skills Framework' was not incorporated into the design of the interview questions but was used for analysis only once the interview data was collected.

An analysis of the interviews identified numerous skills that the participants, according to their reports, developed during the courses. When reflecting on their experiences of learning during the NIDA courses, the participants felt that the skills that they developed and/or further advanced included communication, teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self-management, and lifelong learning. Skills associated with planning, organising and problem-solving were mentioned on one or two occasions and there were no references to technology skills found within this post course analysis.
'Creative Escape' and the workshops offered were not designed to specifically target participants developing work related skills. However, the analysis of the post interviews with participants found that 'Creative Escape' offered the opportunity to review and develop areas similar to NIDA and included participant references to communication, teamwork, initiative and enterprise skills, self management and lifelong learning. From the data collected 'Creative Escape' appeared to provide more opportunity to develop problem solving skills than NIDA. Planning and organising skills were mentioned briefly. Elements related to developing technology skills were not discussed by any of the NIDA or 'Creative Escape' participants during the post learning interviews.

Following is a summary of analysis findings related to five of the employability skill areas (communication, teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self management, life-long learning).

Communication

Communication skills as outlined in the 'Employability Skills Framework' include the following elements: listening and understanding; speaking clearly and directly; writing to the needs of the audience; negotiating responsively; reading independently; empathising; speaking and writing in languages other than English; using numeracy; understanding the needs of internal and external customers; persuading effectively; establishing and using networks; being assertive and sharing information.

The NIDA participants referred mainly to three communication elements of speaking clearly and directly, listening and understanding, and persuading effectively. The other elements covered to a smaller degree included understanding needs of external and internal customers, negotiating, being assertive and sharing information.

Each of the six NIDA participants referred to how particular elements related to their individual communication skills development. One participant referred to gaining some insights into his listening, persuading and negotiating skills and shared how since completing the NIDA course, he used these newly developed skills when structuring arguments.

Another participant discussed the way he developed his skills in speaking clearly and directly, by understanding more about how the body and voice work. He referred to exercises related to voice projection, vocal variety, pronunciation and power of the voice and described his thoughts related to the benefits of developing these communication skills in a performing arts learning environment.
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.

Two participants shared the benefits of developing persuasion skills at NIDA in relation to presenting an interesting and compelling message when communicating with work colleagues and external clients. One of these participants shared the following related to developing these skills:

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.

Three other NIDA participants talked about their increased confidence when communicating in the workplace and how this enabled them to be more assertive with colleagues.

While it would be expected that the NIDA Corporate Performance Courses offered participants a way to develop communication abilities, this analysis showed that ‘Creative Escape’ also provided some opportunities to build communication skills.

The elements related to developing communication skills discussed by the ‘Creative Escape’ participants included listening and understanding, speaking clearly and directly and sharing information. Unlike the NIDA courses the communication skills development opportunities provided by ‘Creative Escape’ were not specifically designed into the workshops. However, the approach of the tutors provided an environment where these skills could be developed in a visual arts environment.

One ‘Creative Escape’ participant commented that she liked the fact that her workshop took place in close proximity to other visual arts workshops because this enabled the different participants to listen and observe what was happening in other areas of the ‘Creative Escape’. She was undertaking the Contemporary Acrylics workshop and said that she

...really liked the fact that we had the botanical artists on one side and we had the pastel artists on the other side and at first, me being me goes oh no
they'll see what I'm doing but it was great because everybody else was sort of listening in on all the other techniques that people were being told and the little community that we had and we were all sort of peaking over each other's shoulders and going 'oh that looks great' which was just fantastic and that worked really well.

In the other 'Creative Escape' workshop investigated during this study there were many visualisation and reflection exercises. This enabled participants to develop listening and understanding skills as the group shared detailed explanations about images they had created. The reflection and visualization activities offered one participant the opportunity to observe:

> how different people work and how different people perceive things and how differently different people go about doing things. I think that sort of format or situation could be used in all sorts of training for all sorts of purposes and people, different groups of people.

As well as developing communication skills, the other employability skills mentioned by participants in the post interviews included teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self-management and lifelong learning.

