

Non-Formal Arts Education - New Relational Structures to Facilitate Access to Resources

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Background

Official educational policy in Malaysia encourages a focus on 3 R's in Primary education and places an extremely strong emphasis on science and technology in secondary education. As a result, school authorities, many parents and children have been indoctrinated to think of the sciences as superior and the arts as inferior.

Since the advent of industrialisation in the 70's, the education system in Malaysia has shown decreasingly less sympathy for the arts. Music, dance and drama are no longer included as formal subjects in Malaysian primary schools. However, in the previously mission and Chinese vernacular schools the traditional offerings are made available through extra-curricular activity, such as art clubs, the school choir, the school band and year-end concerts. In the national-type schools without colonial influence, arts are treated as service subjects working across the curriculum to improve teaching and learning, or to service competitions, campaigns and school functions.

The visual arts is the only art form which continues to enjoy formal instruction in all primary schools, while about 10 years ago music was reintroduced into a selection of primary schools, depending on the availability of trained personnel. The hands-on approach necessary for dance, music, drama, craft, industrial and fine arts translates into having to provide specialist teachers, special space, special materials, tools etc., other than what's available in the standard classroom or schoolbag. These demands create an additional stumbling block, as schools in Malaysia prefer to prioritise their limited funding into science and computer labs.

As a result of the obstacles mentioned, only particular forms of fine arts and music most convenient for a classroom setting are taught despite the existence (in theory) of an excellent curriculum. Parents, who believe their children should experience a more rounded/liberal arts education in depth, must be able to afford private lessons in music, dance, drama and visual arts outside the school.

ARTS-ED's 'Arts in Heritage Education Program'

The poor circumstance of the arts in schools was the main impetus for the setting up of an Arts Education Working Committee under the auspices of the Penang Educational Consultative Council (PECC)¹ in the state of Penang. The Arts Education Program

¹ The State Consultative Council does not initiate formal policy changes as education policy falls under federal jurisdiction. Rather, its several working committees advise on problem areas related to education. The working committees collect data, conduct research, or initiate 'non-formal' projects to resolve local problems.

(ARTS-ED) was designed as a non-formal educational endeavour aimed at providing more meaningful and varied arts instruction for school children in the state of Penang.

In its first year of operation, ARTS-ED gathered together art educators, fine artists and commercial artists from within the state to run short skill/technique orientated courses for teachers and students within the time-space limitations and policy priorities of Malaysian schools. While many teachers and students participated in the courses they could not however create a platform for continuity within the school system. As it became obvious that the school system gave very low priority to the arts, ARTS-ED in its second year of operation decided to bring the program and the children out of the school environment and into the community.

When ARTS-ED's moved out of the school confines, the program used the theme of 'heritage' in its widest sense to frame its activities. The 'Arts in Heritage Education Program' was intended to facilitate access to 'real' learning. The program attempted to put the children in contact with their real environment and community, which were seen to hold a greater potential for affective education.

Educational Philosophy and Methodology

"Intelligences function artistically – or nonartistically – to the extent that they exploit certain properties of a symbol system...If language (or sound or movement) is used metaphorically, expressively, in ways that calls attention to their formal or sensuous properties then it is being used artistically"¹. The education of aesthetic intelligence is concerned with the development of sensation and feeling into what is commonly called sensibility. The various arts comprise the different symbolic forms of aesthetic modality and operate through this aesthetic modality.

The ARTS-ED Program is primarily concerned with the education of aesthetic intelligence. By mobilising the intelligences² for artistic ends it aims to provide opportunities for a more balanced education in lieu of the excessive priority given to science and technological proficiency in the school curriculum. In its educational approach it aims at expanding learning methods beyond the focus on drill and fact-collection to include problem solving, experiential, holistic learning.

