

# Reflecting on the arts in social action: Possibilities for creative engagement in Action Learning

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## Abstract

*Using my own experience in integrating the arts and Action Learning, I discuss creative expression as a principal strategy in fostering social change and in advancing social betterment. In this paper, I offer several examples of the use of the arts in Action Learning involving homelessness, AIDS, and serious mental illness. The paper incorporates specific tactics for employing the arts in Action Learning including: fostering group cohesion, affirming countervailing values, amplifying voice, building support among participants, prototyping creative settings and projects, and linking creative prototypes to the development of social enterprises.*

## Key words

Action Learning, values, voice, prototyping, social enterprise, arts, social action, folk art, participation

## Introduction

What is the potential of the arts for Action Learning? In this paper I engage this question and, using my own experience in the arts and Action Learning, I seek to tease out what is distinctive about artful ways of taking social action. The arts offer avenues for self-expression, the development of group life, the creation of rich intersections among the arts, health and social services, and the development of indigenous knowledge. The resurgence of folk art and folk knowledge as forms of creative engagement (Yanagi, 1972) reveals the importance of local knowledge. The usefulness of the arts is reflected by their legitimacy in participatory,

community-based and empowerment-focused forms of learning through action.

There is now a disjuncture occurring in the arts. It is no longer under the control of elites who themselves once had the power to define what constituted art and who were once able to determine what stood as merit and worth in the arts (Moxley, 2013). Diverse forms of the arts, now visible across many different communities as outsider, vernacular, naïve, and brute forms or styles, indicate that artists do not need formal training in a specific art medium to emerge as artists whose work moves people cognitively, emotionally and spiritually (Rhodes, 2000). The emergence of such forms suggests counter movements in the arts resulting in the weakening of elite control over what constitutes artistic expression.

Carey (2006) indicates that the popularization of the arts are a function of people's search for belonging, meaning, and creative engagement thereby opening up the field to a range of creators and diversifying what constitutes art and artistic forms, as well as who can stand as an artist (Moxley, Feen-Calligan and Washington, 2013). But artists have always stood in the shadows of a society where there is considerable potential for creativity (Tanizaki, 1977).

Such diversity can challenge prevailing aesthetics concerning what constitutes the beautiful (Foster, 1998). Indeed, artistic production is now unhinged from the requirement of producing beauty since artists can adopt a counter-aesthetic or a negative aesthetic; enabling artists to characterize those situations in which society produces ugliness either intentionally or unintentionally (Berger, 1997). In this manner, the arts can serve as an avenue of criticism of prevailing social conditions. I remain mindful throughout this paper that the arts can serve as a form of dissent (Moxley, 2013). It is the expression of dissent that may very well offer society its most potent form of information and evaluation that together can challenge what majoritarian groups consider normal, acceptable, valuable and worthwhile (Sunstein, 2003).

Emotionally for me the arts today challenge our sensibilities in situations that we do not fully understand or appreciate. Our experiences of daily life simply do not expose us to those locations

of human action and human experience in which human beings are diminished in their functioning or their status (Allen, 1995). The arts are dynamic and when we seek to link them to Action Learning many possibilities open up as avenues for seeking social engagement, intergroup dialogue, and ultimately social justice (Moxley, 2013). If Action Learning is an important element of realizing social betterment, then artists and their creative expression may be a source of inspiration, action, and creativity that together stimulate social change (Eisner, 2004). Within this paper, I maintain my focus on those groups whose members experience marginalisation for as I suggest in another venue:

... popular art can diminish what Carey (2006) calls 'modern solitude' but for us it is a vehicle for cutting through marginalization, for humanizing those who have experienced dehumanization, and for tapping into the creative impulses that all humans possess, particularly when they search for innovative ways of thriving in the face of challenges. (Moxley et al, 2013, p. 17)

## **The arts and creative expression as strategy in Action Learning**

Increasingly I observe the arts forming in novel community locations and I come to see them in unexpected places. Whether traveling through India or Ethiopia or in rural or urban areas of the United States, I see many rich examples of the arts and group engagement in the arts. In the summer of 2013, visiting a village in northern India, I sat with women in a Chopal, a village square, and listened as they talked with me (through a translator) about their hopes for enriching their children's lives through the arts. The women themselves had formed a self-help group in which they were engaging in their own productive economic activity through shops, crafts, and food production. But they saw their children developing differently. Adjacent to the Chopal was an empty unused building that the women saw as the site of the arts education they envisioned for their children. Here the arts become what Campana (2011) calls "agents of possibility."

In late 2012 I attended a small planning group meeting in which the members, who identified with the disability rights movement,

came together to create a community centre celebrating disability culture. The participants envisioned the community centre as a place for creative engagement, for the staging of protest and demonstration, and for the collation of the local history of the disability rights movement. For these individuals the arts (and humanities) meant heightening their own identity as people with disabilities and heightening awareness of other groups about the history and culture of disability communities. The centre also represented a space for memorialising disability history and it served as a container holding knowledge about the disability experience (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Harvey, 1996).

