Hong Kong 2007 – Zurich 2009
REFLECTIONS on building cultural software
Tom Brown
Foreword

Following the success of the first ELIA Leadership Symposium held at the Getty Center in Los Angeles in 2003, and the second held at the Tate and University of the Arts in London in 2005, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts hosted the 3rd ELIA leadership symposium. The overarching theme for the symposium was ‘Building cultural software’ and brought chief executives and senior management in art education institutions together in Hong Kong in December 2007. 126 influential leaders in the arts from many of the world’s most important institutions and coming from 22 countries participated in an active programme of site visits, key note presentations and facilitated discussions.

Hong Kong made quite a setting for the leadership symposium: vibrant, energetic and unique; time-honoured, but also increasingly cutting-edge. Topics discussed include: Purpose and Practice: Teaching, Research, Purpose of Arts Education Renewal: Curriculum Development, Leadership Development, Institutional Change, Investment Facing Outwards: Partnership, External Relations, Advocacy, Internationality, East meets West

These themes are explored in detail in a paper commissioned by the steering group and written by Tom Brown.

The ELIA leadership symposium 2009 will take place in Zurich, hosted by the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste. The discussion themes in Zurich will build on issues emerging from Hong Kong and will respond to some of the participants’ suggestions about future content. We are pleased to herewith present the insightful and thought-provoking synthesis ‘REFLECTIONS on building cultural software’ and to have established the link from the 3rd leadership symposium in Hong Kong to the 4th ELIA leadership symposium 2009 in Zurich.

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Report

Building Cultural Software, title of the third ELIA Leadership Symposium, created a framework for talks in Hong Kong. Delegates addressed, refined, and built on issues identified at the first two Symposia in Los Angeles and London. Comments and discussions from keynote speeches and breakout sessions focused on questions arising from themes of ‘Purpose and Practice’, ‘Renewal’, ‘Development’, and ‘Facing Outwards’. The notes that follow summarize participants’ reflections and observations under several common threads.

Creative Industries – Opportunity or Threat

The tension between emphasis on the arts’ economic capital and the significance of other outcomes, including social capital and cultivating citizenship and eudaimonia, were recurring motifs at the symposium. In his opening address, the Honorable Tsang Tak-sing, HKSAR Secretary for Home Affairs, cautioned that investment in arts and culture brought intangible benefits that should not be measured in economic terms alone. Charles Handy, in his keynote address, cited Adam Smith’s ‘great conundrum’ – economic growth serves and supports the cultivation of civilization, wellbeing, and happiness, but endless growth results in endless pursuit of “unnecessary things” at the expense of cultivation. Handy views the education offered by academies, its cultivation of mystery, imagination, and creativity, as ideally suited to counter that trend. Not just because academies produce creative and resourceful artists and arts leaders, but because they have the capacity to produce leaders for every sector of the 21st century’s knowledge-based culture.

Gerald Bast, Rector of the Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, alluding to Walter Benjamin, noted, however, that far from being proconsul of utopias, the arts have been reduced to economic entity; chasing markets rather than leading. Bast’s remarks and others throughout the Symposium echoed doubts expressed by Artistic Director of London’s South Bank Centre, Jude Kelly, who, in her keynote speech asked – forty years after introduction of the notion of creative industries, what have the arts gained? Although governments have identified creative industries as a major driver of economic growth, how have the arts and specifically arts’ schools benefited?

While discussants agreed that assembling the arts under the creative industry banner has given us clout to ‘sit at the table’, it also raises questions: Are we prepared to be there? Are we there as players or merely as tokens? Do we have ‘the chips’, the different set of knowledge, skills, and political finesse to play, influence, or even set the agenda? How can arts schools capitalize on recognition creative industries have gained? How can we use this capital to lend authority to our voice as we advocate for a strategic development for creative industries and the creative economy that aligns with our own? Can arts institutes fully exploit the opportunity presented by the concept of creative industries?

Are creative industries in danger of being marginalized, of being a player in name only, of becoming, as Kelly contends, a dumping ground? Has emphasis on economic capital overshadowed the social capital of the arts?

