

Envisioning the Future of Arts Education: Challenging Core Assumptions, Addressing Adaptive Challenges, and Fostering the Next Generation of Arts Education Leaders

Edward P. Clapp

Towards a New Concept of Arts Education: Second World Conference on Arts Education; Seoul, Korea

Harvard University, USA

epc003@mail.harvard.edu

In the United States the field of arts education experienced a period of rapid growth following the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. As a result, arts education programs in schools and arts education organizations offering a wide array of arts teaching and learning experiences for a broad constituency group began to flourish throughout the late-1960s and 70s. While the field of arts education has made great strides towards honing its practice and developing itself as a profession, both the arts and arts education must now assess their contemporary significance and consider drastically re-conceiving themselves in order to meet the demands of a post-modern era.

Since the founding of the NEA the rise of globalization and the rapid pace of digital technology have changed the way we know, experience, and participate in our socio-cultural surround. While many individuals in the field of arts education have worked hard to stay abreast of cultural changes, some may argue that the field as a whole largely adheres to a set of core assumptions that may no longer be applicable to our contemporary cultural landscape. In this essay I argue that the field of arts education must undergo a radical transformation in order to maintain its relevancy. At the heart of this transformation lies the task of reassessing the field's core assumptions.

To begin this process, the field of arts education must first *identify* its core assumptions to gain an accurate understanding of the underlying purposes, procedures, and principles by which the field operates. Having identified these core assumptions, the field must then *test the validity* of these foundational understandings. Where necessary, the core assumptions of the field must be defined anew in order for arts education to not only survive, but thrive in the decades ahead.

Identifying and challenging the field's core assumptions, however, are no simple tasks. This process will require field leaders to step outside of their practice to recognize (read: "*re-cognize*") what presumed truths inform their every decision. *Who* does this work, however, is just as important as what the work is that needs to be done.

At the same time as the field of arts education is struggling to play catch-up with digital technology, globalization, and its own attempts at professionalization, there is yet another challenge that looms over the field. In 2011 the oldest members of the Baby Boomer generation (individuals born 1946-64) will turn 65. As this generation reaches retirement age, the field of arts education will be facing a dramatic generational shift in leadership.

While this anticipated shift in leadership is not unique to the arts sector, it is important to point out that unlike many corporate industries with long-standing histories of practice, the field of arts education (as with many other non-profit sectors) was largely established in the 1960s and 70s by Baby Boomers (Saunders, 2006). The core assumptions of the field, it can be argued, have both been conceived and continually ratified from Baby Boomer perspectives. While the beliefs, values, and operating mechanisms instituted by this influential generational cohort once propelled the field forward, continuing to rely on the dominant voice of Baby Boomer arts education leaders may actually impede the field from progressing into the 21st Century.¹

In order to most accurately identify and challenge the field's core assumptions, it is imperative that the perspectives of younger arts education professionals be brought into dialogue with the Baby Boomers who have traditionally served as the field's leaders. Naturally, conflicts may arise in how arts education professionals from different generational cohorts make meaning of the world—but conflict is good. As leadership theorist Ronald Heifetz (1994) notes:

...the ability to adapt requires the productive interaction of different values through which each member or faction in a society sees reality and its challenges. Without conflicting frames of reference, the social system scrutinizes only limited features of its problematic environment. It operates at the mercy of its blind spots because it cannot prepare for what it does not see (p. 33).

In order to successfully identify and challenge its core assumptions, in order to see beyond its blind spots and pursue a path of adaptive change, it is necessary to engage not just the field's most time-honored and trusted authorities, but its emerging and most radically thinking young professionals as well.

¹ Using the cultural evolution of Easter Islanders as a case study, Ronald Heifetz discusses how "the beliefs that once played a central role in a robust society became impediments to further adaptation" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 32).

