

Conditions for Facilitating Arts Education Research

or

The Art of Stepping Aside

Contribution of Michael Wimmer/EDUCULT, Austria for the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education, 25 – 27 May 2010

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Yes, I agree with you. This is not a very thrilling title. So let me offer a subtitle “The Art of Stepping Aside” which is not much better but maybe a little bit more mysterious. Maybe you now start to listen because you ask yourself: “What does he mean by that?”

We will see. Anyway I will try to do my best and offer you some thoughts which might entwine around the terms of facilitation, research and arts education.

Facilitation

Starting with the term “facilitation” I found the following definition:

“Facilitation is the art of leadership in group communication. A facilitator is one who fulfils a leadership role in a friendly social environment. His or her mission is to produce a sense of group cohesiveness. It is about helping the participants to work together in a mutual cause to produce consensus as a prerequisite of future success.

Facilitation aims to promote a congenial social atmosphere and a lively exchange of views. The idea of facilitation has become of crucial importance in the context of the so called digital media, when the facilitator in online communications is fulfilling the role of a “social host” and the ‘meeting chairperson’. As social host she/he has to issue warm invitations to people.

Zane Berge (1995) has proposed a widely used classification of facilitating activities under four categories: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical.

When talking in the context of arts education let us simply stick to the pedagogical category. According to Berge, the pedagogical role concerns the teacher’s contribution of specialized knowledge and insights to the discussion, using questions and probes to encourage student responses, and to focus discussion on critical concepts. In addition, by modelling such behaviour, the teacher prepares the students to lead the pedagogical activities themselves.

In its popular meaning we could say facilitation is about simplifying complex circumstances to enable learning processes and to raise the awareness of the learner.

Alongside with this term we find pedagogical concepts like Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Suppressed" or Carl R. Rogers: "Learning in Freedom". Both have in common to change the relationship between teacher and learner and by that moving the learners at the centre of learning processes, is it in the field of arts education or is it in education in general.

So far so good.

What the arts can contribute

Talking about the need of someone who should provide simplification means to accept that there is complexity and irritation around. Talking in the frame of arts education you may allow to give the stage for a moment to an artist whom I want to present you as facilitator in an artistic sense of meaning.

Some of you might know Charles Ives. As an "American original" he was regarded as one of the first American composers of international significance. It must have been quite a strange guy, born in Danbury/Connecticut in 1874. He mainly worked as an insurance executive devising creative ways to structure life-insurance packages for people of means, which laid the foundation of the modern practice of estate planning.

As a result of this he achieved considerable reputation in the insurance industry of his time, and many of his business peers were surprised to learn that he was also a composer engaging in a systematic program of experimental music, with quite complex musical techniques including polytonality, polyrhythm, tone clusters, aleatoric elements, and quarter tones, foreshadowing many musical innovations of the 20th century. According to his wife, one day in early 1927 he came downstairs with tears in his eyes: he couldn't compose any more, he said, "nothing sounds right."

Charles Ives' Unanswered Question

Twenty years before, in 1906 he wrote a short piece of about 6 minutes called "The Unanswered Question" and I am going to play some bars for you. It starts with an ethereal sound carpet of string music expressing – as he said – the "silence of the Druids, who know, see, and hear nothing". Over this indifferent universal background the trumpet repeatedly poses "the perennial question of existence". Wind instruments as the "fighting answerers" are reacting but for all their sound and fury, are getting nowhere.

[1 minute of music]

I do not know if you found an answer. Following elaborated interpretations: With this piece Ives encompasses a philosophical idea, which he was able to address incomparably in his music: in contemplating the sublime mystery of creation, a question can be better than an answer.

And indeed, remembering the many obtrusive efforts to present answers in the best marketing manner, you can get tired (and not inspired) about the lack of creativity which is represented in this eternally repeated phrases.

The efforts of a perennial repetition of simple answers may lie in the logic of an advocate. But it can make us forget, that it is always questions which make our lives a daily adventure, stimulating our curiosity and creativity in an open universe.

So let's talk about "questions".

So my point is that the world is about questions (at least more than answers), and so questions might be also the key for tackling research in the field of arts education (but not only in art education).

As I am acting as one of the facilitators of this conference I would enjoy not only to produce a friendly social environment (as the definition says) but also to encourage your reactions and to try a little experiment. To make this work, the spatial circumstances are at least sub-optimal.

