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Essay 11

Why the arts and artists are important

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E 11.1 Alexander Robert Frederick Welch, aged 7 weeks, April 2012. An inspiration for an older father! Photograph: Graham F. Welch

'Every child is an artist...' (Pablo Picasso)

Introduction

I came across the above quote, attributed to Pablo Picasso¹, during a recent visit to a nursery (kindergarten) class in a Primary school in East Sussex. The quote formed a large banner heading on a wall display of individual children's Christmas-themed collage pictures, each full of silver, green, red, glitter, and other reflective elements on black backgrounds. The art was one of several displays around the classroom that celebrated these 3-4-year-olds exploration of materials, each unique, yet unified by a common creative purpose and intrinsic capability. As an erstwhile musician, at least in a former life, I noticed also how the young children were engaged with sound and sound making materials, such as a trio (two girls and a boy) drumming with their hands on the top of a radiator to establish a strong, even pulse, whilst another child (girl) in a 'home' corner was putting items into a pretend make-up bag, pausing between each item to shake and listen to their collective sounds; another child (boy) was carefully cradling a baby doll whilst improvising a lullaby; yet another (girl) was singing to herself whilst exploring the dressing-up box; two other children (both girls) were seated on the floor playing with programmable toy bumble bees which emitted different electronic noises as they moved in particular directions. From time-to-time, these child-centred activities were overlaid with a particular kind of exaggerated speech by the adults who were organising their afternoon, such as 'What a wonderful drawing!', 'Well done, John' and 'Time to get your coats on children!'. These adult utterances were a form of 'infant-directed-speech' (cf Saint-Georges et al, 2013), with the strong prosodic features being infused with recognisable musical elements, such as in exaggerated melodic contour, changes in loudness and rhythmic patterning, higher than normal vocal pitch and a wider vocal pitch range, as well as contrasting vocal timbres.

In this nursery class environment, young children and adults offer an illustration of how arts activities are common and integral features of our humanity, including communication.

¹ Attributed to Pablo Picasso, *Time Magazine*, 4th October 1976, three years after his death.

Evidence of our arts making stretches back at least to the earliest reported stone markings in Africa 73,000 years ago (*cf* Henshilwood et al., 2018) and the use of bone flutes in Europe over 40,000 years ago (Higham et al, 2012). Others have argued that music predates language (Brandt et al., 2012), or at least that singing and speaking originate from a common affective prosodic behaviour (Brown, 2017). Although this debate into our artistic origins is likely to continue in the light of new evidence and emergent theory, the global prevalence of the arts implies that the creation and use of imagery in symbols and sounds are key characteristics of the human condition (Cross, 2016; Dissanayake, 2012); being both a reflection of our inner individual worlds, of our sensemaking (*cf* Bruner, 1991), and also of our need to communicate with others. Similarly, our audiences are both internal and external because the interpretation of art is constructed in the mind. Artistic behaviour and 'outputs' each draw on the uniqueness of the artist, and the interpretation of these is undertaken by others acting as audiences whose minds are equally individual and unique. In one sense, therefore, our perception of a commonality of shared experience is a deceit, in that it derives as much from an individual's social and emotional engagement as with the artistic 'product' which generates such cognisance. Arguably, experience is never literal; there is always a 'translation' of an input stimulus into existing schemata as we make sense of the world around us, whether consciously and other-than-consciously.

This book is a celebration of the arts and, in particular, artists, including their oft subversive (in the sense of extending and challenging) roles in our private, social and cultural lives. The book's narrative also seeks to acclaim the diversity of artistic behaviours, as well as the relatively recent recognition by academia that undertaking structured research in the arts is both worthwhile and enriching. This development has presented a challenge in some instances to our established ontological bases of what counts as research (McNiff, 2013), such as in arts-based research which seeks to integrate arts activity within the actual research process. Examples in the current edited volume include Colin Dunne's iterative journey in dance from traditional to contemporary, Sir Christopher Frayling's doctoral study encounters in a literary world and subsequent enquiries into what counts as knowledge and how this should be framed, as well as Marie McCarthy's discussion of engagement with music as a cultural practice. The arts present a challenge to established approaches to research that characterise enquiry in the physical, natural and social sciences

because of the need to understand how non-discursive approaches, such as in sound, still or moving images, objects, or dance, might offer unique insights that are useful to artists and to others seeking to make sense of the human condition (*cf* Barone & Eisner, 2012; Stévanice & Lacasse, 2017).

