

Letter from Vancouver: Practice Based Arts education Policies

October 2006

The following is a keynote speech given by Arnold Aprill at the ArtsSmarts/GénieArts Canadian national annual meeting of arts education partnerships, addressing the development of practice based arts education policies.

ArtsSmarts/GénieArts is a Canadian initiative, launched in 1998 and supported by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, that promotes the active participation of young people in the arts through long-term arts education partnerships. It is designed to increase and enhance arts-related activities in the classroom by promoting art as a vehicle for teaching all subjects across the curriculum.



I am privileged to be speaking to this national network of arts education partners devoted to integrating the arts across the curriculum in schools. It is exciting to be invited into your national family. The work of the ArtSmart partners is so closely parallel to our work at CAPE, the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, that I get to feel like I'm a visitor and at home at the same time! I want to congratulate you on the extraordinary exhibition we saw last night at the new Artstart gallery of arts-integrated student work and teacher and artist documentation from across the nation of Canada. Bravo! It is also a pleasure to be part of a learning community that has made a commitment to indigenous learners and to French/English bi-lingual expression.



We are at a watershed moment in the history of the arts in learning. In an information age that requires learners to construct and represent knowledge in multiple and ever-changing ways, recognizing the importance of arts learning in creating meaningful democratic education has become more urgent than ever. The possibilities have never been more promising, and the opportunities have never been greater. At the same time, there is significant resistance to these emerging innovations in learning in-and-through the arts. The reasons given for this resistance are typically based on scarcity economies: “not enough time”, “not enough money”, “not enough test score improvement”, but at the core of this resistance is a failure of imagination- the inability to recognize that these new communication systems and learning pathways are already the sea in which we swim. Unfortunately, this sort of friction is characteristic of seismic shifts in the landscape. That is the nature of watershed moments.



So it is very easy to get sidetracked from the work at hand by pressure from competing, contradictory messages: “Don't waste time teaching the arts until after the math and

reading scores improve!” “Don’t connect the arts to the rest of the curriculum or you will compromise the arts!” “Keep the arts after-school!” “Give up on public education!” “There isn’t enough money!” “There isn’t enough time!” “Test first, teach later!”

These messages create powerful social and political realities, but they are also illusions. The assumptions they represent are not sustainable. They make everyone conflicted and anxious and miserable. Conflict, anxiety, and misery are not problem solving states. So how can we acknowledge the seductiveness of these messages without becoming magnetized to them? By creating vivid counter-messages that help us reframe the discourse in more productive ways- that invite us to consider our schools through lenses that, rather than focusing on compliance, shine light on problem solving actions. And for all the rhetoric thrown around in educational policy circles about encouraging schools to operate in a more business-like manner, contemporary business practice’s commitment to risk taking, innovation, and distributed leadership is notably missing from educational policy discussions. What we have here is a radical slippage between words and deeds.

So let me propose four counter messages that, instead of shutting people up and shutting ideas down, might be useful in opening up the discourse:

- 1) YOU ARE RIGHT
- 2) GET INTO THE PRESENT
- 3) DOCUMENT YOUR STORY
- 4) SPEAK TO POWER

Message # 1: YOU ARE RIGHT:



Consider the possibility that everything we arts-in-learning advocates have been advocating for all this time, against enormous inertia and resistance, is finally being taken seriously. It is time for those of us involved in learning-through-the-arts initiatives to stop operating on the defensive, hoping that someday colleagues and policymakers will acknowledge the contributions our programs are making to education.