Identifying Adaptive Challenges in Arts Education

Now a decade into the 21st Century the field of arts education faces unique challenges that divide its constituents, stifle its progress, compromise its relevance, and threaten its survival in the decades to come. At this very moment the way we experience, understand, teach, fund, and advocate for the arts are in flux. Change is not necessarily a bad thing, but the changes now faced by arts education are of the variety that challenge the very nature of *what* we do, *how* we do it, *where* we do it, and *why* we do it (See Appendix A).

Heifetz and Laurie (1999) identify such challenges as being *adaptive challenges*. Adaptive challenges differ from *technical challenges* in that routine procedures cannot be called upon to solve problems that go beyond the capacities of traditional technical expertise.

Differentiating Between Adaptive and Technical Challenges

Technical challenges are the types of problems we know how to solve using technical expertise—routine know-how or common procedures we've previously established to maintain the systems we've become accustomed to working within. Adaptive challenges, by comparison, are much more problematic than technical challenges. Whereas technical challenges can be solved with technical expertise, adaptive challenges "require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 13). In essence, all one needs to do to solve a technical challenge is to employ skills one already has. In order to address an adaptive challenge, it is necessary to develop entirely new ways of conceiving the system within which the challenge is taking place. Technical expertise cannot be employed to address an adaptive challenge for the simple fact that, by nature, adaptive challenges go beyond the scope of the system within which technical expertise resides. The only way to address an adaptive challenge is to reconstitute the system that it is challenging. Of course, this is easier said than done. Not only are systems difficult to change, but having the clarity to be able to identify *what* to change in any given system is a hard enough challenge all on its own.

One of the first steps towards addressing an adaptive challenge is to engage in what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) describe as "getting on the balcony" (p. 51). Using a dance metaphor, Heifetz and Linsky suggest that in the thick of a dance party revelers spend all of their energy focused on the whirling and spinning of their bodies on the dance floor—a process of engaging some dancers while attempting to respect the personal space of

others. Lights are flashing. Music is pulsing. Bodies are coming into contact with one another. Space is being negotiated and then renegotiated... with all of these sensory experiences happening at once, it's hard for any given dancer to see what's going on across the dancehall outside the small space that he/she may occupy at any given time.

By “getting on the balcony” and looking down on the party below we are able to view a problem from above for the purpose of understanding how broader systems function and, therefore, how those systems may be entirely reinvented, rewired, retooled, and otherwise made anew. After gaining the perspective of a “balcony view” we are then able to head back down to the party and—potentially—change the nature of the dance entirely. The first step, then, towards developing an adaptive approach to problem solving is to gain some perspective—to see what's really going on.

Gaining Perspective: Identifying Our Core Assumptions

Identifying our core assumptions is a lot like getting on the balcony. Whereas gaining perspective on a problem may seem pretty obvious, gaining perspective on the foundational understandings that define the field of arts education can be quite tricky. Tricky because it requires us to step outside of our practice and identify what we hold as the truths by which we operate—trickier still because different practitioners will identify different core assumptions as being at the heart of their daily practice.

What is a Core Assumption?

In casual terminology an assumption is an idea held to be true without any proof of its truth. Assumptions appeal to us as commonsense truths to such a degree that, without deep reflection, we may never question their validity. Before Columbus sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, there was a largely held assumption that the world was flat. Before Copernicus proposed a heliocentric model of the universe in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in 1543, there was a largely held assumption that the Sun revolved around the Earth. Before Darwin wrote *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, there was a largely held assumption that humans and apes had separate origins. In all cases, the assumptions that were held were largely accepted as truths.² These *truths* were maintained for centuries with little evidence to support their validity. If for no other reason—commonsense was the

² The author notes that the in each case, the ideas of Columbus, Copernicus, and Darwin were indeed explored by thinkers before them.

foundation of these truths.³ Once science debunked what *seemed* to be true the assumptions that the world was flat, that the Sun revolved around the Earth, and that man and ape have separate ancestors were then replaced with new assumptions—or theories—that were not based on common sense, but on careful consideration of what could be observed by gaining a new perspective on dominant assumptions.