In addition to relying on leadership from within to answer how best to take advantage of creative industries and not be overtaken by them, participants also acknowledged that reassessment of arts education practice is an important means to provide solutions to these questions.

The Domain of Creativity

Reassessment of arts education practice demands a clear and up-to-date picture of the domains of the arts.

Creativity is not an exclusive domain of the arts. Creativity gives the arts and arts schools an edge in a knowledge-based economy in which the creative industries are recognized as a key component. Teaching of creativity in arts schools provides a model other disciplines adapt for their own uses as they diversify in the face of demands from an information-society and globalization. As a possible consequence, creativity is no longer perceived as a prerogative of the arts. If not commonplace, art and creativity are not strangers in the realms of science, mathematics, technology, and business. And visa versa. This blurring of boundaries between art and other knowledge areas is not merely a matter of one borrowing the means of the other to achieve its own ends, but of aspiring to the
other’s ends as well. It is not just that business schools use theatre exercises to train executives in their MBA programmes, for example, but also, new art forms such as Bio-Arts are as likely to be created in university science labs as they are in art school studios.

How can arts education practices revitalise to embrace changes in the arts and how can we ensure they lead these changes?

**Arts Education Practice**

The teaching of creativity may have made arts schools distinctive, but it also may have made us complacent. Charles Handy’s advice may be apt: the right time to change is when you don’t think you need to change. “Learning is endless experimentation fueled by experimentation”, he remarked. Echoing Handy’s comment, one participant pointed out: we often teach the past, if we are lucky we teach the present, but we should be teaching the future. While the maxim – the world is in flux and change is the only constant – still holds true; change is faster than ever before. Yet, an implied message of education persists – the school as repository of learning, the place to find the answer to any question, the solution to any problem, conservator.

Compounding these issues is the trend for students to focus increasingly on the ‘new’ at the expense of traditional skills. Students often want to accumulate technological knowledge and skills rather than hone ability in fundamentals such as narrative, colour, drawing, and technique. Whereas the market values graduates who have cutting-edge know-how, it still demands they also have a thorough knowledge of the basics. Distinctive qualities that sustain core values need to be reflected in the curriculum of arts educational institutions, reaffirmed, and strengthened, but change is imperative. How do we ensure that arts educational institutions hold on to their distinctiveness, reassert their core values, while avoiding the comfort zone?

While no one disagrees these core values include willingness to take risks, create new models, and lead artistic and cultural innovation, other concerns are less easily answered: is content based on acts of courage or economy driven? How do we avoid the agenda being taken over by corporate and populist tendencies identified with civic and local political ambition?

While ensuring quality of content, we also need to strike a balance in the perceived tension between courage and experimentation on the one hand and accountability and measurement on the other. And, accomplish balance through a consultative process rather than top down. Plus, acknowledge changes in curricula have a ripple effect on the rest of the organisation, staff development, appraisal, and recruitment. These need addressing in order for change to be effective.

**Learning Outcomes and Modes**

Upholding core values is important to sustain distinctiveness, but curriculum change and renovation are essential to wellbeing and continued significance of arts’ schools, especially when only a few of our students will be artists for life, many will not. Students need to be educated for portfolio and multiple careers with a range of knowledge and self-management skills to handle constant change.

One common concern is that, what the schools offer their students and what the students want of their teachers are often not aligned. The ease of information retrieval electronically through secondary sources has radically changed learning attitudes. Students, who live increasingly in a 24/7 society where everything is available on demand, are no longer prepared to spend time learning something ‘just in case’ (they need it). If, and when they need it, they’ll get it ‘just in time’ from the Internet. As a result, students increasingly look for more accessible and suitable modes of learning and for accelerated learning. They expect to learn at times, places, and at a pace tailored to their needs. What are the implications of these trends for art schools? How do we prepare students and teachers to play roles in a future that has not yet been imagined? How can arts educators make full use of learning modes such as e-learning?