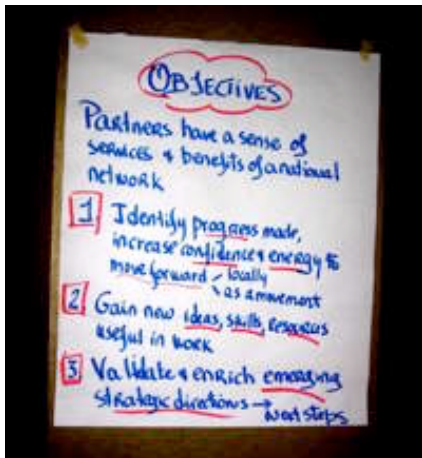
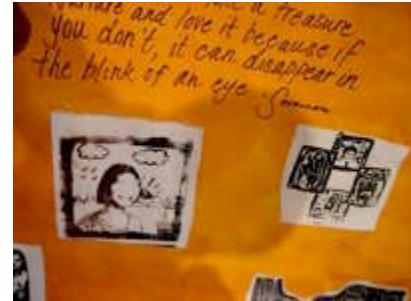
We now have a credible track record of effective practice that clearly resonates with and contributes to innovative thinking in contemporary teaching and learning, and to the development of creative economies. The arts education work of Steve Seidel at Harvard Project Zero on making learning visible resonates with the writings of Daniel Pink on economies based on conceptual thinking. The Peer-to-Peer arts education critique processes developed by the Empire State Partnerships in New York parallel the teacher leadership work of Anne Lieberman and Lynne Miller and Linda-Darling Hammond, and the “learning organizations” work of Peter Tsenge. The British government recently released a statement on the essential role of creative education in developing healthy economies. The UNESCO Asian Regional Conference on Arts Education opened with a statement that arts education needs to be recognized as a central tenet of effective large-scale school reform, and visa versa.

We need to kick our own internalized addiction to marginalization.

We need to say, “We really were right all along.” Not in a spirit of arrogance, but in a spirit of enthusiasm, working in collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines

(literature and writing, science, mathematics, new technologies, world languages, special education, bilingual education, etc.) who are also forming networks of effective practice. And we need to move forward with enough confidence and curiosity to allow ourselves to challenge and investigate our own assumptions. When we discover mistakes in our thinking and practice, we need to recognize that these are not defeats, but rather opportunities for generating new understandings.

Radical Compliance: Naysayers will respond with, “That is all very well and good, but we must focus first and foremost on improving reading and writing.” How can we respond? We can engage in *radical compliance*. We can take the concerns of the naysayers to heart and run with them, make them our own. We can say, “You are absolutely right! Let’s get together and get serious about kids’ reading and writing. Let’s explore the roles that the arts actually play in improving reading. Let’s also explore the roles that writing plays in serious art making. Let’s examine our practice in depth together.”



When the learning standards say that students need to “compare and contrast”, let’s bring in professional art critics, let’s study critical thinking, let’s engage in serious criticism.

The most creative option open to the compliant is usually passive aggression- appearing to comply while foot-dragging in a variety of highly original ways. There’s no “juice” driving compliance, so simple compliance is ultimately not sustainable. One response is to get really creative and make compliance rich, complex, and enticing. Make compliance subversive. Every committed action needs to be the result of choices consciously chosen by the person taking the

action. Simple compliance robs the actor of decision-making. Administrators in schools and arts organizations are obligated to oversee quality control, but quality teaching and quality art-making can only result from teachers who make intentional choices in their teaching and from artists who intentionally choose their engagement with their art. The energy lost in systems of monitoring and surveillance is regained in systems of distributed leadership.

Naysayers will respond with “That’s fine for a very few exemplary, creative teachers, but most teachers are not capable of that kind of decision-making”. Our experience has been that teachers ARE capable of that kind of decision-making, with no teacher left behind- given quality professional development, access to peer networks, and leadership opportunities. This kind of decision making- self-directed, but respectful of and responsible to others- is exactly what we must expect of every teacher, every artist, and every child in a democracy.

And when traditional arts instructors ask, “Where is the rigor in integrated instruction, where is the technique?” let’s truly listen to their concerns. Let’s honor rigorous technique and deep content knowledge- but let’s also teach our students how to actively

investigate their own criteria for excellence. And for God's sake, can we please put to rest once and for all the widespread but pointless false dichotomy that pits integrated teaching and learning against direct instruction in the arts. Our goal is the creation of a wide range of strategies for catalyzing informed, active, expressive, perceptive, intellectually challenging, and rigorous learning in and through the arts- not a particular pedagogy, program, or ideology. Enough with the either/or mentality.

MESSAGE # 2: GET INTO THE PRESENT:

Our students are post-modern citizens. They grew up with, are interested in, and actively participate in contemporary art forms (technologically based arts, interdisciplinary arts, popular arts, multi-cultural and inter-cultural arts) in ways that mirror the most innovative thinking of contemporary artists, and often with greater skill and content knowledge than that possessed by their teachers. Cross that digital divide between generations. Get into the present.