What did Columbus, Copernicus, and Darwin all share in common? They each were able to get on the balcony in a manner that helped them gain a new perspective. They each then used their new perspectives to question the core assumptions of their respective fields, conducted experiments that tested these assumptions, posited new approaches to practice, and then ultimately headed back down to the party to instill conceptual change.

In their book *Immunity to Change* Kegan and Lahey (2009) suggest that “Big Assumptions” are at the core of what prevents individuals and organizations from reaching their improvement goals:

We call them “big assumptions” because they are not currently viewed as “assumptions” at all. Rather, they are taken as true. They *may* not be, but as long as we simply assume they are true, we are blind to even the question itself (original emphasis, p. 58).

Dick Deasy, founder and former director of the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) identifies a set of “foundational assumptions” held by the field of arts education (Deasy, 2009). Deasy’s assumptions include such profound notions as the following:

Students learn in multiple ways and the arts provide multiple pathways for their doing so.

Quality arts programming can transform the culture and performance of schools.

Arts education is underfunded at federal, state, and local levels.

Deasy is quick to point out that these assumptions may not have existed twenty, fifteen, or even ten years-ago, and that while these assumptions may appear to be universal, not all people within the arts may agree with them.⁴ This note by Deasy wisely suggests that the core assumptions of a given field are both ephemeral and subject to individual experience. Assumptions, as per Deasy’s suggestions, (a) are constantly up for review and revision and, (b) may be generalized over a larger population/community, but deviations will always exist within that population/community.

Building off of Deasy’s foundational assumptions for the field of arts education, my colleagues Ann Gregg, Nancy Kleaver, Heath Marlow, and I sought to further define the parameters of the field’s core assumptions by “teasing-out” the categories into which such

³ Strict religious beliefs likewise contributed to the maintenance of these widely held assumptions.

⁴ Richard J. Deasy. Presentation at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. April 6, 2009. Cambridge, MA.

assumptions may be considered. In our 2009 presentation at the AEP Fall Forum we delineated the core assumptions of the field of arts education into three discrete categories. We redefined the notion of “core assumptions” as the “prevailing purposes, procedures, and principles that influence leadership and practice” (Clapp, et al., 2009). In doing so, we built upon the notion that an assumption is an unvalidated truth that is up for constant revision, and that these truths stand as generalizations held over a field that may either add nuance or utterly disagree with any given assumption.

Purposes

Core assumptions that address the *purposes* of arts education discuss why we do the work we do. These assumptions answer questions beginning with the word *why*. Why engage in arts education? Why advocate for arts education? Why is arts education important? These assumptions held by the field, then, are not the question of *why*—but the answer. For example:

Question: Why is arts education important?

Answer: Arts education is important because it provides students with the opportunities to express their creative capacities.

Core Assumption: Arts education provides students with opportunities to express their creativity.

Question: Why advocate for arts education?

Answer: We should advocate for the proliferation of arts education because arts education experiences make our citizens more skilled workers capable of addressing the demands of the 21st Century workplace.

Core Assumption: *Arts education provides students with the skills they will need to excel in the 21st Century workplace.*

Procedures

Core assumptions that address the *procedures* of arts education concern themselves with how we do the work we do, who provides these services, where should arts education take place, and what encompasses an arts education experience. These assumptions answer the question of *how, who, where, and what*. How do students experience arts education? How should arts education be funded? How does arts education fold itself into broader curricular structures? Who administers an arts education experience? Where should arts

education take place? What should an arts education experience entail? As with the purposes of arts education, the core assumptions surrounding the procedures of arts education are not the question of how, who, where, and what—but rather the answers to these questions. For example:

Question: How should arts education be funded?

Answer: Arts education should be funded by the public because the cultural enrichment of a community is the responsibility of every citizen.

Core Assumption: *Arts education should be publicly funded.*

Question: Where should arts education take place?

Answer: Arts education should take place in public schools and be accessible to all students.

