

ENGAGING THE MIND PROCESS OF THE ARTS AS A CATALYST OF TRANSFORMATIVE THINKING IN LEADERSHIP, KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION AND COMPASSIONATE CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Premiere programs in leadership development and knowledge integration are turning their attention to the “mind processes of the arts” as spark, catalyst and cohering agent for professional development across the disciplines. Leading corporations and government agencies on both sides of the Atlantic are today calling upon a new breed of teaching and performing artists as consultants in change management, deep learning, creative problem-solving and ensemble leadership. Conference keynoters and process specialists are also being recruited from the arts, not as novelty, but as prophetic voices from the periphery, the cutting edge, the future just coming into view. Their tools – the modes and codes of artistic communication, reflection and exploration – are taking their place as significant new features of the corporate mindscape. Logic and analysis, once virtually the sole parlance of so-called “serious thinking”, are today cast opposite a bevy of fiery featured co-stars: imagination, ingenuity and intuition. Enter the “mind processes of the arts”.

Here are six examples of arts-based leadership and training initiatives from the annals of our own company, Creative Leaps International.

Starbucks Coffee Company -- to introduce the principles of *Servant Leadership* to the company’s national team of over 5000 store managers

General Electric -- to enliven executive education and grow the company’s internal identity as a global organization containing rich cultural diversity

Pfizer -- to establish a highly innovative setting for creative problem solving and risk taking at an international conference of the healthcare industry

The Bank of Montreal -- to energize creative thinking and catalyze whole-hearted, fully invested participation in reshaping of the bank’s vision, culture and goals

Council for Excellence in Government -- to nurture creativity and personal integrity among 1000 top Federal and White House government executives

Center for Creative Leadership -- to communicate and embody the latest research on leadership as partnership, an emergent and fully participatory dynamic of groups.

How have these applications of the arts come into being? What is their lineage, their pedigree, their source? Are they grounded in an intellectual tradition or have they emerged opportunistically in response to market forces?

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Without a doubt, market forces drive or inspire nearly all successful entrepreneurial endeavors, and arts-based interventions in the corporate leadership training arena are no exception. Over the last decade, at the same time that non-linear systems and chaos driven causality were revolutionizing approaches to strategic thinking, another force, more ancient in its origins and even more mysterious in its effects, was making itself felt in corporate cultures everywhere. I'm referring, of course, to the rediscovery of heart wisdom or "emotional intelligence" in our dealings with one another. The subtleties of felt knowledge, intuitive insight and inter-personal relationships were asserting themselves as crucial aspects of a more complex human equation -- in business, in education, in society at large. The stage was being set for something new, something paradoxically fresh and innovative yet also in tune with our most ancient natures, an invention which, if realizable, would somehow thrive on chaos and non-linearity even as it engaged fully the mysteries of the human heart. That invention was very possibly "the arts".

But were "the arts" ready? Were artists and arts organizations prepared for this quantum leap into the psyches of 21st century professional men and women, into the roiling marketplaces of big business, big government and lifelong learning?

The answer is both "yes" and "no". Understandably, most artists and arts organizations were far too busy creating and producing art or far too stressed with basic survival issues to be thinking about or investing in the possibility of designing special services for the corporate sector. However, though this was surely the case for the majority of arts practitioners, for a handful of others it was the opportunity they had been waiting for. In some fundamental way, *they* were ready. The writing on the wall had become visible for them and the future was summoning them forward.

Our own organization, Creative Leaps International, was one of those early innovators. Since the founding of our parent company, (Associated Solo Artists) in 1972, we have been pioneers in arts-based interdisciplinary education for K-12 schools. We routinely used the arts to enliven thinking and learning across the full spectrum of academic studies, bridging disciplines and making creative connections among the arts, sciences and humanities. Making creative connections and bringing ideas to life were our way of life and we excelled at it. We also worked with teachers on issues of renewal, creativity and knowledge integration. This was the ground of our preparedness for the quantum leap we were about to take.

