

# APPROACHES AND TRAINING IN THE EDUCATION OF THE PERFORMING ARTS FOR PRE-TERTIARY SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** My paper will look at Malaysia's recent effort grooming future generations of artists to be leaders of the arts. Two Arts Schools are set up in the last five years in the country by the Ministry of education for school children, 13 to 18 years of age, who have an interest and talent in the visual and performing arts. The curriculum offers a dedicated development path, providing students with a new teaching and learning environment where both their artistic and academic potential are to be realized. The Arts Schools aim to provide quality education for preparing leaders of the future who will have an impact to society, enriched by an education of the arts. The Schools will particularly build on Malaysia's unique strengths in the Malay traditional arts of Wayang Kulit and Bangsawan, the arts which involve the visual, dance, theatre and music. The approach to teaching however is still very contemporary actor training methods. The emphasis is on teamwork and communications, two skills that the Ministry deem important in nation building. My paper will look at the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used and whether there will be genuine empowerment of our youths at the end of their education.

**Keywords:** arts schools, teaching strategies, empowerment of youths.

## INTRODUCTION

Two Arts schools were set up at pre-tertiary level in the last five years in the country by the Ministry of Education for school children from 13 to 18 years of age. These secondary schools, one in the state of Johor and the other in Sarawak are established with the aim to develop the potential and artistic talent of the students. That is the concept. The philosophy behind it is that it will be an institution that will develop an individual's potential in a balanced manner through an arts education to produce a knowledgeable, ethical, poised and confident person, with a very strong Malaysian cultural identity. The vision states that the school will be the custodian of the national cultural heritage with the mission to nurture talent and develop the artistic potential among students, encouraging active student participation in artistic activities and in building collaboration with other institutions and arts activists. A syllabus is drawn in which firmly roots the arts, performing and the creative arts, namely, theater, music, dance and the visual arts studies in the Malaysian education context.

## ARTS IN EDUCATION

Arts studies became a part of a formal school curriculum in 2007. This is to be the beginning of the development of the arts in the country at school level. Prior to this huge, bold step, the disciplines of drama, music, dance and visual arts have just

been aspects of students' activities or co-curriculum in certain schools. Therefore, there is an opportunity now for talented and interested students to learn, participate and even to excel in these disciplines.

The objectives of the Arts schools are:

- a) To produce students who are balanced in their academic as well as artistic achievements.
- b) To produce students skilled and knowledgeable in the arts
- c) To establish the school as the foundation for excellent artistic education with a Malaysian identity at the international level.
- d) To produce activists in the arts and ethical cultural practitioners.
- e) To produce individuals with the love of the arts who are to become the guardian of our cultures.

The management and the administration of the Arts Schools is similar to the other schools except for the appointment of a few extra posts like the senior administrative assistant for the arts, heads of each discipline, visual arts, dance, drama and music instructors for the arts and support staff for each discipline. The Arts schools together with the Sports schools are managed under the Co-Curriculum and Arts Department of the Ministry of Education. Besides the usual management budget, the Ministry allocates a special allocation for allowances for services of experts, purchases of equipment, utilities, budget for participations at state and national levels, benchmarking visits and others. Historically, the performing arts was a classical heritage from ancient Greece, and were held in high esteem as a civic, educational and religious institution. The 5th Century BC dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides left mankind a heritage in poetry, dramatic craftsmanship, philosophy and insight into characters which has not become obsolete in more than 2,500 years. Education in ancient Greece was based on literature, music, and physical acting. Literature included reading, writing, mathematics and declamation of epic poems. The whole process of learning was done through memorizing long epics and then delivering them with the support of acting techniques such as vocal inflections, facial expressions and dramatic movement. It will be accompanied by music keeping the beats, harmony using the flute and lyre. The elements of performance were the essence. One's knowledge of the arts was respected: in fact if you were a prisoner of war, you would be set free if you recited extracts from a Euripides play. The dramatist Aristophanes, in his play, *Frogs*, has two of his characters exchange this dialogue:

Aeschylus: Pray, tell me on what particular ground a poet/artist should claim

admiration?

Euripides: If his art is true, and his council sound, and if he brings help to the nation by

making men better in some respect.

