

Nurturing generational change in arts education:

A West Australian experience.

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In common with many Bachelor of Education Primary courses, Murdoch University has required students to include some coverage of arts education. The teaching team's dissatisfaction with the depth and focus of these studies has led to a process of renewal that focuses on ensuring these young teachers in their initial teacher education have enough knowledge and understanding, skills and values to get started with actively including the arts in their everyday teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Initial teacher education for the primary years at Murdoch University follows a familiar pattern of a four year Bachelor of Education. Students can also complete a one year Graduate Diploma of Education [Primary] and a two year Graduate Entry Bachelor of Education. Students in each of these courses have to successfully complete a number of compulsory curriculum units including EDU207/EDU217 Curriculum II A or B. In 2004 the cohort for these units was 240, including both on- and off-campus students.

As has been the case since these courses were revised, these parallel curriculum units encompass 3 of 8 learning areas (38%) of WA Curriculum Framework: the Arts, Health & Physical Education, and Technology & Enterprise. This complex mix was addressed in a 70 hour semester 2 unit: 2 x 3 hour workshops over 12 weeks and 1 weekly lecture. Not only has there been limited time and resources to cover the 3 learning areas, there has been a compression of attention possible within the arts learning area. In common with the curriculum frameworks in other states, the Arts learning area in Western Australia focuses on students developing aesthetic understanding and arts practice through the five art forms of dance, drama, media, music, visual arts and combinations of these art forms.

Further compounding the challenges of this situation is that students come to these courses with limited prior learning in the arts via their own schooling or lives beyond school. Experience in the arts is often fragmented and distant.

What our students tell us about their learning in the arts

In an on-going research project (Wright 2003-4) students surveyed in these units tell us that:

- 43% had "nil" experience in the arts
- 45% had "limited" experience in the arts
- 12% had "substantial" experience in the arts¹

As a result, many of our students express anxiety about modelling artistic attributes to young people. They are concerned about their limited opportunity for development of arts-based knowledge and understanding.

In this paper we report on moves towards addressing these deficits and enhancing the arts education of initial teacher education students at Murdoch University, Western Australia. We do so, in part, through processes designed to help students construct maps for learning and teaching the arts. We do so in the belief that, to teach effectively you need to have your own construction of knowledge, understanding, skills and values about both content and pedagogy.

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TEACHING THE ARTS

Teaching the arts in schools is often fractured, focused on microcosms and on individual pieces in the jigsaw (Blakeslee 2003). This is perhaps understandable: the complexity and detail of the arts and the specific interests and enthusiasms of individual teachers conspire to focus on the pieces rather than the whole. Syllabuses and support materials have also often taken this detailed and specialised focus. As a result, we have a plethora of recipe books about teaching the arts. While these serve an important function, teachers need move beyond being slaves to recipe books. The danger for many teachers is that their arts learning programs lose continuity and wholeness across the educational and school life of students. Hence Arts lessons become fragmented, often existing in isolation and lacking connection. What this means is that teachers and students can get lost in the jigsaw pieces. We advocate that contemporary arts teachers become "menu planners" taking in the whole picture.

The more we work in arts education, the more we realise the breadth and complexity of the field, the layering of detail [perhaps more than can be encompassed by any one person's life time, interest or inclination]. But we resist the temptation to throw up our hands in defeat. We have a more pragmatic task that we need to attend to: given our context and resources, how can we help teachers, mainly "generalist" classroom teachers, find their way through and into purposeful and valuable arts learning for students?

We are building ways to answer that question for our B Ed Primary students through implementing two complementary strategies:

1. Building maps and overviews that give shape and focus to the pedagogic journey
2. Developing a second compulsory unit that introduces students to the arts in personal ways thereby helping them to make personal aesthetic meaning as prelude to curriculum units that focus on teaching and learning.

We are committed to building each pre-service teacher's own knowledge and experience in the arts so that they have the confidence and the competence to include the arts in their teaching programs.

