

**Dr. Lee Willingham – Founders' Conference Guest Research Presentation**

Good morning. Thank you for the privilege of sharing in this vitally important conference in an equally vital time in arts and education in Canada and beyond. For me to address matters of educational research in the arts in the presence of so many fine scholars might well border on the fraudulent. There are some ideas that I think are worth throwing out there, and perhaps some perspectives that may challenge, inform, and dare I say inspire! I also want to make clear at the outset that the arts touch the lives of a wide range of community sectors, and my work at Wilfrid Laurier University has focused on where the arts intersect people of all ages, including schools, faith based communities, civic events, street festivals, penal institutions, hospices and palliative care centers, and even in the intimacy of homes and families.

Permit me also to invite you to consider research to be any endeavour where new knowledge is discovered for the purpose of informing decisions and practice, quantitative studies utilizing scientific method, all manner of qualitative (often immeasurable) practices, and perhaps most importantly, research in the arts embraces creative works, art making, composing, performing.

I've titled this presentation: *Could we ever know?* It is a research question in the most general sense. The idea came from this: *Could we ever know each other...?* a 2 piece art exhibit by London ON artist, Jamelie Hassan. It is on display in the Robert Langen Art Gallery at Wilfrid Laurier University in conjunction with a Peace and Justice Studies conference that took place last week.

*Could we ever know each other...?* consists of two mixed works that continue Hassan's ongoing preoccupation with cultural values, militarism and Canada's role in international conflicts. The work, work inspired by a quotation of the late Canadian writer Gabrielle Roy that appeared on a Canadian \$20 bill before it was taken out of circulation also includes 4000 silk poppies woven into camouflage netting.

But something is missing....

The full quotation reads, "Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?" — affirms the importance of arts to culture and culture to nation. Our exploration this morning is framed by this quote... and, like many research investigations, we are setting out to affirm the

answer we believe to be true... to find some evidence that yes, in fact, we need the arts to know each other.

I grew up in a Wesleyan Methodist minister's home. Sunday lunches consisted of a much overcooked roast beef and vegetables meal, and while the sinewy meat was being dissected, so was my father's sermon. A good sermon had to have three points. And, the best sermons had alliterative points. It didn't really matter what the sermon was about; it was critical that the form had words like "burden, build, bless," or "sorrow, suffering, salvation." My presentation this morning has three points, all starting with the letter "p." (Colleagues who excel in the art of rhetoric have pointed out that there are two practices that weaken rhetorical endeavours, etymological definitions, and alliteration. I confess that I am guilty on both counts this morning!)

What is the purpose of research in Arts Education?

So, here comes the etymology...sources suggest that the word "research," is derived from middle Fr. *recherché*, meaning to seek out, or to search closely. Why and what are we seeking and searching in this endeavour.

How can we ever know...?

Among those purposes are:

- Advocacy---seek change in political policy or social values. What happens when the politicians get it but the policy works shut it down?
- Answer a question...something we think to be true but we wonder... we want evidence
- Improve practice of teaching and learning
- Raise the quality and deepen the understanding of arts learning experiences Solve a problem
- Settle a debate
- Establish a causal-relational practice
- Enact justice
- A body of performance practices
- Make meaning by experiencing art works
- Make new art!

What kind of research are people calling for? Program evaluations.... Goal attainment.... In-depth in student engagement... what are the components...how can arts based assessment methods determine that the learning has been successful without traditional paper/pencil tests  
What can we tell from people's artworks?

Need for advocacy.... Is there advocacy fatigue? Does this mean others advocate... we are tired?!!

The manifesto of the Musagetes foundation addresses the deep and perplexing problems that beset contemporary life, including:

- The significance we ascribe to instrumental reasoning, which can calculate the costs, but not the value, of everything
- Our reliance on the economy as the most important measure of meaning
- The diminished sense of community in a world dominated by individualism and fear of "the other", and our neglect, even at times disdain, for the intangible, the difficult-to-measure - intrinsic values, human feeling, inventiveness and imagination, the life of the spirit. Musagetes Declaration Foundation

What gets measured gets done. (Jack Welch) Research can convince. Quantifying what we do is essential in a knowledge-based techno-rational-science culture.

