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A reflective perspective on the challenges facing research-led teaching in the performing and creative arts

Introduction

In this article, I am aiming to provide a reflective perspective on the role that research-led teaching plays in the development of future arts workers in higher education. This will involve exploring the challenges faced by lecturers developing curricula in the performing and creative arts. My ultimate aim is to suggest some potential solutions to the ongoing tensions between vocational training and research-led teaching that continue to plague the field.

My own professional background lies in theatre management and producing, and having just moved to a research intensive university after four years in a post-'92, vocationally orientated university, I thought it might be insightful to evaluate how my own perspectives on vocational training and university education in the performing and creative arts have evolved over the course of my career. To achieve this, I will follow Schön's (1991) process of 'reflection on knowing-in-action', which will inevitably culminate in something of a hybrid between a personal think-piece or provocation paper and a traditional academic research paper.

Background context

According to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2006): "Creativity is something we [in the UK] do well. Our creative industries are internationally renowned and amongst the fastest growing sectors of our economy, accounting for more than 8% of our GDP and more than 4% of our export income. They provide jobs for two million people." (p. 2). In February 2008, the then Labour Government launched its latest action plan for the creative industries. *Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy* (DCMS 2008) presented a new national strategy designed to move the creative industries from the "margins to the mainstream of economic and policy thinking" in the UK (p. 4). The strategy included the creation of 5,000 new apprenticeships in the arts by 2013 and was inspired by the lofty aim of making Britain "the world's creative hub" (p. 6). This latest strategy was designed to run alongside recent government investment in cultural leadership in the sector, including the Clore Cultural Leadership Programme, which was established in 2004 to develop the next generation of arts leaders. This focus on vocational training, professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning meant that the education in the performing and creative arts was enjoying its strongest political and financial support ever.

However, since the change of Government in 2010, the UK's arts budget has been cut by 30%, of which around half (15%) has been passed on to front-line arts organizations; and if Simon Mellor, Arts Council England's new Director of Arts and Strategy, is to be believed, further cuts are imminent (Gardner 2012). At the same time, Unistats' mandatory Key Information Set (KIS) data has forced UK universities into publishing benchmarking data on their course web pages, including students' satisfaction with their course as expressed in the National Student Survey and their employability rates six months after graduation. This has understandably increased

universities' awareness about employability and led to a renewed focus on student placements. For example at my previous institution, Leeds Metropolitan University, every student will soon have the right to a guaranteed work placement of at least two weeks.

One issue affecting students seeking internships in the performing and creative arts is that organizations funded by Arts Council England have been warned against offering free internships, unless interns are simply shadowing an existing employee. This has inevitably led to a reduction in the number of high quality placements in the field, with already stretched arts organizations struggling to increase their payroll, especially when some of them are making their existing staff redundant. So the performing and creative arts are increasingly finding themselves in an employability conundrum, in which students are encouraged to find vanishing placements.

How to teach arts management?

When I secured my post at Leeds Metropolitan University in the enticingly new discipline of Entertainment Management, I was, like many new lecturers, apprehensive about certain aspects of my new post. This feeling was compounded by the fact that I had never taught (or even *been* taught) arts or entertainment management; like most arts managers, I had simply learnt on the job. This realisation had provided another motivation to move into higher education – namely to strive towards professionalising the industry and to negotiate the delicate balance between business and creativity on the one hand, and between vocational training and academic rigour on the other.

My first challenge was to develop some new modules. Desk and library research revealed very few textbooks specifically focussed on arts and entertainment management. There were plenty of books on entertainment, but most of them took an artistic or sociological perspective. There was a plethora of books on management, but most of these were much too generic to be of any real use in covering the idiosyncrasies of management in the diverse sectors of the arts and entertainment industry.

So I turned to professional industry websites such as Arts Council England, the Independent Theatre Council and the Arts Marketing Association, which provided both inspiration and excellent teaching materials. For example, Arts Council England's site featured a wide range of research papers on cultural diversity in the arts, and their funding pages inspired me to incorporate a genuine funding application as the core assessment for my Arts Management module. The Arts Marketing Association website had a bank of recent case studies available to download free for members, and this provided a host of effective learning tools, including accounts of a re-branding exercise at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and a digital marketing strategy at the Lowry.