A second layer of preparedness came directly from our creative and performing work as concert artists and traveling artists in residence. We had many years of experience doing what is known as *outreach programming*, i.e., bringing our performances to under-served and disenfranchised audiences, often in very non-traditional venues including truck stops and factory floors, courtrooms and boardrooms. Through these on-the-spot colorful and impromptu experiences, we learned how to serve as friendly, effective ambassadors for our art forms and informative guides for less experienced arts consumers. This experience proved invaluable in our move into the corporate sector.

A third layer of preparedness emerged from our invention, in the late 1970s, of a genre of performance we called the "Concert of Ideas". This was a blend of several art forms including

music, poetry, visual arts and drama which wrapped themselves creatively around a central topic such as “imagination in art and science” or “international human rights” and, through live performance, brought aspects of that topic to life. Our objective? To set our listeners’ minds in energized, exploratory motion, to catalyze fresh, creative thinking around our topics in a way that was original, joyful and irresistible fun. In time, we became very good at this too.

Factors of Our Preparedness for This New Work

- Experience as *teaching artists* making creative connections among ideas and bringing these ideas to life
- Experience as *outreach* ambassadors for our art forms and guides for inexperienced arts consumers
- Our invention of “*The Concert of Ideas*” as a fun, celebratory, exploration of significant ideas among adult thinkers and learners

So, when the invitation came, as it did one summer completely unexpectedly, to provide an arts-based keynote on leadership to business executives from across the country, though we hardly knew it at the time, we were ready, deeply ready. We were an immediate success. And with that, our new endeavor was born. Creative Leaps International was established a new program division within our non-profit and our work in the corporate sector began to grow rapidly.

Today, an increasing number of arts practitioners are entering this new and hybrid field. Poets, symphony conductors, percussionists, storytellers, acting companies, dance companies, visual artists, musical ensembles, writers, photographers, archetypal mythologists: though they scarcely know one another exist, they are together inventing a domain that has the potential to change the everyday nature of work into *the everyday work of art* – our very lives as works of art...an idea whose time has come.

The Mind Processes of the Arts

What exactly do we mean by the “mind processes of the arts”? There are many possible answers to this question, some scholarly, some common-sense. One common-sense answer points to what our minds are doing as we perceive things – perception is surely center-stage to the mind processes of the arts. Or, wondering further: what an *artist’s mind* is doing as she prepares to draw something. *Her* seeing is bound to be different from a casual look. Hers is surely *a look that notices more, pays more attention to detail and then somehow absorbs this detail into her imagination for transformative action*. This is a good beginning.

How we take in the world through our senses, attributing significance or insignificance to a host of details, noticing or failing to notice patches of order in the flux of everyday happenings – this is the domain of *perception* and it is chock full of error, logic and glorious idiosyncrasy. Likewise, the domain of *imagination* is equally on target: how we envision, interpret and co-create knowledge, how we experience the present moment and the future waiting to be born. We are definitely in the thick of our mental processes when we focus on *perception and imagination*.

Let's look now at how a number of scholars and researchers have begun to codify and interpret the domains of perception, imagination and the mind processes of the arts.

We'll explore three angles of view: Professor Elliot Eisner of Stamford University, a leading scholar on arts education; secondly, a research team from the Center for Creative Leadership; and thirdly, my own colleagues and I from Creative Leaps International in our roles as practitioners and action researchers.

I heard Professor Eisner speak at a conference at the University of California, Irvine, a few years ago and afterwards spent some time with him. The list below is based on my notes from his lecture and our subsequent conversations.

Mind Processes of the Arts

A summary of Professor Eisner's list

1. How to create and attend to qualitative relationships in the absence of rules (sensitivity to somatic knowledge and "rightness of fit").
2. Acting flexibly with purpose to approach a goal, dealing with unexpected discoveries and insights along the way, "surprises" which change you, exploring the possibilities.
3. Learning how to explore, to explore within a medium, and the possibilities of the medium
4. Relying upon imagination to see multiple perspectives. Fancy, not as a problem, but a fundamental utility.
5. Learning how to pay attention to nuance
6. Surrendering to the arts via its processes. Following. Giving-in, rather than leading.
7. Learning to use language figuratively, transcending what words can never say. The qualitative feel of language, transcending the literal to get to the heart of the work.
8. How to create emotionally what cannot be expressed literally...expressing something via a form, how form is crafted...technical acumen so the medium responds to expression.
9. The qualitative features of the arts themselves and the world outside the arts.