This morning's presentation will not pretend to acknowledge or provide an inventory of recent and current research studies, but here are some examples:

The Ontario Arts Council's valuable summary of research and trends in arts education, *Making the Case for Arts Education*, published several years ago offered these reasons for the importance of arts education in our schools and for our students:

- The arts help children develop vital higher-level skills
- Arts education helps students to learn other subjects
- Assessment methods used in the arts can measure achievement in other disciplines

The link between arts education and higher-level skills is now being acknowledged by those outside the arts:

In August, 2013, Information, Communication, and Technology Council of Canada released a research study entitled *The Next Big Bang*.

The message?

The best training for a top level job in the IT sector is a quality music education.

In addition to its importance in societal health and well-being, the arts industry represents a significant component of the Canadian economy and the role that music education plays in maintaining the arts is vital.

Increasingly, the most stable, highest paying jobs in the Canadian economy, both within ICT and in general, require higher-functioning skills that have been tied to an education in music

Digital economy companies rely on innovations and these tasks require that workers have more than basic training in technical fields. Entrepreneurs in emerging technologies must be able to do more than simply write code in a globally competitive environment in which lower-value activities are increasingly migrating off-shore.

### *Benefits of Music Education*

Music education's benefits have long been a subject of interest among neuroscientists and psychologists, and music has been credited with a variety of positive effects on children's brains. Many studies have been conducted on the benefits of learning to play a musical instrument and the effects of music on critical thinking, spatial reasoning, and cognitive development. Among these studies findings:

- It has been found that students in high-quality music education programs score higher on standardized tests compared to students in schools with deficient music education programs;<sup>liv</sup>
- Students at schools with excellent music programs had higher English test scores than students in schools with low-quality music programs

- Another study measuring the development of the brain reveals that young children who take music lessons show different patterns of development and improved memory over the course of a year as compared to children who do not receive musical training;<sup>lvi</sup>
- Musically trained children also performed better in a memory test that is correlated with general intelligence skills such as literacy, verbal memory, mathematics, and IQ;
- Furthermore, learning in the arts nurtures motivation; this includes active engagement, disciplined and sustained attention, persistence and risk taking. It also increases good attendance and high educational aspirations.

### *National Endowment for the Arts*

Study reported that students of low socioeconomic status who have a history of in-depth arts involvement show better academic outcomes than do low-SES youth who have less arts involvement. Overall, eighth graders-graduation with high levels of arts engagement from kindergarten on showed higher test scores in science and writing.

The study also showed a higher level in civic engagement for students who had high levels of arts involvement.

Learning through the Arts, RCM, explores, among other things, the relationship of integrating the arts in the curriculum to learning and academic achievement. These studies have multiple purposes, but a profound conclusion from the Uptis/Smithrim study in 2003 included the statement that there is no evidence to suggest that by incorporating the arts into the core curriculum, academic achievement is lessened. The arts can't hurt!

### Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

#### Arts for Arts Sake:

Does arts education really have a positive impact on the three subsets of skills that we define as "skills for innovation": technical skills, skills in thinking and creativity, and character (behavioural and social skills)?

The kinds of arts education examined include arts classes in school (classes in music, visual arts, theatre, and dance), arts integrated classes (where the arts are taught as a support for an academic subject), and arts study undertaken outside of school (e.g. private, individualized instrumental music lessons; out of school classes in theatre, visual arts, and dance).

Multi-arts education. An extensive body of correlational data in the United States reveals that

students who participate in a large number of arts courses (likely a mixture of kinds of arts courses) have higher educational achievement (as measured by grades in school and scores on verbal and mathematical standardized tests) than those who take fewer or no arts courses.