But I was still missing the direct voices of arts professionals. Industry reports and case studies provide a useful background, but there is no substitute for the authenticity of lived experience as recounted by industry professionals themselves. So using my existing theatre contacts, I approached my local theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, to discuss possibilities for collaboration. This led to a series of meetings with senior managers at the playhouse, which in turn created opportunities

for guest lectures, site visits and student placements. This partnership developed organically over the four years I worked at Leeds Metropolitan and culminated in an official partnership, which remains vital to the continued success of the university's student experience and employability strategies.

I have been in my current role at the University of Leeds for just four months now. It has been interesting to observe first-hand the differences in outlook and approach between a post-'92 (new, vocational) university and a Russell Group (well established and research intensive) institution. Where my Leeds Metropolitan students were predominantly kinaesthetic learners, who were desperate to produce events and make things happen, their counterparts at the University of Leeds are more comfortable with the theory and happier to challenge big ideas. While the learning outcomes at Leeds Metropolitan emphasized vocational learning and stressed the benefit of assessments to students' employability and careers, the course and module titles at the University of Leeds highlight theorization and inter-disciplinarity. On a practical level, this has meant altering lecture content to embed it more within frameworks of academic debate rather than tailoring it towards employers' needs; and seminars are dedicated more to creative and critical thinking rather than to applying the theory to professional practice.

Ultimately, this is a question of tailoring academic learning to the needs and expectations of students – and in the new UK context of £9,000 tuition fees and national student surveys, the student is inevitably king. But there are clearly larger questions at stake behind these different approaches and strategies. I feel that I have adapted my teaching to match the skills, needs and expectations of my students; but I fear that this might have been influenced more by my unconscious perceptions of institutional expectations than I care to admit, and that in the worst case scenario, while my Leeds Metropolitan students were let down by a lack of critical insight, my University of Leeds students will be sent out into the world lacking some basic vocational skills – a situation which risks disappointing future employers.

My conclusions are that the UK's higher education sector is rapidly transforming itself into a two-tier system, which is serving to dichotomise vocational and academic learning even further. This raises wider questions about the desirable equilibrium between vocational training and academic learning and the problems that this dichotomy might pose. It also begs the questions of how universities will justify their new price tags, and what (and indeed who) university-level learning is actually *for*.

Learners and beneficiaries

It has been suggested that today's lecturers need to move beyond the traditional distinction between learner and teacher and become "lead learners" (Campbell and Norton 2007, p. 11). According to Hughes (2004), this lead-learner role involves discussing, modelling and scaffolding learning, and helping students to identify *how* as well as *what* they learn. Once the distinction between teacher and learner becomes blurred, there is arguably a positive shift in the power dynamic, with students being placed on a more equal footing with their lecturers. This shift engenders a responsibility for lecturers to become professional learners, as well as mentors and facilitators (Briggs 2005; McGill and Beaty 1992; Race 2005) and agents for transforming knowledge (Biggs and Tang 2007).

In the performing and creative arts, the implications of this might involve lecturers establishing or maintaining closer links with arts organizations and keeping abreast of the latest trends in the sector through activities such as action research. In research-intensive universities, it might entail a closer, more symbiotic relationship between research, teaching and artistic practice. The rise of Collaborative Doctoral Awards, where PhD students are jointly supervised by a university and an arts organization, and the gradual acceptance of practice-based PhDs within the academy provide clear examples of this symbiosis starting to take hold and break down some of the traditional barriers between research and artistic practice.

Discussions about the beneficiaries of university learning are perhaps harder to conclude. It might be natural to assume that students are the core beneficiaries of their own learning, and the resurgent focus on graduate earnings and employability, together with generally high student satisfaction rates, would tend to bear this out. But it would be naïve to imagine that students were the sole beneficiaries of their learning. As Taylor (1999) points out, the 1990s witnessed a transition to a market-driven system, aimed at the private rather than the public good. Perhaps accordingly, the Dearing Report of 1997 reassessed the core purposes of higher education and defined one of these as serving the needs of the economy (Laurillard 2000). Governments still support universities (albeit marginally and often indirectly) because graduates benefit the economy: and as graduates are the core agents of a knowledge economy, society benefits as well.

Universities also benefit from student learning, not only directly through tuition fees, but also indirectly through tangible and intangible knowledge transfer – for example, by feeding teaching and learning into research outputs. Finally, employers benefit by having access to a more highly skilled work force, which again can reap huge benefits in the knowledge economy. But I'd like to pause here and postulate that universities make many assumptions about what employers need and want, and sometimes disregard this question completely to follow their own agendas.