Such a conceptual expansion has resonance with the recent British Educational Research Association's 'close-to-practice' initiative (Wyse et al., 2018). Here, educational researchers are seeking to undertake 'research that focusses on aspects defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and often involves collaborative work between practitioners and researchers' (p1). Relatedly, it is imperative that we explore how artists engage with their chosen field through research which provides an insider perspective – such as offered through the chapters in this book.

Creativity

There is an ongoing educational interest in fostering creativity in children and young people across *all* disciplines (as exemplified in the report by the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019), as well as in and through the arts, including music (e.g., Biasutti, 2017; McPherson & Welch, 2018; Odena, 2018). Any kind of research implies creativity. In terms of definition, creativity is commonly associated with the production of ideas that are original – novel in some sense to the individual, group, and/or wider community, useful and perhaps unexpected or surprising (Simonton, 2013).

Additionally, recent research into creativity from a neuroscience perspective using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) provides evidence of how successful creative professionals from the worlds of the creative arts and entertainment (exemplified by writers, actors, directors) make distinctive use of particular areas of the brain – the dorsomedial subsystem of the default network – to imagine possible futures (Meyer et al., 2019). A comparison group of professionals from the legal, medical and financial industries used the same neural mechanism when asked to think about the next 24 hours (a proximal perspective), but only the creative experts engaged this subsystem when imagining events further into the future (a distal perspective). These creative experts also showed greater

subsystem connectivity even when at rest (Figure 1). The researchers suggest that 'Creativity may help us get outside ourselves, extending our imaginations to farther times, spaces, perspectives, and hypothetical realities' (2019, p492).

Setting these particular experimental findings within a wider neuroscience literature, a recent overview (Loui & Guetta, 2019) synthesised evidence of the real-time contributions to creativity of multiple constituent mental processes (*cf* Goldenberg et al., 1999). They comment:

'These mental processes involve selective attention and stream segregation, long-term and autobiographical as well as working memory, idea generation and evaluation, and expectation and prediction, as well as the ability to switch between these processes... As shown in a meta-analysis of fMRI studies on creativity (Boccia, Piccardi, Palermo, Nori, & Palmiero, 2015), musical creativity often involves auditory-motor networks, such as the supplementary motor areas, in addition to other prefrontal regions that are consistently active in creativity studies' (Loui & Guetta, *op.cit.* p.12).

In addition, there are other neurological studies that suggest that the language and emotional centres are also likely to be involved in creative activity (such as in jazz improvisation – Donnay et al., 2014; Przysinda et al., 2017).

Arts and health

It is also increasingly recognised that the arts can make a difference to individual and collective health (*cf* MacDonald et al., 2013; Welch et al., 2020). A recent review for the World Health Organisation (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) suggests that there is a growing body of studies that demonstrate how the arts can have a positive impact on physical and mental health across the lifespan, from early childhood through to senescence. The WHO review reports two broad themes: (a) prevention and promotion – such as supporting child development, encouraging health-promoting behaviours and helping to prevent ill health, and (ii) management and treatment – including helping people experiencing mental illness, assisting with end-of-life care and supporting care for people with acute conditions (pp.vii-

viii). For example, a 'Dance to Health' programme – designed to reduce the likelihood and impact of falls in older people – is reported to have had a positive impact on participants' physical, emotional and social health (Vella-Burrows et al, 2019). Other related research has demonstrated how rhythm-based interventions matched to individual needs can help patients with movement disorders, such as Parkinson's Disease (Dalla Bella et al., 2018), and how movement to favourite music can also enhance hand muscle strength in older people (van den Elzen et al., 2019). A combined arts 'Music, Mind and Movement' programme for people with dementia has demonstrated benefits to the majority of participants compared with standard care related to aspects of cognition, namely verbal fluency and attention (Brancatisano et al., 2019).

Benefits from arts participation are evidenced in other age groups, such as in analyses of adolescent data from the 1970 British Cohort Study which suggest that an ability in the arts at age 10 was associated with a lower level of behavioural difficulties at age 16 (Mak & Fancourt, 2019). For children with a tendency towards hyperactivity and impulsivity (core characteristics of ADHD, alongside inattention), there is evidence that a short-term, systematic and engaging orchestral training programme with 8-10yo can facilitate the development of inhibitory control to modulate hyperactivity (Fasano et al, 2019). There is also evidence that children's sense of social inclusion, of being part of a community, can be nurtured through singing which is usually experienced in UK schools as a whole class activity (Welch et al., 2014, see also Welch & Preti, 2019).