On several occasions in 2013 and into 2014, I sat with activists for music education who saw this kind of learning as a vital opportunity structure for children whose schools dispossessed them of creative engagement. Under the leadership of a musician, himself not a formally trained educator, the activists were shaping a new way of enacting the development of children in poverty, using music as a portal through which those children could learn about the world beyond music itself. The founder was confronting the deficiencies in music education within primary schools, but he was also forming a new kind of school through Action Learning as the activists, children, and families began the process of co-creating curriculum, forging new partnerships with the arts community, and shaping facilities and venues to support music-informed education. Participation in the arts serves as yet another form of possibility.

While I do not consider myself an artist, I do see the arts as a strategy for human emancipation and for addressing barriers and challenges which those who are committed to Action Learning face in realising social betterment. In all of its diversity the arts offer opportunities for: reshaping aesthetics and introducing novel ways of appreciating beauty which society may neglect to see or respect, confronting socially-induced ugliness found in degradation of ecosystems, both human and natural ones, and in bringing out of the shadows that which society denies (Connolly, 2013).

When I reflect on my own Action Learning through the arts, I come to see how creative expression can shed light on that which

society keeps in the shadows as a strategic form of marginalisation. The arts here can serve as a counter strategy, so I am not surprised to find the arts being used as vehicles for enlightening people, particularly those who possess power, about homelessness, HIV, abuse and trauma, mental health issues, and violence. By pushing artful expressions of such situations into mainstream community venues, and into the consciousness of people who possess the resources to address them denial can crumble in the face of the provocative, the documentary, the visual, and the inventive portrayal of realities that society can easily oppress.

In this way, for me, and within my Action Learning research and practice, the arts potentiate new ways of framing social issues. Through our Action Learning research, my colleagues and I have framed four forms of narrative through which the arts can frame (and deepen insight into) situations that society can easily deny, such as homelessness (Washington and Moxley, 2008). Artists can deploy images that capture the plight people suffer and offer collective forms of mourning and the catharsis accompanying them (Junge, 1999). Alternatively, artistic representation can capture the self-efficacy and sources of resilience people possess in combating factors inherent in the plight. These are the same factors that could otherwise overwhelm them in the absence of the virtues that they mobilise to address the challenges they face - too often commanding their own resources without assistance of the greater society. Artists can also create narratives in which they interpret how people transform and recover in the face of what can be debilitating situations or life challenges (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994).

Through the arts, those groups and their members facing oppression or marginalisation can build new capacities for support, whether this involves mutual support among artists, self-help, care and assistance, and or creative connections with other community groups. Thus the arts themselves anticipate sanctuary, group formation, prototyping of novel or innovative ways of living and problem solving, and organisational development. The arts themselves can intersect with economics, work and employment, community service and civic engagement, and health as well as

mental health promotion. People who face serious health challenges may find the arts as a source of healing (McNiff, 2004). Particularly in its efforts to bring out of the shadows what society can deny the arts do facilitate new forms of knowledge, such as emotional knowledge. Both artists and those who receive the arts, including audience members, can come to better understand what is denied through an emotional awakening. Emotion itself can stir action and learning combining with cognition to create new ways of viewing the world, what Austen (2010) refers to as the cognitive emotions.

Kast (1994) notes that emotion involves something moving within us. Motion is essential to learning and the arts can move us emotionally to see what we would otherwise not see. It opens up the field of vision and enables us to see new possibilities in the human condition. Audiences may say that the art “moved them.” Or, that they found the exhibit “moving.” Such movement can establish a first condition of learning: the person’s receptivity to that which is observed. Such a movement can stir curiosity perhaps best fulfilled when a person or group experiments with artful representation.

## **Possibilities for Action Learning**

### **The arts as a way of learning**

Connolly (2013), who confronts the power hegemony inherent in neoliberal regimes, identifies the arts as a source of disruptive action in society that can heighten emotions, create alternative aesthetics, and bring people together into concerted action. For Connolly this concerted action undertaken at local levels reflects a form of experimentation around emergent or novel social arrangements. Central here are new kinds of roles people undertake: as provocateurs, creative agents, documentarians, and educators (Hyde, 1998).

But what is Action Learning within the context of the arts? Action Learning involves an engagement in generating representations of reality that challenge the status quo and that bring out of the shadow the lives and perspectives of people whom the greater

society considers unimportant, reprehensible, deviant, or dangerous. Invoking Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, the process of learning can induce change in perspective and understanding rather than merely an augmentation of canonical knowledge. For Kolb (1984) learning is experiential, which ties directly to action. The arts are inherently experiential but they are also interpretative, allowing people to cast upon a canvas an evocative impression of their own experience. This capturing of experience in an interpretative manner fosters insight producing a form of deep understanding in which artists communicate how they see their world.