What employers want

According to a recent YouGuv poll, two thirds of UK employers feel that students who have completed a placement year are more employable than those who have not (Sherriff 2012). The survey also found that 46% of companies perceive the skills gap between students with a year's industry experience and those without to be on the increase, with 74% reporting that students who had completed placements demonstrate a better ability to communicate professionally, and over a third claiming they have a better grasp of business etiquette and are better equipped to work in a team. The survey questions are revealing here, indicating that perhaps the most vital role played by placements is to develop soft skills. This is borne out by a recent study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity, which found that 76% of employers identify listening skills, persuasion and teamwork with successful organizational performance (Huhman 2009) and it confirms the findings of other studies into the rising importance of soft skills (e.g. Richens and McClain 2000). These surveys indicate that employers perceive soft skills as harder to develop, whereas the knowledge or hard skills required to accomplish daily tasks can be imparted quite easily and quickly (Erling 2010).

However, professional bodies in the UK, such as The Association of Graduate Recruiters, have long been calling for degree programmes to embed hard skills such as financial accounting and human resource management into their curricula. Cox (2012) argues that the need for "business-ready" courses is not restricted to management schools or newer subject areas, and identifies a particular problem in traditional arts and humanities subjects, which have tended to resist change. Indeed he contends that transferrable skills are of particular significance in these fields, where students will generally find employment outside their subject areas, and notes that poor employability prospects are perhaps one reason why these subject areas are starting to witness a drop in demand as tuition fees rise.

It is harder to determine what arts employers expect from graduates, as they often lack a collective voice. The performing and creative arts comprise a diverse body of art forms ranging from film and visual arts to opera and dance and the vast majority of organizations in the sector are micro organizations, so in any case their needs will always be diverse. However, the sector is generally acknowledged to be fragmented and under-managed, with many organisations utilising pro-am or semi-professionals, and part-time and voluntary labour (Leadbeater 2005). As a result, the sector faces significant skills gaps which require educational solutions. There is, for example, a strong demand from employers for better trained arts managers, voiced most strongly by Michael Kaiser, President of Washington DC's John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, who recently claimed that "the main challenge the arts world must address is the lack of a large, trained corps of managers who know how to find resources, attract audiences and other constituents and provide support to our artists" (Kaiser 2009).

The university's role

In spite of this, Crossick (2006) argues that the role of universities is not to churn out fodder for the creative industries based on existing skills needs and gaps, but rather to educate the next generation of creative, conceptual and critical thinkers, who will underpin the creative industries of tomorrow:

> "Of course the creative industries need a workforce that will be effective today, but even more they need one that will continue to be valuable tomorrow and the day after. The attempt to transfer the sector skills council model to the creative and cultural sectors fails to see students as they enter the workforce as the carriers of knowledge that derives from research rather than of narrowly-conceived skills. In so doing it undermines a key feature of the creative industries. That key feature is conceptual and theoretical imagination, critical and lateral thinking across disciplines, and the willingness to take risks. The unfortunate proposal to kitemark approved skills-focused degree programmes ignores the very characteristics of the creative industries on which their success rests" (p.12).

Crossick maintains that universities offering courses in the performing and creative arts need to strike a balance in their curricula between listening to employers and maintaining confidence in their own traditions of knowledge transfer: despite the increasing focus on graduate employability, employers don't always know best, and

universities can provide a stabilising role by intertwining their teaching and research. This point is elaborated by Barnett (2000), who argues that in an age of "supercomplexity", a university should be "engaged in assisting novel juxtapositions of its discourses and, in the process, in creating new forms of knowing" (p. 105).

Kolb's (1984) experiential theory of learning and Dewey's (1980) theories of active learning provide some insightful perspectives on students' learning processes and on these 'new forms of knowing', which I would argue have a particular resonance in the arts. According to Kolb, learning is a "continuous process grounded in experience" which constantly encourages ideas to be formed and re-formed (Kolb 1984, pp. 26-27). This definition of learning reflects Duff's (2003) helical model, which depicts teaching as an open-ended and interactive activity; and it is particularly applicable to the performing and creative arts, which are founded on principles of mimesis and nuanced through practices of rehearsal and repetition.

Hudson et al (1997) highlight the demand for transferable skills as the key challenge facing modern academics, and they qualify this as the pressure to create "a multi-skilled, responsive and adaptable workforce" (p. 6). But this is just one of the myriad duties of a modern university. As Kenney-Wallace (2000) points out, there is a visible tension between learning for learning's sake and the professional application of knowledge; and there is a further tension between vocational learning and critical thinking. It has been argued that employers' continuing demand for practical, applied business skills has led to reduced possibilities for encouraging critical thinking in students (Vandermensbrugghe 2004). Vandermensbrugghe claims that critical thinking is even viewed with suspicion in many areas of professional life, regarded as a challenge to workplace culture or even as questioning the status quo.

