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ACCESS

EDITORIAL

Editorial: Of incalculable worth

There can be no doubt about the prioritisation of science, technology, maths and literacy in state-based schools at the expense of the creative-based subjects, dance, drama, media, music, visual arts, poetry. In August 2015, author Philip Pullman was outspoken in his dismay of this situation in the United Kingdom. His statement under the heading, 'Don't Downgrade the Arts' sums up the issue at stake (Pullman, 2015):

> In September it will become compulsory for secondary school children to study the English Baccalaureate core subjects of English, maths, science, a language and history or geography. I believe that arts subjects are also essential to education. They are of incalculable worth in what it means to be a human being.
>
> Every government secretary of state or minister should jolly well go to the theatre, go to a concert, go to an art gallery, go to a museum, become somehow interested in these things. If they're not interested, they shouldn't be in government, full stop. You're lacking a human dimension of some sort if you're not interested in the arts. And I think it's a terrible fate to be ruled by philistines and barbarians as we seem to be at the moment.

Flood (2015) in *The Guardian* addressed Philip Pullman's proposition that UK's downgrading of arts education is a 'barbarian' attitude. Flood stated that Pullman slams 'the UK's government of "philistines and barbarians" for failing to understand' the worth of the arts. The education secretary at the time, Nicky Morgan answered Pullman's claim by defending science, technology et al., stating 'the subjects that keep young people's options open and unlock the door to all sorts of careers are the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths)'. Morgan set this statement up against her proposition that 'the arts and humanities' used to be what people did 'even if you didn't know what you wanted to do', because they 'were useful for all kinds of jobs', and 'we know now that couldn't be further from the truth' (Morgan, cited in Flood, 2015).[1]

The setting up of the ARTS against the STEM subjects seems to be disadvantageous for both view- points, and in Morgan's proposition there is an overt marginalisation of the ARTS.[2] It is a well-rehearsed antagonism. It seems that advocacy for the ARTS in education is an old story, yet because of continued reinscription, here we are having to advocate for them once more. It all becomes tiresome, but it must be said and said again that the ARTS 'are of incalculable worth', and not only for 'what it means to be a human being' as Pullman says, but also for expanding the mind and testing creativity. I am sorry Nicola Ann Morgan, but your argument and your methodology which sets up the value of STEM by putting down the value of the ARTS simply gives evidence of impoverished criticality and lends support to Pullman's statement re-'barbarianism'.

Should the arts be 'of incalculable worth', then what does this worth offer, what does this worth suggest? It is generally understood to be a worth that applies to a creative and ethical approach to pedagogy, even sustains pedagogy, a worth that allows ethical questions to be asked. It is a worth that invites communication, diverse opinions and even disagreement, by honouring agonistic struggle rather than a blind acceptance of agreement or antagonism. It is a worth that heightens awareness and appreciation, divulging the nuances of human thinking, perceptions and passion, and even opening neural pathways to learning. It seems indisputable that the arts channel expression and perhaps, more importantly, invite understanding of human diversity and difference. We may emerge from visiting a museum or art gallery or theatre, or stand on the street watching

samba or hear the sounds of a bugle at dawn, exclaiming 'Wow, that's the human experience, I feel that, I understand that!' The arts adduce a collective conscience, start the evaluations, allow risk and doubt, celebration and praise, breaking through moral certitude to allow alternative understandings. It would be an impoverished soul who is not moved or affected by Munch's great *Scream* of abandonment piercing the implosions of nature, or did not feel the tragedy of love and loss in *Giselle*, or find some common empathy in T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, or appreciate the kinaesthetic quality and pulsing sound of the Māori *haka* before an All Black test match. That's the contribution of the arts to move us towards, and allow us to be more human. This leads us to the rationale for this special issue of ACCESS, the second for 2017. It all started in 2015. The theme for the 45th Annual Conference of PESA, held at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, was *Re-engaging with Politics: Re-imagining the University*. With other educators in the field, I proposed a symposium under the title, 'Aesthetic Education: Re-imagining knowledge'. From the symposium, this special issue grew. The symposium addressed the marginalisation of the arts in education, not by setting up a polemical antagonism against the STEM subjects, but by proposing aesthetics as a way to re-imagine and enhance a learner's awareness of the potential of knowledge.

Too easily in the neoliberal, market state of knowledge production, acquisition and transfer, learning becomes instrumentalised and reductive. Educators, and the university as a site of education, work to frame knowledge as an economic site: input in, knowledge out, maximum efficiency. The proposition of our symposium, and of this special issue of ACCESS is that aesthetics may be a key to opening the mind of a learner to a wider sphere of critical understanding, without forsaking the criticality required to navigate the world of economic forces.

Innovation may have characteristics that are similar to aesthetics: hard to pin down, difficult to explain. Yet, innovation, not aesthetics, is adopted with great facility by those making argument for the prioritisation of STEM subjects, and in fact the positioning of STEM is made justifiable by positioning our whole epoch as 'the age of innovation'. This does of course overlook that the arts too are innovative, and aesthetics has the capacity to activate innovative ways of seeing and being.