MESSAGE # 3: DOCUMENT YOUR STORY:

The good work that we do fails to go to scale largely because our most innovative and effective practices remain invisible outside of our individual classrooms. It is essential to document and create public manifestations of teacher, artist, and student work processes. The Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), inspired by the documentation processes of Reggio Emilia, Italy, has found that supporting teachers, artists, and students in asking compelling questions about their teaching and learning, and in then documenting and sharing their investigations into those questions, is an essential and dependable strategy for revitalizing schools through the arts. And for all the talk about bringing parents and communities into the educational process as primary stakeholders, the sole accountability mechanisms we provide to the public on a regular basis are test scores published in daily newspapers. Schools that already have a sense of their own accomplishment are celebrated, and failing schools are publicly shamed.



Transparency as accountability: We really cannot expect improved practice if no one who is implementing what hasn't worked in the past isn't given new images of what is possible, rather than more of the dysfunctional same. CAPE is working to develop broader strategies for accountability that include rich documentation of innovative teaching in action, made available to broad publics to stimulate broad public discussion of quality teaching and learning in and through the arts. Most adults' ideas about arts education have been limited by their childhood experiences with the arts- which were typically either nonexistent, or else were limited to crafts and concerts. There is nothing wrong with either crafts or concerts—but they are insufficient for catalyzing the high levels of cognition and expression that the arts are perfectly capable of igniting in our schools. The transparency provided by rich documentation of art-making processes,

including both final products *and* learners' problem-solving ideas and conceptual insights developed along the way, provide important points of entry for stakeholders that make richer approaches to accountability possible. One cannot judge the quality of instructional delivery without some information about what that delivery mechanism actually is.

MESSAGE # 3: SPEAK TO POWER:

The United States does not have a history of strong arts education policy, but when public school systems started to suffer economic stress in the 1970's, what little arts education policy there was at the school district level pretty much disappeared. Over the years since then, many school systems, supported by innovative foundation and corporate grants officers, tried to fill the arts education vacuum with services provided by external not-for-profits. Little drops in big buckets.

One of the problems with this practice was that services were typically *delivered* without schools or school systems *building capacity* to sustain arts education policies. The quality of the programs provided is not what was at issue here (the quality was in fact all over the map). The more fundamental issue is that even high quality programs do not have meaningful impact if the programming itself does not focus on building an infrastructure for sustainability as part of its core practice.

Sustainability does not just mean dollars. Sustainability also means renewable relationships, on-going experimentation and reflection, induction processes for new teachers and artists and principals, honoring of teacher leaders, celebration and public sharing of lessons learned from actual work, etc.

As a practice surfaced of on-going partnership development between schools and arts organizations, the opportunities for sustained co-learning and innovation increased. The appearance of an emergent emphasis on research and documentation supported what Larry Scripp, founder of the Research Center for Learning Through Music at New England Conservatory, calls the Teacher-Artist-Scholar model. All participants- teachers, artists and students- study their own work with their colleagues. Gail Burnaford of Florida Atlantic University guided CAPE into action research methodologies that created professional communities of teachers and artists across schools in Chicago.

Practices inside CAPE and other arts partnership initiatives have been field-tested over time, providing promising models for districts to adopt. These practice-based policy models (peer to peer professional development, professional networks of practitioners, documentation and action research, public manifestations of promising practices) have significant and long overdue potential to break down the barriers between school-based practitioners (teachers, artists, and principals), academics, and policymakers. CAPE has also, with support from the U.S. Department of Education, been collaborating with the Office of Academic Enhancement and the Fine and Performing Arts Magnet Cluster Program of Chicago Public Schools to nurture the in-school leadership of certified arts specialists. It is time we take what we have learned from our many pilot projects over the last couple decades, and speak to our colleagues in the policymaking arena about what it takes to translate practice-based knowledge into sustainable arts education policy.



Of Pilots and Policy

“Pilot project” in the U.S. has unfortunately often come to mean, “short-term funding” rather than “long-term policy development”. “Research based” education reform has all too often come to mean “limited to what has already been proven” rather than “exploring new solutions” – as if educational research were something that is finished and done, rather than expanding and on-going. The problem may stem from conceptions of public accountability focused on proofs and outputs provided by and to experts, rather than transparency of practice to publics themselves.

