Transformative Learning for Pre-Service Teachers: When too much Art Education is Barely Enough!

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Abstract: Education ‘in’ and ‘through’ the arts has been identified as a powerful vehicle in assisting students to understand their world and providing students with a range of positive influences on approaches and attitudes to learning. Growing evidence indicates that educators should seriously consider the role the arts can play in their pedagogical practice, regardless of the age group of students or the learning discipline that they teach. In this paper the authors outline how the arts take on a pivotal role in a unique pre-service teacher education program based in rural Victoria, Australia. After completing their undergraduate qualification, students embark on a twelve month graduate studies program, which enables them to teach all levels in primary and post-primary schools, specialising in at least one subject area in the later years of schooling. During their course of study in the program all students are required to undertake both visual and performing arts as a learning discipline. Due to the diversity of backgrounds and undergraduate degrees with which students enter the course, there are many who have reservations about the arts. The course provides a variety of learning and teaching approaches that challenge, and aim to break down, mythconceptions about the arts. In examining a range of evidence, such as evaluations of the course and the authors teaching practice, journal entries and work produced by students a picture is emerging that something transformative is occurring. Something potent that encourages the development of a respectful disposition that is both sensitive to the arts and provides the confidence and skill to incorporate meaningful arts learning as part of an educator’s pedagogical repertoire.

Keywords: Art Education, Interdisciplinary Learning, Teacher Education, Reflective Practice, Curriculum, Pedagogy

Introduction: The Arts within Education Considering the Debates and Evidence

The justification to include the arts within school curriculum has been a subject of research projects and various inquiries for some time. These investigations have been conducted internationally by both independent organisations and governments at state and national levels. In Australia for example there has been an inquiry into the state of arts education and schooling by the federal government each decade since 1970. This has resulted in reports such as Action: Education and the Arts (Commonwealth Department of Education, 1985), The Coulter Report (1995) and the most recent First we see: The National Review of Visual Education (Davis, 2008). Whilst the arts continue to be identified as a ‘key learning area’ or ‘essential learning discipline’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b) within Australian school curriculum, reports such as those outlined above have examined areas such as the content of arts programs, the time allocated to this discipline within curriculum and quality teaching in art education. Familiar
arguments continue to emerge indicating that an imbalance still exists in the curriculum and the quality of art education programs varies considerably. Amongst the recommendations in these reports is an emphasis on the need to equip both pre-service teachers and practicing educators with the confidence, competence and skill to deliver meaningful arts education experiences to students (Bottrell, 2000).

Perceptions pervade and value judgements are made that allow for certain bodies of knowledge, or ways of knowing the world, to dominate the limited time that exists within a crowded curriculum at the expense of other disciplines (Robinson, 2001). These same value judgements described by Robinson in the United Kingdom can be identified in Australia, where currently there is a move to develop, by 2010, a national curriculum rather than individual state and territory governments maintaining their own. A National Curriculum Board under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has been established to develop an Australian national curriculum. The role of the board is to negotiate core content and the achievement standards that are expected of students from Kindergarten to Year 12 in English, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography and Languages (National Curriculum Board, 2008). These changes are to be negotiated, agreed on and phased in by the end of 2010. At this point work on the development of national art education curriculum has not received a mention.

Whilst cyclical rhetoric espouses the value of art education as outlined in the range of government inquires, it appears in many instances to have resulted in inaction. Over the same period of time evidence of the value of arts within a learning context has been recorded. The role the arts can play in their pedagogical practice should be an automatic consideration for educators; regardless of the age group of their students, or the learning discipline in which they teach.

Building on the early exponents of the value of arts education such as Dewey (1958), then Eisner (1972) and Greene (1978), the report by Fiske (2000) Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning in the United States has often been cited as a watershed document on research into the instrumental value of the arts for learning. Studies included in Fiske’s report provide evidence that indicate involvement of students in the arts contributes to increased linguistic fluency and higher order thinking Results of one such study by Burton, Horowitz and Abele (1999) indicated the arts exerts a positive effect on critical cognitive and personal dispositions of students and that many of these competencies extend then to other subject domains. In the United Kingdom the All our futures: Creativity, culture and education report (Robinson, 1999) described how the arts among other creative ways of learning assist in developing dispositions young people will require for them to actively participate in a globalised, high-tech world as well as the uncertain and unpredictable future.

