

CNAL/RCAA Conference: A Personal Reflection
March 25, 2015

Setting the Stage

Engagement. Communication. Creativity. Partnerships. These were key themes that emerged when arts educators, government officials, policy makers, artists, and others gathered for the 2015 Conference of the Canadian Network for Arts and Learning at The Royal Conservatory in Toronto. Presentations, panel discussions, and performances packed the day with energy and optimism, and the participants left at the end of the conference re-energized and ready to continue the work already being done in support of arts and learning across Canada.

The day began with a welcome from MC Ben Heppner, followed by a stirring gathering rite by Deanne Hupfield from the Ojibway Nation, who united the participants in movement – an act that set the tone for the day. Other presenters brought greetings to the delegates, including Louise Filiatrault, Secretary General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, who reinforced the importance for strengthening arts education – one of four pillars of international education as stated in the Paris Statement. She also affirmed UNESCO's commitment of supporting arts as an integral part of a quality education, and presented concrete evidence that change must happen if Canadian education, is to prepare students for the global challenges that are growing every day.

The highlight of the morning came with an amusing yet thought provoking commentary by Mary Walsh. Holding nothing back, she was adamant that arts and culture in this country is not recognized for its tremendous potential of creating a society that is deeply rooted in creativity, imagination, and well being. In Canada we tend to view the arts using a business model, trying to apply business terms to arts and culture. "As we grow older you realize your strengths and try to play to those and you stop ragging on at yourself about what you are now!" This was a powerful message to consider as the delegates moved through the agenda. She traced the root of many problems back to education and read the quote, "To call teaching three R's in school a good education is the same as calling a knife and fork and spoon a good dinner."

Education in Canada is at a crossroad. We continue to be confronted with economic and societal challenges that bring into question the very existence of schools, school structures and curriculum. Proposals for change in education often elicit emotional responses that clearly indicate a problem. While the status quo is no longer acceptable, changes must be carefully and systematically developed. At stake is the survival and future of an education system that will address the needs of our students as they prepare for their adult roles in society. This became the focus of the conference agenda. Following up on *Building on the Paris Statement*ⁱ (2015) that emerged from the Regional Ministerial Conference on Education Post-2015, and on the Report for Canada, *Implementation of the Road Map for Arts Education*ⁱⁱ(2010), this CNAL/RCAA event took another step in solidifying its mandate and creating a larger network that builds on strengths through collaborative action.

Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged during the 2015 CNAL/RCAA Conference were not new. In 1997, for example, following the first National Symposium on Arts Education, *Connect, Combine, Communicate: Revitalizing the Arts in Canadian Schools*ⁱⁱⁱ summarized the proceedings using three powerful words that were a call to action. The following year after the second National Symposium, the summary of proceedings built on those actions and extended them further: *Leadership, Advocacy, Communication: A Vision for Arts Education in Canada*^{iv}. In subsequent years, these themes migrated in several directions, building on momentum created by groups of passionate, committed individuals with the overall goal of improving arts and learning in Canada. This network continues to grow through the Canadian Network for Arts and Learning, and possibly now more than ever before there is an urgency to engage, communicate, and partner using creativity as a guiding force.

Engagement. From the opening of the conference, it became apparent that through engagement we build capacity. In welcoming the delegates, Angela Elster, Senior Vice-President Research and Education at the Royal Conservatory, encouraged everyone to take back to their communities across the country the key messages that were about to emerge during the day and not leave them at the RCM. “We must share them with everyone.” Later in the day the panel discussion on engagement picked up on this theme, and moderator Michael Foulkes, Board Chair for the RCM, quoted Michael Koener with his challenge: “Find people with affinity and passion!” There was little doubt that the room was filled with such people, but we were challenged with spreading the word further rather than to keep speaking to the converted.

Rob MacKinnon, principal of Etobicoke School of the Arts, stressed that it is important that we identify those who we want to engage. Bakari Lindsay, Co-Founder of Collective of Black Artists, the delegates to get all parties involved, and they in turn will take franchise or ownership because they will feel a sense of belonging. Another panelist, Lee Willingham, Associate Professor at Wilfred Laurier University, in speaking of sustaining arts and culture, identified three groups that need to be part of the dialogue: culture bearers, culture builders and culture brokers, the latter of whom bring other cultures into our culture. This approach demonstrates how we can engage others in the arts outside our discipline.