In an article published in the January 1998 issue of *Art Education* ("*Does experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?*"), Professor Eisner offers another formulation of the aims and outcomes of arts education which is also wonderfully revealing.

Aims and Outcomes of Arts Education

Elliott Eisner: excerpted from "Does experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?"

1. Acquiring a feel for what it means to transform ideas, images and feelings into an art form..."getting a feel" and "getting in touch"
2. Refining awareness of the aesthetic qualities in art and life...also the conative aspects of cognition, the desire to frame the world as an object of enjoyed perception
3. Understanding the connection between the content and form that the arts display as well as its cultural and temporal context
4. Cognitive Dispositional Outcomes:
 - a willingness to imagine possibilities that are not now, but which might become

- a desire to explore ambiguity and forestall premature closure in pursuing resolutions
- recognizing and accepting multiple perspectives and resolutions

For the purposes of this paper and the concerns of this conference, one cannot help but notice in Professor's Eisner's descriptions that a great many of his arts-based mind processes are routinely a part of our everyday lives. *We notice attentively, we speak figuratively, we express ourselves emotionally, we solve problems in the absence of rules, we use our imaginations, we navigate with a sense of purpose toward our goals.* It certainly seems that the mind processes of the arts are pretty much basic to how we use our minds as human beings. I would agree and I would add that the mind processes of the arts are especially basic to how we use our minds *when we are using them well and at a high level* -- whether we are doing art, crafting a business plan or negotiating world peace.

Colleagues of mine at the Center for Creative Leadership (Palus and Horth) have been studying these mind processes from a leadership perspective and have identified several performance factors grounded in the arts and aesthetic awareness which appear to be integral aspects of the successful leadership mind. They refer to these capacities as creative or aesthetic competencies of leadership and, indeed, they echo Professor Eisner's taxonomy remarkably well especially considering the very different manner in which their research was conducted. Professor Eisner's research is the result of a lifetime's work studying how children learn and, in particular, how children learn from the arts. The findings at the Center for Creative Leadership were the result of interviews and assessments of successful leaders, exposing their defining competencies and habits of mind. The research outcome: successful leaders know how to think creatively and *do so*, routinely engaging the mind processes of the arts as they lead and accomplish their own best work.

Aesthetic (or Creative) Competencies of Leadership Identified at the Center for Creative Leadership

- **Noticing** – slowing down, taking in more, an intensity of perception, seeking deeper meaning
- **Subtle representation** – able to portray fine distinctions, an eye for detail and relationship
- **Fluid perspective** – attuned to the dynamics of change and multiple points of view
- **Using R-Mode** – right brain processing: i.e. non-verbal, intuitive, holistic, relational processing
- **Personalizing Work** – allowing artistic interests and abilities to spill over into our jobs
- **Skeptical Inquiry** – cultivating uncertainty and alternative ideas, preserving the questions
- **Making Shared Meanings** – competency with group processes, engaging creative tensions
- **Serious Play** – learning and exploring without rules, safe, joyful impassioned learning
- **Portraying Paradoxes, Conflicts, the Unknown** – the ability to go deeper, preserving mystery

- **Facility with Metaphor** – in constructing meaning, integrating L & R Mode, generative thinking

Our third angle on the mind processes of the arts comes from our work here at Creative Leaps International and our sister company (education division) The Learning Arts. Through 32 years of field work with children and teachers and a dozen years working and collaborating with leaders in business, science and government, we've chosen to organize our own corresponding learnings as six Arts-Based Human Universals. Relative to Professor's Eisner's "Mind Processes of the Arts" and the Center for Creative Leadership's "Aesthetic Competencies of Leadership" (both of which I classify as "first order" processes), our Creative Leaps taxonomy addresses a partially overlapping and somewhat more complex group of "second order" processes akin Professor Eisner's "Cognitive Dispositional Outcomes" of arts education. For the purposes of this paper, what is most striking from my perspective is the *confluence* of all three strands of research, each illuminating from its own perspective the central role of arts-based mental processes in thinking and learning -- especially within high performance contexts, including academic achievement, scientific research, leadership and entrepreneurship.

