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# Back to Basics: Creative Guesses on the Future of Philanthropy in Arts Education

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In late summer of 1940, three boys exploring the French countryside climbed into a deserted fox den and descended into a world that humans had not visited in 20,000 years.

The caves of Lascaux are famous for their age and timeless beauty; chambers filled with countless meticulous images. At a time when early humans were living short, brutal, subsistence lives, they took time and energy to observe, perfect their craft, crush pigments, venture deep into the earth, and create extraordinary spaces of teaching and remembering.

No doubt they also filled their world above ground with images, music, and dance, shared from generation to generation. Before text and math, humans had painting and dance. The fossils of this creativity are imbedded in their modern forms. It is this continuum of creating, teaching, and learning which we define today as arts education, arguably the basis of human knowledge and understanding.

This article is inspired by [the 2019 series in \*The Philanthropist\* on philanthropy and the arts](#) sponsored by the Metcalf Foundation. In it, we heard from the sector about the importance of creative spaces, supporting new creation and building arts infrastructure, among others. This piece focuses on the critical transfer of craft, creative expression, and appreciation. Why and how should we build creative capacity in young people? Is it still important to invest in arts education during a time of global crisis? And what are some trends in arts education that we should consider? As we move into an uncertain future, it is more important than ever that the next generation is equipped with tools of creativity.

**Back to basics**

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How do we “learn” art? My first memories of art education include drawing in the sand, building with Lego, singing, and dancing with relatives and friends. Family and community have always been at the heart of creativity. Through ceremony, in kitchens, on car trips, and around campfires we instill the importance of art in our lives. Those who take creative paths usually come from homes filled with art or communities that love music – representing the first, and most important, source of arts education.

Schools and arts-based organizations are two other homes for the arts in Canada. For most of the past 50 years, courses in music, drama, fine arts, and dance have been an assumed component of public education. Students who wished to learn an instrument, collaborate on a school play, or go on a field trip to a gallery or live performance usually had the opportunity. Educators also made many efforts to incorporate the arts in other curriculum. While school-based arts programming has struggled in recent years, dedicated teachers and schools continue to provide a home for artistic creativity.

Finally, there is the arts sector itself. Imagine Canada estimates that Canada has approximately 8,600 arts, culture, and recreation charities, the majority of which focus on arts and culture (Imagine Canada, 2019). These include everything from orchestras and galleries with multi-million-dollar budgets, to volunteer-run neighbourhood arts groups. Regardless of their size, these institutions have the combined responsibility for housing Canadian culture and art, and ensuring that it is celebrated, shared, and taught to future generations.

Most artists and creative thinkers can locate themselves at the centre of these three overlapping circles. Regardless, they are often repeatedly asked the same question: *Why does it matter?*

### **Why do we need arts education?**

There have likely been debates regarding the value of arts education since someone decided to paint pictures of buffalo rather than hunt them. Many excellent pieces have been written on why arts education is so important. For the most part, these arguments fall into two categories: “the intrinsic,” that there is something about creative expression central to humanity which should be passed down for its own sake, and “the extrinsic,” that through art we can become better at other things (Engebretsen, 2011).

#### ***The extrinsic***

The easier of the two arguments to articulate involve extrinsic values, as they tend to have quantifiable outcomes. Students in art programs do better in math and sciences (Hetland, L., & Winner, E. 2001). They are more proficient at problem solving. They measure higher in academic achievement including better compulsory test and SAT scores (Cohen, R., 2012).

The Royal Conservatory of Music, as part of a Learning Through the Arts national study from 1999-2002 found that “Grade 6 students who had participated in the program for three years scored 11 percentile points higher on tests of computation and estimation than did their peers in control groups.”

But why does doing art in and of itself help with academic subjects? One suggestion from recent brain research is that creative endeavours may improve neurological development (Johnson, 2019). Like stretching helps athletic ability, we may soon have tangible proof that

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creative pursuits provide a helpful workout for the brain.

Art can also convey concepts in non-arts disciplines. Research on learning styles shows that only about 20% of us learn best from reading and listening as opposed to active participation (Cameroon, S., 2001). For whatever reason, the rest learn and remember by using art – from puppetry to singing the times tables or taking part in a play about history.

The impact of COVID-19 on local economies that rely on arts districts and facilities helps highlight the layers of economic value provided by the arts. From a civic and economic perspective, those who pursue their art as a career not only provide entertainment, they support community cohesion and are an economic engine. The cultural sector contributed 2.7% of Canada's GDP in 2017, or \$53.1 billion (Statistics Canada, 2019).

### ***The intrinsic***

If you could quantify art, it wouldn't be art.

Though they are by no means a representative sample, none of the arts educators interviewed for this piece suggested that extrinsic factors provided a primary motivator in their career choice.

"There was a heated debate going on when I was in music education at university in the '90s as to whether to teach art [to develop] skills for other things. The 'music makes you smarter' argument," said Phil Bravo, associate director of social innovation at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "In my mind, music for the sake of art makes it valuable. Music is a vehicle for understanding and another way to engage with the world."