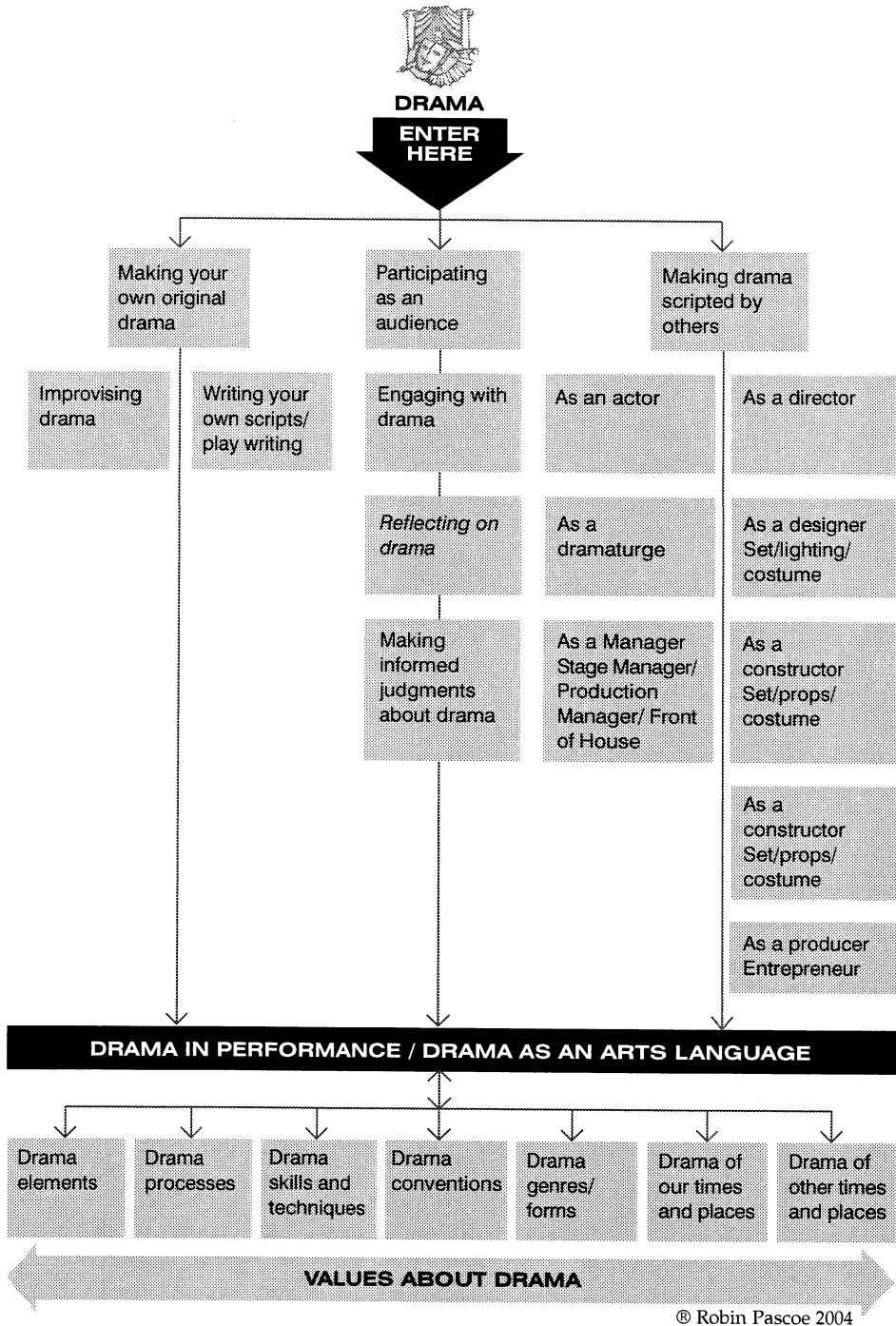
Strategy 1: Maps for the learning journey for beginning teachers

The first strategy is based on providing students with maps – we use the term knowledge maps – for their learning journey into teaching the arts in schools. Like cartographic maps they are symbolic representations of spaces and landmarks. They also operate to provide a description of cognitive and conceptual spaces and landmarks. In a sense, these act as cognitive maps that help students align their developing understandings in arts education with their experiences and links feeling and meaning with pedagogy and content in a transformative way (Mansfield, 2000). The purpose of these maps is to provide guidance about the specific aspects of each of the art forms included in the learning area while also showing how there is similarity across them. In doing so, they build on one of the features of the Arts Learning Area Statement in the Western Australian Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) that explicitly identifies the scope of the art forms as well as a set of generic arts outcomes.

Building overviews or maps is a balancing act, that is finding ways of expressing ideas sufficiently simply while staying true to the discipline, in our case each of the art forms. Part of this is finding a perspective that is appropriate to the teacher - the primary classroom teacher - while also being consistent with the perspectives of artists and the wider population.

In our work we have developed a series of art form specific overviews - or knowledge maps - that we have incorporated into these units (Pascoe, 2003-4). For example, the map for drama incorporates an overview of ways into drama in schools and articulates the territory for drama learning.

