

Embodied experience:

The function of empathic intelligence in tertiary arts education

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This paper offers a perspective on tertiary arts-based practice and its assessment suggesting that the concept of empathic intelligence provides a framework for interdisciplinary discourse, embodied experiences and forms of assessment which are creative, integrative and potentially transformative. The paper provides both theoretical insights and research evidence from a study which investigated the use of a collaborative, group devised performance project in the development of pre-service teachers of drama in the Master of Teaching Program, Faculty of Education and Social Work, the University of Sydney, Australia. Insights from this study illuminate aspects of empathic intelligence and the nature of creative arts praxis.

There is a noteworthy tension in contemporary education. On one hand, the pressure for accountability increases in predictable ways, with one particularly unfortunate outcome, namely the diminution of rich educational objectives. At the same time, there is increasing awareness of the transformative potential of education, particularly in arts-based education.

To support arts-based education, it is timely to consider how best to harness the insights of brain-based research on the role of affect in cognition (Damasio, 1994, 2000, 2003; Carpenter 2002), and to develop a language for recognizing, naming and evaluating the phenomena involved in the performance and assessment of arts-based education. While current taxonomies are adequate to describe form, structure, plot, pacing, focus, rhythm, dramatic movement, kinesthetics, proxemics, characterization, aesthetics, and the like, new concepts need to be developed to take account of the affective aspects of arts education.

It is becoming increasingly apparent from Antonio Damasio's work in particular, that feelings can fine-tune cognition, and nuance judgments to prepare for the development of wisdom. If so, then arts education, as never before, can rightfully claim significance in

the development of understanding, high-order decision making, the development of complex interpersonal abilities and empathic intelligence (Arnold, R.1993, In Press). If affectivity and imagination are the essential underpinnings of arts-based education, such education can mobilize transformative experience. Transformative here refers to experiences of such powerful emotional and cognitive synergy that the psyche is changed irrevocably. Damasio argues:

Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other percepts (1994, xvii)... (Emotion and feeling) provide the bridge between rational and non-rational processes, between cortical and subcortical structures. (1994, p.128).

Many arts educators work tacitly in sympathy with these neurological insights, but it is affirming and encouraging to professional practice to understand why certain processes are effective. Laboratory work on brain-based research has shown that emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision-making. Damasio notes:

The neurological evidence simply suggests that selective absence of emotion is a problem. Well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly... These (results) also made it possible to view emotion as an embodiment of the logic of survival. (2000, p.42).

Embedded in Damasio's arguments, there is, arguably, support for the fundamentally important role of arts education and the functioning of imagination. It is within the inter-subjective and intra-subjective experience of imagined worlds that feeling and reason can psychically engage, deepening one's sense of self and consciousness of others. Damasio's own philosophical and ethical commitment to both understanding and enhancing the lives of his patients, even those whose mental functioning is very minimal, reflects a professional functioning applicable widely in person-centred professional practice. His willingness to engage in a sensitive and feeling way to his patients provided a source of significant scientific insights. Similarly, arts educators have opportunities to observe, engage and empathize with their students in contexts conducive to multi-modal, aesthetic expressions of their perspectives.

Arts education sees the imagination as a central concern of pedagogy and Maxine Greene argues passionately, and persuasively, for the role of imagination in education and its capacity to illuminate and elaborate the role of empathy. She says:

One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years...of all cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities (1995, p.3).

The ability to make affects conscious, to reflect upon their function and purpose, and to engage them in nuancing thought and judgment is quintessentially an outcome of engagement with arts education, provided the assessment of such educative experiences resonates with its primary purposes. While there is insufficient time here to establish an argument about links between engagement as a precursor to caring, we will discuss some aspects of engagement within a context of the performing arts, drawing attention to worlds beyond the self and the known.

We will explore in some detail two aspects of empathic intelligence: the development of perspective taking, and engagement and reflection upon feelings to demonstrate one way assessment and pedagogy in the arts can be aligned and purposeful. To position the argument in a context, some brief explanation of empathic intelligence follows.

EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING IN ARTS EDUCATION

The phenomenon of learning defies easy explanation, but when people attune to each other, something significant can happen in the space between them. Empathic Intelligence attempts to articulate aspects of the inter-subjective and intra-subjective phenomena of pedagogy (Arnold, R. 1993, In Press). It is a theoretical concept underpinned by an argument that effective pedagogy happens when an educator is able to create a dynamic between thinking and feeling, in a context that is perceived as caring. Empathically intelligent educators demonstrate a number of qualities, attributes, predispositions and abilities, in particular those which contribute to enthusiasm, capacity to engage others, expertise and empathy. At its best, empathically intelligent pedagogy can be transformative. It can mobilize tacit abilities, create affirming emotional templates for learning and support the development of higher-order cognitive and subjective abilities.

In practice, empathic intelligence is demonstrated by four professional qualities which outstanding teachers possess (Arnold, R. 1993, In Press). The first of these is empathy. Empathy is an ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of self and others. It is a sophisticated ability involving attunement and introspection. Empathy is fundamentally an act of thoughtful, heartfelt imagination. The second is enthusiasm for teaching students and the pedagogical field of learning. The third is expertise not only in the pedagogical field, although good teachers need to be both theoretically informed and effective in practice, but a capacity to recognize both regressive and developmental states in students. Finally there is engagement, the ability to attract and hold students' attention through centered purposeful interactions.

EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

We would like now to consider how aspects of empathic intelligence played out in an assessment project with teacher education students. The study investigated the use of a collaborative, group devised performance project in the development of nine pre-service secondary teachers of drama in the Master of Teaching Program at the University of

Sydney, Australia. The Program is a two year, post-graduate award, in the Faculty of Education and Social Work which educates students to teach in secondary schools, years 7 to 12, and focuses on facilitating student teachers' learning, and understanding of learning, as a basis for changing classroom practices within the whole education community.

The student participants who took part in this study had completed arts-focused undergraduate degrees and most planned to enter secondary schools as drama teachers at the completion of the course. Only a small number of the participants had performance backgrounds and for some, this was their first experience in performing for an audience.

The study was conducted in association with one of Australia's leading education based theatre institutions, the Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia (SGCA). The Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia is an associate Centre of the University of Sydney and is closely aligned with the International Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London (Hughes, J. 1998, 2003, 2003a). The Centre aims to provide a comprehensive national program of educational, arts and cultural activities based upon the exploration of the works of William Shakespeare. In addition, the SGCA aims to facilitate professional development for teachers and educational opportunities for students through performance and production activities. Each year, the Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia hosts an Annual Sonnet Stroll celebrating the birthday of William Shakespeare. The Sonnet Stroll is open to the public and is comprised of site-specific outdoor performances of Shakespeare's sonnets in and around the Royal Botanic Gardens and Sydney Harbour. Leading actors and performers associated with the Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia usually perform the sonnets. This was only the second time that tertiary students had been invited to perform.

PERFORMING AS A LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT TASK

Traditionally, assessment of students at the University of Sydney has been heavily based on written essays and examinations. Recently, more innovative approaches to assessment procedures have been explored by the Faculty of Education and Social Work. The assessment task examined in this study involved the year two Master of Teaching drama student teachers devising 5-6 minute performance pieces which were presented at the Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia's annual Sonnet Stroll in April 2003.

Significantly, the task mirrored the group devised performance core component of the Senior High School HSC Drama syllabus, a syllabus that the participants involved in the project will teach. In the State of New South Wales, students completing year twelve of secondary schooling undertake the Higher School Certificate Examination (HSC). Students of HSC Drama are required to devise and perform a group performance piece as part of this examination. This piece is expected to be an original piece of theatre that demonstrates an understanding of dramatic elements, theatrical techniques and conventions. A further objective of this assessment task is for students to experience the collaborative nature of drama and theatre, and a logbook is required to be kept by the

students in order to document this experience. Schoolteachers are not allowed to direct the students' work. The University project mirrored these objectives and procedures in that the participants were not directed in the building of their performances and the participants also recorded entries in logbooks.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE PERFORMANCE PROCESS