Though they do track measurable outcomes, for Bravo, a music teacher's primary purpose is to focus on the music no matter what. "Rule number one for any art teacher: Make."

"It's very personal," reflected Michael Prosserman, founder of Unity Charity, a youth arts organization. "I am a dancer myself. It's always been an outlet for my own stress in life. Personally, it changed my life and created my community. It is a perfect engagement to rally around mental health."

Andrée Cazabon, CEO of Productions Cazabon and associate producer at Reconciliation Education, sees art as a way to "spot and work with patterns, exploring systemic solutions." Much of Cazabon's current work connects reconciliation, film, and multi-media. She is exploring a common human challenge. "There is not enough time given to imagination and creativity. We need more time for dreaming. Only in this way can we use imagination to create new pathways."

For Julie Frost, senior arts consultant for the City of Toronto, a wide range of factors sit at the core of arts education. "We live in an increasingly visual world saturated by social media. We need the capacity to be aware, navigate and articulate in order to be full participants."

Lola Rasminsky, founder of Avenue Road School for the Arts and Arts for Children and Youth (now VIBE Arts) references the ability to undertake deep learning and incorporate feedback. "For arts students, not getting it right the first time is part of the learning process, an inevitable part of developing a skill. They don't give up at the first sign of failure, and they welcome

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criticism because they know it keeps them on the path to mastery” (Rasminsky, 2012).

Is there any other way to explain the organic outpouring of creativity we have experienced during the pandemic? As Rasminsky reflects, “What’s helping many of us get through this crisis? Creativity – our own ingenuity in finding inventive ways to deal with everyday challenges – and the imaginative expressions of others: jokes, funny videos, inspiring performances, and stirring artwork. They are balm for our shaken souls.” Faced with crisis, humans create.

In [the third article in the Metcalf series](#), Mélanie Demers referred to her art as simply “a pure gift of love.” How do you quantify that? Do we even need to?

Why are most of us moved when we listen to certain music, stare at a painting, or watch a performance? Maybe this is one of the things that makes us uniquely human, gives us purpose and meaning, and generates connection. Making and teaching art is good. Let the music, poetry, and dance speak for itself. From an intrinsic perspective there is little need to say more.

### **Trends, dynamics, and creative guesses**

What are some of the issues and opportunities likely to impact the future of arts education in Canada? The following considerations come out of several different conversations.

**Regeneration:** “Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by the sun of York” (Shakespeare). In ecological and systems models there comes a time in the cycle for “release.” In Buddhist philosophy this is engendered in the concept of “impermanence.” Forest fires release and regenerate – so will COVID-19. It will dramatically impact arts and educational organizations. Some will not survive. In the process of regeneration, the pandemic has initiated questions about what needs to be saved and what needs to be transformed. The 2008 downturn was devastating to education programs in many arts organizations. Will the same thing happen again now? Is self-preservation a good reason for an arts organization to continue? Is it time for mergers? These are difficult questions for organizations as they navigate uncertainty. We need benevolent, honest partners who support transition and regeneration – as difficult as it might be – now more than ever.

**STEAM not STEM:** Science, technology, engineering, *arts*, and math. As budget holders engage in triaging to re-design public education in a pandemic, we will need strong creative voices to ensure that arts programs remain part of the core. Even before the pandemic, most Canadian provinces had cut resources for arts education. This is not the time to wipe them out completely; we need to re-imagine the arts as a basic component of a complete education.

Stephen Huddart of the McConnell Foundation noted that, coinciding with the Space Race and the Cold War, Canada saw a flurry of programs that integrated sciences and arts during the 1960s and ‘70s. Both were seen as an important tool against a common enemy. We may be in a similar place now. Children need an education that presents these disciplines as complementary. Integrated education is imperative.

**Equity:** The de-centring of public education in arts has exacerbated existing issues of equity. In a 2018 report, People for Education noted that “*Low poverty schools* are more likely to raise more money per school, more money per student, and more money specifically for the arts, as compared to *high poverty schools*. Schools with *high parental education* were 10 times more

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likely to have an arts budget of \$5,000 or more, as compared to schools with *low parental education*" (People for Education, 2018, p.5). As governments define more arts programs as "extracurricular," parents must shoulder more costs, which results in inequitable outcomes for the next generation of Canadians. This issue, likely to be compounded by the pandemic, will require groups like People for Education to continue to draw attention to inequity and suggest solutions for it.

***The rise of community arts:*** A rich, vibrant community arts movement has developed in Canada. Sketch, VIBE Arts, and UrbanArts are three of many scrappy community arts organizations in Toronto. Elsewhere, Graffiti Gallery in Winnipeg, MASC in Ottawa, Art Hives in Montreal, and Calgary's Antyx Community Arts plant seeds of creativity in their neighbourhoods. El Sistema-inspired music programs have also taken root in more than 20 communities across Canada. Small, determined groups working to establish or maintain community arts programming are at work right now in communities across the country. As Huddart sees it, these initiatives have the power to "catalyze change and engage civic imagination." For funders, these efforts, which often fly low on the radar, represent an opportunity to learn, connect, target neighbourhoods, and support unique programming.