So learning here is more than the acquisition of new knowledge or experience. It more likely involves the induction of perspective and the acquisition of insights into alternative ways of seeing and understanding. In all of its forms the arts and the people who engage in its production are well qualified in shaping such perspectives and ways of gaining insight. In this sense, artful representation and the interpretation accompanying it, can set in motion a process of empowerment. Consistent with Kolb's work, learning is more of a process than a massing of outcomes.

### **Art and its influence on resistant or receptive audiences**

The action of artists links to a resistant or receptive audience or viewer. The stance of the audience may create two different forms of learning, one in which people find consonance with the art and another in which people confront their dissonance in which they struggle with the what they confront through their sensory experience.

#### **Resistant audiences**

Imagine an artist who exposes audiences to the experience of imprisonment or torture. There is a realism of bars, graying and damp settings, and gritty furnishings. Behind the bars stands a disfigured individual, whose body is torn and distorted communicating perpetual pain and surrender. Some audiences may resist such images. They may discount them and readily defend themselves against those images, ones provoking sorrow,

pain, or disgust. The defences of other audiences may harden and become resistant to the representation the artist offers in all of its stark reality. Is this learning for the audience? One can argue that it is.

Critics here may assign manipulative intent to the artist who is seen as taking advantage of observers who may be vulnerable. Critics may raise ethical concerns and degrade the aims of the artist, which can be to empower viewers with the distortions of imprisonment. The artist opens up the emotional field of a given subject or object and the participant enters to learn about something that can induce the experience of violence, as Kaminsky's (1984) poem achieves when he amplifies the voices of Hiroshima survivors.

Those artists who engage in such provocative action define a boundary between those who endorse imprisonment and those who do not. The creation of such a boundary may ultimately fulfil the intent of the artist. Society incorporates multiple boundaries and the artist is ready to amplify those. Such is how many artists have operated: as prophets, critics, and innovators (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). Some artists are prepared to identify a space or location that induces the experience of loathing among mainstream or privileged members of society. Creative engagement proceeds in this manner. Action Learning is induced when viewers actively engage the art and arrive at conclusions that inform their lives, for better or worse, even though those conclusions may deviate from the artists' intentions.

### **Receptive audiences**

Alternatively, imagine an artist who promotes identification among viewers. They do not resist the representation the artist offers members of the audience. Indeed, they find it consonant with their worldview and/or their belief system. The artful representation of imprisonment, torture and disfigurement induce open reflection among the members of the audience who consider the art from several vantage points or perspectives. Dialogue ensues and the discussion produces new insights into the artists' intent. But beyond this interpretation, members of the audience



are moved emotionally and perhaps even ethically for the ugliness the artist portrays motivates audiences to think of themselves as moral agents. The receptive audience may experience empathic regard for the message and/or vision the artist presents. Perhaps this involves a vision of a world disordered by deprivation. Such an aesthetic, one the artist and audience may both consider “ugly,” portrays the state of reality as it exists in situations normally unavailable (either because of status, class, location or emotion) to viewers. How reality actually exists can be a form of realism or it can be an expression in which brute interpretation amplifies what is wrong in a given situation. Here representation and the decisions the artist makes about framing may move people to think differently about a given situation.

### **The importance of emotion**

Critics may underscore the emotionally moving features of the art. People are observed seeing the art through an emotional lens since the induction of such sensing is so fundamental to multiple art forms. Observers witness sighs, groans, and verbalisations that reveal the evocative features of the art. Observers themselves sense something is wrong with imprisonment. They witness its devastation. Perhaps through sculpture, photographic images, poetry and verse, paint and brush, or collage; the artist presents images communicating what is desperately so wrong within a given society. The artist’s portrayal of incarceration is so moving that it may catalyse change – in the perspectives, understanding, values and actions of those who consume it. Here the artist can serve as witness, educator or prophet. And here the art as object, may embody critique of that which is wrong and offer prescription for how it can be changed.

One may argue that art does not exist until there is an audience who consumes it, denies it, resists it, or supports it. What figures into this equation is the importance of the audience whose members are composed of observers who actively engage the art and its creator. The reaction of those observers is likely immaterial to judging what constitutes art. Such reaction may be positive or negative. The art itself may create despair and dread. Alternatively, it can create joy and a sense of the sublime. What is

important here is that there is a reaction measured by the audience itself. Critics may stand between the art and the audience but it is not really the critic's measure of judgment that determines whether artists fulfil their aims. That power resides with the audience itself.

This is likely why art is so inherently participatory and links it to Action Learning as a strategy for stimulating social change. Even the art of the repulsive in a given culture can pull people in and involve them in the process of deciding for themselves their stance on a given theme or situation. Whether the viewers' reaction is consonant with their beliefs or reflects dissonance, the emotional product can influence learning. Participation itself is evocative. The art both stirs people's cognition and emotions enabling them to form images they may have not experienced before. The images themselves sit within a field of emotion that imbues them with new significance and meaning (Austen, 2010).