Pilot projects typically END at the conclusion of the piloting phase - which is when the real work of APPLYING what has been learned from the pilot is supposed to BEGIN. What seems to be missing? Mechanisms for:

- 1) REFLECTING on and disseminating learning from pilots
- 2) APPLYING learning from pilots to new sites
- 3) DEVELOPING NEW POLICIES to support these new applications of learning
- 4) ON-GOING DATA COLLECTION and reflection to provide formative assessment of new practice and policy in action.

Short term funding schemes, regular (and irregular) turnover in leadership in foundations and public school systems, the intransigence of bureaucracies, the partisanship of politicians that treat educational policy as a political football, and the fragmented individualism of academic culture all contribute to this failure to create a sustained scale-up of effective school reform efforts, even though the field is “littered” with small triumphs. Funding organizations need to rethink their gifts to not just include “dissemination” plans (dissemination may tell the story, but doesn’t necessarily spread the practice), but also planning (at the beginning) and funding (at the “end”) for applying new learning to new sites, and for studying effective mechanisms for spread. Funders appear to have developed more skills at supporting the start-up of arts education initiatives than at scaffolding sustainability- typically leaving the local public sector off the hook and placing the responsibility for scale up and sustainability onto small not-for-profits with little experience with policy development and no political leverage.

Practice Based Policy Recommendations:

Having made the statements above about pilots and policy, I challenged myself to describe what CAPE has learned from its own pilots that could and should be sustained and scaled up as a matter of policy:

Talented Leadership Matters: Talented leaders- teachers, principals, artists, external partners- really do make a difference.

Policy: Leadership needs to be explicitly mentored, and effective leadership mentoring programs need to be funded and studied. Leaders and leader-mentors need to be intentionally recruited, and exemplary leadership needs to be formally acknowledged. Effective leadership programs integrate university programs with district-based and practice-based programs. Innovative leaders should be given opportunities to grow in the profession- becoming trainers of other leaders, teacher educators at universities, and presenters in the field. External partners

need to be selected for their effectiveness as provocative change agents, not for their “usual suspect” status. Leaders need to be called upon to regularly articulate their visions for improved education.

Capacity-Building Works Better Than Surveillance: Scaffolding growth produces better results than monitoring compliance.

Policy: Professional development needs to be explicitly asset-based. Teachers and teaching artists need funded opportunities to be mentored in documenting and examining their actual practice with peers, and to be given structured opportunities to present their work to various publics. This means access to time, quality professional development, and materials for documenting and presenting work. This participation in and acknowledgement of growth accelerates improvement faster than monitoring. This is not about indulging poor work, but rather, about scaffolding and rewarding growth. This is also not about canned professional development. The proper measures of quality professional development are the practice outcomes- the quality and quantity of innovative new work produced by participating teachers and artists and students (and this does not just mean test scores).

Student Capacity: There must be a rock-bottom commitment to scaffolding all students’ capacities – a commitment that moves far beyond lip service to the rhetoric of “all children can succeed”.

Policy: Inclusive demonstrations of student capacity- both processes and products- need to be regularly and publicly shared. Structured opportunities for public sharing of student work processes, including student inquiry and thinking about their work, need to become “business as usual”. CAPE calls this practice “Exhibition as Curriculum”. Publicity campaigns need to be organized by districts around the importance of sharing student work processes with parents and communities.

Going Public- New Ideas of Public Accountability: Curriculum fairs and town halls around documented teaching processes make teaching visible, and give communities informed ways of judging the quality of teaching beyond test score results. The public needs public access to public education.

Policy: Structured opportunities for public sharing of teacher work processes, including teachers’ inquiry and thinking about their work, need to become “business as usual”. Publicity campaigns need to be organized in districts around the importance of sharing teacher work processes with parents and communities. Programs need to be created that prepare parents to collaborate in the documentation of teaching and learning processes.

Teacher Talk and Professional Community Matters: Teachers and artists learn by rigorous, on-going professional conversation with each other.

Policy: It is worthwhile to invest money in regularly convening teachers and artists to talk to each other about effective teaching, especially once they have had opportunities to provide peer professional development to each other.

Mediating Organizations Matter: Schools need critical friends to stimulate growth, and teachers, artists, and principals need witnesses of that growth.

Policy: Public schools systems need to identify and invest in external partners that effectively scaffold in-school leadership, that convene meaningful professional communities, and that challenge schools to develop innovative and provocative approaches to curriculum and instruction. These external partners need to truly partner with schools to build school capacity, and not just provide services. These effective working relationships with external partners need to be documented and shared within the district and across districts.