Moreover, the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG) – formed in 2014 to raise awareness of the myriad ways in which the arts can bring benefits to lifelong health and wellbeing – report that one strand of activity, the 'arts on prescription project', led to a 37% drop in GP (doctor) consultations and a 27% reduction in hospital admissions (APPG, 2017, p8). Of 2,500 museums and galleries in the UK, over 600 have programmes that are specifically targeted at health and wellbeing. Concerning what the APPG term as 'everyday creativity', they estimate that there are more than 49,000 amateur arts groups in England, involving 9.4m people, being the equivalent to 17% of the population. These arts include drawing, painting, pottery, sculpture, music- or film-making, singing and handicrafts. Although there may be debate as to whether creativity is specific

to a particular domain or more generalisable (Baer, 2018), it is logical to expect that induction into what counts as a domain's knowledge area is likely to provide a fundamental basis for subsequent creative activity.

The politics of arts and education

Despite the evidence of the centrality of artistic endeavour and creativity in how we define humanity, this is not always recognised in educational policy and practice, at least at a national level. For example, in England, politicians continue to tinker with the content of the statutory formal state school curriculum since its original iteration in 1989. As policy changed, different versions of a National Curriculum emerged and these were required to be taught in 1995, 2000, 2008 (for Secondary schools only – Primary school curriculum changes at this time were subsequently shelved) and 2015 – the current version. In addition, as a performance measure for Secondary schools and their 16-year-olds, the then Government introduced the so-called 'English Baccalaureate' (EBacc) in 2011, with the first outcome data being reported in 2015. The EBacc consists of a more limited selection of curricula, namely English language and literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography or history, and a language – ancient or modern. 'Secondary schools are measured on the number of pupils that take GCSEs [General Certificate in Education] in these core subjects. Schools are also measured on how well their pupils do in these subjects.' (DFE, 2019). However, the introduction of such selective curricula bias is not without negative consequences for other subject areas. Figure 1 shows the impact of EBacc policy on examination uptake in its various component subjects since 2011, as well as the EBacc overall, which currently counts for approximately 38% of the examination entry in 2018 (Thompson, 2019).

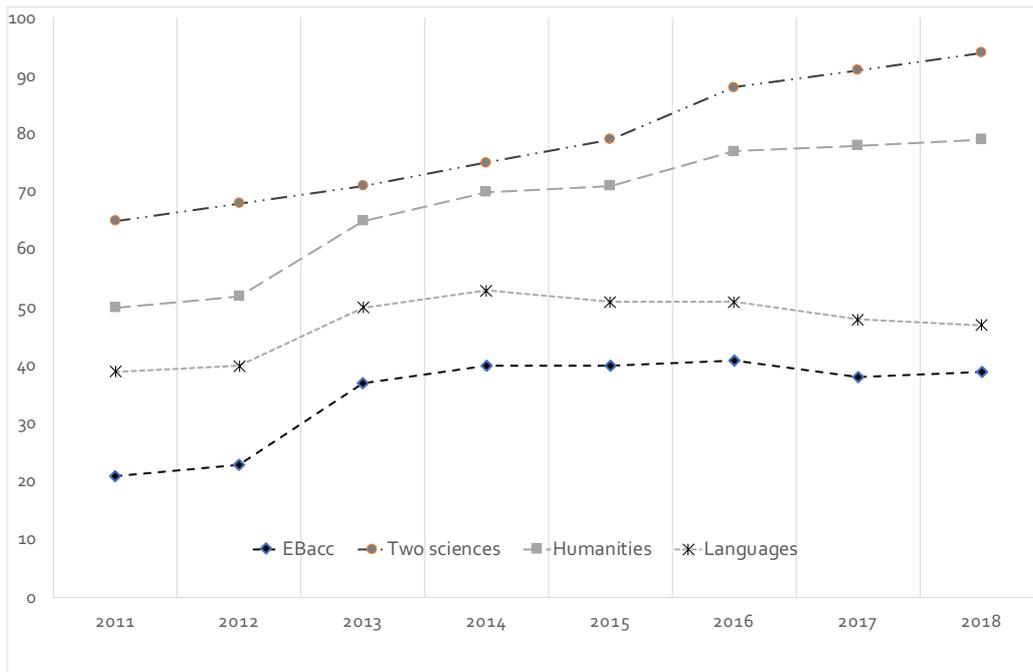


Figure 2: Pupils in state-funded schools entered for the EBacc and selected EBacc components to 2018 (Thompson, 2019)

Not only are the arts notable by their absence in the UK Government’s EBacc configuration, despite regular condemnation by leading figures from the arts (e.g., signed letter to the Guardian Newspaper, 8 May, 2018), there is also evidence that examination entries for arts and arts-related subjects have declined since its inception (Figure 2).

