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Rethinking Arts Education in Oceania

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## Dancing feathers and dreams of green frigate birds

### Rethinking Arts Education in Oceania

Cresantia Frances Koya

#### **Reclaiming Art Spaces**

This paper presents an argument for the reclaiming of Art Spaces within formal School Curricula and non-formal education, on the basis of Cultural expression as a valid and “...*distinct way of knowing*” (Sahasrabudhe 2005, 53) critical to the development of critical and creative thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the context of *Arts Education in Oceania*, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith’s seminal work provides some fundamental reasons for *re-thinking*. In her attempt to decolonize research, she advocates an Indigenist approach that resonates with the Art Education debate. These include the need for ‘indigenizing’, ‘reclaiming’, ‘remembering’ and ‘story-telling’ (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999).

#### **Arts in Education (AiE)**

In the pre-independence School Curricula, Art Education emphasized western art forms and in Fiji for example, the emphasis was on realistic painting, papier-mâché, macramé and the like, under the general category of arts and crafts. Post-independence saw some change in Arts Education with inclusion of pottery, weaving and print making using tapa cloth designs and techniques on paper. In many instances however, art and crafts were seen as ‘soft’ subjects allocated for students as a break from ‘real’ learning. In the best case scenario, students were often taught a variety of art forms offered on the basis of availability of teaching staff with an interest in the arts, and more significantly, school resources. The alternative was a bleak reality where art and craft classes were (and still are in many instances) absorbed by perceived more relevant examinable subjects usually determined by students’ progress in other academic subjects.

Internationally, the role of the Arts has gained recognition in terms of its contribution to holistic development, student self-esteem and spill-over positive approaches and outcomes in other subject areas. In the region, this realization has been slow and painful with the Arts sometimes being boxed into the Technical and Vocational (TVET) stream with an emphasis on non-academic students. Non-academic students are those perceived as non-performers in mainstream subject areas such as Math, English, Social Sciences and Science subjects. Students who seen as academically weak are more likely to be encouraged to take up TVET(including Arts) as an alternative post-School livelihood option

That having been said, the last decade has seen a renewed interest in revisiting conversations about the value of AiE. This is reflected in the *Culture and Education Strategy, 2010* which highlights the need for a strong systematic approach to capacity building in culture and the arts in order to strengthen and further grow the creative and cultural industries within the wider cultural economy framework. The Culture and Education Strategy endorsed by Forum Education Ministers in Papua New Guinea 2010 highlights regional awareness of the critical role that culture and the arts plays in development.

The longest standing AiE Curriculum in the islands is in Papua New Guinea, first included in the school curriculum almost four decades ago. The situation in the rest of the region however, is quite different with few island nations making the move towards AiE post-1990.

In the 1990s, a Curriculum Development initiative in Solomon Islands saw *Creative Arts Curriculum* designed for Forms 1 to 5. In this package, the *artists-in-schools* approach engaged traditional masters in the teaching of cultural expressions through the arts. Ten years later, in the early 2000’s Samoa began a similar move in the development of an AiE curriculum package for *Creative Art Studies* at primary level and at secondary school in the following genres; music, performing arts and visual arts.

Around the same time, the *Cook Islands Curriculum Framework* (2002) presented the Arts as an opportunity for deeper and more meaningful learning. The new focus included dance, drama, music, media (film and video), literature, visual arts and cultural oratory and crafts (p18). Similarly in Fiji, the Fiji Education Sector Programme (FESP) 2003 – 2009 resulted in the *Fiji Curriculum Framework* (2007). This framework also emphasizes the role of the arts highlighting the benefits of learning experiences in music, visual arts, and the performing arts (dance and theatre). A complete review of Art Education Syllabus for Classes 1 to 6 took place in 2010. In 2011, the Department of National Heritage, Culture and the Arts is currently working closely with experienced Art practitioners and curriculum developers from the region in collaboration with the Curriculum Development Unit in an attempt to *Mainstream Education for Sustainable Development through the Expressive Arts* with an emphasis on Culture and the Arts in Fiji.

