

# THE ARTS

A STATEMENT ON THE ARTS  
AS A KEY LEARNING AREA  
OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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# The Arts

## **Defining The Arts**

The Arts are significant ways of knowing. Through artistic experiences we come to know ourselves and we come to know others. The Arts, it seems, are an intrinsic aspect of human life. Since the beginnings of recorded history, people have embellished their lives with ornament, with tuneful sound, with dramatised stories and with celebrations in dance. In our daily lives today, we cannot escape the influence of The Arts and our contemporary world would be bleak without music, fashion, theatre, dance, graphic design and film. These art forms have become vehicles of expression so intrinsic to our culture that it would be unthinkable to offer a school program without them.

Students today confront The Arts on a daily basis, whether it be through television, film, radio, newspapers, billboards, fashion, theatre or festivals. The Arts are accessible to all students in some form. However, arts education programs in schools enable students to discern quality amongst the plethora of images, sounds and virtual experiences with which they are confronted. Arts educators introduce students to a wide range of arts experiences so that they can become discriminating in their own judgements of arts experiences. Arts educators also introduce students to skills in the arts so that they can use artistic experience for the expression of their own ideas. Lively and challenging arts programs in schools produce artistically empowered students who contribute actively to their artistic world rather than simply become passive consumers within it.

## **The arts as ways of knowing**

While each art form has its own way of knowing, there are some common fundamental aspects to all of the arts disciplines which differentiate them from other key learning areas of the school curriculum. The first common aspect is that all arts form draw upon aesthetic experience as the key to artistic learning. The second common factor is that all arts forms may be described as symbol systems, each with its own language, structure and meaning system. Finally it must also be recognised that all arts forms are culturally constructed. In other words, the arts are created and understood within specific social and/or cultural groups and while some arts forms may seem universal in appeal, most are the products of their own context.

### 1. The arts as aesthetic forms of knowing

All arts forms rely on sensory experience in both making and responding processes. We engage in artistic experience for many purposes but a significant purpose is for enjoyment and fulfilment. While financial gain may be the outcome of many artistic experiences, without inner drive and intrinsic motivation artistic output may be 'lack lustre'. Many artists describe the adrenalin rush they achieve from creating in the arts. One researcher (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) describes this inner drive as a 'flow' experience; an experience that is extremely satisfying and fulfilling, yet is independent of external reward. In school we can sense when students engage in a 'flow' experience simply by their attention to the task. Such students attend to what they are doing in a focussed way; time seems suspended for them as they purposefully seek to marry ideas in their head with the potential of the medium in which they are working.

Aesthetic knowing however, may not simply rely on sensory experience. In fact, aesthetic knowing is based on learned knowledge. Through immersion in a cultural context students

are exposed to many arts forms from infancy. Before their schooling years students learn the difference between the cacophony of sounds in the environment, and music. They already have a notion of what art is and what art is not. Through social experiences at school and at home students learn to value trends and fashions and thus establish their own aesthetic sensibility. However left to their own devices, students will not master the skills required to develop an empowering command of the art form. The arts teacher takes the student on a journey of discovery, in which new aesthetic experiences are introduced to increasingly expand the students' aesthetic world. The aesthetic journey from the first year of schooling to year 12 is not one to be left to chance.

## 2. The arts as symbolic forms of knowing

Art products take on the role of a symbol because they have the capacity to evoke ideas or feelings in the mind of the viewer or listener. The dance, the poem, the film, the musical piece and the painting have the power to evoke images, ideas and responses in those who witness the works. Knowing that arts works function as languages, artists are able to convey messages, ideas and emotions through artistic statements. For students in school, the arts become ways of making statements about themselves; some say that through the arts we become what we make (Erikson, 1980). Students of The Arts learn that their products will be interpreted by audiences or viewers and that presentation of the product is a way of communicating personal and shared thoughts and experiences.

Symbol systems which comprise arts experiences are based on conventional as well as personal ways of sharing experiences. Arts teachers introduce students to established meanings which have evolved in particular art forms. Students learn to 'encode' or 'read' arts works by interpreting the symbolic structures in them ie by analysing the composition of a painting, a musical work or a piece of drama. In conceiving of The Arts as symbol systems, it is considered that each arts form is a type of shared meaning system, just as mathematics is a coded system representing quantitative information and the sciences are systems of knowing about the physical world. However, it is also recognised that even within each broad symbol system there are many styles, genres and forms which each may still have its own structure and meaning system eg jazz, opera, rock and blues are all musical styles.

