

Reflections on UNESCO 2nd World Conference on Arts Education

Seoul, South Korea, May 2010

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We will always remember the UNESCO 2nd World Conference on Arts Education held in Seoul, Korea as a wonderful and stimulating experience, both professionally and personally. It was a great privilege for us to participate in such a dynamic forward-looking event and to meet leaders of arts education from around the world. Moreover it was such a joy to hear, see, smell, taste, and otherwise explore Korean arts and crafts. We cannot say enough to commend both the host organization and the host nation for putting together an outstanding event.

The stated focus of the conference was to build on the work of the First World Conference on Arts Education (Lisbon, 2006) and particularly on its main outcome, the Road Map for Arts Education. The road map advised member nations of UNESCO to explore two intertwined themes that became the focus of the 2nd World Conference that we attended: “Arts for Society, Education for Creativity.” The conference developed several UNESCO goals. One was the International

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Appeal for the Promotion of Arts Education and Creativity at School, approved by UNESCO's General Conference in 1999. A second was to explore world peace through arts as a part of the 2010 International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures.

Over 2000 state officials, scholars, teaching artists, and activists attended the UNESCO Conference, hailing from 129 (out of 193) member countries. Those we spoke to and listened to all agreed that arts education is beleaguered around the world, its value misunderstood or altogether denied. How to change that situation and what ideas and evidence to bring to bear in doing so have, however, generated many different responses. Since different nations face different challenges, supporting and sustaining the arts through arts education necessarily involves many different concerns and objectives.

As we absorbed purposes and points of view, we realized that conversations were occurring at two different levels of discourse. There were the nominal issues of the conference, explicitly addressed in talks and discussion panels, and there were the sub-rosa issues, implicitly expressed in the assumptions and attitudes of participants. What was said and what was left unsaid formed intellectual gaps that reflected other gaps, real and perceived, between developing and developed nations, between traditional and global cultures, between art, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other.

To a large extent, participants addressed one of three points. The use of arts education to preserve traditional and ethnic cultures and foster global appreciation of their global diversity. The use of arts education to heal communities in crises and promote socio-political multi-culturalism, and the use of arts education to foster creativity for 21st century needs. Very few speakers or panels attempted to grapple with all three issues or probe their intersections. We were among them. We frankly had not expected or understood the depth of the fragmentation we observed, and did not adequately address it in our opening keynote speech. We get the chance now to take a closer look at some of these inadvertent gaps and silences.

We will look in this report at the gap between the first and last issue, between tradition on the one hand and innovation on the other. For many speakers and many participants, perhaps the majority, arts education was understood as a primary means of preserving indigenous or traditional cultures and protecting them against an assault of cultural homogenization being carried out by media giants, often American, which are overwhelming the world with a particular Westernized concept of what the arts are and what social functions they should perform. Lee Dae – Yong, President of the Korea Arts and Culture Education Service made this point for his nation and for many others when he said: "Korea must continue to work to bring back its lost spirit of culture and arts that have gone missing temporarily during the area of industrialization, democracy, and IT" (information technology).

We appreciate and value the role for arts education and not only for the preservation of the unique ways of being in the world. To our mind, the preservation of traditional cultures actually intersects with arts education as means of fostering creativity. Consider that the global culture purveyed by the West is highly commercial and consumerist in contrast to the highly participatory nature of most indigenous arts. This is a very important point for us, because those who make their own arts, as most people in traditional societies do, are inherently not only creating their own culture, but are learning and participating in the creative process on a daily basis. Consumer arts, in contrast, place this kind of everyday creativity in the hands of a few elite individuals at work with corporations, which then sell those arts to the rest of society. The upshot, unfortunately, is that those who consume culture without participating in its creation become divorced from understanding the creative process.

For us, therefore, participatory arts and the understanding of creative processes go hand in hand. Moreover where the arts become nothing but a consumer product, it loses not only its intrinsic value, but also the imaginative and creative capacities that drive innovation in and beyond the arts. In countries such as Korea, where “creativity” is seen as the key to driving the economy, we believe that traditional arts within arts education may very well play a vital role in maintaining and developing that manifold imagination.

Notes

Michele and Robert Root-Bernstein were keynote speakers at the UNESCO 2nd World Conference on Arts Education. They are co-authors of the book *Sparks of Genius: The 13 Thinking Tools of the World’s Most Creative People* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999). This is the first of a series of reflections on the UNESCO 2nd World Conference on Arts Education that appeared as blogs on the Psychology Today website and are published here with the express consent of the authors.

For a full discussion see

www.psychologytoday.com/blog/imagine/201006/reflections-unesco-s-2nd-world-conference-arts-education-seoul-korea

The full keynote speech can be downloaded at

www.unesco.org/culture/en/artseducation/pdf/fullpresentationrootbernstein