### **Valuing AiE in Oceania**

Arguably one of the current leading experts in AiE in the islands, Teweiariki Teaero posits:

Art is one of the defining characteristics of any culture or society, reflecting the mother culture and local environment. It is physically and ideologically shaped by these two factors. It follows that an ideal art criticism approach should also be firmly grounded in both the culture and local environment. The contents of any art curriculum ought, therefore, to include important aspects of society's art and material culture (1999, p8).

In the islands, where art is valued for the most part on the basis of its cultural worth and functionality, there is a real need for advocacy and awareness about the benefits that AiE presents to formal and non-formal education and to social development and cohesion. Community awareness about the potential contribution of the arts to economic development through stimulation of the creative and cultural industries as well as for human and social growth is essential. Dinham (2011) presents ten reasons to value and prioritize AiE. These are adapted from the Australian context to suit island realities and needs.

1. *Authentic arts programs are linked to a wide range of diverse skills useful for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;*
2. *Students are introduced to alternative and new ways of thinking, seeing and experiencing;*
3. *Critical Functional Skills: Learning to 'act creatively', think flexibly and solve problems;*
4. *Mutual benefits of an authentic art program is intrinsic, and instrumental, personal and social;*
5. *Promotes cultural and cross cultural understanding, values connection and empathy for others;*
6. *Provides learning opportunities for self-expression and self-validation;*
7. *Engages students in ethical, aesthetic and communicative judgment;*
8. *Research indicates that students who engage in the arts out-perform other students linking the arts to positive learning in particular in mathematics and readings;*
9. *Benefits for disadvantaged and minority/marginalized students; and,*
10. *Positive effects on student's sustained interest in learning and schooling.*

(Adapted from Dinham 2011, p19).

Equally crucial to the support for, and success of, AiE, is the ability of Curriculum designers to develop a meaningful package that is strongly grounded in Culture. Engelhardt (2005) in linking the arts and culture argues that "*the AiE approach also enables local cultural values and identity to have a central role in education*". He also calls for the *artists-in-schools* approach

to share their skills in traditional music dance and crafts), and incorporate their artistic skills and knowledge into lessons... [to] provide an opportunity for students to learn about the various art forms that their own culture produces and compare them with those produced elsewhere, and, in the process, learn about cultural values (p2).

Further to this, Sheldon Shaeffer, Director UNESCO Bangkok writes in the foreword for *Educating for Creativity: Bringing the Arts and Culture into Asian Education*:

Koya, C.F (2011). *Dancing feathers and dreams of green frigate birds: Rethinking Arts Education in Oceania*, In **Ta'aroa: Pacific Ballet of Creation**, Suva: University of the South Pacific. Pp 19 – 23. ISBN 978-892-01-0879-1

The arts have the potential to play a distinct and unique role in bringing the ideals of quality education into practice. As a creative medium, the arts stimulate cognitive development, encourage innovative thinking and creativity, engender understanding of the importance of cultural diversity and reinforce behavior patterns underlying social tolerance (UNESCO 2005 pviii).

What is particularly critical to AiE initiatives is the purposeful collaboration between Curriculum experts, Art practitioners and cultural producers in the local community. This cannot be underscored as it would be very easy to defer to western frameworks of AiE which an external advisor or consultant in the Arts or in Curriculum often brings to the table. What is apparent is the need to *recognize and value* the contribution of indigenous art forms and the encouragement of contemporary expressions of these.

Teasdale and Teasdale (1992) for example, argue that *“the arts in traditional Pacific societies are not compartmentalized, nor are they practiced in isolation from everyday life. Indeed, they are part of the very fabric of people’s existence, expressing values and beliefs, and ensuring the stability of social relationships”* (p5). What is evident is the need to contextualize AiE to ensure authentic learning experiences in the Arts. Also in support of this, Teairo (1999) calls for a re-examination of art curricula in Oceania through (1) a more appropriate and holistic art education programme; (2) a more culturally relevant and more humanistic curriculum, that (3) enables students to appreciate, enjoy and react appropriately to visual stimuli and artwork (p10).