Figure 1 Knowledge map for drama²



As outlined in Figure 1, we begin by focusing on the fundamental activities of an art form - not on specific genres, styles or histories but on identifying what lies at the heart of an art form. In drama, for example, it is possible to conceptualise three fundamental categories of activity:

1. making your own original drama
2. participating in drama as an audience
3. making drama that has been scripted by others

Within each of these foundational activities, there are sub-categories. For example, you can make your own drama through:

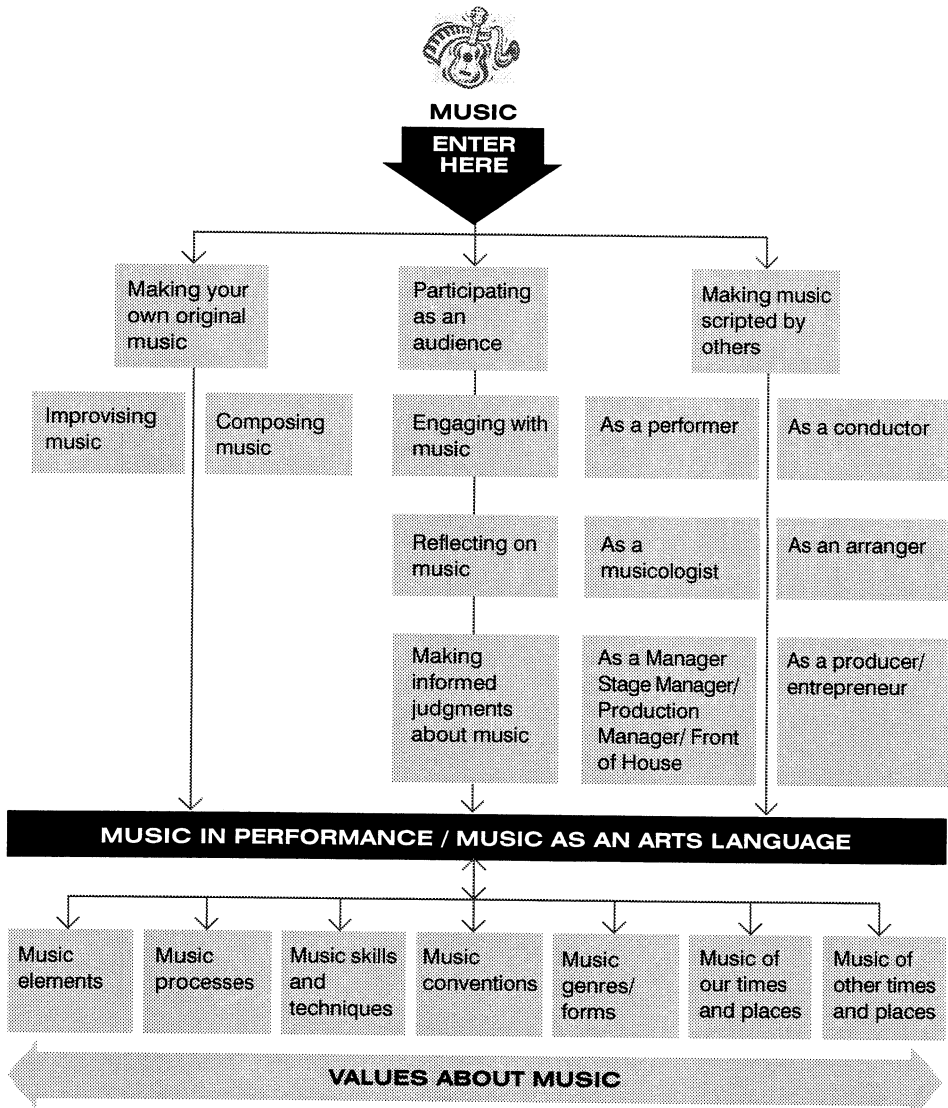
- improvising drama, or
- writing your own drama

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that no matter which door you use to enter into these activities, there is a foundational sub-structure of knowledge, understanding, skills and values to draw on. This is an interconnected web of elements, processes, skills and techniques, conventions, genres and forms and drama from our own contemporary times as well as from other times and places. Underpinning these aspects are values about drama such as respect for different points of view, participation, working in community, the social and collaborative nature of drama, etc.

Taken together this structure makes what we call drama as an arts language [or drama in performance - as opposed to drama as a literary study]. In short we have a simple coherent map—that acts as a heuristic device—of the art form. The art form in schools then reflects this same model. Of course, there are additional underlying principles and conceptual understandings about the nature of drama and how it works. From this map it is possible to categorise, explore and expand. Drama elements such as role and character, movement, symbol and metaphor, are not scattered but coherently connected. They are not seen in isolation and while there is overlap in these categorisations, the map provides a way of holding diverse and sometimes conflictingly defined concepts in a form that works for teachers. We know that it works because our students have told us so.