## **Evocative projects in action**

### **Homelessness**

In one project I undertook with my co-researcher, formerly homeless women presented their photographic journeys of homelessness in public settings to help visitors come to understand the beauty of these heroic women and the brute ugliness of homelessness. The exhibit created a paradox: heroic subjects with considerable virtue immersed within a degrading and violent situation. The images themselves highlighted the virtues of the eight women whose photographs were on display. The audience, a mixture of interested citizens, human service professionals, educators and corporate administrators, came to witness the heroism and environmental degradation standing in stark contrast but blending into one context. The women stood out from the backdrop – the ugliness of homelessness.

Often times in such exhibits the nonverbal or paraverbal communicate the most: people weeping in front of a collage of photographs that show the dark foreboding features of a homeless shelter; people talking under their breaths uttering "this could be

me” as they observe a photographic essay of a women coping with homelessness by sheltering herself in a car she knew could fall apart on any given day. Another woman who observes a set of photographs while she holds her teenage son so tightly he could barely move, tells an independent observer that the photographs and the story they tell portend danger for herself and her child.

In an elevated tone one hears a strident voice or shriek cut across the exhibit hall: “what are we doing? How have we failed?”

People do not reprimand the woman visitor. No one reprimands her since the ensuing silence validates what likely everyone is feeling: what the photographs communicate is something that is not right. The ethical imperative emerging is a form of learning based on self-reflection on community life and its faults and possibilities.

Such a scenario does not fully capture Action Learning, but it does capture some of the ingredients Action Learning can incorporate by using the evocative nature of the arts. The scenario captures active engagement through the use of artful products, such as photography, that engage visitors in the representational or interpretative realism of homelessness among poor minority women. Each woman’s story is told through well-organised essays stretching across canvases in ways that visitors can access them physically and visually. Standing next to each display is the woman whose photographs tell her story. She is prepared to take visitors through the display of photographs offering her own storied narrative in all of its evocative features. Each display is premised on one well-validated assertion of the humanities: that a person’s story can incorporate the full countenance of a given social issue (Hyde, 1998).

There are yet two other elements to this scenario indicative of Action Learning. First, there is a reception so all participants, whether storytellers, researchers, and visitors, can come together and process within a safe milieu what they just immediately experienced. The availability of food draws people together, crossing boundaries and dividing society, which otherwise creates and sustains outside of this gathering. The visitors then move into an educational forum in which the storytellers fill in the more technical features of homelessness, discussing its numbers,

demographics and the toll it takes on health and well-being of those individuals who experience it. The forum only takes about 20 minutes. The visitors are receptive to the details since they have first come to understand the devastation inherent in each autobiography. Cognitively they are open to this information because they have become ready emotionally or perhaps even ethically.

### **Succumbing to AIDS**

I look in my journals in which long ago I captured other ways the arts engage people holistically. It is 1990 and the AIDS pandemic remains aggressive as it is spreading across the United States. I am on the flats in Cleveland, Ohio, an area now gentrified by art galleries installed in what was once productive factory space adjacent to the Cuyahoga River. The factories have long gone and in the vacuum the galleries had become well rooted. I enter one of those galleries and blinding me is the pitch white of the walls. The wooden floors are scuffed, indicating the numerous visitors who have crossed those planks to view what turns out to be a provocative exhibit. A young man has recorded his progression into AIDS with various art pieces.

They are arranged in chronological order with an adjacent label indicating the date of each photograph. The young man is descending into disorder, perhaps into dementia. His story is one of death and pain: the last mounted piece tells the story clearly without relying on anyone's words or phrases. I find myself not merely moved but distressed. I find myself reflecting on the global pandemic. I find myself at a loss for words. I find myself succumbing to AIDS. I now understand the artist's intent as I reflect on this experience some 24 years later. His aim for me was to align myself with the act of succumbing, of giving up, and of yielding to death.

The face of AIDS has changed dramatically since 1990. New medications have emerged as well as innovations in human services, both likely ushered in through the sincere efforts of Gay activists and advocates. People are living longer with HIV, which itself is now considered a disease rather than an inevitable prelude

to AIDS. People living with the infection have strategies for reducing their viral loads, increasing their CD4 counts, strengthening their immune systems, and engaging in lives with normal rhythms. How did this change occur?

While we may be thankful to modern medicine, we must also come to understand that this change was a product of an awakening and an expanding consciousness of how social action improves people's lives. I also want to think (perhaps in error) that the particular exhibit I described moved many people emotionally, helped educate visitors about needless loss, and broadened understanding of the human condition writ large stirring acceptance of those who struggled with the disease and the negative social reaction people too often experience. As I write this I am mindful of the AIDS Quilt and the names of the people lost to the pandemic.