**Teamwork**

The 'Employability Skills Framework' describes teamwork through the following elements: working across different ages and irrespective of gender, race, religion or political persuasion; working as an individual and as a member of a team; knowing how to define a role as part of the team; applying teamwork to a range of situations eg future planning, crises problem solving; identifying the strengths of the team members; coaching and mentoring skills including giving feedback.

 Coaching and mentoring skills, including giving feedback were areas identified by participants in the post interviews as a valuable aspect of the NIDA courses. Sessions such as seeing yourself as others see you provided NIDA participants with the opportunity to develop their feedback skills. The experienced tutors provided feedback and coaching throughout the course as well as encouraging everyone in the group to give feedback to each other. One participant was impressed by the tutor's skills at positive reinforcement with all participants through out the course.

Four of the participants attended the course with a workplace colleague and they shared how they were able to give and receive feedback during the course and also back in the workplace. According to one participant she continued to provide feedback to her colleague once they returned to work.
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 but 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.

The NIDA Corporate Performance Program is part of the NIDA Open Program where short courses are available to the public. While some of the participants attended with workplace colleagues, all participants were involved in learning with people from different backgrounds, a variety of industries and range of ages. All participants mentioned how they enjoyed the experience of sharing ideas with people from other workplace environments. One participant said she gained some insights from hearing the challenges that other participants have to overcome.

The ‘Creative Escape’ participants discussed opportunities to work across different ages and backgrounds, identifying the strengths of the group members and the most common element discussed, similar to NIDA, was coaching and mentoring skills including giving feedback.

One participant enjoyed working on her creativity away from her workplace and felt comfortable giving and receiving feedback with the tutor and the others participants. She said it was worthwhile experience in terms of learning about my own and other people's creative nature. She added that this aspect of ‘Creative Escape’ assisted her in developing observational skills and enabled her to observe how differently different people go about doing things to determine the variety of abilities of the other participants.

Another participant also observed the different skill levels of the other participants and the design of the workshop allowed her to see the quality of some of the other people's outputs which she found quite extraordinary, inspiring and kind of mind expanding as well.

**Initiative and enterprise**

The initiative and enterprise elements outlined in the ‘Employability Skills Framework’ included: adapting to new situations; developing a strategic; creative, long term vision; being creative; identifying opportunities not obvious to others; translating ideas into action; generating a range of options and initiating innovative solutions.

A participant found that learning in a performing arts environment gave him skills to incorporate a creative approach to the way he communicated in the workplace.
For him one of the key lessons from this experience was to find creative ways to *inspire the imagination* when communicating and presenting.

‘Creative Escape’ offered the participants an opportunity to be creative and put ideas into action. For example, all participants stated that the workshops they attended provided them with a process that enabled them to generate a range of options when creating. For one participant the ‘Creative Escape’ experience enabled them to discover that being creative did not just mean starting over again if she was unhappy with how she was progressing but working with what she had and being patient and finding what emerges after going through the full creative process.

*Larissa 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 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.*

Another ‘Creative Escape’ participant stated she enjoyed discovering the unexpected aspects of engaging in a learning experience that used the arts. Her work related learning was usually *focused on a particular objective* and while she felt more comfortable knowing exactly what was going to happen she had discovered through attending learning experiences with an arts focus that she also enjoyed the unexpected experiences that can provide more memorable learning breakthroughs.

*And sometimes it’s the unexpected stuff that you get from that broader holistic development that takes you to spaces you didn’t even know you had the capacity for and they’re the most memorable breakthroughs.*

‘Creative Escape’ offered her another opportunity to stretch and explore her creativity. She confided that as her confidence grows her longer term vision is to incorporate creative aspects into the learning she provides her clients because she feels the arts provides learners with the *more rounded development of the whole person.*

**Self management**

Self management elements outlined in the ‘Employability Skills Framework’ included: *having a personal vision and goals; evaluating and monitoring own performance; having knowledge and confidence in own ideas and visions; articulating own ideas and visions and taking responsibility.*
One of the self management skills mentioned in the interviews with NIDA participants included evaluating and monitoring own performance. Four of the participants mentioned how they regularly incorporated some of the skills and techniques they had gained at the NIDA course into their day-to-day work. For example one participant continued to make an effort to control her breathing, tried to keep her shoulders down in an attempt to reduce looking nervous and these techniques helped her feel much more relaxed and calm when presenting.