Arts-Based Human Universals

Identified by Creative Leaps International and The Learning Arts

- **Engaging Emotion** as an integrator of deep learning, engaging cognitive feeling, linking affect and intellect expressively, purposefully
- **Capacity for "Peripheral" Learning**, integrating input from the periphery of awareness, attuning awareness to the periphery, valuing the periphery as a source of creative stimulation
- **Translating the Universal as Personal** – working with the process through which we experience, interpret and connect with the universal as personal, seeing the personal in the universal
- **Working with Multiple Levels of Meaning** and alternative modes of expression to reveal different frames of reference and other "logics"
- **Creating "Affirmative" Thinking Environments** where something different begins to feel possible, establishing "learning fields" which support the flow of ideas in all directions
- **Composing and Transmitting "Life"** – a sense of creative self-authorship, recognizing that we "transmit" life or the absence of life – who we are – at all times

A Catalyst for Transformative Thinking –

In Leadership

Leadership development programs grounded in the mind processes of the arts are among the premiere offerings of both the Center for Creative Leadership and Creative Leaps International.

The premise of these programs is that activating and exercising the mind processes of the arts is tantamount to activating and exercising some of the most important mind processes of leadership. This is a defining feature of these programs and supported by the research summarized above.

At Creative Leaps International, an initial phase of *activation and exercise* is aimed at establishing a level of “*inner readiness*” for deeper processing. The activation takes the form of a “Concert of Ideas” through which several sensory processes are set in motion: perception is playfully flexed; listening is deepened and linked to other mental and sensory modalities such as vision, imagination, emotion and memory; multiple perspectives and multiples layers of meaning are evoked and explored; self-awareness and interpersonal awareness are also called into focus. In short, the mind is summoned to a fuller readiness for experimentation and deeper processing.

As the Concert of Ideas progresses, the catalyst action of the arts takes a more focused turn. This *focused engagement* is then directed toward specific thematic content: vision, values, personal commitment, adaptive capability, relational issues within communities, culture change or specific instructional agendas. An example cited at the beginning of this article was the rapid introduction of the principles of servant leadership to more than 5000 store managers of the Starbucks Coffee Company. At the client’s request, we researched and produced a customized Concert of Ideas which brought the principles of servant leadership to life in vivid, animated fashion. In so doing, we mobilized strong, positive mental and emotional images and experiences that both motivated and accelerated learning. The relationship of arts-based mind processes to motivation and accelerated learning cannot be over-stated. It is well documented and rooted in the biology of the brain.

Most important, from my perspective, is the fact that work of this type stands as a strong *validation of imagination*, a validation that comes as the immediate result of having lived intensely, even for an hour, within the domain of one’s imagination -- feeling the possibilities of what is not yet, valuing those possibilities, and committing oneself to bringing them into being. The story of Don Quixote, enacted “live” in one’s presence, is an uplifting spark of this kind – a spark to new visions, courage and commitment. One begins to see life as an act of imagination.

In Knowledge Integration

All of us know only too well that our intellectual lives are easily fragmented by the glut of information pouring in around us from all sides. Many professions are so specialized that colleagues in adjacent offices can barely discuss their own latest findings without battling a sea of impenetrable jargon. The well of knowledge gets deeper and deeper, but cross-connections among fields of endeavor, even as they are more desperately needed, are increasingly rare.

Arts experiences, on the other hand, are fundamentally acts of synthesis, individual acts of meaning-making, expression and interpretation. Whether personally created or personally appreciated, works of art invite us into intriguing realms of *gestalt*, into places where making connections and formulating possible meanings are the game we play. It is our counterpoint to knowledge fragmentation.

In education, arts-based approaches to greater connectivity support interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning. Making connections *across* disciplines adds dimension and coherence to learning, makes learning feel more like life, more like the real world, where, after all, everything is connected to everything else. In adult learning, however, we definitely have to work a little harder at facilitating broad band gestalts. We struggle with creative connections which might offer a hint of wholeness to our outlooks and beliefs. Once again, enter the arts.