How students learn

The most cited taxonomies of learning are Bloom's (1956) six-step cognitive classification and Biggs' Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) (Biggs and Tang 2007). Bloom identifies six cognitive skills – knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. There has been much debate as to whether these six skills are hierarchical or whether they should be judged more holistically and according to their end result. From an active or experiential learning perspective, for example, successful application may be more valuable than synthesis and evaluation. Bloom's taxonomy also fails to address other spheres of learning such as kinaesthesis and ethics, which more vocational courses may wish to emphasise. But it does provide a useful and workable starting point for checking that an academic programme is developing a holistic range of skills, which explains why it still underpins many learning outcomes in higher education in the UK.

Biggs' SOLO taxonomy fits more closely with the definition of learning as a continuous process grounded in experience. Unlike Bloom's taxonomy, it is designed to provide a systematic description of students' cumulative learning as it grows in academic complexity. Biggs' taxonomy is closely linked to learning outcomes, as it aims to set the level at which different student cohorts should be performing. It is also divided into quantitative and qualitative phases. The quantitative phase covers "unistructural" and "multistructural" learning, which broadly reflect Bloom's knowledge and comprehension skills and represent the pedagogical objective of "increasing knowledge" (Biggs and Tang 2007, p. 79). The qualitative phase

incorporates "relational" and "extended abstract" learning, which encourages skills such as comparison, analysis, critique, evaluation, hypothesis, creativity, design and production; this phase is geared towards deepening understanding. The significance of creative, design and production skills cannot be lost in the field of the performing and creative arts.

Some possible solutions

There are clear tensions between vocational and academic learning in the performing and creative arts, and discernible conflicts of interest between employers' and academics' expectations of graduating students. Work placements provide an obvious solution to this impasse. This kind of on-the-job learning seems to be employers' number one concern, and in theory it leaves ample space for academic learning and critical thinking in the classroom, for the two or three remaining years when students are not out on placement. The problem with work placements is that there often aren't enough to go round, and many are not of the quality expected by modern students paying historically high tuition fees: the days of photocopying and stuffing flyers into envelopes are fortunately becoming a distant memory. The demise of free internships, while to be lauded on some levels, such as equal opportunities and widening participation, does however place further pressures on non-profit organizations, many of whom are struggling to survive in the wake of swingeing Government cuts, and this has severe implications for students seeing placements in the arts.

A practical alternative to placements, internships and the traditional sandwich year is work-based learning and consultancy. The programme I taught on at Leeds Metropolitan required all students to undertake a minimum of 80 hours work-based learning and to complete a reflective portfolio to evaluate its outcomes. This encouraged students to become "reflective practitioners" (Schön 1991) and provided them with a platform on which to apply their learning. In the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds, all undergraduate students have the opportunity to undertake either an enterprise project or a collaborative performance project, where they are matched with a partner organization such as a school or a prison and challenged with investigating, delivering and evaluating a performance or enterprise activity to fit the organization's needs. These types of practical interventions not only serve to develop more confident, rounded human beings; they also develop enhanced team working and problem solving skills and provide students with rich stories and examples to share in future job applications and interviews.

But solutions do not always have to be found outside the lecture theatre and seminar room. Inside the classroom, case studies offer another practical solution to the tensions between vocational and academic learning, as they encourage a problem-based learning (PBL) approach. Research has consistently shown that PBL can encourage active, independent and reflective learning; promote positive attitudes and greater engagement; and motivate kinaesthetic learners (Gossman et al. 2007; Prince 2005). Biggs (2003) holds up PBL as an exemplar of aligned teaching because it focuses students all the way through the learning process on solving professional problems. For Biggs, the advantages of PBL are that it: forces students and teachers alike to reflect on the concept of 'understanding' and how to foster it;

discourages cynicism by convincing students of the tangible benefits of their learning; and culminates in "informed action" on the part of working graduates.

Assessment can also play a key role in aligning academic study and professional practice. According to Light and Cox (2001), assessment systems provide students with an indication of the standards expected of them and encourage them to take the level of their learning more seriously. Light and Cox also note, however, that many forms of assessment fail to test the correct level of attainment. Lambert and Lines (2000) identify validity and reliability as two of the most important concepts underlying assessment and argue that these concepts are interconnected. Assessment is a hugely complex construct, based on many different (and often conflicting) values, principles and objectives. It also comes in many different guises and varies significantly from one institution to another and from one subject to another.