Proust's Questionnaire

I remember another artist, Marcel Proust, who with "À la recherche du temps perdu" produced his own literary universe. He also was one of the most prominent persons to answer a questionnaire which then became Proust's Questionnaire. It is a questionnaire about one's personality.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Proust was still in his teens, he answered a questionnaire in an English-language confession album belonging to his friend Antoinette, daughter of future French President Félix Faure, entitled "An Album to Record Thoughts, Feelings, etc." At that time, it was a fad among English families to answer such a list of questions that revealed the tastes and aspirations of the taker.

Proust answered the questionnaire several times in his life, partly considerably changing his answers but always with enthusiasm.

A similar questionnaire is regularly seen on the back page of the Vanity Fair magazine, answered by various celebrities. In October of 2009, Vanity Fair launched an interactive version of the questionnaire, which compares your answers to various luminaries.

Now it is your turn

The questions are: What is your favorite virtue, your favorite qualities in a man, in women, what you appreciate most in your friends, your idea of misery, but also your favorite poet, painter or composer.

And I would like you to get in touch with your neighbor for just two minutes to talk about your thoughts on the question: Which kind of reform do you admire most?

(2 minutes of discussion in the audience)

Thank you very much. At this stage I have to disappoint you in two ways. On one hand there is no chance to make all of us acquainted with your reactions. On the

other hand – having had a look in the French album, “Les confidences de salon” (“Drawing room confessions”), in which Proust’s reaction is published, there is just empty space.

Instead of that I found a fascinating reaction on another issue, on the idea of happiness, which is often mentioned in the context of arts education.

Marcel Proust’s reaction is quite astonishing: “I am afraid to be not great enough, I dare not speak it, I am afraid of destroying it by speaking it”. (in this respect Proust was more sensitive than some school administrators of today, offering a subject called “happiness” within the school curriculum)

After this little excursion in the artistic field I try to come closer to the point, and this is “research”.

Three dimensions of research

When talking about research I assume that you with your manifold professional backgrounds might have quite different connotations in mind.

Starting from that definition we could look at research from three different view points.

Scientific research

To what we might think first is an understanding of research as a scientific method to search for knowledge or any systematic investigation to establish facts. The primary purpose for applied research (as opposed to basic research) is to discover, to interpret and to develop methods and systems for the advancement of human knowledge on a wide variety of scientific matters of our world and the universe.

Primarily we identify research as a scientific method which provides scientific information and theories for the explanation of the nature and the properties of the world around us. Nevertheless it can make practical applications possible.

Scientific research takes place in different academic and application disciplines. When it comes to facts and figures this is also true in the field of arts education which can be regarded from quite a variety of viewpoints of different scientific disciplines.

Coming myself from the heart of Europe I cannot avoid to start by mentioning that there is a long philosophical tradition in Europe to deal with the arts. It was mainly the German idealism of the 18th century with its strong bias towards hermeneutic which fostered interpretation as a philosophical method to make a broader understanding of works of art possible. This might have been one of the starting points of arts education.

On the other end of the spectrums there are all the pragmatic methods of social sciences and also cultural sciences producing mainly qualitative results in terms of efficiency and utility (the keywords are learning in the arts, learning through the arts,...)

Output – And what about input

As we learned just before by Howard Gardner, most of these analyses have a strong bias towards output.

From the viewpoint of a decision-maker it might seem astonishing that there is far less scientific research on the political, economic, social, technological framework in which arts education takes place – particularly when it comes to comparisons between different communities, regions or states and their individual priorities. As a result of this research deficit we know almost nothing when it comes to facts and figures in terms of input (is it in terms of public or private funding, man power, facilities,....).

EDUCULT – Fact Finding Mission

This structural deficit would be seen as a considerable professional weakness in other political fields, when Fe a lobbying group is pushing for more resources but nobody can provide data how much resources are already spent. As far as I see there is almost no transparency in terms of resource provision and distribution and consecutively there are no adequate facts and figures for respective decision making processes.

Under the title “Fact Finding Mission” and with the support of the European Union my institution EDUCULT is at the moment preparing a scheme how arts education can be made transparent also in terms of resource input –with the medium term goal – to produce comparability is it among institutions but also between public entities (at least in Europe).

Art-based research

We all agree that scientific research with its different disciplines can play an important role for quality development and professionalization in the field.

But – as we all know – not only science can produce knowledge. The arts as a mirror of the world can be equally used for the production of knowledge. We are familiar with the arts in the forms of painting, composing, writing, singing, acting, filming or dancing.

But there is also a research dimension when arts production takes place. There is a statement of Pablo Picasso: “I never made a painting as a work of art, it’s all about research”

Based on this statement a new discipline appeared which we might call: art-based research. This new artistic research approach can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual production of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both artistic researchers and the people that they involve in their studies.