My reference point is that stark white room in which the artwork of that particular young man was arranged to capture his descent into death. The deep grooves in the floor reveal the volume of human traffic moving through that gallery. I sought out the curator. She told me that the sponsor of the artist, the young man's family, had the floor sanded and varnished before the exhibit opened. I reflect on the deep multiple grooves in the floor.

### **The mural**

What stood out for me was the artist's strong hostility over which he seemingly had little control. It was prominent and consistent. His psychiatrist told me that it was a negative symptom of his schizophrenia. The negative symptoms were those that remained after aggressive pharmacological treatment. It was 1993 and the medication this young man imbibed was a powerful reminder that he was less than what he was supposed to be for his age and social class. According to the sociological literature since his diagnosis Lawrence, a pseudonym, had descended further and rapidly in the social structure. His father said that the schizophrenia started when Lawrence enrolled in university. He called home on several occasions to report that he was bed ridden with what he said were the symptoms of influenza.

But soon the symptoms worsened and the dreaded pattern was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as schizophrenia. Lawrence followed the recommendations of his physician. Leave school since it was too stressful. Reduce his expectations for a normal life and accept his illness and what it predicted about his potential. It was 1993 and while the psychiatric rehabilitation movement was accelerating in the United States, the recovery movement was nascent. Later on in the decade Lawrence would have had numerous options involving supported housing, employment, and education. Later there would be the possibility that he could have re-entered higher education with considerable support from a responsive team of professionals and consumers.

I met Lawrence when I worked with a group of mental health consumers who were seeking to engage the arts to advance their quality of life. He shared with me his love of art and how he felt art was a way of advancing people's understanding of mental illness. The following week Lawrence came to the meeting hall, the site of the emerging community of support, with a mural rolled up. Actually, the mural had three panels with each panel devoted to a phase of what he called his "career." The first panel captured his life and accomplishments prior to the onset of his mental health challenges. Punctuating and populating this panel were numerous letters testifying to his accomplishments, award certificates, and school transcripts as well as teacher evaluations revealing his tremendous competence and sharp intellect.

The second panel captured Lawrence's descent into what he called "the system." Here the content framed what the system saw as his emerging incompetence. Punctuating and populating this panel were diagnostic reports, letters testifying to disability, pejorative professional reports amplifying what Lawrence could not do, and medical and social service reports identifying individualised service plans that he felt led him nowhere. Those plans revealed how the system saw Lawrence's potential: that someday he would be ready for competitive employment working in perhaps a restaurant, clearing and washing dishes.

The third panel represented what Lawrence sought to achieve for himself. That is, his future, as he saw it. He longed to return to

higher education and pursue his love of biology. He posted to these panel statements of his potential, bibliographies of books he read, excerpts from college catalogues, and descriptions of careers. The words emblazoned across this panel amplified his aims: "I am an educated person. I want to move forward."

Does this mural constitute art? The contents of each panel incorporated real documents arranged in a way in which Lawrence could interpret his reality. The mural was a way he could communicate to others the nature of his experience and the unfolding of schizophrenia conditioned by how a system of care saw it and sought to manage it. While Lawrence did not seek to recruit others into a cause, he did want them to see the destruction he experienced as a function of a label and as the labelled.

Lawrence had hoped that the mural would help people understand his aspirations and the barriers he faced. He had sketches if not caricatures of various actors, and he sketched or painted elements of scenes of mental health systems he saw as mostly destructive. His initial exhibit brought in 100 visitors. They observed the three panels and had a chance to interact with the artist. The triptych fell on deaf ears. Lawrence did not realise the support or the public attention he sought.

### **The artists' collective**

It is 2007 and I am working with a group of people who struggle with serious mental illness. Fortunately, unlike Lawrence, these individuals have organised themselves into a self-help group characterised by considerable peer governance. The members, all of whom have been brought together through the experience of serious mental illness, many sharing Lawrence's experiences with the onset and initial social reaction, are invested considerably in the formation of an intentional community.

This community is an on-going source of sustenance offering a diversity of support through the provision of assistance in multiple life domains: nutrition and good food, safe and stable housing, socialisation and social contact, vocational development, health promotion, and work. While the members recognised the importance of cultural engagement and the contribution of the arts to healing and well being, they came to appreciate the need to

create more opportunities within their well-established community. What emerged was an art collective in which members of the intentional community could get involved in the collective to advance their creative work primarily in the form of painting and portrait.

The membership of the artists' collective was a product of an asset assessment. The initial group of artists readily joined the collective and came to see it as a circle of like-minded people who could come to define an alternative life course competing with the labels of mental illness they had carried for almost their entire adult lives. Artist stood as an alternative identity and the collective immersed its artists in a new context in which they could become and practice as artists, support one another, and engage in the business of art. Indeed, the capacities of the collective formed its core competencies and as it became known among the members of the intentional community and the greater holding community, (i.e. the large city in which it was nested) the collective earned an identity independent of the mental health status of its members.