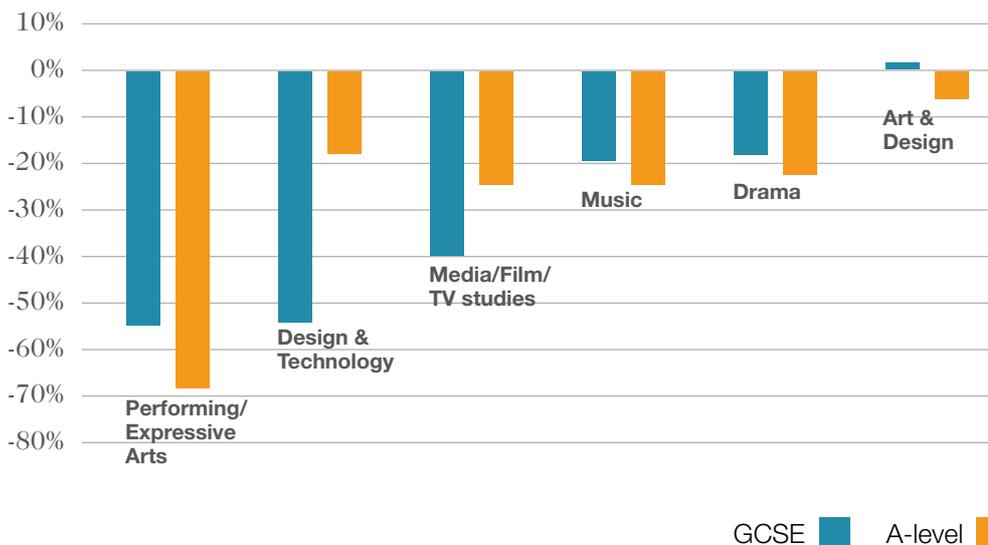


Figure 2: Decline in named subject uptake by Secondary-aged pupils, 2015-2019 (Guardian 8 May, 2018)

Why is this reported decline important? For several reasons. Firstly, our human design embraces artistic endeavour, of art making and of finding meaning in the arts activities of others (Mithen, 2005). School curricula should be designed around fostering the development and capabilities of the whole brain, not selected features. Secondly, we should not be enacting curricula which are primarily related to our conceptions of the needs of the current world, but rather to creating a knowledge and skills base that is flexibly appropriate for possible futures. Thirdly, from a purely economic perspective, it is inappropriate to have an examination bias in which arts culture, including arts making, is neglected, not least because it is reported that the arts and the creative industries contribute at least £85b a year to the UK economy, based on 2016 figures (Cebr, 2019).

Some have argued that the arts are better placed as extra-curricular activity; however, this creates a divide between those who have such access and those who do not and likely disadvantaging those who need them the most. The Durham Commission cited research by the Sutton Trust (2019) that 37% of young people in England do not take part in any extra-curricular activities. Given that access to high quality education should be central to improving life chances for all, there is a need to ensure that everyone has access to the kinds of creativity that are characteristic of the arts, and that these should be regularly timetabled during the normal school day. Arguably, this is especially crucial for those children and young people who live in disadvantaged economic circumstances, given the likelihood that they will enter the state school system at age five already with an attainment gap of nearly half a year. This gap increases to over nine months by the age of 11 years, based on scaled scores in English and mathematics (Hutchinson et al., 2019).

One way to address such early disadvantage is to develop pedagogical approaches that draw on the evidence of the impact of arts activity on wider educational achievements – to encourage and promote a continuing conception that 'Every child is an artist'. Examples of arts benefits with young children include longitudinal study data from Finland (Linnavelli et al, 2018) in which 5-6yo children attended a low-cost community-based music playschool. Over two school years, these young children significantly improved in their development of phoneme processing and vocabulary skills compared to peers not attending such activities.

One reason for such an improvement is that structured musical experience is likely to promote enhanced sound discrimination and encoding, and to promote phonological processing and reading ability (Putkinen et al., 2019).