Practitioner Knowledge Matters: Policy and research can become disconnected from practice. Practice can become disconnected from research and policy. What teachers and teaching artists know from lived experience needs to play an active role in both research and policy development.

Policy: Action research networks, in which teachers and teaching artists systematically reflect on their practice, need to be understood as more than just good professional development. Structures need to be created in which researchers and policy makers are actively engaged with educators who are critiquing their own practice in action.

Artists are a Valuable, Sustainable Resource: Artists model the cooperative work, the persistence, the resilience, the expressiveness, the ability to appreciate divergent points of view, the ability to find multiple solutions to a problem, and the flexibility and sense of agency needed to move between thought, feeling, and action that are essential in meaningful work in the 21st century. Contemporary artists consistently bridge diverse disciplines and media in their work, and serve as a powerful connector for learners to the world of real work, and for schools to their global and local communities. Artists maintain a contagious passion for problem solving that is largely missing from our schools (to their great detriment). All too many teachers and students find their schools painfully under-stimulating. Boring.

Policy: Sustained funding and structures need to be committed to engaging practicing artists in public education.

The Arts Serve Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: At a time when many of our students share their schools with students from ethnicities different than their own, and with students who speak languages different than their own, and at a time when students with special needs are often marginalized, the arts are a democratizing force, with special powers for developing shared languages.

Policy: The arts need to be a conscious priority for schools with second language learners, diverse student populations, and students with special needs.

Teaching Beyond the Standards: The emphasis on standards as the primary driver of rigorous instruction is insufficient to the task of meaningful school improvement.

Policy: Professional development on standards needs to include inquiry-based approaches, so that the standards are not just “covered”, but also “uncovered”.

Teachers' and artists' authentic content knowledge, including curiosity about and real engagement with the compelling questions that drive each discipline, matter more than ticking off the standards.

New Technologies and Contemporary Practice: Learning in the arts needs to be integrated with learning in new media and new technologies. Post-modern arts practice (spoken word, conceptual arts, performance art, multi-disciplinary arts, installation art) needs to be included in comprehensive approaches to arts learning. Get a digital camera and use it. If there is only one computer on-line in your school, that's enough to get started. If you don't know how to use it, find someone who does.

Policy: Arts content needs to include pre-modern, modern, and post-modern forms. Artists working in new media, new technologies, and contemporary art forms need to be incorporated into comprehensive arts programming, despite the lack of state standards in these areas. Innovative new dialogue needs to be intentionally convened between arts departments and new technology departments in school districts. Teachers and artists and students need access to digital technologies.

Cognitive Growth is at the Center of Arts Learning: 19th century romantic notions of the relationship between the heart and the mind have created a stereotype of the arts as focused solely on emotional experience, but arts learning only becomes profound when learners also reflect upon and expand their thinking through their encounters with the arts.

Policy: Teaching artists and teachers need structured professional development in scaffolding student cognitive work in the arts. Districts need to explicitly honor the cognitive aspects of arts teaching and learning, and resist the temptation to limit their perceptions of the arts to culminating performances and products. This means that teachers and students not only need access to practicing artists, but also to practicing arts curators and arts critics- thinkers in the art world that are all too invisible to young people. The emergence of "informances" (public presentation of works in progress) and documentation practices that represent work at different stages of completion are helping reveal the cognitive growth at the center of arts learning.

Many of these policy recommendations entail the commitment of dollars, a challenging recommendation at a time when school systems are hard pressed for cash. It has been our experience that fiscal resources committed in the manners described above are highly efficient (unlike many other professional development and staffing initiatives), and rather than being a luxury, are incredibly cost effective. Lots of bang for the buck.

To summarize our policy recommendations, based on observing educational successes in arts education partnerships at home and abroad:

- 1) HIRE REAL LEADERS
- 2) HIRE REAL ARTISTS
- 3) ASK REAL QUESTIONS

- 4) SUPPORT REAL THINKING
- 5) SUPPORT REAL GROWTH
- 6) GO PUBLIC

Experience and research have compellingly demonstrated that when budgets and organizational structures are intentionally designed to sustain these six policies through arts education partnerships, schools improve- measurably. And that is the task at hand.