New competencies emerged as the collective became adept at: marketing, staging art exhibits, participating in large scale art festivals, and supporting shows in which artists displayed their work. Moving about the physical community I began to notice the artists' displays in commercial, governmental, retail, and cultural sites. When visiting with these artists I became mindful of how the collective could stimulate creative capacities that were long dormant and through such stimulation new identities formed when those individuals who held them were willing to express them through their art.

Perhaps Lawrence could have benefitted from such a collective. Like its parent host, the collective represents an intentional community in which members share various identities that stand apart from the more pejorative one induced by a label of serious mental illness. The collective formed a context competing with the greater world in which people likely misunderstand or even fear serious mental illness. Within the collective Lawrence may have sought refuge, for intentional communities can serve as a form of sanctuary within an otherwise hostile world. He would have



likely discovered like-minded artists with whom he could have shared a common experience or his critique of the mental health system, as together they engaged in mutual support. Johnson (2010) reminds me of how group life can nurture innovation through such mutual support.

For me the collective reflects the paradox of social action. Before pushing out efforts to change the outside world, people who experience marginalisation accompanied by oppression, likely form their own community of support. It is within this community of support that members gain the skills, stamina, and identity they require to pursue an agenda of change. Given the focus of artists on engaging in criticism of what exists, creative framing or reframing of what can be, and experimenting with alternative ways of seeing and understanding a collective of creative expression can prepare members for more concerted action in the world in which they may feel unwelcome.

Action Learning here may be either internal, external or both. Within a group, Action Learning can build culture and support preparing members for social action in which they externalise their learning by sharing it with others. Thus, in many cases, art exhibits are forms of externalised Action Learning. Exhibits can move members of a group from an internal stance to an external one.

## **Tactics of arts-informed Action Learning**

### **Fostering group cohesion**

Whether the arts in action work or not begs the question of their importance and relevance as a strategy of social action. Art is human and it reflects the evolution of human beings across the millennia. Some art theorists point to the way the arts instil or otherwise promote group cohesion, a quality perhaps necessary to survive in the face of hostile environments. Cohesion here brings people together into tightly knit groups and by affirming identity and interrelationships, the members of a group come together into closer commerce. Here the arts are distinctive in what they contribute to group membership, identity and relationship to the sublime. Note how the point paintings of Indigenous Australians

capture the relationship of groups and their members to seasonality, to hunting and gathering, to a particular ecosystem, and ultimately to the cosmos. The group may form within its relationship to the sublime.

Looking closely at folk art will likely reveal how people come to memorialise their membership in groups, and how traditions that compose those groups, give their members continuity in the face of an uncertain environment. Artists were fundamental to advancing community life through the affirmation of traditions during the Great Depression. The New Deal supported the involvement of artists in community life. And artists were integral to supporting community life in the face of the Great Depression (Kennedy, 2009).

Building on their idealised visions, artists can advance innovations in human relations. In one painting produced by an anonymous folk artist that hangs in my own collection, I witness daily the portrayal of children engaged in play. Surrounding them are watchful parents who with great excitement are observing the children's collective play. The context of the painting is the artist's vernacular reconstruction of the village, in which the scene is placed. But what is unusual about this painting, at least from my perspective, is that the village strikes me as one located in the deep south of the United States. The year 1963 is painted in the upper corner. The group of children and parents are black and white. And they play in harmony. I imagine the date. And I reflect on the history of the United States. The year was one year before the full emergence of the civil rights movement. Was the artist capturing a vision of the future? Was the artist thinking about the deployment of new values that could come to fulfil a yearning for a new era of social harmony? Such is the possibilities that artists can imagine and even deploy. Is such deployment a form of Action Learning? I see it as such a form.

Inherent in support is cohesion at a group level or within a social network, such that the interconnections among members influence the behaviour of individual members. This kind of cohesion effect is very powerful and becomes an asset of social action.

Engagement in social action requires risk in the face of retaliation

and retribution. Risk can create physical threat and danger. It can degrade people's lives who engage in the social action of which the desired change demands which likely implicates liberation and emancipation.

Folk art, in particular, can create support within a group as members come to draw together folk knowledge, useful in first interpreting a given situation, then in shaping action, particularly for community building, and then in sustaining action during periods that can compromise morale. My colleagues and I have experimented with quilting as a way to foster group cohesion (Moxley, Washington, Feen-Calligan and Garriott, 2011). Quilting is one way of affirming mutually held values and forms of knowledge as people with common experience express them in each square of the quilt that together form a greater whole.

Emotional support is particularly important in situations in which people may otherwise find themselves alone. Emotional support can influence cohesion within a group and become an important factor in healing in the face of trauma. Action Learning in the form of emotional bonding can be one form of learning that is increasingly recognised as essential to social action, recovery, and human development. Support is intimately connected to identity. And the arts foster identity and identification, both of which are essential to the emergence of viable social movements.