Built into the design of every Concert of Ideas is a unique strategy aimed at *maximizing connectivity*. The mechanism, quite simply, is metaphor. Through metaphors -- and songs and stories couched in a variety of metaphors -- we create bridges from one expressive telling of an idea to another, with each successive telling illuminating a different facet of whatever central theme we are exploring. Within the concert line-up, each musical selection or story serves both as prelude and postlude to other musical selections or stories – its particular imagery colors what has gone before and also creates the lens or perspective through which we will view what comes next. We see through the eyes of our most immediate experiences. We refer to this design technique as “creative juxtaposition”. The metaphors and stories play off one another and create a sky-full of possible connections and constellations. The creative possibilities of designing an event in this way literally boarder on the infinite.

(As a further point of reference on *connectivity* and *creative juxtaposition*, I refer you to the work of anthropologist, psychiatrist and systems theorist, Gregory Bateson, who writes at length about metaphoric thinking as a *mapping process*, calling it “double description” – two versions of an idea placed side by side. He likens the experience of “double description” to binocular vision. Only when we view our subject through both lenses (both descriptions, both sides of the metaphor) simultaneously, do we receive that bonus of insight or the experience of “depth” that springs into view through binocular vision -- or double description.)

Precisely in this way, small acts of connectivity inherent in metaphoric thinking naturally feed into larger scale quests for connectedness in the wider view. The Concert of Ideas is designed to make this process (the quest for connectivity) irresistible in its own right. As smaller scale connections are savored, larger scale questions emerge inviting acts of integration at ever higher levels. Encouraging and enabling such acts of integration is, indeed, the deep purpose of any Concert of Ideas.

In Compassionate Cross-Cultural Relationships

“Imagination makes empathy possible,” says philosopher Maxine Greene. It is only through imagination that we are able to grasp what it’s like to be in another person’s skin, to see and feel the world from another’s perspective. Imagination, in its fullest bloom, reaches out not merely for what is new and fascinating, but also *to other people* and to what is real and true in them. In this light, imagination is a spiritual reaching out, a thread of connectedness that reminds us we are part of an expansive human family, indeed, a planetary family of myriad life forms.

The arts embody our imaginations as culture. **The mind processes of the arts** facilitate the reach of our imaginations on a daily basis. The arts are our invitation to tell our story and to listen deeply to the stories of others. Author and consultant, Margaret Wheatley, in her book

Turning to One Another encourages us to convene the conversations we most need to have as communities, as families, as teammates, as nations. Creating the space for these conversations, providing the proper kindling and catalysts so these stories can be safely and authentically told is what the arts have done well since the days of the first cave paintings. In our work as Creative Leaps International with organizations, companies and governments over three decades, the arts have made these gatherings into celebrations, joyful moments for sharing traditions, unique perspectives and *differences which make a difference*. We have witnessed this in hugely diverse settings including the Arts and Business Summit at Castle Borl in Slovenia, the White House Excellence in Government Conferences in Washington DC, the GE Executive Education Center in Ossining, New York and the Ground Zero Commemorations of September 11th, 2001 at that holy and fateful site. The arts facilitate new levels of awareness, attentiveness, interpersonal connection and empathy.

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper has been to provoke the following consideration: that the arts grant us an advantage in imagination, compassion and learning that can rightly be called *evolutionary*. It is an advantage whose full potency we have scarcely begun to witness. Pundits suggest we are at a crossroads in our human evolution whose driving force is today, not biology, but our individual and collective psychologies, the stuff of our *inner* lives, our dreams. Shall we meet the future in fear and greed or shall we live out of that still green and growing tip of our natures we call imagination?

Inventor Buckminster Fuller said, “If humanity does not opt for integrity, we are through completely. It is absolutely touch and go. Each one of us could make the difference.” Each one of us *can* make the difference. The arts of imagination, writes Emily Dickenson, light the slow fuse of possibility, the slow fuse of hope that the best is yet to be. Shall we seek those possibilities together or leave them untried and undiscovered by this iteration of humanity? It is a choice that is ours to make.

John Cimino

*In our world, music is never just music.
It is revolutionary. It is the sound of ideas.*

In our world, the arts are no longer some parallel experience you have along the way, but rather a powerful source of insight and transformation feeding directly into the thinking, feeling and acting of daily life -- full of possibility, truth and optimism.