These inquiries are distinguished from research activities where the arts may play a significant role but are essentially used as data for investigations that take place within academic disciplines that utilize more traditional scientific, verbal, and mathematic descriptions and analyses of phenomena.

The domain of art-based research, which can be seen as a more focused application of the larger epistemological process of artistic knowing and inquiry, has come into existence as an extension of a significant increase of studies researching the nature of the art experience in higher education and professional practice (McNiff).

Research-based learning

Turning from the artistic field to the pedagogic one we can easily identify a research dimension within educational processes. But first of all we have to take into account that we – as participants of this conference are coming from all parts of the globe – might have very different ideas about what defines a good school

Many of us have received Ken Robinson's interpretation of a traditional school as a child of the industrialized age. And maybe all of us have realised that the way school systems are organised with their narrow curriculum split in 50 minutes units is the most ineffective way to produce learning outcomes.

For more than hundred years there are efforts to change school systems and reform them according to the necessities of contemporary societies.

Is it under the label of "progressive pedagogy", "alternative schooling" or the implementation of a new culture of teaching and learning. The intentions are similar: The direction goes from a teacher oriented school to a child oriented school. As already mentioned in my chapter on "facilitation" this school is about giving children the responsibility for learning, to give them the chance to make their own learning experiences and consequently to make them researchers themselves. The role of the teachers then changes from an almighty knowledge provider to a facilitator of common research processes.

Ordinance concerning a holistic-creative learning culture at schools

One of the senior administrators of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Culture and the Arts, present at this conference made it clear that I would not get out of here alive if I did not mention an Austrian "ordinance concerning a holistic-creative learning culture at schools" that was published as a guideline for schools last year.

It is full of sentences like: "Communication, interaction and procession of information and knowledge require skills which can be essentially acquired through methods of autonomous, holistic competence and through project-oriented as well as interdisciplinary learning" or "It is the task of any school to promote students in their entire personality and development of their talents". As a kind of motivational text it paints an outline of a school in which a research-driven new culture of teaching and learning takes place.

Nevertheless I do not want to hide that also in my country there is still a long way to go to bridge the gap between claim and reality.

"Cultural Explorers!" EDUCULT and its accompanying evaluation

But there are examples of good practice around and I would like to present you one of them.

24 schools in eight different German cities take their students, teachers, and at least one external partner on a research expedition into culture. Based on students' questions and with the help of teachers and experts from media-related professions, music, arts, libraries and other cultural institutions, each school develops its own 2 ½-year "Cultural.Explorers!" project. The idea is to establish long-term collaborative ties with external partners that will continue to exist beyond the duration of the programme.

Working on their projects, children and young people act as "Cultural.Explorers!" themselves observing everyday phenomena with a fresh outlook and gaining new knowledge about cultural phenomena in their immediate environment. Each school implementing its project idea receives extensive support in terms of scientific advising, professional development, and networking opportunities with other "Cultural.Explorers!" schools. They also receive financial support.

The accompanying evaluation by EDUCULT aims at the systematic analysis of the programme and the generation of models for practice. Dialogue between the ones involved and the joint learning process is at the centre of the research process.

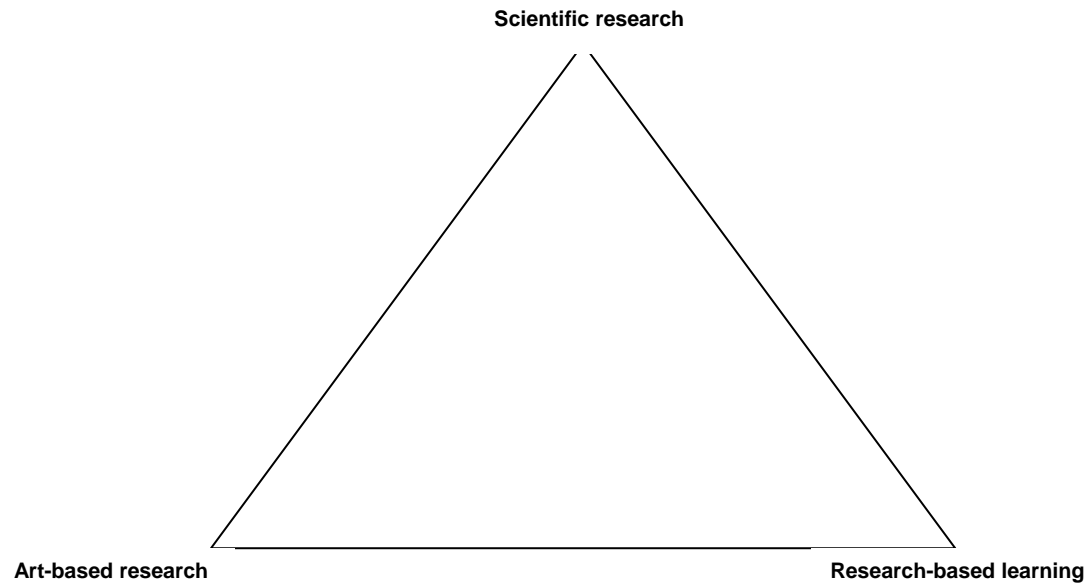
To explain also the method: A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods ensures that all questions relevant to the evaluation are dealt with. Dialogue and exchange is key: For example, EDUCULT conducts round tables with teachers, partners from the arts and culture and pupils. Also, a text-based survey taking place twice among the teachers is designed in a way that it can be discussed and worked on in a team.