There are clear lessons to be learned here in the performing and creative arts. If, as suggested earlier, university teaching needs to make better use of applied and problem-based learning, then this needs to be reflected in assessments. For example, a final year undergraduate module I taught at Leeds Metropolitan explored the strategic management of entertainment organizations. The assessment required students to work in groups to present a strategic analysis of their allocated organization directly to their clients and to summarize their findings in a consultancy-based report. This developed the students' soft skills, such as team working and communication skills, while encouraging them to apply their learning to a real case scenario and to critique the Strategic Management theory by discerning gaps between theory and practice. It also developed their tact and confidence in presenting to and discussing with employers, preparing them better for interviews and developing their industry contacts.

The earlier discussion on employers' needs highlighted the importance of soft skills, and again, this is an area where the arts can really flourish. Crossick (2006) argues that one of the strengths of the performing and creative arts is that they generate 'networked knowledge' produced through creative conversations between diverse groups of professionals – artists, directors, producers, designers, writers, technicians, etc. The ability to think creatively and thrive in a network are virtues extolled in current leadership theory (e.g. Knell 2007) and they fit closely with the new, porous organograms that are starting to become the norm (Holden 2011). The arts thrive on passion, creativity and communication and they are concerned with authenticity, de-coding and meaning-making. This begs the question of how lecturers working in the performing and creative arts can engender these attributes in their students. A possible answer to this conundrum might lie in better knowledge transfer: "artistic and cultural experience creates complex, thoughtful and critical citizens. Much of this would be unthinkable without the research and scholarship that goes on in universities. And the interplay of that research with artistic and cultural experience is often described as knowledge transfer" (Crossick 2006, p. 3).

Knowledge transfer of this nature depends on the development of strategic partnerships between universities and arts organizations, which are generally value-driven and concerned with mutual mission fulfilment. I have had first-hand experience of three such partnerships in my career to date, from both sides of the

fence. At the National Theatre of Scotland, we worked closely with the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD, now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and the University of Glasgow. As a national touring company with no dedicated theatre space of our own, we regularly used the rehearsal spaces at RSAMD and in return provided mentoring and shadowing opportunities for their students. We also co-supervised a PhD student from the University of Glasgow, who was writing her thesis on the role of national identity in the establishment of the National Theatre of Scotland. This experience taught me what fertile ground for research arts organizations could provide but also that expert, dedicated researchers were needed to unlock the knowledge and experience contained inside them.

As an academic, I have benefitted hugely from this symbiosis. By developing a strategic partnership with West Yorkshire Playhouse, I have not only gained access to audiences as research participants, but also been involved in action research projects, undertaken consultancy activities, and secured placements and consultancy projects for my students. Having now moved to the University of Leeds, I am developing a different kind of partnership, centred on knowledge transfer, research and innovation. These kinds of partnerships are vital to both parties; they do not involve huge sums of money – or indeed any money at all; and they can quickly reap huge benefits, providing some practical solutions to many of the challenges discussed in this article.

Conclusion

A review of these potential solutions to the challenges faced by research-led teaching in the performing and creative arts suggests that the logical way forward lies in synthesis and compromise. Students study for a host of reasons, only one of which is employability, and universities' aim to develop critical and creative thinkers rather than vocationally skilled employees remains a valid one. However, whether we like it or not, employability is rising up the agenda and the performing and creative arts will not be immune from this. Universities have a key role to play in brokering knowledge-based networks in the new economy (Nevarez 2003). This presents particularly exciting opportunities in the arts, which thrive on networked knowledge, conceptual and theoretical imagination, critical and lateral thinking, and the willingness to take risks (Crossick 2006).

Ultimately, if academics, employers and students engaged in the performing and creative arts could collectively reject the false dichotomy between vocational and academic learning and perceive education in a more holistic, longitudinal sense, the rewards of their creative collaboration could be significant. This collaboration would require academics to listen to employers and develop students' soft skills – perhaps by adopting Bloom's (1957) *application* mode of learning and Biggs' (2003) *experiential* learning; it would entail employers appreciating the mindset and wider attributes of graduates and their potential to add creative and conceptual value, rather than focussing too narrowly on their hard skills; and it would encourage students to engage with their learning in a broader sense, to appreciate the symbiotic interrelationship between vocational and academic learning.

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