Although Hetland and Winner (2001) disputed the rigour of some studies into the impact of arts education they argued that a case existed for expanded research into the impact arts learning has on the quality of education. Further evidence has also emerged that arts education acts positively in addressing social issues such as exclusion, cultural diversity, student engagement and retention rates in schools. Hunter (2005) in making comment on a series of Australian studies into education and the arts also described how arts participation assists students who are at risk, provides students with other role models and
to varying degrees positively impacts on students: social and personal development, attitudes to learning, literacy, numeracy, arts knowledge and skill, generic competencies (writing, communicating, problem solving, planning, organising, perseverance) (p. 4).

Discussing art education Bamford (2006) reflects the terminology used by Burton, Horowitz and Abele (1999) and describes how education and learning can occur both in and through the arts and how arts education not only has an impact on the child, but also on the teaching and learning environment and on the community. The greatest benefits in each of these areas are realised where excellent programs exist that incorporate learning in the arts and through artistic approaches. Bamford identifies significantly different benefits, although they are complimentary, that accrue from learning in the arts disciplines (education in the arts) to those achieved through the use of artistic approaches to the teaching and learning of other discipline areas (education through the arts). It is vital not to confuse these two distinct areas as being one, and both approaches are required for high-quality education.

It is within the context of this discourse, that teacher education programs offered by universities are also undergoing unprecedented pressure from a range of economic, political and social factors to identify the vital elements that will equip educators of the future. What are the necessary skills, knowledge and attributes pre-service teachers require to prepare them for a career as an educator? This article describes an example of a unique pre-service teacher education program based in rural Victoria, Australia, that has incorporated much of the current evidence pertaining to both art education and broader research on teaching and learning to develop a course where the arts are central to learning. This course provides beginning teachers with confidence, skills and insights to undertake meaningful and quality arts teaching in schools.

The Nature of this Particular Teacher Education Course

La Trobe University is situated in the Australian state of Victoria. The major campus of the university is in metropolitan Melbourne, it also has campuses at several regional locations throughout northern Victoria. The Graduate Diploma in Education (P-12), GDE (P-12), the course under focus in this paper is offered from the Albury–Wodonga campus of the University. This campus has a student population of approximately 1,200 students, located in City of Wodonga in the north east of Victoria on the state border. Wodonga when combined with the City of Albury which is situated across the state border in New South Wales has a population of 105,000 making it one of the largest inland rural regional centres in Australia.

Demand for the GDE (P-12) has seen it grow from an initial cohort of twenty one students in 1997 to the present time where the intake is between seventy to eighty students. The course attracts students from the local area, other regional and metropolitan centres from across Australia and also internationally. It has developed and adapted over time to reflect the current curriculum that is offered throughout the state of Victoria in Government schools and to accommodate emerging educational issues and local community need.

The GDE (P-12) is a unique teacher education course designed to prepare teachers to teach from the Preparatory Year to Year 12. It provides students who possess at least a bachelor degree (3 years at university with at least one major sequence of study) with the opportunity to become qualified to teach in both primary (children 5 – 11 years of age) and secondary (children 12 – 18 years of age) school settings by undertaking a further twelve
months of study in a pre-service teacher education course. The traditional convention for
teacher education courses in Australia is to prepare students for either primary or secondary
school teaching, though the contemporary emphasis is on Early Years (a Preparatory Year
to Year 4), Middle Years (Years 5 to 9) and Later Years (Years 10 to 12). An advantage of
a P-12 pre-service course is that the students approach teaching in a seamless manner as
school students move between the various stages of schooling. A course such as the GDE
(P-12) provides pre-service teachers with knowledge, skills and approaches to teaching and
learning that relate to all of the stages of schooling, without limiting thinking to either
‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ mindsets. Further, pedagogical strategies used by academic staff
in the course, work in ways that are counter to traditional teaching approaches, that is, lec-
turers shun the view that they are simply there for the purposes of transferring knowledge
‘from expert to novice’ (Beare, 2001, p. 1). The approach adopted in the GDE (P-12) is one
that respects and assumes that we all have knowledge; that some are more knowledgeable
than others in certain areas; that knowledge is both unstable and dynamic, and that change
is relative to culture, context and environments.