The class consisted of female students only and was divided into two groups. The first task was to select the Sonnet. Group 1 chose Sonnet XV, *When I consider every thing that grows*, and group 2 chose to work on Sonnet XCIV, *They that have power to hurt, and will do none*. In mid March 2003, the participants visited the sites of the performances, the Royal Botanic Gardens, in order to assess the performance possibilities of the Sonnet Stroll spaces. The participants then devised and rehearsed their performances, both in the rehearsal studio and at the site of performance. The rehearsed Sonnets were then performed at the Sonnet Stroll in April 2003.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

During the process the participants kept reflective journals and submitted logbooks which were analyzed. In May 2003 they undertook a three week professional experience in schools where they taught the group devised project. At the conclusion of this practice teaching program they were interviewed by an independent researcher in order to determine the strength and weaknesses of the project. An independent and formal evaluation of the unit of study was also undertaken by the Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Sydney.

The data analysis revealed that in addition to gaining skills and knowledge which equipped the student teachers to teach more effectively, the participants felt they had developed a refined empathic attunement with school students undertaking similar projects and an embodied sense of themselves as artist teacher. The analysis revealed two broad categories of comment. The first category consisted of initial fears and problems such as performance anxiety, production/rehearsal concerns, group dynamics and pressures such as time restraints. These findings are tabulated in table A. The second broad theme revealed what the participants perceived to be the outcomes of the project: learning from and in a group, enhanced performance and teaching skills and empathy with the students they are going to teach. These are presented in Table B.

Table A Summary of Participant Responses: Initial Fears/Problems

PARTICIPANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Lack of knowledge of sonnets	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Unfamiliar with dramatic techniques	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Outdoor venue	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Developing characters	X		X		X		X		
Lack of independent director	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Rehearsal time	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tension in the group		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Anxiety: letting the group down			X				X		X
Not a performer	X	X					X	X	X
Other pressures: work, university	X	X		X		X		X	X

Table B Summary of Participant Responses: Outcomes and Findings

PARTICIPANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Better understanding of the sonnets	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Learnt from the group	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
Gained confidence	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Ability to receive constructive criticism		X			X	X	X		
Empathy with HSC students	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bonded with group				X	X			X	
Benefited from an embodied experience	X		X			X	X		X
Learnt skills for teaching	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Enthusiasm for the project	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Learnt about HSC group devised project	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

The project data reveals that the participants believed that they had enhanced their capacity for effective teaching by developing the four E's: Expertise, Empathy, Capacity to Engage and Enthusiasm (Arnold, R.1993, In Press).

EXPERTISE IN THE PERFORMANCE PROCESS

The project facilitated a development of expertise in performance building by allowing the participants to experience the performance process itself. This in turn resulted in a greater degree of confidence in the participants and a greater empathic understanding of the experiences encountered by their secondary students studying for the Higher School Certificate. The project data also revealed that participants felt they had learnt essential skills for teaching, particularly in relation to the HSC Group Devised Project. These assertions are observed through an examination of the initial fears and problems identified by the participants prior to the task as well as the outcomes of the project. Before embarking upon this task, the Master of Teaching students had voiced projected fears and problems. After the Sonnet Stroll had been performed, the group recalled few of these initial fears/problems.

One fear expressed by the participants was the lack of knowledge of Shakespeare and the sonnets. Whereas only one student mentioned it as a prior fear: *'...I hadn't done that much Shakespeare before'*, six out of the nine participants claimed to have a better understanding of the sonnets at the project's conclusion. From the interviews, it appears that the method of study was an important element in gaining a greater understanding. One participant mentioned that she had gained *'confidence'* in Shakespeare. Another thought it was a *'tangible'* way of connecting with Shakespeare and, in her particular circumstance, working with the sonnets was one of the major benefits of this exercise. Yet another student felt she had benefited from *'looking at Shakespeare in a different way'*.