The question then needs to be asked: if you can map one art form, can the other art forms be mapped in the same way? Will the pattern hold true? The simple answer is yes! It is possible to construct similar knowledge maps of the other art forms. Possibly, it is easier to do so for other performing arts like music and dance (see Figure 2 Knowledge map for music). Our work has shown that it is possible to construct similar maps for all of the art forms. These are shown in the appendices.

Figure 2 Knowledge map for music



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RECOGNISING THE ART FORM SPECIFIC

Underlying each of these maps is art form specific knowledge, understanding, skills and values. In turn, each map then leads to more specific and detailed unpacking of specific aspects. For example, in Figure 3, music processes can be understood in part through a consideration of aesthetic choices including notions of variety, contrast, repetition and balance.

Figure 3 Examples of music specific detail unpacked from the music knowledge map

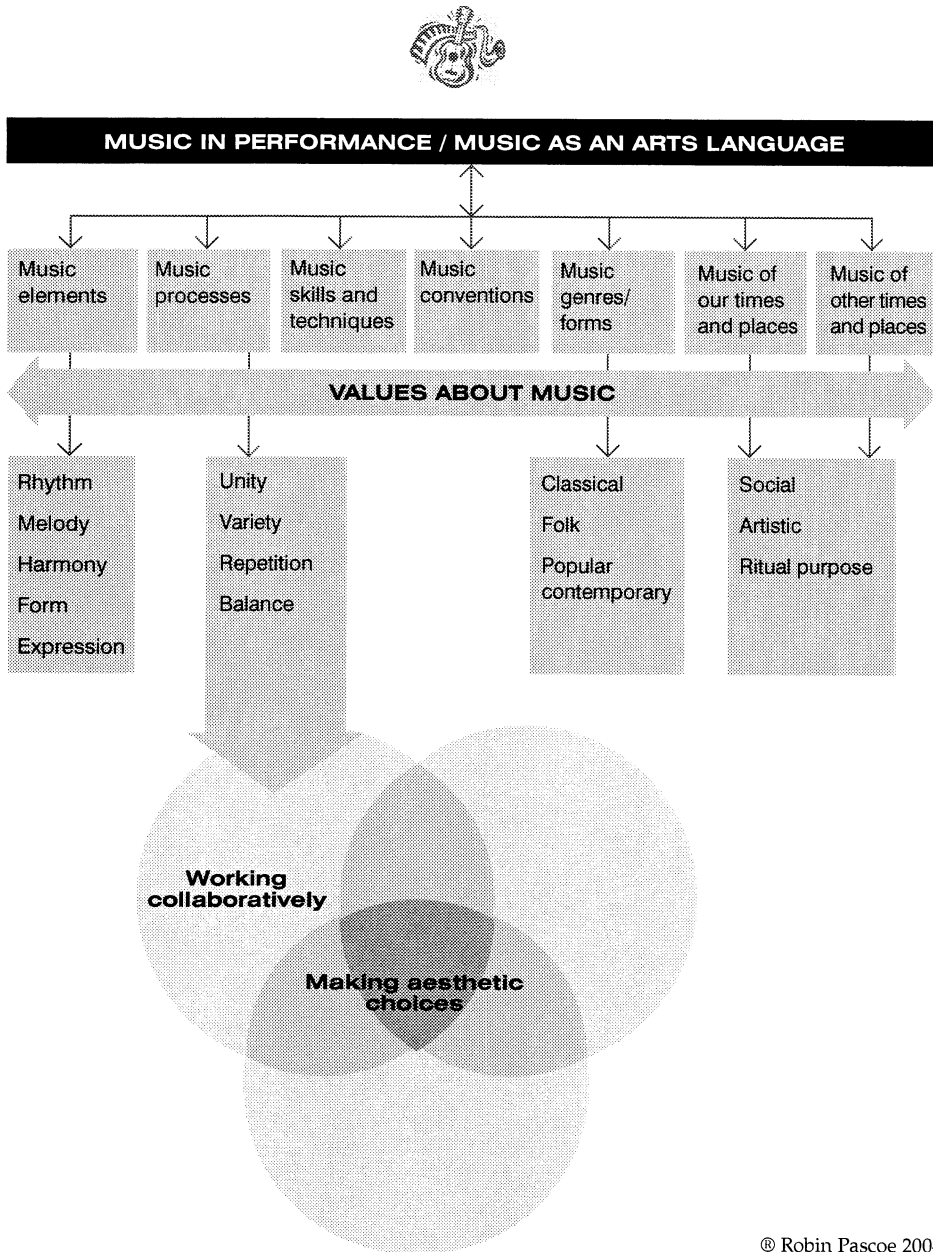
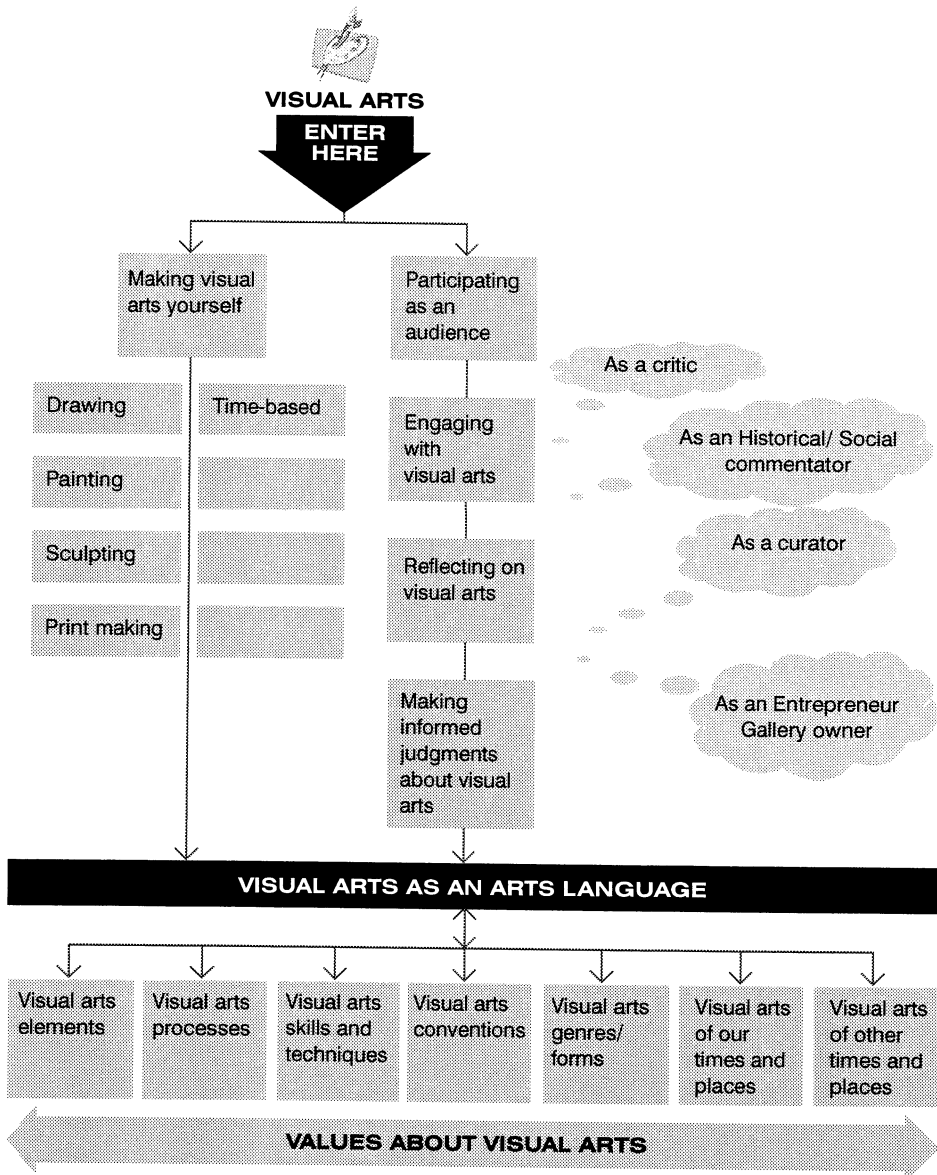


Figure 4 Knowledge map for visual arts



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In the same way it is possible to articulate other aspects of this approach communicating the more conventionally understood aspects of an art form. These are not ignored or dismissed. They organically spring from the conceptualisation of the whole field.

As uncomfortable as some people are about the curriculum conceptualisation linking arts forms, it is a reality. It reflects the changing context of arts education—partly in response to high modernism and developing socio-cultural understandings—and the real world our teachers are moving into.

Will this approach hold for all the arts included in schools?

Our experience is that it will - with minor modifications that recognise the differences between the performing and the visual arts (see Figure 4) and media (Appendices).

A strength of these maps is their capacity to springboard beginning teachers to more conventional terms, for example, highlighting their ability—and that of their students—to work as artists, critics, and/or social commentators.