## 3. The arts as culturally constructed ways of knowing

While the arts are seen to function as symbol systems, they are also embedded in specific cultural contexts. Unfortunately many histories of the arts in western cultures assign a hierarchical role to the arts from different social and cultural contexts. Male artists have been given higher prominence than female artists, and the arts of many indigenous, third world and eastern cultures have been marginalised in arts theory. Faced with classes comprising students born in all parts of the globe the arts teacher is faced with the difficult decision of determining which cultural approach to take in an arts program.

Cultural pluralism in art education (Chalmers, 1996) means that arts teachers need to be aware of ethnocentric approaches which apply values derived from one culture to that of another. For example, the viewing of Aboriginal arts works as aesthetic objects to be hung in art galleries may be to misconstrue the purpose and role of Aboriginal culture in western terms rather than in terms of Aboriginal meaning. Through the arts forms of drama, drama, media, music and dance students can explore issues such as racism and prejudice. Through careful selection of arts works for inclusion in the arts curriculum, teachers can develop tolerance and recognition of the diverse ways in which people have and do make arts works.

Symbols are highly valued aspects of our identity. Through music, art, dance, theatre and films Australians have shaped images and expressions of life 'down under'. Australian artists have contributed significantly to the shaping of an Australian cultural landscape; a landscape that is continually being reshaped. Through arts programs in schools students develop the skills to make their own expressions of identity and through the products that they make both in school and beyond the school walls they contribute to the changing cultural symbols by which we are known.

### **The art forms of dance, drama, media, music and visual arts.**

While there have been many attempts to subsume some arts forms under the guise of other subjects in the school curriculum it is no longer sustainable that arts forms such as dance be conceived as part of physical education. The student who wants to dance as a career does not want, nor need, to use his or her body like an athlete. Dance, media and drama are seen as art forms with discrete purposes, skills and meaning systems apart from those of other areas of the curriculum. However., while the boundaries between areas of arts knowing is often blurred it seems that students with particular intelligence in music, or kinaesthetic intelligence in dance should be provided with experiences in these areas. The five arts forms of dance, drama, media, music and visual arts are seen to be appropriate for inclusion in school programs. There are many other arts forms, but many are beyond the resourcing and levels of understanding of school students eg glass blowing, architecture and opera.

#### 1. Dance

Through dance students utilise their kinaesthetic intelligence to create bodily forms in space and time. Unlike sport dance is an expressive form of movement which has formed an integral part of most cultures. People dance for many reasons; for some dance is a social activity, for others dance is part of ritual and celebration and for others it is part of theatre and entertainment. Dance is a non-verbal art form of communication in which meaning is conveyed through the use of time, space, form, gesture, costume, etc. In different cultural contexts, meaning systems have been created to convey sophisticated ideas and feeling through conventional and creative approaches to movement styles. In their schooling years, while their bodies are young and supple, students learn to move expressively and to develop knowledge of dance as a form of self knowledge and cultural understanding.

#### 2. Drama

In drama people enact both real and imagined events. By taking on dramatic roles individuals can engage in dramatic play, improvisation and theatrical performance as well as performance for the fields of film and television. Drama involves the creation of meaning through action and gesture. Individually or in groups drama students search for ways to convey situations and ideas through the use of voice, sound, movement, language, space, time, mood, tension and contrast etc. Through drama students learn to interpret and construct representations of real and imagined human interactions. By exploring drama in different cultural contexts students place their own drama in relation to drama in other places, other times and in other social situations. By presenting their drama work to others students learn to communicate effectively with each other and with an audience.