It was pointed out by Elster that when we talk about engagement, we need to celebrate our successes and build on successful strategies rather than starting from the beginning. The challenge for the arts sector, as Lindsay stated, is to keep current, and in a world where donors are hard to find and harder to keep, it is more than engagement for funding. In response, Elster emphasized the importance of expressing what has been accomplished, and she encouraged us to keep telling our stories. In doing so, she reminded us that we need to bring down the silos that are becoming tougher and less likely to come down. “We must be proud of what has been accomplished, look for easy solutions, and keep telling our stories. CNAL/RCAA is an example of an over-arching network where we can tell these stories and celebrate our accomplishments.”

Communication. In January, 2013, the Inter-Agency Task Team, a secretariat of UNESCO, produced *Communications and Advocacy Tools User Guide*^v— a series of tools designed to be strategic points for advocacy and communication. In it, there were several guiding questions to consider when leading a communication strategy, including:

1. What do you need your target audience to know? What do you need your target audience to do?
2. Who has influence with your target audience? With whom is your target audience in contact?
3. What topics do you want to discuss or present to your target audience?
4. How do these topics relate to your target audiences' priorities? (p. 4)

Although specific strategies were not discussed during the conference, various points of view reinforced the need for us to be aware of these important aspects of communication in order to present to and convince our audiences why arts education is so important. In her opening address, Mary Walsh spoke about the power of the arts as a communication tool: "Arts can help you learn to communicate – learn who you are." For those gathered, there was a sense of efficacy when it comes to skills and knowledge to communicate, but as Mervon Mehta, Executive Director Performing Arts, RCM, stated during the panel discussion on creativity, "We don't have the right people listening. How do we get business leaders to understand in a different way?" This is the challenge. During questions with Walsh, one participant commented that we need to shift from the negative to celebration and hope because the dominant narrative is very negative for the deficiencies in the arts. Walsh was quite emphatic in presenting her view that currently the dominant narrative is "get out, get a job, start spending....We need to get our narrative out there: culture and the arts is the dominant narrative. How do we get human beings as the dominant narrative?"

Partnerships. *Canadian Reflection on Arts and Learning: The Challenge of Systemic Change*^{vi} was prepared for the 2006 World Conference in Lisbon, Portugal by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. It highlighted the importance of developing partnerships for the sustainability of effective programming in arts education.

It is very important that the arts education community remain connected. The goals and objectives of their organizations are similar but they are often pitted against each other when competing for limited resources. Networking and partnerships are an ideal solution for both those who fund and those who receive funding. (p. 13)

In that document, several partnership initiatives were identified. In 2010, *UNESCO Questionnaire on the Implementation of the Road Map for Arts Education*^{vii} presented its report that included a number of successful partnership initiatives at the Ministerial and Municipal levels, and identified successful partnerships as funding sources to support arts learning and teaching.

At this year's CNAL/RCAA conference, the importance of partnerships was reaffirmed. Following the opening address, a networking session provided an opportunity for the delegates to interact with several leaders sharing information about various partnership programs across Canada. The interactions proved to be a valuable opportunity not only for networking but also learning from each other, and throughout the day, follow-up conversations continued to take place, affirming the importance of such exercises.

The idea of partnerships emerged during the panel on creativity. Nicole Anderson, President and CEO of Business for the Arts, stated, "We need to show the linkage between the arts and other sectors such as health and social services." She described how business leaders are engaging their employees in arts initiatives that are having a significant impact on the company. Once these leaders see the success of such initiatives first hand, it provides us with an opportunity to leverage their enthusiasm and create partnerships that have the potential of providing sustainable funding.

Another example of partnerships through networking was described by Ann Patteson and Stephen Campbell in their research presentation on the impacts of arts in learning. An important step in the information and data collection was networking hub meetings that took place throughout Ontario. Discussions at these events not only yielded rich data, but also created the potential for future partnership opportunities. The sharing of information is critical for the cultivation of partnerships. As Mary Walsh so aptly put it, "We are all part of this country and we all have something to contribute."