The approach also recognises the specific aspects of each art form while providing teachers with cues and clues to similarities including notions of creating, interpreting, exploring, developing and presenting (Curriculum Council WA 1998), - and differences such as art form specific knowledge.

STRATEGY 2: ACTIVATING ARTS LEARNING

The second strategy we employ to support students as arts educators and highlight in this paper is the necessity for nurturing students' knowledge and awareness of the arts in their own lives.

Building on a unit that had been running for some time at Murdoch University, we are in the process of re-engineering EDU360 *Learning Through the Arts* as an introduction to the arts. This second year unit will be a compulsory prelude to the arts curriculum units EDU207/217 that appear later in the same year. It is a foundation to the essentially pedagogic focus of the curriculum methodology units.

In *Learning through the Arts* we focus on stimulating and awakening the creativity and imagination of each student through a range of arts activities.



Semester 1 2004 has been developed around a series of practical workshops. We began by exploring paper - playing Paper, Scissors, Rock and making simple origami shapes as an introduction to making simple paper Bunraku puppets. There were workshops on both unstructured and structured play. Students explored story and telling stories for a variety of purposes. The unit concluded with students working on a collaborative *Living Newspaper* project that drew together their capacity to use drama, music, dance and technology. We used iMovie and GarageBand - two of the programs in the Macintosh iLife 04 package. Students also completed an arts advocacy knowledge product and provided a rationale for why the arts should be part of the learning of every child in school.

What was important in the context of this unit was not so much the specific content of these activities as the valuing, enjoyment, and exploration of the arts in the lives of each participant. This is a unit designed to re-kindle in each student the arts as meaning making, and the arts as a source of enjoyment and satisfaction. Now these students are ready to begin arts pedagogic studies.

PRINCIPLES AND EVOLVING PRACTICE

For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nurture of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn (Greene 2001: 7).

Our work with these students in Initial Teacher Education is shaped by 3 informing principles:

- (i) a focus on **artistic behaviours** as different ways of making and thinking and creating meaning
- (ii) a focus on **storytelling** using different arts languages
- (iii) a focus on **aesthetic playing** looking at the sense and selves being made and remade.

We celebrate how expressiveness involves searching for qualities that show how experience is felt, lived, and understood.

This commitment, drawing in part on the work of Freedman (2003), Greene (2001) and Macintyre Latta (2001), is leading us to new understandings in arts education, including:

- *Curriculum as a place of mediation.* This involves an understanding of the curriculum as a conceptual space in which students develop their ideas with the aid of teachers who do not merely act as guides, but as critical partners. Curriculum is newly becoming understood as a form of mediation between and among students, teachers, and a wide range of texts and images from inside and outside the school.

- *Critique of elitism and formalism in arts education.* There is a change in response to the elitism and formalism of high modernism.
- A broadly socio-cultural approach where there is a focus on the complex and critical interaction of working with arts ideas, skills and practices, responding (analysis and appraisal), and understanding the arts in context (the four outcomes for the arts articulated in the Western Australian Curriculum Framework). This approach seeks to put back into arts education the diverse meanings of art to human existence, aid student understanding of the power of culture (including fine and popular culture and their interactions), and the arts in everyday life and contemporary realities.

These understandings and principles can be more clearly understood when contemporary arts education scholars highlight that the field itself is changing (Addison and Burgess 2003; Bresler and Thompson 2002; Burnaford, April & Weiss 2001; Diaz & McKenna 2004; Freedman 2003; Goldberg 2001; Robinson 2001). For example, the field itself is expanding with a concomitant blurring of boundaries (and a rejection of the late 19th century Western European classification and codification of art forms); research reveals the connection between form, feeling and knowing (interactive cognition); we now more clearly understand the importance of social perspectives to arts education, the reality of pervasive technologies; how arts education serves to inform cultural identity; and finally, how form contextualises whatever it communicates and how important it is for young people to constructively critique both form and content.

NURTURING GENERATIONAL CHANGE

The arts are in a state of flux and change - always. The silos of isolation that have characterized the arts in schools are breaking down. Ways of seeing the arts - in the broad community - are changing. What happens in the arts in schools must not only reflect the arts in the broader community, they must not be the dead hand of conservatism.

Teaching is necessarily pragmatic. As much as that instrumental focus irks some—and we do not equate pragmatic with being technicist or reductionist—it is our reality. The challenge for teacher education is to respond to these real world pressures while keeping in balance tendencies to over-simplification and reductionism. Imperatives of the world of schooling and the world beyond schooling need to be kept in balance with our principles and values as artists and our aesthetic understanding. That means being clear about priorities and value. As this paper demonstrates, we work from the art form first, syllabus second. And we balance these two demands.