But, there are difficulties if the purpose of research is limited to those benefits that are by-products of learning experiences in the arts. Are the arts handmaidens to the so-called core disciplines... the hard subjects....are we merely a soft subject whose transferable skills benefit the privileging the literacy-numeracy-science hegemony in a politicized school system? Research on multi-arts education has not clearly demonstrated a causal impact on student success outside of the arts. And, I ask you, what if a study came along that made such claims for peewee hockey, or mastering video games?

It is important that we understand what it means to function in life with an artistically informed set of values... our moral code, if you will. If we believe the evolutionary and neuroscientists, we are hard-wired to experience the arts and the experiences can be profound, transformative with amazing results in re-arranging social norms and concepts.

How can our research enhance peoples' arts experiences? Are there intrinsic values in the arts? Can the next research cycle move beyond the extra-arts benefits? In truth, I feel we need it all! We need the transferable skills to be made manifest, quantified, and celebrated. But, we must never lose sight that the hardest kind of research involves the probing and investigating of the impact that arts engagement has on the participant, and frankly, the smile on the face, the intensity of concentration, the evidence of what Csikszentmihalyi termed as the "flow" experience where time and space gives way to creative concentration, may be all of the data we need to justify the arts as among the highest of human endeavours.

In my work, the energies are pointing in two directions. First, the role of the arts in lives of people is often manifested through this comment, "doing this makes me a better person." What is "better?" How does it work? Much evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, points to the fact that without the arts in one's life there is a vacuum, and with the arts, the person feels more whole, more complete, dare I say, healthier. The arts have a healing quality that feed and fuel much of our body, mind, and spirit appetites.

Here is but one example of a scientific study that embodies arts and health:

### **Study with National Ballet School aims to see if dance can help Parkinson's patients**

In a large, mirror-walled and sun-filled practice studio at Canada's National Ballet School, more than a dozen dancers are stretching out their arms as they step across the floor in time to the piano, following the moves of their instructors with earnest concentration.

But this isn't a class of young ballet students decked out in tights and ballet slippers performing pirouettes and pliés, but a group of adults with Parkinson's disease engaged in a study to determine how dance might alleviate their symptoms and alter the course of their disease.

Often joined by their care partners, the 15 participants mimic the moves of instructors leading the 75-minute weekly class, first while sitting, then standing, and finally by adding choreographed steps that take them across the floor.

Their final "number" has the dancers as would-be sheriffs moseying into an Old West saloon to shoot off a few rounds in a showdown, their feet moving to the strains of a musical arrangement that includes bars from "Oh! Susanna."

Anecdotally, at least, dance has been found to temporarily alleviate some symptoms of Parkinson's, or PD, a progressively debilitating neurological disorder that can cause tremors, rigid muscles, balance problems and slowed or frozen movements.

Bar said there seems to be something about dancing that goes beyond simply exercising or having physiotherapy.

"If you think about dance, it's not just exercise. It's cued by music, so there's a rhythmic cue. There's usually a narrative, a story that goes behind, so there's a linguistic level to it," she said.

"There's also an emotional level — the joy of just dancing — and also if you're getting into a certain character, there's an emotional value there.

"So really when you're thinking of dance, you're not just thinking of exercise, you're thinking of movement along with some type of dramatic expression."

Bar has teamed up with Joseph DeSouza, a neuroscientist at York University, to study how learning and executing dance steps over the 12-week course affects participants' physical symptoms as well as their brains.

The other direction that seems to welcome arts initiatives is in the areas of Peace and Justice. There are so many ways to enact social justice through the arts... messages that are profoundly more poignant and powerful than with discourse.

Let me offer one example of a project under construction at Wilfrid Laurier University, which started as a theme event for our annual Sing Fires of Justice multi-faith, ecumenical, cross-cultural choral weekend.

Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak

(Ojibway for “Good Hearted Women Singers”).