***Influence of the mosaic:*** Interactions between different cultures and technologies has produced plenty of great art. Renaissance orchestral music was shaped by new instruments traded along the Silk Road. African art influenced Picasso and other artists of his time. We can trace the origins of Blues music to a collision between African, Indigenous, and European folk and spiritual traditions.

Arts education in Canada is at an extraordinary moment characterized by a flourishing Indigenous creative culture and contributions from new Canadians arriving here from around the world. You might think of it as a renaissance in Canadian creativity that provides opportunities for new ways to deliver meaningful arts education. It also presents a challenge for long-standing arts organizations founded and focused on European traditions. These orchestras, ballets, and theatre groups have an extraordinary opportunity to create something new. Vivaldi probably didn't know about Inuit throat singing when he composed the Four Seasons, but Tafelmusik incorporated it with extraordinary results in their Four Seasons Mosaic.

In the spirit of "Build Back Better," we now have an opportunity to re-imagine an arts education infrastructure that exposes students to vastly diverse forms of expression.

***Collective impact:*** Julie Frost reflected with some irony that chronic underfunding of arts programs over many years may have necessitated collaboration and contributed to resilience in the sector. While this is not a recommended funding strategy, it has made collaboration the norm. For example, the successful 2013 Hockey Sweater orchestral education program stemmed from a shared commission among the Toronto Symphony, National Arts Centre, and Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra.

{Re}conciliation, another collaboration between the Canada Council for the Arts, McConnell Foundation, and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, supported arts-based responses to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It "aimed to promote artistic collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, investing in the power of art and imagination to inspire dialogue, understanding and change" (Canada Council for the Arts, 2016).

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Most arts organizations are familiar with collaboration and co-creation: they work together because they must, but also because it brings others into the creative process, which is essential for generating new art. This strength can be leveraged to support artists working together and to include arts education in strategies to contribute to social justice, environmental activism, and economic growth.

***Mind-blasting accessible tools:*** Andrée Cazabon suggests anyone involved in arts education and philanthropy should expose themselves to a broad spectrum of art forms. For example, Cazabon cites her experience at Douglas Cardinal's UNCEDED: Voices of the Land, which showcased 18 Indigenous architects. "It was so incredible, I don't actually have words to describe it." The installation involved a multi-media sensory experience unlikely to neatly fit into any checkboxes on a standard grant application form. Today, technology is encouraging crossover between disciplines, putting powerful tools of self-expression into the hands of young people.

The explosion of creativity resulting from pandemic is another example of this. "It is amazing what our students are creating and sharing now that they are in self-isolation," said Bravo. Multi-track home recordings, movie-making, and collaborative technologies have made it possible for people to co-create art and share it around the globe. This will inevitably change the way we teach art.

***Creative granting and evaluation processes:*** Want to drive an arts educator crazy? Present them with an application form and a 150-word limit preceded by the question: "What new innovation are you introducing in this program?" The triple irony of this question is that:

1. Repeatedly asking this indicates a lack of innovation on the part of the donor;
2. It is often asked of organizations with core missions to instill creative innovation; and
3. Restrictions in word count on a grant application template provide little opportunity to respond innovatively.

As arts groups make use of new creative tools, blur the lines between different forms, collaborate with unlikely partners, and take risks with their craft, grant-makers must keep up, experimenting with their own innovations in assessment and evaluation.

***The innovation imperative:*** In his work *The Ingenuity Gap*, Thomas Homer-Dixon explores the necessity of creative and collaborative problem-solving in the face of increasingly complex – often-human-generated – crises. Reflecting on the COVID-19 response, Bravo says, "It took us about 48 hours to put our entire program online. We've moved to a portfolio review process for our students, adopted new technology and shifted our teaching practices. Rules are out the window and we are doing some deep thinking about what it means to be an artist and what our mandate is." The pandemic has forced arts organizations to speed up their assessment, experimentation, and adoption processes. Not surprisingly, arts educators are also testing creative solutions to respond to the pandemic and training their students to embrace uncertainty.

If we accept the intrinsic and extrinsic values of art outlined above, then innovation is an absolute imperative. And, as Huddart noted, coordinated efforts to induce this kind of learning in Canadian classrooms may not have succeeded before because they were ahead of their time. This may be a good moment to revisit earlier efforts to encourage innovation education

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programming in classrooms on a national scale.

**Family:** Let's remember that family and close community remain at the heart of nurturing creativity. Philanthropic organizations should consider how family fits into an arts education strategy.

We will never know why or how our ancestors first painted cave art or told stories around a fire. But we know that passing on these traditions was important to them, as it should be for us. We face complex challenges that require creative thinking, innovation, empathy, and collaboration. We have new tools, diverse voices, and a capacity to generate collective impact. These are among the attributes that arts education nurtures.

Rule number one: Make.

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