Factors associated with the performance process ranked highly amongst the participants' initial fears. Some mentioned that performing in an outdoor venue as a fear, others referred to a perceived lack of unfamiliarity with dramatic technique; however, the majority of participants identified limited rehearsal time as a core concern. It was a fear that was realized in many cases. Three participants specifically mentioned the timing of the performance, in that it took place at a time when other assignments were due, although it needs to be noted that they also mentioned that this would help them empathize with HSC students: *'...I underwent the experience that students that I'm teaching are going to be experiencing.'* For the others, the problems with rehearsal time was associated with *'...finding the time to get together in our life style as university students.'* Every participant mentioned the difficulty with organizing rehearsal times when the whole group could be together. Despite these fears and problems, all participants were able to build a performance and present it to the Sonnet Stroll audience.

EMPATHY WITH STUDENTS

One clear outcome of the project was a greater empathic understanding of the problems encountered by students when working in groups. Significant issues involved tension amongst the group and difficulties in decision making. Seven participants referred to tension in the group as a key concern prior to the project, but only one specifically mentioned tension during the process: *'A few people in the group wanted to do certain things, other people in the group didn't.'* Several participants felt that experiencing the *'decision making process'* would help them connect with students involved in group work at all levels as there would be a greater understanding of group dynamics. Many participants felt that they had gained a greater insight into teaching group devised projects and stated that they had gained confidence in technique. This insight was gained through experiential learning and a subsequent understanding of what their students will be going through. They stated that they had also gained an insight into student/teacher relationships.

The data revealed that the expertise gained from the project tended to overlap with empathy with HSC students. The HSC is an extremely stressful and demanding time for secondary school students. Students are expected to engage in lengthy hours of personal study in a large number of diverse subject areas. They are also asked to submit assessments and undergo examinations. These demands are often compounded by extra-curricula activities, pressures of part-time employment and obligations to family. Similarly, many of the participants in this study felt as though they had a greater empathic understanding of the difficulties that would be experienced by their HSC students as a result of being subjected to similar pressures: As one participant stated *'...I underwent the experience that I think students that I'm teaching are going to be experiencing.'*

ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS

Drama in secondary schools demands student-centered interactive group activities. The student teachers in this study gained insight into the process of engagement with their students. In the HSC drama classroom some of the principal difficulties encountered by students are associated with the decision making process and the relationship between group members. As HSC results determine entry into university courses, immense pressure to perform at the highest standard possible is felt by the majority of HSC candidates. As can be imagined, this pressure enhances conflict amongst student groups as many different creative ideas are floated. Groups must contend with diverse performance abilities and different aesthetic judgements plus creative ideas, in addition to the usual complications associated with leadership, commitment by group members and balanced input. All these factors can lead to significant tension amongst students, ultimately affecting their ability to build a performance for assessment. The participants

of the university project responded that they had develop an enhanced empathic understanding of the HSC Group Devised Project by experiencing similar pressures and encountering tensions within the group. The students also commented on the strength and power of the experience given its involvement of the body in space, gesture, voice, proxemics and role. As one participant noted: *'The power of a performance such as we undertook can only be fully understood when it is embodied and experienced'*.

ENTHUSIASM

All of the participants responded positively when questioned about the overall experience of participating in the project. All reported an enjoyable experience on practice teaching as they implemented their newly discovered abilities and attitudes. In fact, two of the participants argued that the group would benefit from additional performances at other times during the two-year course. The following is typical of the responses:

The project really brought us together as a group. We were able to feed off one another's skills and create something together. The best part was how excited we got just before the performance. And the audience liked us. The project was challenging but fun and it was fantastic to work off each other's enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

The student participants in 2003 Sonnet Stroll project appear to have enhanced their competence as pre-service secondary teachers by developing the four E's: empathic understanding, expertise in performance building, capacity to engage with their students and an enthusiasm for both the project and for teaching. Our purpose here is to illustrate why arts-based education is fundamentally important if education is to be transformative. To fulfill that purpose, we argue that assessment can and should align with such goals by seeking to engage students in meaningful activities designed to both enhance and reveal deep learnings, embodied experience and outcomes. We believe the concept of empathic intelligence offers a model to help arts-based educators to work in authentic, artistic, purposeful and transformative ways.

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