Bridging communities through song is an annual concert that brings both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples together to meet and enjoy a variety of music, stories, and rituals. On March 1st, we will be joined by Aboriginal singing artist *Susan Aglukark*, to bring communities together through singing, dancing, and the various art forms represented by our diversity. Our research investigates the effect that making art together has on our prejudices, preconceptions, and ongoing relationship. We continue to explore ways to bring justice to our lives, to walk justly, to reconcile the wrongs of a dominant colonial culture, and where summits, legislation, and laws have failed, the engagement in the arts almost always succeeds.

The purposes for arts research are many.

## 2. Now, the Processes.

Research explores, using valid methodologies, to acquire data that can be interpreted, analyzed, and useful in practice. Since so much of our subject matter deals in the affective realm, the metrics used in other research disciplines often do not yield conclusive results. We are dealing with anomalies, and ambiguities. I often turn to Elliot Eisner to refresh my perspectives around arts and science.

### **What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?**

The influence of psychology on education had another fall-out. In the process science and art became estranged. Science was considered dependable, the artistic process was not. Science was cognitive, the arts were emotional. Science was teachable, the arts required talent. Science was testable, the arts were matters of preference. Science was useful and the arts were ornamental. It was clear to many then as it is to many today which side of the coin mattered. As I said, one relied on art when there was no science to provide guidance. Art was a fallback position.

## 3. Power



The power is in the effectiveness of the dissemination. How can we mobilize knowledge? Are we, in the cultural/fine arts sector riding the wave of social innovation, where success is not measured through revenue streams, but rather through collision corridors, networking, innovation, big plan idea hubs, disruptive innovation (Melanson), and market revolution. (Venture capital vs. social capital... commodification of the arts has devalued the social capital).

We are, then, the custodians of our culture. We are charged with three basic cultural tasks, and let me first, lean on our friend Max Wyman to help us define culture:

Max Wyman: *Culture* is everything that is created of an artistic nature—the imaginative expression of civilization rendered visible, audible, tangible in plays and books and dances, films and recordings and sculptures, scores and scripts and videos...the whole exhilarating panoply of the creative outpouring of human community.

**Culture bearer:** A culture bearer is one who upholds, preserves, and makes evident to others the key human values and processes that through human expression, we name as “a culture” or “our culture.”

**Culture builder:** Through creative scholarship, research and exploration, culture is born, nurtured, established and disseminated and these processes are at the very core of most disciplines within higher education.

Culture building is where everyone is a leader/DNA of an enterprise or community/shapes world class behavior

### **Culture broker**

1. One who facilitates the border crossing of another person or group of people from one culture to another culture
2. Defined culture broking as “the act of bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change
  - Artistic creativity involves a journey, which artists are impelled to undertake, not knowing where it will lead or if and how they will arrive - a quest for the profound and true.
  - Artistic creativity has no calculated purpose, it is not goal-oriented, nor measurable in easy ways, nor fully explicable rationally.

- Its outcome is unpredictable - it accepts ambiguity, mystery and paradox.
- Artistic creativity calls upon humility; it endures the tedious and repetitious so as to reach mastery; it contains loneliness and the potential for failure.
- It recognizes that something beyond the rational exists; it offers glimpses of the (non-supernatural) sacred.
- It gives spirit a connection outside itself; while it originates in the self, it aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity.
- It proclaims that humans have the right to pursue freedom and urges confidence in exercising that right - it inspires others to be brave.
- It champions originality and authenticity but opposes vanity.
- It accepts the potential for epiphany and exaltation and for fun and delight.
- It lives in the “now” - it takes place in the moment.
- It is transgressive and disruptive of the existing order - not as a pose or to flaunt difference, but as a necessary reality.

*Musagetes Foundation Declaration*

Orbinski: Searching for certainties in an uncertain world is a fool’s game. (The process of seeking...)

“What I’ve experienced is that I can’t know the future. I can’t know if anything that I do will change what happens tomorrow. I can’t know with certainty, but what I do know is if I do nothing, nothing will change.”

To seek permanence of place or function in a world of uncertainties is a fool’s game. The value is not the endgame, but the process. To engage in the process of justice and social action in and of itself has intrinsic value.

James Orbinski (born 1960);  
Former President Of Doctors Without Borders