The course consists of three units: Issues in Education and Methods of Teaching inform
the students’ fieldwork and teaching practice experiences, which comprise the third unit,
Teaching Practice (refer Figure 1). In the Methods of Teaching unit, students identify where
and how to source content and experience a range of teaching methodologies for each of the
disciplines: Arts, English, Humanities, Mathematics and Science. Literacy and numeracy
are considered integral and as such are addressed within all discipline areas and not as stand
alone components of the course. This has resulted in each of the discipline areas being alloc-
ated equal time, the combined face to face contact for the Methods of Teaching unit is ap-
proximately 200 hours, hence students learning time in the arts discipline is equal to that in
Mathematics and English. All students are required to study methodologies for each discipline
to Year 10. The content from the students’ previous undergraduate degree provides the focus
of their later years (Years 11 and 12) teaching method/s. The course is delivered in an intens-
ive mode where students attend university four days per week, and spend at least one day
per week in schools and other learning settings through fieldwork opportunities. The students
also participate in several block periods of time throughout the year on practicum placements,
locally, in schools across Australia, and sometimes internationally. The combination of a
minimum of 20 days of fieldwork and 45 days of supervised teaching practicum comprises
the unit, Teaching Practice.
Having provided a snapshot of the nature of the GDE (P-12) the focus of this paper will examine how arts education is approached with pre-service teachers within the time allocated to the arts discipline. We will also discuss where the arts and arts education are woven or permeate other aspects and units of the course. This in many ways emulates Bamford’s (2006) notion of learning in and through the arts. The result being for many of our students what Mezirow (1991) describes as a transformative learning experience.

**The Arts Discipline – Maximizing the Time**

During the course of study outlined above all students are required to undertake arts – both visual and performing – as a learning discipline, this article concentrates in particular on the visual arts component. The learning focus for this discipline emulates the current school curriculum documents developed by the Victorian government, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) which suggests that ‘The Arts are unique, expressive, creative and communicative forms that engage students in critical and creative thinking and help them understand themselves and the world’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005a, p. 4). The two broad dimensions covered in the arts are Creating and Making (art
ideas, skills, techniques, processes, performances and presentations) and Exploring and Responding (context, interpreting and responding, criticism and aesthetics).

In the arts discipline component of the Methods of Teaching unit, our aim is to provide an environment and experiences where students are encouraged to take risks, experiment, think creatively and differently as well as explore the potential of learning through the arts, find new ways of expressing and communicating, develop confidence in linking and using the arts in their teaching practice, relate theory and practice, develop practice and refine arts techniques, skills and concepts and explore different learning styles and approaches (Centre for Regional Education, 2008). As with all aspects of the course we clearly outline the contribution studying this discipline in the GDE P-12 has for student development, both personal and professional. Specifically participating in the arts has potential to instil a greater understanding of the role and importance of the arts within curriculum and an increased level of confidence and understanding that will enable them to incorporate aspects of the arts in schools.

Due to the diversity of backgrounds and undergraduate degrees with which students enter the course, there are many who have reservations about the arts. Assessment tasks are addressed during the first session of each unit. Pure fear and dread is evident in the expressions of some of the cohort during the discussion around arts assessment and the subsequent expectation that students will both perform and make an art work that reflects their educational journey culminating in a public exhibition towards the conclusion of the course. It is not uncommon in this early stage of the course for students to describe themselves as ‘extremely apprehensive’ or being ‘initially very nervous of the task’.