Core Assumption: *Arts education should take place in public schools.*

Principles

Core assumptions that address the *principles* of arts education are related to the underlying theories that support the field. Deasy's core assumption that "students learn in multiple ways and the arts provide multiple pathways for their doing so" indirectly assumes the importance of Howard Gardner's (1982) theory of multiple intelligences. In the last forty years of arts education history there have been many theoretical models that have undergirded the assumptions of the field in different ways. Discipline-Based Arts Education (Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1987), Arts Integration, "Arts for Arts Sake," Artful Thinking (Project Zero, n.d.), Studio Thinking (Hetland et al., 2007), Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen & Yenawine, 2001), and 21st Century Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004) are amongst such theoretical frameworks.

Who's Got Core Assumptions?

The language around core assumptions is deceptively complex in its simplicity. If I were to ask: "Do you have core assumptions about the field of arts education?" "Sure I do!" Might be your answer. "Perhaps you do," Kegan and Lahey (2009) may say (and I would be in agreement with them), "but it's more likely that your core assumptions have you."

Functioning as underlying truths that guide our decision-making, our core assumptions are not ideas we generally *have*. At least, we don't have them in the sense that we can control them. They have us. The locus of control is with the assumptions—not with the individual.

The goal of identifying one's core assumptions is, indeed, to take back that control from your core assumptions, to no longer be *had* by your core assumptions about the field of arts education, but to *have* your core assumptions, to hold them. Kegan and Lahey talk about this concept of being had vs. having an assumption in terms of *subject* and *object*. When your core assumptions have you, you are subject to them. You operate in accordance with their parameters, you take them as truth, you formulate your actions and decisions based upon the frameworks your assumptions have set for you. They are at the *core* of how you know, experience, and operate within the field of arts education.

When you have your core assumptions, you have moved them from subject to object. You are no longer subject to your core assumptions once you are able to step outside of them and hold them as you would any other sort of object. It is at this point, when you can hold your core assumptions as object, that you can then begin to scrutinize them, question their validity, or perhaps dismiss them altogether.

Challenging Core Assumptions

The above examples of core assumptions were not designed to be universal, but instead designed to be emblematic of what certain individuals in the field of arts education may assume to be undeniable truths. Universal or not, resorting to generalizations helps us talk about broader swaths of a population. Whether these generalizations of core assumptions ring true for all, or many, or none, is separate (but related) to the key point that, as long as these assumptions and others like them are held to be true, the system—the field of arts education—can only function within their parameters. Problems confronting the field can only be addressed with the technical expertise that these assumptions warrant. In an instance where an adaptive challenge faces the field of arts education in a way that leaps beyond the field's core assumptions, the assumptions of the field must change—what the field understands to be true must be altered in order to meet these challenges.

Let's take one of Dick Deasy's core assumptions that was mentioned earlier: "Arts education is underfunded at federal, state, and local levels." If we accept this core assumption to be true, if we are subject to this core assumption, then we must operate within its parameters. This assumption suggests to us that as a field we will always operate from a position of scarcity, we will never have the full resources necessary to live out our greater visions, and therefore we must compromise ourselves and our programming. The assumption, in essence, limits our ability to progress.

However, if we step outside of this assumption and move this assumption from having us to us having it, then we can begin to problematize the validity of this assumption. We can then ask ourselves why we believe this is true. We will certainly come up with some very good reasons. That's the assumption protecting itself, fighting to stay at the core of our meaning making, struggling to retain its control.

The next step in our process may be to ask ourselves, "what would it take for this core assumption to no longer be true?" This is the first movement towards developing adaptive expertise geared at overcoming an adaptive challenge. By asking ourselves what it would take for arts education to operate from a position of plenty, we are not calling upon technical routine know-how, we are forcing ourselves to think adaptively about our own field. We are moving from survival-based quick-fix approaches to problem solving, to paradigm shifting visions of reconstituting the field anew.

One of the challenges facing the field of arts education that I have noted is a disconnect between how 21st Century students naturally express themselves in a digital world, and the arts disciplines that are traditionally made available to them in-school and through afterschool programs.⁵ Perhaps a core assumption being maintained by the field is that the primary disciplines of arts education are visual art, dance, theatre, and music. The field is subject to this notion. As long as the field on a whole accepts this as truth, the disconnect stated in the challenge to the field will continue. It is not until we challenge this core assumption that we can begin to address this disconnect and more effectively provide students with digital arts learning experiences that better correlate with their interests and personal aptitudes. One can see that replacing visual art, dance, theatre, and music with digital media arts would indeed require a paradigm shift in the field—an adaptive change.