### **Affirming countervailing values**

The work of the artist I describe above brings into my consciousness values that were not of their time. Those values are countervailing ones that can create tension with the prevailing values of a culture or that stand in opposition to them. Those values may be emergent ones held by many people who are unwilling to express them publicly yet may nonetheless identify with movements and artful forms of demonstration, until it is safe to make them real in their daily lives. Social change theory suggests that there are leading parts influential in altering a given society (Johnson, 2010). Populating those parts or locations are people who are the innovators, the early adopters of the change that eventually the society as a whole may incorporate, and even

come to celebrate. The arts and their deployment may anticipate such an alteration of values.

Witness five movements that today are reshaping how we think about the global society: the disability rights movement and disability culture, Gay rights and culture, deep ecology, sustainability, and animal rights proceed through the creation of new narratives, the redirection of human and civic energy, and the deployment of images and icons challenging the status quo. Each of the five movements captures what Connolly (2013) identifies as sources of societal innovation. The arts can redefine values and deploy them through emergent narratives that challenge a society to change what it once considered to be an immutable reality. Action Learning can embody such innovation and the arts can serve as its vehicle.

### **Amplifying voice**

Voice is so fundamental to the realisation of change. The willingness to lend voice, particularly to those values that the greater society negates, expresses courage, a virtue indispensable to advancing social change and betterment. The events surrounding Stonewall ignited a movement that spread first slowly, then rapidly across the United States gaining considerable momentum in 2000, as Gay and Lesbian activists challenged the status quo. Culture supports such movements and members linked by supportive structures begin to create narrative that counters what the majority may assert as real.

The arts in its many forms, such as performance, theatre, music, spoken words, poetry, sculpture, murals, paintings, dance and movement, and crafts can amplify voice. And inherent in voice is perspective, stance, and location. Those qualities of position gain salience through the arts, which can become a vehicle for emancipation and liberation. Thus, the arts are fundamental to thinking about Action Learning in emancipatory ways.

Countervailing values can find expression in art forms and it is those forms that can liberate voice, even in the face of hostility or potential violence. Here we see the importance of the arts as a way of expressing dissent. Why is dissent so essential to social change?

It creates new information that can alter the position of those groups and their members who at first stand in opposition to the liberation of perspective (Sunstein, 2003). Exposure to the arts can help people overcome such opposition and win the day for emancipation. In this manner the arts in Action Learning can be political.

### **Prototyping creative settings in service to creative action**

As I indicate in previous content, the arts can take place in numerous contexts in which creative people come together to take creative action. What I refer to as “prototyping” involves an explicit appreciation of how actors form what Sarason (1972) called the “creation of settings.” Imagine the settings in which the arts can occur. These can involve alternative galleries, craft workshops, exhibits, studios, and classrooms – all settings in which learning transpires through intentional and creative action.

What do these sites hold in common? They are places in which alternative learning can occur. I label those sites as alternatives because they are voluntary, embody people’s interests, deploy new or novel values, and experiment with innovations in structure, form and relationships. They are places within which people can come to heal, express themselves, steep themselves in ritual and process as well as create sanctuary where quiet solitude may be essential to the creative process inherent in the artistic engagement of ideas, concepts, feelings, and experience.

Such places may counter the cacophony of those places that can undermine the creative spirit – the din of incarceration, the noise of the factory, and the chatter of the outside world. Indeed, the principal paradigm of the creative prototype is likely the studio. This is the place in which people as artists can control their settings thereby creating the contexts in which they are most able to create. Creating the setting in which creative work will occur may be one of the most fundamental synergistic aspects of the artist’s work life. It is in such settings that the planning and prototyping of creative expression likely takes place (Schon, 1986).

All of these entities serve as sites of creative expression, engagement and production, offering members opportunities to

interact and create novel role constellations. Those constellations can involve what many artists may take for granted but can be very important for those who experience marginalisation: instructor, curator, docent, master artist, novice artist, gallery manager, or marketer. The options offer numerous possibilities involving the creation of the self and the forging of new identities.

Those of us who come to work with the arts in Action Learning projects, may recognise that the studio is a private world but social change demands public presentation and performance. The nexus between the private and inner life and the public and outer life is visible in the arts in Action Learning. People may come together to co-create a supportive world in which artful production occurs. Then they produce, they push their creative production out into the public sphere so people can consume or confront their work. What is salient as I reflect on what I learned from our work with homeless women who engaged the arts, was the formation of a tightly knit creative group. This group formation served as a prerequisite for moving out into the public sphere in which the participants sought to educate others whose schema of homelessness were either inaccurate or simply impoverished. The exhibit these women co-created was a prototype of action, something that they sought to nurture, grow and further develop.