#### 3. Media

Media forms such as radio, film, television, print and photography are created using a large range of technologies. Each media text is a construction created through complex processes

of selection, ordering and presentation using a range of words, sounds, images and movements. Students of media learn to understand the processes of construction involved in electronic and mechanically produced media products. They make their own videos, films, newspapers, cartoons and photographs with the intention of communicating ideas to specific audiences. They learn to develop critical perspectives in relation to media products and build a knowledge of aspects such as genre, narrative, and style. Through media analysis students also come to understand that media products are products of time and place. Through the study of media products in varying social and cultural-contexts and in past contexts, students come to realise the impact of changing technologies on the way phenomena and ideas are communicated and known.

#### 4. Music

Music is an aural art form which relies upon the sense of hearing. However for the performer, music is created through the body in action. In both singing and in the playing of a musical instrument the performer controls sound in expressive ways. The strongly evocative capacity of music to arouse emotions and response means that music can serve a range of purposes; music can be used for relaxation, entertainment and ceremony as well as being part of dance, drama, film, media and art.. While nearly all children are exposed to music in their everyday world, without formal experiences in music education they will not develop a full capacity to understand and construct within the symbol system of music. Highly developed musical intelligence can be observed in exceptional children at a very young age and all children are most receptive to learning the language of music in their early childhood years. Throughout their schooling years music students learn to listen, perform and compose and to develop a knowledge of musical elements. Students learn to discriminate between forms and styles of music and to attend to particular qualities in the music of different composers, countries, cultures, periods and styles. Aesthetic response to music deepens as students develop more perceptive ability to attend to musical form, mood and structure.

#### 5. Visual arts

People have always made objects and images using materials available in the world around them. Visual art works have the capacity to represent stories, to evoke ideas and feelings and to embellish our lives with decoration. Art works in the visual arts can be both two and three dimensional and can be categorised in a range of mediums including painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, woodcraft, metalcraft, printmaking and computer generated art etc. Through making art students learn to represent ideas and feelings drawn from their experience of the real and imaginary or constructed world. Through describing, analysing, interpreting and making judgements about arts works from a range of past and present contexts students recognise that art works have the capacity to convey ideas, communicate, evoke response and even persuade. Artistic sensibility is developed with experience of the visual arts in the roles of maker, critic, historian and aesthetician.

## **Students as 'makers' and 'responders'.**

### 1. Students as makers

Arts experiences must be practical experiences. Students need to be given opportunities in every year of their school life to make arts works of their own. This means choreographing their own dances, composing their own musical pieces, improvising and making up their own dramatic works, constructing their own sculptures and making their own videos. Through arts production students explore and develop ideas suitable for the medium in which they are working. Students learn techniques appropriate for specific mediums or arts forms and develop knowledge of appropriate ways in which to structure, compose, arrange order, sequence etc.

Making is fundamental to arts experience in schools. The Arts cannot be undertaken through virtual experience, i.e. by watching others presenting arts works or by seeing art in books. Arts experiences are tactile, sensory and kinaesthetic as well as cognitive and highly intellectual. Thinking in The Arts is thinking in action. Problems are solved in sound, in colour or in space. Thinking in the act of making is to think in the domain of the experience. Composers of music actually think in tunes and sounds are always in their heads. The musically prodigious child has a need to express sound and the subject of music is the only area in the curriculum in which s/he can do so. Artistic learning involves engagement in the processes of The Arts. This involves processes such as conceiving of ideas, researching, shaping and practice, taking risks, adapting and honing. The developmental process in each art form is different but rarely does a perfect finished product arise from nowhere. The seed of an idea is usually developed gradually and the maker engages in a slow process of working through ideas and testing ideas in the medium.

Once the product is nearing completion the maker usually recognises that the solution to the task at end is nearly resolved. Artistic resolution for the artist is a recognition that the arts work has been found; the process of searching is over. Even young children reach a point of satisfaction when they know that the product is good enough and that it is then finished.

The presentation of the product for viewing and/or listening is a significant part of all arts forms. Presentation signals that the arts are working as forms of communication. If the student never shows or presents what s/he has made, the opportunity to act as a maker within the child's world is diminished and stifled. Audiences have a role to play. They provide approval and value to the process and product. Parents, other staff and students form the community of the student and within this realm arts works shape the identity of the individual and more broadly help shape the actual community. Art exhibitions, musical and dance concerts, film showings and drama performances are a significant part of the curriculum. However, presentation is not simply entertainment for school community. Presentation is a phase of the artistic process; it is part of the maker's process and as such students should be assessed on this aspect of their creation. While performance has been seen as an extra curricula activity in schools, it must now be seen as an intrinsic part of the arts curriculum.