While focusing on significance and distinction within the realm of arts and arts practice, in reassessing curricula, arts schools can also examine how
arts education educates the whole person. Unintended learning outcomes add important value to education in the arts and education through the arts. While not replacing intended outcomes of practice in the arts, they cannot be overlooked. In one breakout session, participants identified transferable knowledge and skills students in arts courses acquire. These include:

- Problem solving
- Working in complex situations
- Respecting difference
- Reciprocity
- Pursuit of excellence
- Exploiting creativity
- Ability to collaborate
- Risk making/taking
- Situational sense making
- (Collective) moral values
- Perceptiveness

Identifying and acknowledging wide-range of learning that education in the arts involves gives weight to its relevance. We can demonstrate to students the value of all they learn not just by providing comprehensive curricula that create choices, but which also recognise the diversity of alumni achievement.

### Faculty

Changes in curricula and flexibility in teaching and learning modes may have as great an impact on faculty as the need to maintain excellence, distinctiveness, and innovation have on the institutions where they teach. Does the need of the former—flexible learning modes—require flexibility in staffing including time-limited or resource limited faculty, temporary contracts, and limited tenure? And, what implications will these patterns of staffing have on staff recruitment, morale, the totality of student learning experience, and teaching quality?

Quality teaching is foremost. Simultaneously, there is a perceived need to change pedagogical styles to ones more suited to the modern day academy, to provide more informed pedagogical skills among teachers, to raise the level and status of teaching, and to include pedagogy in the curriculum for students. Investing in pedagogical skills for teachers can vary and may range from certified teaching practice supplied by the school to exchange programmes for teachers, sharing professional competencies, and student and peer appraisals. Important in ensuring quality teaching is the need for schools to provide for physical, intellectual, and emotional space and time for staff development at all levels. Coupled with fostering quality teaching is the development of a link between experiment and a culture of research.

### The Role of ELIA

Delegates viewed the Leadership Symposium positively as an opportunity for learning about different and new practices and perspectives, exchanging ideas, and networking. They also suggested an extended role for it and for ELIA. There were about 45% more delegates in Hong Kong than there were at the London meeting. Additionally, 41% of all delegates were from outside Europe (21% from Asia Pacific and 20% from North America). These statistics and the Asian debut of the Leadership Symposium contributed to ideas about further development of ELIA.

Increased participation in the Leadership Symposium from delegates who originate from institutions outside Europe suggested an expanded role for ELIA. Additionally, international connectivity is a key strategy through which arts institutions achieve change, diversify, innovate, and grow. Establishing links with compatible and complementary institutions, developing, and evaluating partnerships and exchanges are some of the means through which this strategy may be further realized.

European and American institutions are increasingly looking toward China and Asia for engagement, while Asian institutions are actively pursuing partners in the West. Many existing links between East and West institutions develop on an ad hoc basis. They result from personal contacts—a graduate from a European institution returning to China, an American visiting professor at an
Asian institution. Symposium delegates suggested that a database of information on completed, ongoing, and prospective partnerships and exchanges could assist members as they seek to fulfil the goal of international institutional connectivity. Evaluation from all parties on completed programmes would also help planning.

Issues for the 2009 Symposium

For each of these common threads there remain questions and suggestions for further discussions that could guide planning for the 4th Symposium. Additionally, participants in Hong Kong also suggested several topics that might be further addressed in Gothenburg including:

Importance of citizenship and social capital as well as economic capital in evaluating the arts

Dynamics between cooperation and competition within the arts and among arts schools

Erosion of autonomy of art schools

Arts education leaders – sharing more, exchanging ideas, mutually helping each other

Attracting new art education leaders, at all levels, not just senior decision makers

Radicality in curricula

Research culture development and role of research (artistic & practice) in arts schools

Tom Brown

Tom Brown is the Director of the Graduate Education Centre at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, an editor of Dance JournalHK, and a member of the International Editorial Board of Research in Dance Education. He has directed over 100 productions for dance companies, conservatories, and universities internationally as well as choreographed for the concert stage, opera, drama, musical theatre, directed opera, and notated the work of Humphrey, Taylor, and Nijinska. Most recently, he was an editor and contributor for the 2006 publication Why They Dance: Narratives of Hong Kong Dance.

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