As Dewey (1966) has stated ‘[the] educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming experience’ (p. 50) which is as true for a pre-service teacher as it is for a young person in kindergarten or secondary school. Within the faculty of Education at La Trobe University we talk of lifelong learning and learning involving all aspects of the human being rather than just cognitive processes (Jarvis, 2006). The arts component of the GDE P-12 provides a variety of learning and teaching approaches that challenge and aim to break down mythconceptions about the arts and build the knowledge and confidence required to teach well.

In the forty hours of class contact in the arts discipline, the focus is on teaching about teaching art. During this time, we as lecturers model classroom teaching practice, compelling students to get their hands dirty (making art), and to reflect on teaching approaches. It is clearly articulated that the modelling and scaffolding that occurs during tutorials and lectures, as well as the activities undertaken can be applied to their general teaching practice. Part of their assessment requires students to reflect through visual journals their own levels of learning and engagement during the lectures and tutorials. The following comment by a student indicates that as the year progresses students begin to identify with the approaches used.

*my initial response to art was trepidation [and] fear ...I have found through the careful scaffolding in lectures and tutorials that this trepidation has turned dramatically to enthusiasm.*

By adopting this stance the teaching staff rather than just theorising about constructivist ideas of learning and teaching provide opportunities for students to experience and recognise
how for example Vygotsky’s (1965) notions of scaffolding and zones of proximal development might be applied.

Students are exposed to a range of art making techniques such as drawing, print making, painting, sculpture, multimedia, and explore materials such as clay, charcoal, graphite, acrylics (refer to Illustration 1 for examples of this). Woven into the teaching of art making techniques are the elements and principles of design, notions of aesthetics, development of symbols systems and a language with which to talk about visual imagery. Strategies are adopted that include individual and group or collective work. An initial introduction seeks to move students out of their comfort zone and identify what their perception of art is. Invariably responses from students are mixed, ranging from what Costantoura (2000) refers to as ‘Big A’ art such as Opera and fine art paintings through to the broader notion that ‘everything is art’.

Illustration 1: Photo Collage that represents some of the Activities the GDE (P-12) Students are Involved in During the Course

Art making at times is seen to be an even greater challenge by many students with some indicating that they have not drawn since they were in early high school. The first task the students take part in is a collective response to mark making, where up to forty students at the one time work through a guided process. In this task students combine mark making with movement and focus on the element of line. A clear criteria of how the finished product will appear (that is easily achievable) is provided using a range of simple constraints such
as not looking at the paper, drawing with eyes closed and using their non-dominant or least preferred hand. Students are instructed to draw a feature such the eyes of the person sitting opposite them in a limited period of time, such as two minutes. They are then asked to leave the paper on which they have been working and move to another sheet of paper. The student is then confronted, and needs to work with the marks made by the previous person. The next instruction is to draw the mouth of the person sitting opposite them. This process continues, with students moving between sheets of paper and the result is a collective set of ‘class portraits’. In the activity which takes an hour students go through a process that confronts them, through fear or uneasiness, to the feeling of being able to ‘have a go’. Students then reflect as a group on the strategies, skills and feelings they have experienced This tasks allows students to identify that they can make marks, that the constraints imposed allow for freedom and that such a group task removes the ‘ownership’ and therefore some of the threat of art making. The sequential nature of the classes parallels moving from the familiar to the unknown. For the students reflection on this process can take a more personal path as well as relate to learning and teaching strategies.

As I am not a naturally artistic individual I usually avoid art whenever I possibly can. This year, however, has taught me that art isn’t that scary and can be simple to teach. Steps need to be carefully scaffolded and easily understandable for students, especially the younger ones, and throughout this year I have learnt how to do that effectively... Overall the art that I have participated in throughout the year has given me a greater confidence in being able to teach students various aspects, including methods and materials.