### **Linking prototyping to organisational development**

Organisations become substantive as the prototype becomes rooted in place and as members come to support concerted action through collective support. In my own discipline of social work, we appreciate those organisations emerging from early prototypes of social action. Such alternative organisations may strike us as decidedly informal and characterized by intense, flexible or even spontaneous involvement of members in the daily lives of administration, fund development, programming, outreach and community education.

My own research reveals the vibrant and nuanced activities within the arts, in which people are creating what Bergquist (1993) refers to as intersect organisations. Those organisations embody numerous thematic or substantive foci, bringing together singular

or multiple forms of the arts with other strands of human interaction like: social services, health care, vocational development, employment training, adult education, or rehabilitation. Those kinds of organisations have populated the landscapes of communities for decades, but are now becoming visible in what organisational theorists may refer to, as social enterprises. The members of such organisations make income from their engagement in the arts. They may incorporate their own galleries, shops, and studios selling creative products year round or holding markets during holiday seasons.

The members of such organisations can gain substantive skills through their involvement in the arts – like numeracy, computer, and health literacy competencies. Social enterprises can create settings in which the success of a work-ordered day depends on the engagement of members in productive involvement with the arts. Characterising such social enterprises is their undermanning in which there are few professional staff to handle all of the work, so the organisation must depend on the productivity of all members. The necessity of maintaining the organisation and advancing its work can demand creative engagement – in governance, program administration, fund development, evaluation, and service provision.

Here Action Learning becomes highly experiential as organisational members who may lack the professional credentials, that other organisations may highlight as their key asset; become adept by engaging issues and resolving them at a group level. Social enterprises themselves are small enough to favour the integration of group life, social interaction, and technical performance. A social enterprise may become a wellspring of practical knowledge, in which the competencies of members to run the entity can accelerate through social learning – that is learning occurring within a given setting in which members observe how others function, encode that functioning, and practice it within a supportive milieu.

Such social learning may accelerate, when the arts and social enterprise combine to form distinctive cultures of engagement. Often learning in the arts is mediated through demonstration and

experience; the essence of the studio in which participants learn from an experienced instructor, interact with one another in rich and informal ways, and experiment with their own ideas using informal guidance from others as a way to shape their ideas and work. Learning in this way is conative. Artists generate inner concepts, ideas and images, nurture their formation through rich dialogue with others, and then push them out from the interior world, as they coordinate the concept with the movement of the body. Such learning can shape organisational culture and come to influence how the enterprise functions.

### **A reflexive conclusion**

From this overview of how the arts can influence Action Learning, we can appreciate how Action Learning can also influence the arts. As those engaged in Action Learning promote work in various settings to realise social betterment, the arts become a viable set of tools for enacting change. In this sense, while there is history suggesting that the arts can facilitate nefarious ends, such as during the Nazi regime, the frame of reference I offer links the arts and Action Learning so people can advance a progressive agenda of change. Here we can witness the importance of perspective and experience, two fundamental aspects of Action Learning.

A focus on the marginalised implicates the importance of amplifying voice. Who will listen? And who will see from the perspective of the narrator? In a previous paper my colleagues and I sought to amplify how the arts and voice are connected, especially through the medium of lyrical verse. In that paper, we examine a “voice in the wilderness,” as a homeless poet seeks to deepen her audience’s understanding of the debilitating contours of homelessness (Moxley, Tatum, and Washington, 2011). For the homeless poet art heals the wounds of trauma.

It is difficult to appreciate the voice without further seeing how the perspective or stance of the artist influences form, style, theme or message. For the minority and degraded or ignored voice, the outsider artist is witness here of some kind of holocaust (the experience of which can dramatically alter narrative) and serves as a messenger of a new way of seeing an object that viewers,



listeners, or participants may initially overlook or misunderstand. The artist can help us see. And, the artist can help us understand. Sometimes the artist can enable us to connect emotionally with that object we find alien or even revolting. Perhaps the artist can enable us to grasp that which has been out of reach. Thus, the change artists can induce stands as a form of learning, for the artists themselves, as well as for members of their audiences.

As a social worker and social activist, the incorporation of the arts into my own research, and my collaboration with artists as partners in inquiry, has tremendously altered my understanding of multiple social issues. The arts offer a way of knowing that can be at substantial odds with the methods of contemporary social science. As I came to the arts rather abruptly at midlife, I have at times reflected on that fortuitous occasion. Resonating here for me are Thomas Moore's words as he comments on the Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII who:

... used a powerful and relevant image when he convoked his Vatican Council. 'Apriamo le finestre' (Let's open the windows), he said. When he suggested that the locks be loosened and the catches released, fear arose among the church hierarchy. What would happen? What new ideas might enter? (Moore, 2000, p. 27)

Let those of us who compose the global community of action learners appreciate the full and considerable potential of creative expression, as the arts in all their diversity and innovation make possible. Can the arts bring our discipline new ideas of action and new ways of learning? *Apriamo le finestre*.

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## Biography

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