### 2. Students responding as arts critics

As well as making their own arts works it is crucial that students witness arts works by others. Students in every year of schooling should be exposed to live theatre performances and original arts works. Through the role of audience member or viewer the student

becomes the receiver of ideas conveyed through arts works. Not only does the student learn to share opinions about arts works with others but the student learns what is possible in The Arts. The student builds a vocabulary of ideas through exposure to many and varied arts performances and exhibitions. Even if art galleries are inaccessible to the student the student needs to see many reproductions of arts works. The student also needs to be introduced to many musical forms, and many ways of engaging in dance and drama.

As an art critic the student learns to perceive arts work more carefully. Through discussion about arts works students share their observations and thus learn from each other. They also learn to use appropriate terms when discussing the qualities of arts works. By reading the writings of arts critics and engaging in shared discussion students build their own arts discourse which enables them to describe, analyse, interpret and make judgements about arts works. By writing about arts works students learn to formalise their thoughts and to offer reasoned arguments to justify their views of the arts. They also learn to challenge and deconstruct aspects of the arts with which they disagree or which reveal certain prejudices or view points.

Verbal language is a universal form of communication and students at all levels of schooling need encouragement to talk about their own works as well as those by others. Students need to reflect upon their own arts making processes and explain how they arrived at ideas, developed skills, etc. Talking about The Arts develops critical thinking skills as well as descriptive skills required for documentation. While artists are not always articulate about what they do, it is considered that many artists do need to engage in metacognitive processes and be able to explain their work to others, whether those others be clients, patrons, readers of an art catalogue or readers of the blurb accompanying a CD.

### 3. Students constructing aesthetic values

Before teachers begin to teach The Arts they probably need to know what The Arts are. More importantly they need to know what The Arts are not. In other words it is a philosophical question to ask 'What is art?'. But it seems that if we do not have an answer we do not have a subject to teach. However, teachers need not provide students with ready-made answers to this question because it is actually students who need to construct answers to this themselves. Music students need to ask what is the difference between sound and music. Dance students need to know the difference between just moving in everyday life and dance. When does dance begin and end? Questions such as 'Is the sunset art?' and 'Why is a pile of bricks in an art gallery art while my father's brick garage is not called art?' become crucial questions.

These questions are big questions. They challenge the boundaries of the arts and question the assumptions upon which the arts are often based. There is a real place for philosophical inquiry in The Arts. It will take place during art practical sessions as well as in discussion after theatre performances or after viewing a film. Rather than teachers imposing their own values upon students in arts classes teachers need to listen to the views of their students. Aesthetic inquiry in the arts classroom involves allowing each student to have a voice and then encouraging each student to build reasoned and plausible arguments to substantiate his or her voice.

#### 4. Students developing knowledge of the arts in varying contexts

Through exposure to arts works from diverse cultural contexts students develop perceptual capacities in discrimination and discernment as well as tolerance and respect for pluralism. Art teachers play a crucial role in introducing students to the arts of other countries, the arts of past styles, the arts of differing social groups, the range of art genres and styles in each arts form, and the arts of contemporary artists and cultures. Beginning in the first years of schooling students need to see and hear arts works by others and throughout the school years students should be exposed to increasingly complex works appropriate to each year level. Students should develop a knowledge of the arts in past and present contexts and build an understanding that there are many ways to express in and understand the arts. Through discussion and through experiences researching and writing about arts works by others students come to realise the complex issues surrounding ways in which arts works are made and appreciated. It is by knowing about arts works in other contexts that students come to more fully recognise their own unique contribution to the field of art.

#### **The arts for every student**

Arts experiences are the right of every student, no matter which gender, race, socio-economic level or religion. Disabled students need to be provided with experiences in all arts forms, and facilities and equipment need to be adapted for students with special needs. Students disadvantaged by distance need to be provided with video and on-line programs that set tasks which can be achieved in the student's living environment. Aboriginal students must be provided with arts programs which are true to the traditions and values of the indigenous culture of this country. Arts programs provide disadvantaged students with identity and pride and arts programs need to cater for highly 'gifted' and committed arts students as well as those facing intellectual, social or physical disadvantage.