The Program also takes a sort of a spiritualist view that knowledge is already contained within a person. While information can be transmitted from without, knowledge reveals itself when interest and curiosity are aroused. Moving from the known to the unknown, the children were led from the comfort of the familiar to the curious realm of unfamiliar. The local cultural environment such as the wet market and the everyday display of fruits and fish became the source of inspiration for sculpture and installations, legendary

² Intelligence according to Gardner may be explained as a set of capacities.... kinaesthetic, visual, aural, musical, logical, interpersonal etc which are activated by an encounter with sound or visual or other forms of information.

figures carved in relief on granite inspired puppet making and shadow puppet display. The applied arts aroused a curiosity, interest and inspiration in the fine arts.

Environment, Resources and Accessibility

As the Arts in Heritage Program looked to the 'public space' for information and experience, it was important to consider the quality of an environment and the relationship of the child to the environment as this would determine how much he/she learnedⁱⁱ. Inner City Georgetown is a classic example of the perfect setting where trades, crafts, built architecture, consumables, museums, galleries, religious and cultural rituals and practices proliferate in close proximity and are functionally interwoven.

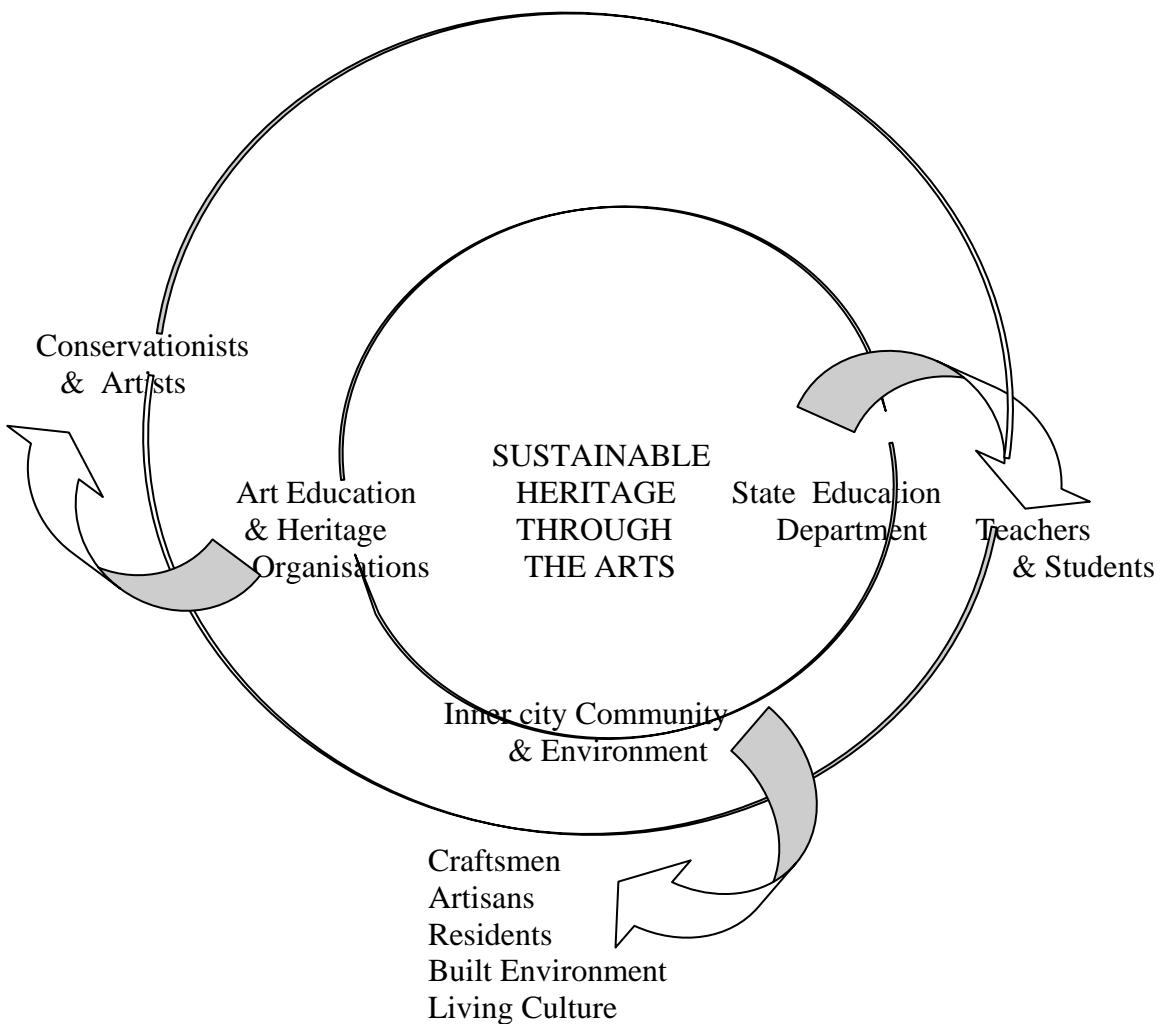
The single consistent aspect of the various programs was that the participants were constantly in touch with the world of objects and people and spaces, which served as their basic models for learning instead of standard institutionally produced curriculum, restricted educational tools and materials, and simulated environments. Since moving out of schools into the real environment, ARTS-ED has become aware that learning is not merely the result of instruction but more the result of participation in a meaningful setting.