Thus the arts schools are given such a role to enable, inspire, and inform the students from being a student from the education system to empowering them to



help the nation "in making better men out of their citizens," and in the process, making the nation a vibrant nation. Of course these students are only 18 when they come out of the system with their arts education after their Form Five (SPM) Examination. The first batch of students have not been produced yet, thus there is no data yet as to where they are absorbed. They can continue Form Six in the usual schools or they can go for the diploma in the arts. There is not much choice for only a few colleges offer a diploma in performing arts, namely, Kolej Yayasan Malacca, and the Academy of Arts, Heritage and Culture (ASWARA) in Kuala Lumpur. There are however, quite a few higher institutions that offer performing arts courses and degrees, called by different names: University Malaya, University Sains Malaysia (being the pioneer in the arts among the higher institutions), Universiti Institute technology MARA, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), University Sabah Malaysia, University Sarawak Malaysia, and ASWARA which also has recently offered a bachelor degree as well as the Diploma. The Private Universities are Sunway College and Monash. The Cultural Centre of University Malaya which offers the Bachelor Degree in Performing Arts faced difficulty getting in students from the Sixth Form after Higher School Certificate who knew anything about the performing arts. The Drama, dance and music departments conduct interviews as well as auditions as a means of selection in addition to the usual university requirements. But the interviews and auditions can be hilarious most times as students when asked why they have selected to study Drama, would answer "for glamour". And all the drama they have watched is television dramas. Do not even try to ask about who William Shakespeare is. If these universities are fed with students from the Arts schools, the academics will have an easier job in teaching at first year level. In fact, these students would have been through a very challenging system and they would have known how to balance inspiration with the awareness of sweat and tears which takes to forge a career in the arts. In addition to their academic studies, students have also to focus on the performing and creative arts. Students interviewed expressed anxiety that being the first batch to come out of the arts schools, they would like to excel in both and especially their academic performance as a way to prove to their parents, and to the authorities of the success of the Arts Schools. Students do have to juggle with their time as the arts studies begin in the afternoon after they have completed their academic lessons according to the time table allocated. In the afternoon for 20 hours a week, they are dedicated to skills training by the industry seasoned staff where students are divided into specialized groups according to their chosen major focus areas: dance, drama, music and design /visual arts.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

Students work as a team in collaboration according to their assigned projects they are rehearsing for a performance. Dancers work with musicians, actors with director or choreographer and so on. The emphasis on these projects is on original work, a work created by one of the students or ensemble work practices. The teaching methodology that is used by teachers are demonstrations, character re-enactments, story-telling, characterization explorations, making theatre projects

assisted by the syllabus provided from the Ministry of Education (2006): The module for Year 1 in the study of Theatre is first of all, awareness of self in the context of theatre, introduction to the elements of theatre, to also acknowledge God as the creator of the universe and to know the relationship between self, other people and the environment. In Year 2 Module consists of the introduction to theatre arts with basic acting, improvisation and arts appreciation. Year 3 consists of introduction to plays, scenography, artistic and management and production. For Year Four and Five the modules are to be the traditional arts of Bangsawan and WayangKulit, thus positioning the students to the socio-cultural landscape as spelled out by the philosophy and objectives of the formation of the arts schools. However, for this batch of year 4 and year 5 students, Bangsawan and WayangKulit are not introduced as yet due to the unpreparedness of their teaching staff. In fact, some of them are only recently sent to be trained in the acting techniques of a bangsawan and the conventions of a bangsawan performance. Therefore, in these Arts Schools, students are exposed to two types of curriculum, one a conservative, traditional curriculum that employs teacher-delivered, memorization activities exam-oriented and the other is a constructivist curriculum which employs strategies such as cooperative learning, scaffolding instruction and authentic assessments. Projects are group oriented and generated from the students themselves under the tutelage of a trained staff. Dewey was the advocate for what he termed as a curriculum that centers on "feeling good about one's self, one's work, and one's place in the world". Dewey (1913, 1934) said:

*"This curriculum is based on the principle of pleasure. Students will be motivated by the connections to themselves, to their classmates, to their environment, and their culture. The satisfaction is immediate as they see themselves reflected as creators of the work, and if they see their work as having value not only to their teachers, but also to others outside the school and in the real world-they will enjoy learning more, and participate in it with enthusiasm."*

One student interviewed acknowledged that one would have to be tough and strong-willed to be in the situation of being challenged to be excellent in two areas. Initial interviews with 45 students of Johor Arts schools reveal that more than 90% agreed that this school is indeed their choice, that they like doing performances, that they see a bright future in the arts, that it makes them more confident about themselves, and strengthen their interest in the arts. To sum up, most of these students are clear about their talent and interest as they pursue the arts.

## ASSESSMENT

Students of Form five are assessed for their SPM Arts Examination paper 60/1 partly through their group performance of a musical. The genre of a musical is chosen as the production involves all four fields, drama, dance, music and visual arts. The Sarawak Arts School performed the musical "About Love", relating it to the theme of Life Under the Sea set by the Examination Board of Malaysia. As the school did not have a proper auditorium, the musical was performed at the



Auditorium of University of Sarawak on July 23 2011. It is quite authentic and commendable as the student director and script-writer is of Iban lineage, and so the costumes, movements, actions and dances are authentically Sarawakian. It portrays the beauty and unique life of aquatic life in Sarawakian cultural motifs. Besides this group performance, SPM candidates are also assessed by their individual assignments in all fields. This production is evidence and assessment for the Examination Board of Malaysia as a fulfilment of the descriptors for the four arts. This assessment is a starting point and practical experience in the arts before they move to higher degree education or to the working world after the completion of their studies. The production serves three objectives:

- a. To fulfill the criteria as outlined by the Examination Board of Malaysia for the Certificate (SPM)
- b. To Provides SPM candidates with practical experience of managing a stage production
- c. To develop creativity among candidates in the creation of an art work

This production was a product of discussion of ideas among the candidates themselves whereby the concept of the musical is identified. Such participation is expected to nurture a sense of team-work, values, develop confidence, and prepare the candidates mentally, emotionally, physically in carrying out a huge task of not only the creative aspect but also every aspect of production work. One aspect of the assessment which is crucial is the collection of evidence in hard-copy and soft copy. They are evidences to prove the achievement and mastery of the criteria set by the Standard Performance Indicator according to specific bands. To achieve band 3 in drama studies for example, the student would have to master 14 criteria including aspects such as theory of acting, documentary, practical, production skill, proving himself/himself to be of a good character. If the student fails to fulfill one criterion, he will not achieve band 3. The highest highest band is band 6. External assessors who are experts in their fields of Arts would visit the Schools and look at evidences handed to them by the trainers and the studio manager to validate them, and an original work, a group folio and a group performance. For Form Five examination or SPM level, students are assessed individually for their report of their folio, on their creativity, on practical skills, on peer review, and values; an original work and two other works; and a group folio and a group performance. 16% is given to values. 16% to knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, 68% to skills and 16% to values.

### ARTS SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

Across the causeway, Singapore too has an Arts School, the Arts School of Singapore established in 2006. It is a 6 year connected arts and academic curriculum for 13-18 years old students. The school awards an International Baccalaureate Diploma to their graduates which is recognized by both local and foreign institutions, qualifying graduates to apply for arts and arts-related degree programmes in Singapore and overseas universities. The school establishes links with overseas arts institutions in order to engage in exchanges, dialogue, partnerships and sharing of good practices, some of them are in China, US and Australia. In 2011, all their year 3 students participated in an overseas immersion

program with their partner institutions. Their public performances which are assessed are turned into one week Arts festival event in July with the art exhibition and installation in the gallery and performances from the overseas arts schools, and drama from the Singapore Arts School itself.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A progressive education as proposed by Dewey and having active approaches to learning is a bold step by the Ministry of Education, but if mainstream theatre was to have any place in the educational climate of the millennium, it needed to be reconceptualized to keep pace with the teaching and learning of progressive educationists. At Arts Schools, there is the opportunity, according to the recommendation of Social Reconstructionist Arts Education, for teachers to "approach the content areas in fun and meaningful ways" and as Milbrandt (2002, p.153) writes:

*Rather than accepting intellectual and moral complacency, art educators must possess the skills necessary to initiate art programs that engage students in critical inquiry, connect learning to authentic and meaningful issues in life, and inspire responsible intellectual and moral action.*

What is important is when the Arts schools prepare their students with the study of drama, dance, or music, teachers would have to be equipped with different approaches and strategies so students would be able to make meaning of the curriculum content to avoid the problems of aimless and activity-oriented teaching. In conclusion, there should be a recommendation to the Ministry to provide for premises for both Arts Schools in Johor and Sarawak as at the moment these Arts schools are temporarily placed with another school, sharing their facilities and infrastructures. The lack of good infrastructures and equipment for the study of Drama, dance, music, and visual arts which each needs rehearsal space, studios, recital studios, dance studios and at least a blackbox equipped with lighting facilities is not fulfilling one of the objectives of the Arts Schools that is to establish the school as the foundation for excellent artistic education with a Malaysian identity at the international level. Right now they are rehearsing at the school canteen space. Space and infrastructures is the foundation of arts education. The second recommendation is to get students to participate at international level, send them abroad for exchanges, and to have international staff as guest teachers. Students should be guided by outstanding arts specialists and experienced educators, and offered a pedagogic environment where they can achieve the highest possible artistic and intellectual standards as individuals and as members of a society. Another point to consider is students should be encouraged to draw on or share the rich traditions of our varied cultural heritage and contemporary practices and learn cultural histories to re explore cultural expressions rather than let the syllabus be tied to with just two traditional arts. It would be a good idea to explore multicultural traditions that Malaysia is so rich of. The education policies are moving towards a transformation and added value and more than ever before, emphasise the needs for young people to extend their abilities as creative learners and thinkers. A creative workforce will not just contribute to the creative industries.



but also be able to respond to new business opportunities. Pleasurable teaching practices can help release students' creativity and increase their ability to solve problems, and think independently. And this is what the character in Aristophanes' play Frogs say why poets/artists should be admired: If his art is true, and his council sound, and if he brings help to the nation by making men better in some respect.

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