The Arts Permeating other Aspects of the Course

The size of the cohort, regional location and the underpinning philosophy of the course provides a situation where no one staff member develops or delivers any one unit or discipline, encouraging a collaborative team environment amongst the staff. It is not unusual to also find the same staff member involved in the development and teaching of multiple units such as Curriculum planning or Educational philosophy in Issues in Education, along with symbol systems and language in the mathematics discipline and children’s developmental stages in the arts. The GDE P-12 is structured along the VELS and there is a strong emphasis on an Interdisciplinary approach to learning.

In line with the research of Bruner (1977), Dale (in Harkin, Turner, & Dawn, 2004) Gardner (1990), and VELS (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b), assessment within the course is structured to allow for multiple forms of response from students and the same task may elicit individual responses such as a performance, digital story, report or poster. Inherent in this is that aspects of arts and design learning are transferable, this is reinforced throughout the course and the concept underpinning all assessment tasks is that key aspects of design and presentation are to be addressed.

In demonstrating to students that the activities and approaches in the arts are readily transferable, there is an expectation that students apply arts learning to their fieldwork and practicum. Whilst consideration is required of the cohort they are teaching, students are required to be able to articulate how they have incorporated aspects of the arts into their planning.
and delivery of teaching and learning experiences. The following comments by students provide some examples of how they articulate this:

I will always reflect on this year as being the time when I learnt how art can be used for learning, for relationship building for communication and to bridge gaps that were too vast for other disciplines.

I have never really been ‘good’ at visual art, and this was the first time I felt that I didn’t have to be conventionally good, all that mattered was I participated. The main thing I will take away from art, besides the positive experience, is ‘there is no wrong in art’. This affirming statement can encourage even the most disengaged student. Because of this I plan to incorporate the Arts where ever I can. Art serves to exercise the creative and analytical mind. Thus by utilizing the Arts I aim to support students to become dynamic individuals, which will hold them in good stead for years to come. At the end of the day we are preparing students for employment opportunities that are still nonexistent.

The Potency and Transformations that seem to Occur

After teaching, evaluating, reflecting on and refining the arts discipline component of the Methods of Teaching unit over several years, a pattern has emerged in the GDE P-12 that replicates the process of transformational learning. Mezirow (1991) articulates that transformative learning is ‘the process of using a prior interpretation to construe new or revised interpretations of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action’ (p. 12). He advocates that in the reflective process

Learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic or otherwise invalid. Transformative learning results in new or transformational meaning schemes or, when reflection focuses on premises, transformed meaning perspectives (p. 6).

Edwards (2005) describes how the process of transformational learning can sometimes be like plunging into ‘the pit’, (Refer to figure 2) where students move from their own knowledge base over a period where they are challenged or exposed to experiences beyond their comfort zone. This can initially result in confusion and frustration delving them into the pit. By ensuring structures are in place within the course, over time a process occurs where pre-service teachers can emerge from the pit with their understandings transformed.
The following extract from an arts assessment task is how one student reflected on the process:

*My journey through the arts this year has been a significant one, I have gone from being extremely apprehensive to really enjoying the subject... Art for me at school was a subject I used to dread, however this year at university it has become my favourite subject. I am not sure if it is the way the subject is taught or whether I am feeling more confident as a person to try new things and maybe put myself on the line through creating art, but I felt as the year progressed I was able to get out of my comfort zone.*

Examining a range of evidence, such as formal and informal evaluations of the course and our teaching practice, journal entries and work produced by students a picture emerges that something transformative is occurring. As part of the University policy regarding Quality Assurance (QA), at the conclusion of the course students complete an evaluation generated by the University Academic Development Unit. Statistical analysis indicates that in the 2006, 2007 and 2008 QA almost 70% (2006), 95% (2007) and 88% (2008) of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt to apply principles from arts classes to new situations or the unit had enhanced their confidence to tackle unfamiliar problems. Similarly 84% (2006), 95% (2007) and 88% (2008) of the student cohort indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed when asked if they were satisfied with the quality of the unit. Richer evidence may be found in the additional comments that students have included in the University Quality Assurance of Units, Course mid-year evaluations and anecdotal evidence from conversation with students and entries in their Visual Learning Journals. Examples of which have been included in sections of this paper (with students’ consent). The images utilised in this paper
also provide some visual documentation of the types of activities and student engagement that occurs in using the arts for learning.