In summation we argue that:

- You can't effectively teach what you don't know [sorry for the negative sentence construction but we want to put it clearly and unequivocally for once!]
- Given the constraints we face, we work to give beginning teachers *enough to get started*.

- Knowledge construction, understanding, values and skills development are complex and specific; they develop over time and require commitment; they are active and require engagement; and,
- Values about the arts are integral to effective teaching and learning.

Our current work is designed to impel a wave of generational change about the arts in schools. We know that art is long and generations change slowly - but they do change.

NOTES

1 Limited experience was characterised as:

“hands on with my children at home” ; “doing music at school”; “enjoying film”

Substantial experience:

“helping in the classroom” (parent helper); “graphic designer in a previous life”

2 It is important to note that these maps draw on a range of documents that detail the territory of the art form and may be contested; the various concepts and terminology are unpacked with students in practical embodied ways. In this paper, there is relatively little of this unpacking or detailing as the focus is on the overall strategy of building conceptual understanding in students through these knowledge maps. Like most maps, they use an abbreviated language and a coding that requires specialised interpretive capacity. We are conscious that some prefer information in more conventional narrative forms.

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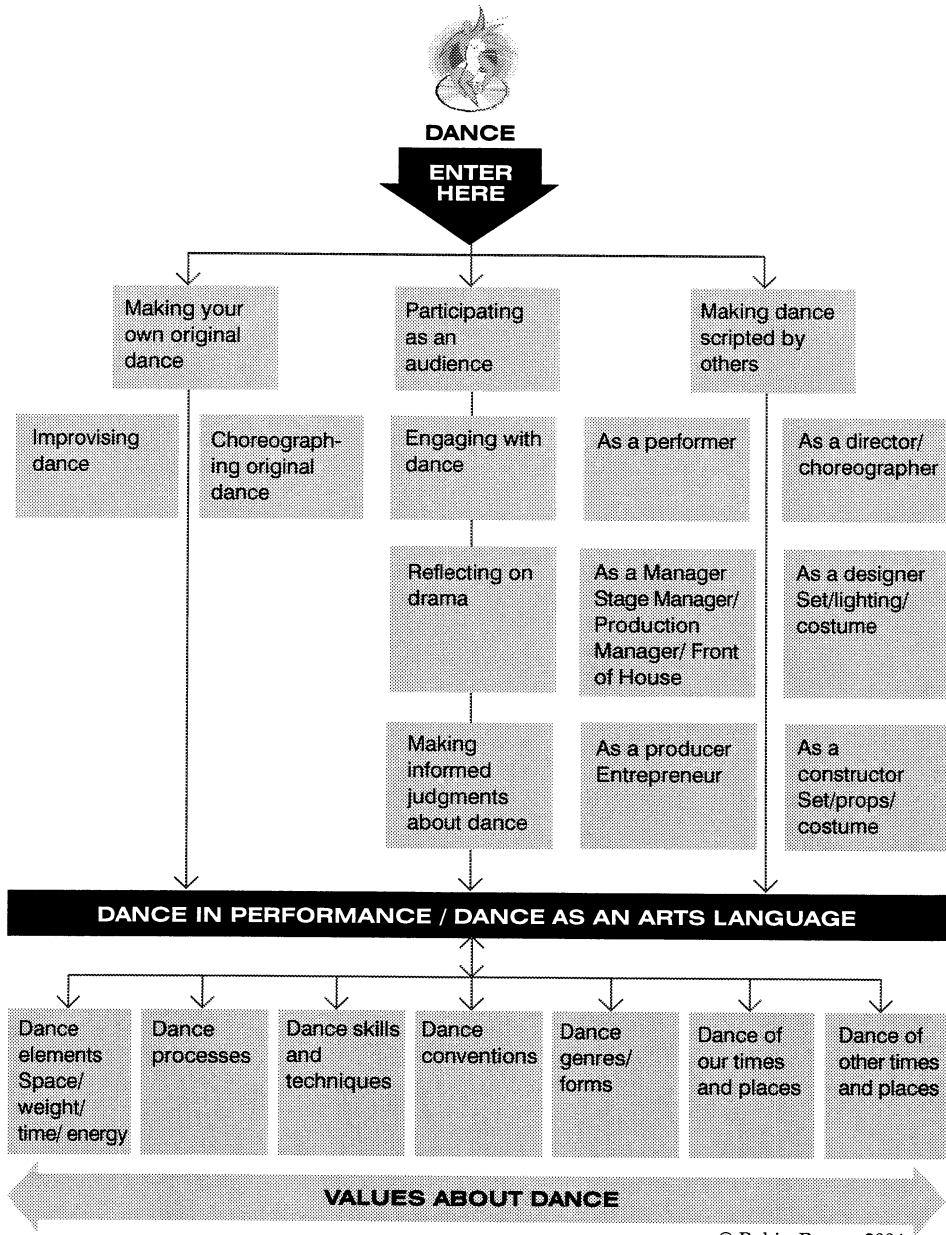
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APPENDICES