"Hold on a second," one of you may say, "I don't think visual art, dance, theatre, and music are the primary disciplines of arts education. I've been a digital artist for years. I don't hold these core assumptions!" Of course you don't! The core assumptions of the field are over-arching generalizations that are not individual-specific, but are instead an amalgamation of the assumed truths held by many. You may have your own personal set of core assumptions and the field of arts education may have an entirely different set. Those with more influence than others, however, dictate the field's greater core assumptions. They determine, based on their values and what they hold to be true, how the field will act, what the field will believe, what arts education—writ large—will hold as truth.

How does this happen?

⁵ See Appendix A: A Short-List of Challenges Affecting the Field of Arts Education.

The core assumptions of the field of arts education are expressed in a variety of ways. When the field's professional associations announce a theme for an upcoming conference, the field asserts its core assumptions. When the editors of the field's professional journals publish articles discussing certain topics and not others, the field asserts its core assumptions. When the field's largest funding bodies release an RFP for programs focused on a given topic, the field asserts its core assumptions.

It can be argued that the core assumptions of the field of arts education are expressed from the top-down. Therefore, challenging the field's core assumptions not only requires us to shift said assumptions from having us to us having them, it also relies upon our ability to surface the values, beliefs, and visions of those on the bottom. The question then is: who's on top, who's on the bottom, and what's going on in the vast middle?

Conclusion: The Great Stage Dive of Change

Once we step outside of the frenzied dance party that is the field of arts education and get on the balcony to gain perspective on our domain, we are able to identify our core assumptions—the underlying truths that have us. If we can hold those assumptions as object—to have them—then we can test their validity, question their reason for being, and adapt them to better serve our purposes.

Equipped with our new vision, we then need to figure out how to return to the dance party and affect change. Sure, any one individual can have insight, alter his or her practice, and then get back down there and start grooving in a whole other way. But how can we alter our arts education practice more broadly? How can we teach the entire room—the entire field of arts education—a new dance?

In order to fully gain perspective on the field, to assess what the broadest swath of individuals assume to be true, we must include as many diverse voices as possible in the dialogue around our field's foundational beliefs. Deferring to our traditional field leaders to reassess our core assumptions will not suffice. We must instead incorporate the perspectives of a new generation of young professionals. Bringing fresh, innovative, 21st Century ideologies into dialogue with the field's original pioneers and most respected leaders is the key to keeping pace with our changing cultural surround. It is only through such an inter-generational exchange that the field of arts education may genuinely see itself, evaluate itself, re-strategize for the future—and then get back down to the party and start a new groove.

References:

- Cameron, B. (2007). New perspectives for new times. (Keynote address). Performing Arts Exchange. Louisville, KY. Retrieved January 10, 2009 from <<http://www.southarts.org/atf/cf/%7B15E1E84E-C906-4F67-9851-A195A9BAAF79%7D/PerformingArtsExchange2007keynote.pdf>>.
- Clapp, E. P., Gregg, A., Kleaver, N., Marlow, H. (2009). "Re-inventing arts leadership for the 21st Century." [Workshop presentation]. Arts Education Partnership National Forum. Cambridge, MA. October 2-3, 2009.
- Deasy, R. J. (2009). Arts education assumptions. [Unpublished document].
- Gardner, H. (1982). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Getty Center for Education in the Arts. (1987). *Discipline-based arts education: What forms will it take?* Proceedings of a national invitational conference sponsored by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. Los Angeles, CA. January 15-17, 1987.
- Heifetz, R. A. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Heifetz, R. A. & Laurie, D. L. (1999). Mobilizing adaptive work: Beyond visionary leadership. In Conger, J., et al (Eds.) *The leader's change handbook*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Hetland, L., Winner, E., & Veenema, S. (2007). *Studio thinking: The real benefits of visual arts education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Housen, A. & Yenawine, P. (2001). *Basic VTS at a glance*. New York, NY: Visual Understanding in Education.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.
- La Senna, D. (in press). Adults, the future, and participatory arts education. In Clapp, E. P. (Ed.) *20UNDER40: Re-Inventing the Arts and Arts Education for the 21st Century*. Somerville, MA: 20UNDER40.
- Lynch, C. (in press). Ctrl c, ctrl v, a new model? In Clapp, E. P. (Ed.) *20UNDER40: Re-Inventing the Arts and Arts Education for the 21st Century*. Somerville, MA: 20UNDER40.
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2004). A framework for 21st Century learning. Retrieved April 17, 2010 from <<http://www.p21.org/>>.
- Project Zero. (n.d.). Artful thinking. Retrieved April 17, 2010 from <<http://pzweb.harvard.edu/tc/overview.cfm>>.
- Saunders, V. J. (2007). Listening to the next generation: Finding new ways to lead the arts and culture field. (Keynote address). Facing Pages. Minnowbrook Conference Center, NY. Retrieved January 10, 2010 from <<http://victoriajsaunders.com/Documents/Listening%20to%20the%20Next%20Generation.pdf>>.
- Saunders, V. J. (2006). Boomers, XY's and the making of a generational shift in arts management. In *CultureWork* 10(3).
- Solomon, J., & Sandahl, Y. (2007). Stepping up or stepping out: A report on the readiness of next generation nonprofit leaders. Young Nonprofit Professionals Network.

APPENDIX A: A Short-List of Changes Affecting the Field of Arts Education

Audiences are changing

- Museums and performing arts institutions are struggling to attract and retain new audiences who are no longer accustomed to being “sit and listen” observers of the arts (Saunders, 2007; Cameron 2007), but are instead eager to be co-creators of their arts experiences (Cameron, 2007).
- As a result of our shifting demographics, more people are seeking to pursue adult arts education experiences at different stages of their lives. Many institutions that provide such services are now charged to develop adult arts education programs that simultaneously fulfill the needs and interests of adult learners ranging in age from being in their early twenties to those in their sixties, seventies, eighties and older (La Senna, in press).

Artistic expression is changing

- Children and young adults raised on digital technology are utilizing electronic media as a means to express their creativity in a manner that goes beyond the traditional arts disciplines offered through schools, after-school programs, community arts organizations, and university arts departments.
- Many arts education programs continue to place an emphasis on traditional visual arts, theatre, music, and dance educators and teaching artists, rather than look to non-traditional arts makers working with contemporary mediums more attuned to 21st Century students' interests.
- Even given a re-orientation of arts educations towards digital media, because of the pace of digital technology, pedagogy cannot keep pace with the invention and adoption of these new art forms.

Artistry is being challenged as authorship is redefined

- In our digital remix world, what it means to be an artist who authors original work is in question. As *copy*, *cut*, and *paste* have become the primary artistic skills of the Internet, one can argue that the traditional emphasis on original thought through artistic expression is being replaced by the ability to mix and match extant material in an aesthetic manner (Lynch, in press).
- The ability to digitally remix works of art has increasingly compromised the notion of artistic intellectual property. To what degree does digital remix exhibit artistic expression, and to what degree is it an act of copyright infringement and/or electronic artistic plagiarism?

Arts assessment is changing

- Given the push towards standards-based assessment throughout the United States, how to assess, document, and quantify quality teaching and learning in the arts remains a mystery of great concern for in-school and out-of-school arts service providers.

Arts administration and funding is changing

- As a result of our tightened economy and shifting public attitudes towards the arts, upper level administrators of arts education organizations are finding themselves spending more time on issues of development and fundraising. This shift away from programming both distracts the field's most accomplished professionals from issues of pedagogy and program design, while at the same time discouraging the field's most talented young professionals from pursuing executive director or senior staff level positions (Solomon & Sandahl, 2007).