#### **Development in The Arts**

In some arts forms, such as music and dance, it is essential that students begin learning in the art form at a very young age. Just as very young children acquire languages at a very young age, so do some students acquire musical and dance ability in the pre-school and early school years. In the visual arts students drawing ability can be seen in the evolving ways they represent figures and objects in space. However in the visual arts it is not unusual for high ability to lie unnoticed until the adolescent years. Whatever the ability of the child, it is true that development will only proceed with experience. If children are only offered a random smattering of arts experiences they will not develop at a significant rate. This would be as true of mathematics and language ability as it is in The Arts. Skill development in all arts forms is time consuming and students need a sequentially planned program of experiences which draws upon varied approaches to processes, ideas and techniques. It is only after years of schooling and years of arts experiences that the adolescent is ready to begin arts experiences at the senior secondary level. At this level the arts teacher hopes that the student will show a fairly autonomous approach to arts making and will demonstrate a personal form of expression and imagination. Until this level students need guidance and structure.

#### **Managing The Arts in the school curriculum**

##### 1. The Arts in primary schools: the need for specialists and generalists

The responsibility of teaching all key learning areas of the curriculum provides significant problems for overworked generalist primary teachers. For **example**, while many primary

teachers can devise very innovative arts experiences within the confines of the normal classroom, it is also true that the constraints of space, time and equipment are so great that art activities are reduced to meaningless 'busing' activities. Similarly music experiences are often rushed and limited and dance experiences are nearly impossible given the furniture in most classrooms. It is not surprising that many generalist primary teachers lack the confidence, expertise and energy to prepare effective arts experiences.

In order to manage arts experiences effectively schools need to devise a management plan to use staff expertise efficiently and to use spaces and resources effectively. It is probably better to have each staff member responsible for one or two arts forms and have the students rotate rooms, than require each teacher to teach all arts forms. It may also be preferable to have an intensive short but high quality dance program in the school year, than a weekly mediocre program from which students gain little.

Well organised arts programs taught by specialist teachers in specialist facilities will provide higher quality experiences for students than ill-equipped programs taught in crowded classrooms. The specialist teacher with training in the art form is able to prepare challenging, varied and lively experiences which bring each student to his/her potential.

## 2. The transition years: primary to secondary school

The establishment of a clear P to 10 curriculum for all schools in each Australian State should provide arts teachers with a more unified approach to curriculum planning. The notion of rotating students around specialist classrooms for arts experiences at the upper level of primary school, is one way of preparing students for the more specialised rooms and teaching arrangements in secondary schools. At the local level some planning is also often possible between primary and secondary neighbouring schools so that arts programs dovetail and students gain a sense of continuity between the primary and secondary years. Shared arts exhibitions, performances, camps and open days also assist with smooth transition.

## 3. The Arts in secondary schools: offering all arts forms in a crowded curriculum

Learning within each art form is akin to learning the various languages offered in LOTE programs. For example, learning Spanish does not mean that students will understand French. Likewise, learning music does not mean that students will learn anything about drama. The arts forms function like different languages. In the school curriculum each art form needs to be taught separately as each has its own pedagogical structure and knowledge base.

At the junior and middle secondary level, students need to be provided with experience in the five arts forms of dance, drama, media, music and visual arts. Within some arts forms, such as visual arts, students need to experience a range of two and three dimensional studio forms involving use of more than one specialised space. Students may therefore need time to gain experience in photography, ceramics, printmaking and textiles which may be taught in different areas. Whatever experiences offered by the school, staff need to consider a basic timetable which allows students sufficient time to experience several approaches within the art form.

Integrated arts experiences are useful to indicate to students that the respective arts forms do often overlap and that some arts forms such as media and drama draw quite heavily upon

various arts forms. Integrated, or related arts experiences are often planned over short periods of time to enable students to work thematically or to prepare for a particular arts performance event. Such experiences can be rich learning experiences but it is also true that extended integrated experiences can end up to be more 'disintegrated' than 'integrated'! Requiring extensive planning and cooperation between individual arts teachers integrated arts programs can result in 'staff burnout' and fragmented learning experiences for students. Staff may also need to consider that development within any arts form may not be possible when learning experiences are fragmented and inconsistent.