### **What could authentic AiE for Oceania look like? A suggested Toolkit for Art Educators**

1. Curriculum must be firmly grounded in the *foundations of education*; philosophy, psychology and sociology; bringing AiE into context of the islands.
2. *Constructivism* which is the idea that prior knowledge of both students and teachers must form the basis on which to build new knowledge and skills.
3. *Culture Gap* an idea presented by Angela Little (1995) who argues that the difference in expectations of the home culture and the school often leads to difficulties in learning and schooling. AiE must consider the lived experience and heritage art forms existent in diverse cultural contexts.
4. *Multiple Intelligence* theory was first developed by Howard Gardiner in the 1980s and is seen as critical to curriculum work. MI presents that each individual has very different skills and abilities that the school experience should develop in a holistic approach to learning. A holistic AiE package must consider these eight intelligence areas: Linguistic intelligence (*word-smart*); Logical-Mathematical intelligence (*number/reasoning-smart*); Spatial intelligence (*picture smart*); Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence (*body-smart*); Musical intelligence (*music-smart*); Interpersonal intelligence (*people-smart*); Intrapersonal intelligence (*self-smart*); Naturalistic intelligence (*nature-smart*).
5. AiE must be grounded in the *3 Rs of Education*; relevance, readiness, resources; and, must include an additional component of *sustainability*.
6. The *3-Hs of Education* are prioritized as curriculum guides and indicators; teaching for the *Head*, the *Heart* and the *Hand*. This brings the AiE experience through knowledge (cognitive learning through content); to values, beliefs and attitudes (understanding, expression etc) and finally to skills-for-life, livelihoods and life-long learning (through learning to do and hands on learning experiences and outcomes);
7. The content and teaching style (pedagogy) must look at *indigenous knowledge* and its contribution to positive and meaningful learning experiences as a core part of AiE in the region and link to issues such as Intellectual property, Copyright, Cultural mapping, Oceanic languages as endangered languages, Pacific History and the cultural and creative industries.

## Empowerment through Art Development

### Case Study “*Ta’arua: Pacific Ballet of Creation*”

**Ta’arua** the production provides a clear example of possibilities through the Arts. As a creative work, it draws from both introduced and indigenous art forms linking story-telling through Ballet and drawing on the strong history of oral tradition and storytelling in the islands. Building on an original concept by French poet and Fiji Resident, Rodger Lesgards, Allan Alo creatively threads Polynesian mythologies of creation from Tahiti, Samoa and Aotearoa, NZ in a stage production that draws on the musical talents of Calvin Rore (Solomon Islands), and local dance choreographer Katalina Fotofili (Fiji).

The stage production makes a significant contribution to AiE in the region in that it

- i. Is an example of cultural and cross-cultural collaboration;
- ii. Creates an awareness of the potential of Contemporary Art; and,
- iii. Demonstrates the fluid fusion of western art forms with traditional dance movements and song.

The production, and its complementary publication, also makes a critical contribution to the documentation of art initiatives in the islands. As an outcome of Alo’s work with the Oceania Dance Theatre it highlights the role of AiE in non-formal education and builds on his personal philosophy that “...enabling the development of artistic identity and techniques are as ways of empowering not only young dancers themselves but also people and communities with whom they work” (Alo 2010, p116).

#### **Critical Mass – an endnote.**

Critical mass is vital to realizing this dream where both Heritage arts, and Contemporary art forms as derivatives and extensions of these cultural expressions, are valued as valid forms of cultural and creative endeavors. The future is clear. “Until the arts are given priority, educational and employment opportunities in these areas will remain unexploited and art will continue to meet academia in only colorful hallways stopping short at the classroom door (Koya 2008, p20). In terms of systematic support systems and networks for the development of formal and non-formal education, it is envisaged that “with political will and foresight, funding, marketing, networking, and regional cooperation, perhaps this vision of hope for the arts and the essence of the Pacific’s cultures, will become a major part of sustainable development initiatives for the region in the future (Vaka’uta 2010, p170).

In the final analysis, it is worth revisiting the man who is seen as the founding father of Contemporary Oceanic Art in the region who spoke at the Red Wave Exhibition Opening held at the James Harvey Gallery in Sydney 2000.

We are not interested in imitating (western art) and asking our artists to perform dances for tourists. It is time to create things for ourselves, create and establish standards of excellence which match those of our ancestors (Cited in UNESCO 2003, p17).

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