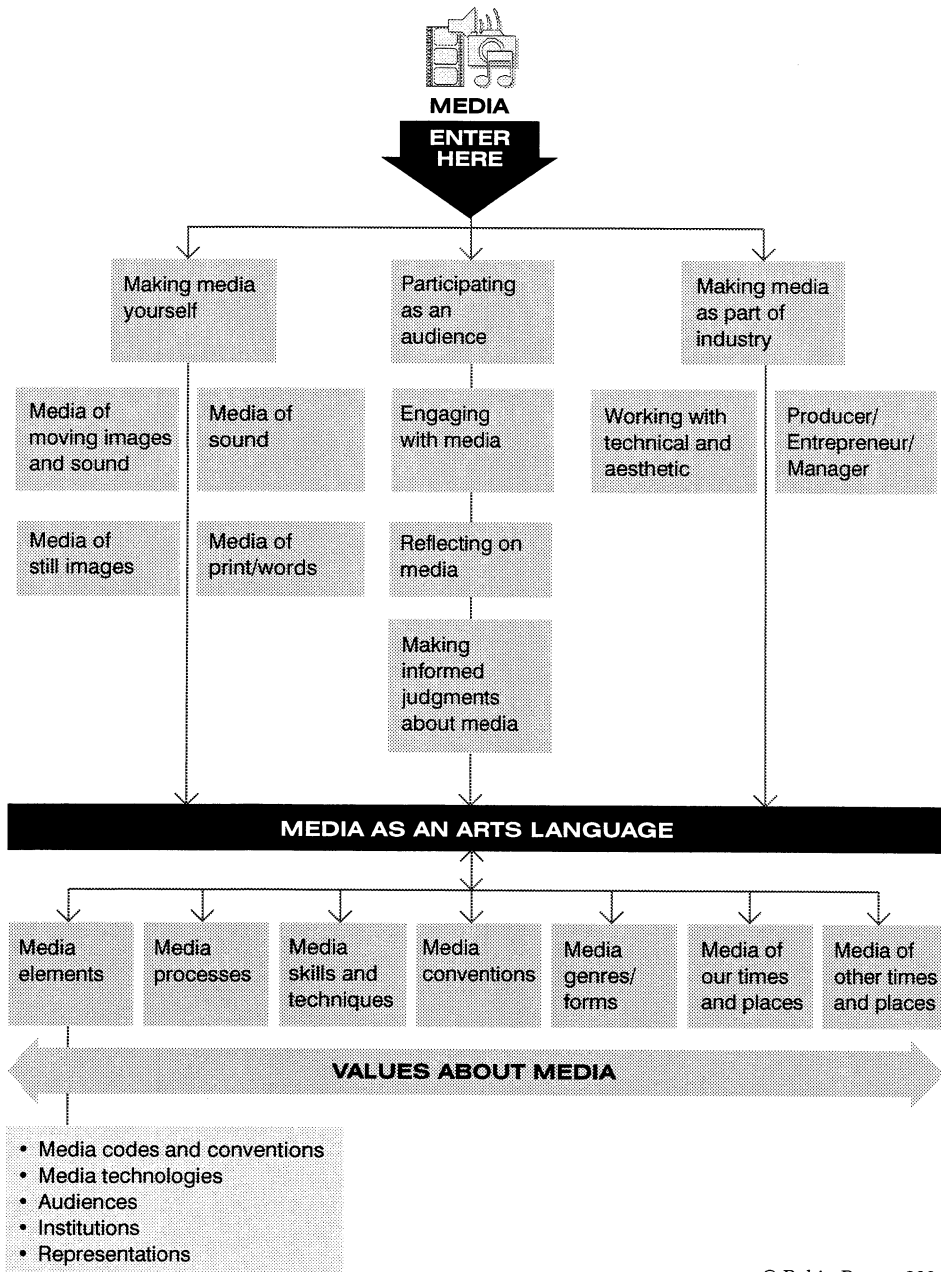
In these appendices, we include the knowledge maps for dance and media, to complete the suite we use.

Figure 5 Knowledge map for dance



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Figure 6 Knowledge map for media



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