Creativity. Creativity, communication, engagement and partnerships are all linked together in many ways. Louise Filiatrault highlighted the importance of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship as strongly supported by UNESCO. *Shifting Minds: A 21st Century Vision of Public Education in Canada*^{viii} (May 2012) states:

Today's economic, social, environmental, and financial challenges are increasingly complex and require creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial thinking to solve problems and keep pace of the ongoing and escalating demand for new and innovative solutions and products. For success in school, work, and life, people must be able to use creativity in order to adapt, generate new ideas, theories, products and knowledge. (p. 10)

During the panel discussion on creativity, a number of key messages emerged. Mervon Mehta began by presenting his point of view: "There is creativity in everyone...it provides an opportunity.. ...general education tamps down creativity. We are not allowing kids to follow their natural instincts." Earlier in the day, Mary Walsh in her opening address gave fodder for this point: "I feel like we have a generation of young people who are in danger because they perceive that what they are feeling is not important." When school curricula devalues the arts, in effect they send a strong message to students that dance, drama, music and the visual arts are peripheral to what is really needed for a successful future. They hear a similar message from parents who encourage their children to take all the maths and sciences they can, "just to leave options open." Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, without the arts the likelihood of developing their creative, innovative and entrepreneurial potential is

diminished, and many find themselves in university without knowing what they want to do with their lives, because they were discouraged from following their passion – the arts.

Mehta noted, “We don’t have the right people listening. How do we get business leaders to understand in a different way? Nicole Anderson pointed out, “Creativity is a business imperative....as a sector, how do we leverage what we know?” One solution she brought forward was engaging employees of companies and corporations. Once they are engaged in arts activities, their superiors see the potential in pursuing their creative capacity and, because of this, there is more likelihood for “buy-in” and support for the arts. With that support, stronger partnerships develop, and this could pay huge dividends if that support is sustained over time. Cheryl Hudson, managing Partner for Strategic Philanthropy with Michael Vukets and Associates, encouraged us to move beyond short-term, less meaningful charitable giving, to sustained, focussed and high impact philanthropy. Creativity is one avenue that leads us to that goal, and we should share innovative expertise in realizing it.

Concluding Thoughts

The future world that our students face will require diplomacy, leadership, persuasion, negotiation, risk-taking, envisioning alternatives, all dependent on imagination and creativity. This wide spectrum of modes of thought is offered through arts education. The problem with support for arts education is that one tailors the total curriculum to fit the available resources, rather than finding the resources needed to deliver the education we want for our students. It is our responsibility to not only advocate for these programs, but also to continue to network and develop partnerships in support of them. We have been talking to the converted, and it is increasingly important to carry on the dialogue with those outside the arts community with the goal of expanding the support base. These people have the potential to influence policy decisions and to speak on our behalf.

We have much evidence that seems to indicate that the view of the arts as expendable continues to exist. Perhaps we have all misunderstood the reason why we study the arts. It is not only that a student can learn to play the clarinet or learn to paint. It is known that teaching the arts, along with history, math and science, helps to create the well-rounded mind upon which Western civilization was built. Our greatest achievements in science and business would not have happened without an education that encouraged achievement in all fields.

More than any other time in history, we need well-rounded minds because it is from creativity and imagination that the solutions to our political and social problems will be found. We have been told that we spend too much money and that we cannot afford the education our students deserve. The real question is not what we can pay for; rather, it is, “How can we afford not to pay for the kinds of programs needed in the 21st century?”

Eric Favaro, Rapporteur

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- ⁱ *The Paris Statement: Regional Ministerial Conference on Education Post-2015* (2015), http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/ED_new/Paris-Statement.pdf
- ⁱⁱ *Implementation of the Road Map for Arts Education* (2010), http://unesco.ca/~media/pdf/unesco/artseducationreport_march2010_en.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Connect, Combine, Communicate: Revitalizing the Arts in Canadian Schools* (1997). Sydney, NS: UCCB Press.
- ^{iv} *Leadership, Advocacy, Communication: A Vision for Arts Education in Canada* (1998). Winnipeg, MB: Friesens.
- ^v *Communications and Advocacy Tools User Guide* (2013), http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/HIV-AIDS/pdf/IATT_Communication_Advocacy_Tools.pdf
- ^{vi} *Canadian Reflection on Arts and Learning: The Challenge of Systemic Change* (2006), <http://unesco.ca/~media/pdf/unesco/2006lisbon-eng.pdf>
- ^{vii} *UNESCO Questionnaire on the Implementation of the Road Map for Arts Education* (2010)
- ^{viii} *Shifting Minds: A 21st Century Vision of Public Education in Canada* (May 2012), <http://www.c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Shifting-Minds-Revised.pdf>