As mentioned earlier, limited skills and variety in arts education in our present educational system is related to the insistence on using only certified trained pedagogues limited tools and spaces, which in turn limit the range, depth and relevance of arts education. Almost no recognition is given by the educational system to professional artists; craftsmen or artisans outside the teaching profession who do not have formal recognize qualifications.

To make the physical environment, physical resources and physical processes present in a community or environment accessible to children, the program conceived of new relational structures set up to facilitate access to the resources normally denied/unavailable in schools. The personnel needed for this network were people from the larger community rather than just specialised custodians of knowledge; older residents, craftsmen, museum guides, commercial and free-lance artists etc. These persons had to be contacted, the program explained, their consent to demonstrate or share their skills and their methods and philosophy had to be sought.

Distributed randomly within the inner city are a number of small and large schools catering to the local population as well as to some of the peripheral population. Students from these schools were solicited with permission from the local education department as the target group to participate voluntarily in any number of the arts projects initiated by ARTS-ED. Workspace was solicited from clan associations, temples, inner city schools and conservation groups operating within the innercity. Material contribution was cajoled from innercity businesses.

ENVIRONMENT, RESOURCES & ACCESSIBILITY



Widening the scope of arts education into the environment and community (beyond the limits of the classroom) gave meaning and function to art. Immediately, educational artefacts such as workspace, skilled craftsmen/artisans, tools, information resources, materials, design and product began to expand.