As mentioned the diversity of the student cohort, their backgrounds, experiences and education, leads to mixed reactions regarding participation in arts education. They can be resistant or sceptical to the arts and use entrenched attitudes to oppose initiating new ideas or remaining open to alternate pedagogy. The following comment by a student is not atypical:

*I commenced this subject this year with great fear and hatred towards the Arts. I was unhappy with the inclusion of art within this course and did not see the purpose of taking part in the tutorials...I often asked myself how does painting, dancing, sculpting drawing and singing help me to be a come a teacher. Surely there are more meaningful things we could be doing!*

Evaluations of the course conducted over the last four years provide evidence that at mid-year stage of the GDE (P-12) there is a breadth of responses, where some students have begun to make connections ranging through to concerns that there is an disproportionate amount of arts in the course, for example:

*The balance of art and other subjects areas have a definite skew... I know we have a lot of lecturers with art backgrounds, but I know there is a feeling out there that as much as it might go against the grain some of the other areas may deserve more time than art. Art is ok, but there seems to be a lot of focus on it compared to other disciplines we barely touch on...does this reflect lecturer interest?*

It is comments like these that has brought about the throw away line in the title of the paper. By inference students perceive that the provision of equal time for each of the disciplines within the Methods of Teaching unit means there is too much time allocated to the arts.

As the year progresses the balance of the course moves from theoretical and structured university based learning to more Professional Experience in educational settings. It also becomes apparent during this time that connections are made by students between the arts experience they encounter at university, and the applicability of these to learning environments. The students begin to identify how the arts can be used to motivate, make learning more authentic, engage and consolidate. The fact that the pre-service teachers have been forced to take risks in the supportive environment during the GDE P-12 encourages them to take their own learning experiences to the young people they are teaching. This transformation is also noticeable during the final weeks of the course with the submission of major assessment tasks, which includes their teaching portfolio presentation and participation in the arts presentation day. By this stage of the course we are seeing pre-service teachers incorporating the arts in their teaching, as well as their own learning. Jarvis (2006) provides a description of learning as

*The combination of process throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person- body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination)
and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (more experienced) person. (p. 134)

Conclusion
Throughout this paper while we have talked about the pivotal role of the arts in a particular pre-service teacher education course. It needs to be emphasised that the potential impact that the arts has for learning comes not from a greater allocation of time but from the acknowledgement of the transferrable nature of this discipline area to all aspects of teaching and learning. Rather than taking a deficit approach and continually trying to legitimise the place of arts within curriculum the teaching team within the GDE P-12 have worked collaboratively to develop a culture that normalises and validates learning in and through arts.
It is not just as a matter of adding content to school curriculum, but addressing the need to incorporate quality arts experiences across learning and teaching and the development of sound experiences for both pre-service teachers and meaningful professional development for educators.

I’ve gained some valuable tools along the way, but perhaps more importantly, the personal benefits I feel I have acquired have gone a long way in securing my confidence in using art in the classroom.
Having pursued a fairly academic route through school and university, I found the inclusion of the arts in this course a somewhat serendipitous experience. Whilst I originally thought the art would be just a chance to have some ‘hands on fun’, I discovered some valuable insights of the possible place of the arts within a broader curriculum.
I feel that through becoming more confident in art will become a better teacher. I have been able to see what a critical role art plays in education, especially from an early years’ perspective. Art is also a vital component in secondary schooling as it gives students a wonderful opportunity to express themselves.

Comments such as these from students combined with other data point to something potent taking place over the duration of the GDE (P-12). A transformation occurs where students develop a respectful disposition which is sensitive to the arts. How far into their career as an educator they will take this disposition is unclear however on completion of the course these pre-service teachers feel they are equipped with the confidence and skill to incorporate meaningful arts learning as part of their educator’s pedagogical repertoire.

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