Links across the curriculum may also be valuable for specific times in the school year. For example, a cross curriculum study of The Sixties in which students examine literature, approaches to science, history, music, art, dance, drama and film of one period can often bring disparate approaches to learning together. However, extended cross curricular programs can also lead to contrived programs in which The Arts are seen to illustrate or serve experiences in other areas. For this reason each arts subject needs to be allowed sufficient time in the curriculum for students to develop mastery within the particular knowledge base that frames that arts form.

At the senior secondary level students who select arts subjects should be offered opportunity to develop specialised study in both making and appreciation. Arts programs need to introduce students to the wider arts industry and provide advice concerning arts careers and arts experiences within the Australian context.

### **Assessment of The Arts**

With increased emphasis on learning outcomes and accountability in education teachers need to design more systematic approaches to assessment and reporting than in past years. This implies that teachers need to write programs which clearly identify the learning outcomes and related assessment criteria of teaching programs. It also implies that students should be told (in advance) the criteria which will be used for assessment of all work requirements. In other words students cannot know how to complete a task if they do not know what the teacher will value and thus assess. This should not mean that assessment criteria should limit the way students go about arts tasks, it simply means that teachers need to be clear about what is valued and thus assessed. If, for example, the teacher wants the students to arrive at highly unusual responses and to take risks in the way they go about their dance, sculptural work or drama improvisation, then the assessment criteria should include a criterion which rates or describes how well the student has done this. If the process of making is valued then the student's ability to explore and develop ideas should be acknowledged through assessment.

Teachers of The Arts need to plan a wide range of opportunities to observe artistic learning their students. By including assessment of students' working diaries, oral presentations, finished products, performances, written comments, research, student self-assessment, and works in progress, etc, teachers build broad-based portfolios of student achievement in both arts making and arts appreciation. By keeping profiles of student assessment across the years of schooling teachers can clearly track achievement of individual achievement across all learning levels.

## **Resources and facilities for The Arts in schools**

While limited arts experiences can be provided in the general primary classroom context there are many arts experiences which require specialist facilities, tools and equipment. Specialist facilities and the provision of qualified staff ensure that arts experiences are conducted safely and that the range of experiences is challenging and worthwhile.

## **Technology and The Arts**

The computer provides students with a powerful tool to assist learning in arts programs. Computers enable students to access information, images, sound, video sequences and ideas. Computer programs also enable students to create their own arts multi-media presentations and web sites. Through the Internet arts students can connect with students in all parts of the world enabling the exchange of information and images. Access to CDROMs and the Internet offers students the opportunity to undertake global searches for information about The Arts. However, it also enables students to appropriate images and texts in ways previously impossible. The digital revolution means that students can manipulate photographs, compose sound sequences, create animated sequences, import and mix images from multiple sources and generally create multi-media packages of complex sophistication.

As a tool the computer has the potential to change the way we conceive of many aspects of arts experience. In assessing students' computer generated arts works we need to re-examine the way we value arts processes and recognise that the computer allows students to appropriate images and texts in entirely new ways. Assessment becomes a complex issue when the teacher cannot see the processes used by the student and when many processes depend upon the availability of software.

It is probably too early to predict the long-term impact of the computer on arts programs in schools. For many schools the impact has not been yet seen because of the low grade technology as yet in some schools. However, given the number of new computer laboratories and lap top programs being established in many schools, and given the seductive nature of computer learning, there is concern that students may not be offered the tactile and sensory experiences which they obtain through arts programs.

## **Summary**

In 1994 the Commonwealth Government's *Creative Nation* report published a charter of cultural rights for all Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). As arts teachers charged with the responsibility of educating young people the charter serves as a broad set of principles for arts education programs in schools, The Charter of Cultural Rights recommends that all Australians be guaranteed:

- the right to an education that develops individual creativity and appreciation of the creativity of others;
- the right of access to our intellectual and cultural heritage;
- the right to new intellectual and artistic works; and
- the right to community participation in cultural and intellectual life. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p.2).

Arts educators are committed to the provision of these four principles.

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