Curriculum and Programming

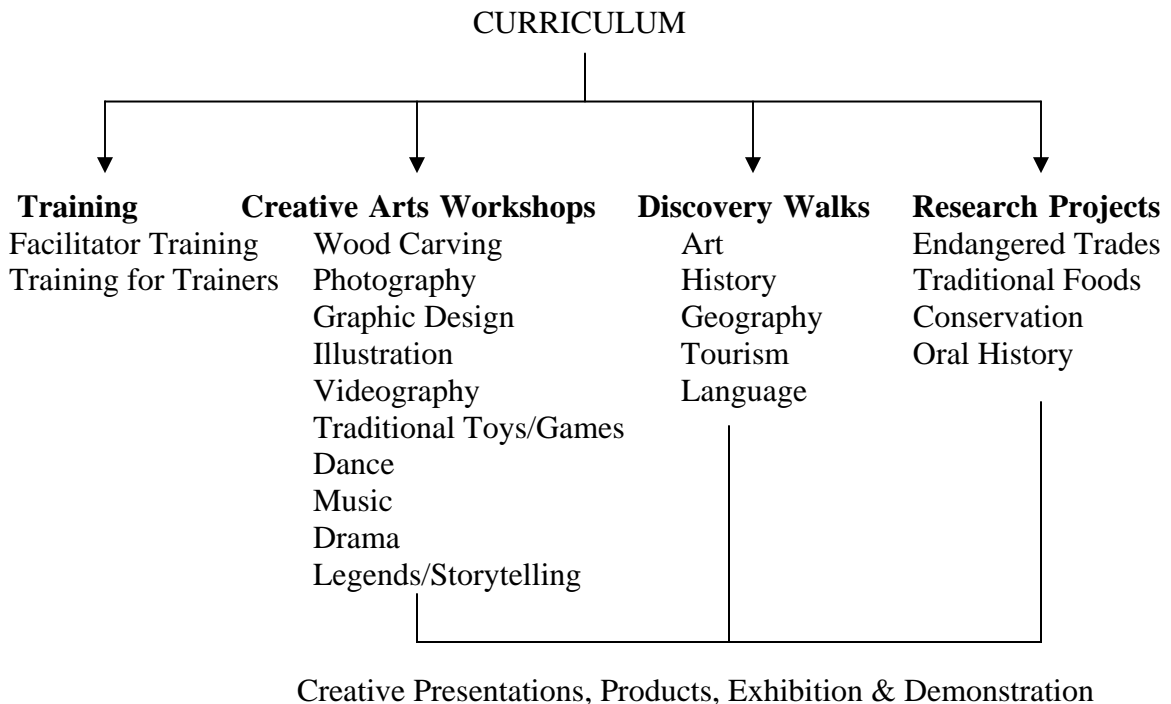
Curriculum in Malaysia is viewed as a commodity that is related to marketable economic value. In an industrial setting it is necessary for the commodity to serve the market as narrowly and accurately as possible. For the present demands children are schooled increasingly in cognitive skills but rarely in the affective.

The Arts in Heritage Education Program offers a wide variety of programs to activate the various intelligences through which children with different capacities might comprehend meaning. Children could volunteer to participate in intensive one-day interactive Discovery Walks, 10-day Artistic Workshops or month-long Research Projects. Every program minimally built awareness of living and built heritage through interactive activities, research and documentation. The longer programs focused on appreciation and skill building.

Each program has carefully built-in incentives and facilities to stimulate the child's curiosity and interest. The unprecedented expansion of boundaries, the freedom to access the wider community, the opportunity to research, document, plan creative presentations or design new products automatically stimulated innate instincts towards self-discovery and self-directed learning.

Accessibility was made through methods comfortable to the developmental stages of the child. The playful nature of games for example, was freely used to reveal the workings (changeable axioms) behind formal systems and to explain conceptual operations. Rather than being given information, the children were taught basic skills and frameworks, which they applied in the field to discover things on their own through observation, interview and apprenticeship.

The hands-on art workshops offered opportunities to be involved in product design allowing children to utilise skills learnt to create marketable industrial products (albeit on an amateur basis). It provided an insight into the nature of industrial design, marketing and management for both commercial and non-profit purposes.



Evaluation

The greatest advantage of non-formal education is the freedom from measured evaluation. The school evaluation system initiates children into a world where everything including personal growth and even imagination must be measured. Prefabricated levels squeeze creativity, imagination and output into assigned niches. The ARTS-ED program from its inception supported experiences that were unmeasurable, personalized methods or ways of working and exceptional products that differed from the norm.

Children in their projects were expected to move progressively from the known to the unknown, discover new information, learn new skills and create new products. However, the progression paid tribute to the whole, to organic growth rather than to quantitative increase. Packages with graded promotions, with instructions to go on to the next level, which merely initiate children into the system of progressive consumption, were strongly avoided.

Group sharing, evaluation and critique were practised at each stage, with intention to evaluate if the information collected and documented or the skills learnt, were understood, could be communicated, revealed new findings or inspired new uses etc. Exchange of stories depicting extraordinary experiences, new relationships forged with residents, failure at a mission were encouraged as self evaluation and as peer learning experiences.