The OECD report on 'Strengthening education for innovation' declares that there is an increase in 'national innovation capacity' when education policies equip people with the required skills for 'innovation-related occupations' (OECD, 2012). Balancing the emphasis on STEM subjects for innovation in education, OECD also reports evidence-based research on the arts, in *Art for Art's Sake? The impact of arts education* (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013). The report presents a valuable exposition of collated evidence, questions and analysis via a systematic investigation of research databases in education and psychology. It is encouraging to read the concluding statement of the report:

> [The arts] are important in their own rights for education. Students who gain mastery in an art form may discover their life's work or their life's passion. But for all children, the arts allow a different way of understanding than the sciences. Because they are an arena without right and wrong answers, they free students to explore and experiment. They are also a place to introspect and find personal meaning (Winner et al., 2013, p. 267).[3]

However, just as this endorsement gives cause for celebration, the statement in the Executive Summary turns to positivistic positioning:

> Does arts education really have a positive impact on the three subsets of skills that we define as 'skills for innovation': technical skills, skills in thinking and creativity, and character (behaviour and social skills)? (Winner et al., 2013)

Answering this question by further data collection and analysis is the purpose of the report. It is seeking to find out how, where and whether the arts fit into the innovation focus of education. However, what is concerning is to see how easily the positioning of the arts, or the potential of the arts for difference in action, is corralled into the mantra of innovation as skills, skills, skills. And when we see our 'character' thus diagnosed as a skill, we might well have cause for alarm.

From this background, the symposium we presented at the PESA conference and the articles in this issue of ACCESS are investigating ways of re-imagining knowledge in, around, through and beyond the skills-based emphases of innovation so defined. Is it possible to articulate the arts in any other way, beyond that of skills? Are alternatives relevant today? The authors here are all experts in the field and they bring a range of experience to questions of aesthetics as an innovative approach to education.

Nuala Gregory in 'Encountering Drawing' brings a practitioner's perspective to re-imagining knowledge through aesthetics, with the aim of addressing the *act* rather than the *art* of drawing. She then focuses on theoretical discussion to evaluate and to some extent substantiate the empirical exploration she has undertaken. Gregory deals with drawing as an aesthetic process with innovative qualities. Elizabeth Grierson, in 'Re-imagining Learning through Art as Experience: An aesthetic approach to education' examines John Dewey's input to the philosophy of education through art as experience. For Dewey, the starting point for a philosophy of learning is the child in his or her environment. Working with Dewey as a philosopher of reconstruction of experience, the discussion examines responses to poetic writings and communications in learning situations, and takes those engagements into experiences of everyday life.

In 'Playing with Philosophy: Gestures, life-performance, P4C and an art of living', Laura D'Olimpio and Christoph Teschers focus on the place of gesture in human learning and interaction with others. As stated in their abstract, they argue that 'through dramaturgical play in combination with pedagogical tools such as the Community of Inquiry, in the tradition of Philosophy for Children (P4C), students can creatively think, reflect and be more aware of the impact their gestures have on others'.

Mark Jackson, in 'Knowledge, Education and Aesthetics' questions education from the perspective of a Kantian understanding of aesthetic experience. The question of how one proceeds with education in the fine arts is important as there is an ineffable quality to the fine arts beyond its obvious institutional meaning or value. In fine arts, what is being taught and what is being learned? And what purpose is being served by aesthetic ideas with respect to cognition? These are the kinds of questions the paper raises and grapples with. Then, in 'Lyotard's Pedagogies of Affect in *Les Immatériaux*', Kirsten Locke brings the investigations of aesthetics to a focus on art and resistance signalled by Jean-François Lyotard's curated exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou. It is an important article as it addresses the brink of the innovation culture in 1985, when the 'information age' was looming large in the stakes of learning. The excavation of pedagogical significance is undertaken with care by Locke.

Two other articles were to be included in this issue, but they appeared in Volume 49 (8) in July 2017, the issue on Modern Learning Environments. I would however, like to reference them here as they are, in fact, crucial to the dissemination of aesthetic understanding as central to this special issue. It is to be hoped readers will refer back to the earlier issue and read them in context with the other material presented here.

David Raymond Bell was a speaker in the symposium on aesthetic education. His contribution, 'Aesthetic Encounters and Learning in the Museum' brought forward a perspective of learning beyond the classroom and into the rich environment of museums. The focus here is on sensory and aesthetic encounters in the museum, and the learning made possible in this setting. Bell considers curatorial construction and display, categorisations of objects, aesthetic judgements, and the cultivation of dis- position in learning via aesthetics status, sensibility, interpretation and value.

The other article published in the special on Modern Learning Environments is by James M. Magrini, 'Dwelling and Creative Imagination in Gaston Bachelard's Phenomenology: Returning to the poetic space of education and learning'. Magrini positions his research in context of 'the moribund condition of education' in institutions of higher education in USA. He considers Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological ontology of space, dwelling, and the creative imagination, as a response to the social efficiency ideology that so dominates the educational landscape.

As editor of ACCESS and of this special issue, I thank the authors for their scholarly contributions. Their work advances rich perspectives on aesthetics as a way of re-engaging with learning in an age of innovation. If as Philip Pullman says, the arts are 'of incalculable worth' then the philosophy of the arts, the practical wisdom of the arts, the value of the arts need to be understood in context of current positioning of innovation within the educational emphasis on skills in the service of national and global economic advancement. By re-imagining knowledge through aesthetic education these authors are seeking an alternative, and no less practical, wisdom and vision. It is time we revisited specious curtailment.

Notes

1. Nicola Ann Morgan, Member of Parliament for Loughborough since 2010, was UK Secretary of State for Education from July 2014 to July 2016, then removed from that position. Following the 2017 General Election she became Chair of the Treasury Select Committee in the Conservative Government. She joined the Conservative Party in 1989 and was a corporate lawyer.
2. The capitalisation of ARTS is adopted in this paragraph as a way of presenting a visual signifier of equality with STEM.
3. This summary statement is also included in the Executive Summary of the *Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts Education,* <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/Art%20for%20Art's%20Sake%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

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Elizabeth M. Grierson

School of Art, RMIT University, Melbourne

elizabeth.grierson@rmit.edu.au

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