With regards to music in the home, cohort study data from Australia of 3,031 children (Williams et al, 2015) found that, over and above the impact of shared book reading, frequency of shared home music activities at ages 2-3y were associated with significant improvements in prosocial skills, attentional regulation, and numeracy. Both language arts and music were also found to have benefits in measures of children's vocabulary and emotional regulation. Furthermore, a longitudinal population analysis of 112,916 children and young people aged 12-18y in British Columbia, Canada found positive associations between engagement and success in school music and pupils' academic achievement in mathematics, science and English (Guhn et al., 2019). Controlling for socio-demographic variables (sex, cohort, language/cultural background, neighbourhood socio-economic status), data analyses suggest that highly engaged music students, particularly instrumental learners, were academically over one year ahead of their peers.

The importance of the arts and artists

Given the wealth of evidence touched upon above and elsewhere in this volume, it seems clear that the arts are not just important, but integral to what makes us human. Our adult engagement with the arts may be relatively passive – such as through film in a cinema or mediated by other, more personal technology – or more active, such as through deliberate choice, recommendation or prescription. Whatever its form, the arts are omnipresent for all of us, ready to be accessed. Most cultures are likely to designate particular individuals as 'artists', in the sense of having some kind of expertise that marks them out from others. These experts are needed, both to maintain an arts cultural heritage, a history of artistic knowledge and its development, whilst also to be at the forefront of interrogating, challenging, and expanding this knowledge.

Nevertheless, artistic behaviour is our birthright and we make sense of our experience of the world from the earliest months of life onwards by engaging in behaviours that are the

basis of the arts. We initiate and respond to expressive sounds, we make deliberate and patterned movements, visual markings, shapes and objects, and often experience cultural examples of these in combination through electronic media, such as our first toys. So, in one sense, we are born as artists who, through our engagement with a wider world, through induction into the artistic behaviours and products of others, encounter 'the arts and academia' across the lifespan, in childhood as well as adolescence and adulthood.

Various examples are to be found in this book, such as in the artistic reflection by Alan Doyle concerning growing up on the island of Newfoundland. Here, not least because of the island's relative isolation geographically, arts making is an integral part of community life. As a child, Doyle witnessed at first hand, both in the home and outside, the joyfulness of family music-making in bands that, in turn, provided a powerful legitimization of his own inner need to join in and sing, and be part of his artistic community. Dana Delany offers another example in her reflections on acting related to the foundational importance of what she feels is a need to draw on the 'innocence' of childhood, '...that joyful feeling of play...that artists keep trying to capture...again.' Similarly, the chapter by the traditional Irish dancer, Catherine Foley, reports on how, as a child, she was immersed in an Irish traditional music home environment where her father played, sang and danced, and of how this provided a lifelong foundation for her subsequent professional life. Childhood is a recurrent theme that pervades the chapter by the anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce. Here the narrative focus is on indigenous Zapotec artists in Mexico and on how they seek to expand, explore and nurture young children's artistic identities, both in the creation of art and well as by an induction into particular artistic practices. Additionally, Kathleen Turner's reflection on the life-changing experience as a thirteen-year-old performing publicly in a choir of three hundred young people from across Ireland echoes research reported earlier concerning the holistic neurological bases of artistic behaviours. For her, the musical act of communal singing in this Peace Choir was infused with intense physical, emotional and social feelings, such that '...a choir could quite literally move you...I mean reach into your chest, grab something in you and give it a pull.'

Although we may view adult artists as being particularly creative and recreative, the evidence from our observations of young children suggests that we are all born with

creativity as a core feature of our design, of how we deal with and make sense of the world. It is a weakness of many of our education systems that this basic creative propensity is not nurtured and sustained through childhood into adolescence and beyond for everyone, but becomes filtered and badged as a minority characteristic, viewing artistic behaviour as special, or as a human pyramid of excellence in which the many look up to the few.

Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, Chair of Music and Founding Director of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick was a catalyst and inspiration for this edited volume. His vision of the centrality of artistic behaviour, of how it could and should be celebrated and explored, brought him into (ir)regular contact with each of the experts who have contributed to this edited volume. It is impossible to write Mícheál's name without powerful images arising unbidden of positive and personal encounters that characterised my frequent visits to Limerick across a decade in different roles as an external examiner and research colleague. These images are infused with the sound of a voice that was resonant with energy, passion, humour, excitement, humility, encouragement, and leadership. His ability to put words together created a sense of possibility, of confidence in new initiatives, of faith in people's abilities to enact different and more enriching and inclusive futures, as well as the importance of change requiring strong philosophical, yet pragmatic, foundations.

The full quote attributed to Picasso that headed this chapter is 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.' Mícheál did not have such a problem. He remained an artist throughout his life and, in so doing, called forth the artist in others. Mícheál's life and work continues through his legacies in Limerick and beyond. We are all better people by having been touched by his art, joy and vision.

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