Thus, we do not only receive important data for the evaluation, but we also initiate a reflection process. Other parts of the research are: ongoing monitoring with the process tutors, questionnaire-based survey among the pupils and school directors, observations, school visits, analysis of the "Cultural.Explorers!" text books. Regular presentations and interim reports ensure that the results can be integrated in the ongoing work process.

Interconnection between science, art and pedagogy

Triangles are my favourite geometric figures.

In our case – and in summarizing the three dimensions of research - I would like to draw a triangle which consists of three corners namely scientific research, art-based research and research-based learning.



The figure should make clear that research is not just a method of professional scientists to produce elaborated knowledge. Also the arts can contribute a lot and of course the learner him- or herself. So what I want to express is that research-driven arts education takes place somewhere inside the triangle.

By that research becomes a professional approach, an attitude of each arts educator. It is a way of looking at the world, of maintaining curiosity in a world that is increasingly beaten down by answers.

The importance of playing – But what does playing mean?

Arts education as we know is highly action driven: In contrary to the dominance of the cognitive subjects students in arts education have the chance just to do something, is it singing, painting, acting or playing. This is fine also in terms of pedagogy (which necessarily has to do with learning) when it opens up common ground for experimenting and searching for new experiences and solutions.

But we should keep in mind that playing is more than unconscious acting. Let me explain that with a music example

There is a saying of the Austrian composer Ernst Krenek, who intensively wondered about music education throughout his lifetime. In this context I found a quotation saying that “playing music does not necessarily lead to better listening”

What he wanted to express is that playing music is not just about stupidly repeating notes but equally about listening to what you are playing and in which way you are doing it.

His point was that you have to add something when you are playing. To make music you have to equally listen to what you are playing, and to reflect on it.

You may object that this figure is a kind of virtual bilocalisation; Inside of the game with your full heart and at the same time finding a place outside to reflect on the circumstances under which you are acting.

You are right: But it is something we can learn and what we necessarily have to learn; is it in cooperation with external scientific researchers, is it in cooperation with researching artists or with our own research capacity.

My point for this conference is: Learning how to make use of research (and to integrate it in our professional approaches) is maybe the most important task we have to fulfil to get out of our marginalized situation.

Without research no understanding

As far as I see this combination of acting and reflecting is the main mean to produce understanding.

Coming back to Proust and his questionnaire: One of the questions was: "For what fault have you most toleration?" - His answer: "Those that I understand".

My reaction: If we want to make use of arts education in terms of fostering tolerance in a world of diversity we have to primarily work on a better understanding. And therefore research seems to be of utmost importance

The art of stepping aside or The artist as a role model

At the end let's try to find a solution for the enigmatic expression from the beginning:

Combining acting and reflecting is what we can learn exemplarily from the professional arts field. Artists are researchers by profession: Is it the artist painting his or her picture and than stepping aside to look at it; is it the musician practicing and listening at one phrase again and again or is it an author re-writing and re-thinking his or her thoughts on and on. They are the examples of good practice acting in the research mode all the time.

These practices in the arts make evident that the contradiction between inside and outside is unsolvable and it is up to us to make it productive.

Credits

To make a long story short: What I really wanted to say in my contribution is – and that is the message I want to leave you with:

Facilitating art education researches means making all of you facilitators and integrating the research mode in your everyday professional life.

For your respective efforts I wish you good luck.

And may the music of Charles Ives with its last phrase of the Unanswered Question inspire you.

Thank you for your attention!