In the discussion, six months after attending the NIDA course, two participants mentioned they had used techniques from NIDA and shared their NIDA learning experience with colleagues. The participants both claimed that they were more open to feedback about their communication style since attending NIDA. They said they had a better understanding of how the different aspects of communication and presentation worked, in a variety of situations, and therefore if colleagues gave them some feedback they had the understanding, the tools and techniques to change or rectify any problems or concerns.

All of the ‘Creative Escape’ participants acknowledged that they were overly critical of their skills and abilities prior to attending their ‘Creative Escape’ sessions but as a result of the course they had been encouraged to view their efforts differently. While they all came to their sessions with different levels of experience and different expectations, the approach of the ‘Creative Escape’ tutors provided a way of looking at their own work from a less critical perspective.

One of the ‘Creative Escape’ participants built on other creative learning experiences she had had and confirmed that she needed to keep trusting in the process. Not only trust the process in a creative setting but also in whatever work she was doing, trust in the process and worry less about whether the outputs are good enough.

Life-long learning

Life-long Learning, identified as part of the ‘Employability Skills Framework’, is understood by the following elements: managing own learning; contributing to the learning community at the workplace; using a range of mediums to learn – mentoring; peer support and networking; IT; courses; applying learning to ‘technical’ issues (eg learning about products) and ‘people’ issues (eg interpersonal and cultural aspects of work); having enthusiasm for ongoing learning; being willing to learn in any setting – on and off the job; being open to new ideas and techniques; being prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills and acknowledging the need to learn in order to accommodate change.
All of the NIDA participants referred to their enthusiasm for learning and explored ways to continue to develop their work skills. All of 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 and by also sharing the NIDA communication tools with other colleagues. One participant shared that he had used the storytelling format extensively now in a lot of the other things we do. Even these workshops over in the UK and the one’s 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.

All of the participants mentioned their enthusiasm for ongoing learning and how this experience at NIDA had confirmed their ideas about what is a productive learning approach and environment. At least one participant was planning to do more courses at NIDA in the future.

All of the ‘Creative Escape’ participants shared how they 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 as a result of ‘Creative Escape’. The elements connected to lifelong learning skills from the analysis of the ‘Creative Escape’ interviews included applying learning to both personal and work related situations; contributing and managing the learning they had determined important for them as individuals; maintained enthusiasm for ongoing learning by providing an engaging and creative learning experience; learning in any setting and allowing them to open to new ideas and techniques.

The NIDA and ‘Creative Escape’ courses appear to have reinforced the existing 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.

Conclusion
This paper presents one aspect of the study undertaken to investigate the impact of work related learning that incorporated aspects of the arts. It presents the findings related to the use of the ‘Employability Skills Framework’ analysis; which was undertaken after the data gathering stage, as a technique for determining whether learning with the arts offered participants a way to develop work related skills. As mentioned previously the ‘Employability Skills Framework’ was not incorporated into the design of the interview questions but was used for a further
analysis only once the interview data was collected. Therefore participants were not prompted during the interviews to reflect on specific employability skills.

This research into work related learning using the arts is based on discussions with nine participants involved in this type of arts learning. Therefore any results, findings and conclusions drawn will not necessarily apply to all work related learning situations designed with areas of the arts. This study was designed to capture the personal perspectives of the participants and while this provided a great deal of information on what happened in these arts learning environments there were some limitations connected to this aspect of the design. One of these limitations included knowing that the discussions were based on what the participants felt they learnt and achieved when working with the arts and did not include evaluation on their performance by superiors back in the workplace. Another area to be considered when reflecting on these results is that all participants, based on the interviews, appeared to be experienced lifelong learners and were therefore skilled in identifying aspects of the arts learning environments that helped develop their work development goals. This may not have been the same for less skilled adult learners. However, it is anticipated that the information gathered will contribute to the limited information available in this specific research area of work related learning using the arts.

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, the analysis revealed that there were also opportunities to develop other employability skills including teamwork, self management, lifelong learning and initiative, enterprise, planning and organising skills. ‘Creative Escape’ was designed to develop skills in a particular visual arts medium and workshops were not designed to build work skills. This analysis has provided some evidence to support the potential of building employability skills in visual arts learning environments including: communication, teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self management, lifelong learning and problem solving.
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