Each project terminated with a creative presentation, demonstration or exhibition usually conducted on the street or in public spaces, charting both process and product. The demonstrations and exhibitions were targeted to fellow participants as well as to residents of the innercity, craftsmen, artisans etc. They provided an opportunity for the participants to evaluate the process they had undergone, to trace the organic growth of the project and their experiences and to look at the potential outcomes. On the other hand, the residents who often took their jobs and surroundings for granted, inspected the re-presentation of their city and their lifestyle and learnt new information about themselves through the representations and narratives by the children. As much as the arts program culled from the city, it returned to the people, for them to reflect upon themselves.

Outcomes

The program's most significant outcome was the formulation and execution a holistic and integrated form of art instruction that involved the development of the individual within a meaningful context:

- Training the senses – learning control of the eye and the hand, through the study and handling of materials and processes in apprenticeship.
- Training the emotions – Examining emotional themes and content in oral histories and biographies collected from residents and tradesmen. Identifying historical,

- religious or philosophical meaning in motifs, patterns, symbols and icons embedded in cultural artefacts or products
- Training the mind - intellectual analysis of the elements and principles of art in design, form and structure as manifested in the environment, in daily rituals and special performance, in edible and inedible products.

Another significant outcome was the ability of the program to bring together the tangible and intangible goals of education by integrating industrial and fine arts albeit at an amateur and simple level. Participants were able to apply what they learnt from instruction to design a marketable product, and produce it for a specific client or for sale to the general public. Simultaneously, participants' art appreciation rose significantly. Through exposure, instruction and exploration they quickly began to recognize the role and significance of art in living culture and in the built heritage

Concluding Thoughts

How can we measure the impact of arts in education when it hardly exists in formal primary education in Malaysia? Formal arts in education in its fervour to protect and certify, has unwittingly imprisoned the child in an artificial, simulated environment and provided formulae as tools, depriving the child, or delaying the child's' acquaintance with the real environment and real experiences. In schools, the studio, the tools, the art materials, the manual are used only when the curriculum allows it. Schools remove objects from everyday use by labelling them as learning tools and shut the child out of the world of artistic products in their meaningful setting. The classroom model of arts in education in Malaysia tends to automate perception.

Proving through research that arts education in general has an impact on learning achievement, social integration and ability to innovate might of course provide an impetus to local policy makers to take the arts more seriously, but this approach circumvents critical questions that need to be addressed initially regarding the content and structure of arts education in Asia:

- Should we fragment the arts into isolated parts, as was the legacy of our colonial arts education policy or should we attempt where appropriate to amalgamate music, drama, movement and visual arts as it is practised traditionally in many 'total' theatre forms?
- Many Asian cultures do not distinguish between fine and applied arts or even between art and other man-made objects. Should fine arts be privileged over craftsmanship or decorative or industrial arts or should we attempt to democratise all human artefacts / man-made things?
- Should teaching technique, appreciation, history, critique, how to make sense of art be confined to a classroom or should the knowledge of art materialize through the practice of art-making as well as aesthetic engagement as an audience and as

an everyday consumer dealing with textures, tastes, sights and sounds of a real environment?

The formal arts in education system will gain tremendously from incorporating or working together with non-formal arts education simply because education has lost touch with the real world while the real world has been banned from educating. The education received from daily life and work and the opportunity that work and daily life gives for us to initiate education is lost in the formal school environment.

‘Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life: it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone stony’ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Gardner H. ‘Intelligence Reframed’ Basic Books 1999

ⁱⁱ Illich, E. (1976) Deschooling Society, Penguin Books

ⁱⁱⁱ Shklovsky, V (1917) ‘Art as Technique’ in L.T. Lemon and M Reis, (1965), Russian Formalist Criticism, University of Nebraska Press

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