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## The Arts and Literacy: What Does it Mean to be Arts Literate?

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### Abstract

The arts have often been recognised as unique areas of investigative inquiry, however artists often find it difficult to articulate this meaning through words. This difficulty has impacted on discourse about the arts and literacy despite growth of research on literacy in specific content areas. This paper will explore the interconnection between artistic inquiry, literacy and multimodality via a literature review and by drawing on interview data from higher and secondary education arts teachers. It notes that teachers of the arts view literacy in two interrelating ways: a. reading and writing in their particular subject area and b. a deeper disciplinary approach where students use these learnt skills and enter into the journey to becoming an artist themselves. This paper therefore aims to determine the answers to: What is the relationship between the arts and literacy? and What does it mean to be arts literate?

## Introduction

The Arts have often been recognised as unique areas of investigative inquiry. Early research such as John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) was seminal in reporting on the ways of knowing and benefits gained when experiencing arts events. He describes in detail 'real-life' experiences as compared to 'artistic' experiences. According to Dewey "art denotes a process of doing or making" (p. 48) and that aesthetics is about appreciating, perceiving and enjoying art. He believes that these characteristics sustain each other through time and space. While 'real-life' experiences could be viewed artistically, it is the manipulation of materials – concrete, sonic, embodied – that distinguishes arts events from everyday, ordinary events. Langer's (1953) work also explores the concept of 'aesthetic emotion' in that the making of an artwork embodies this notion from conception (p. 258) and that artistic meaning "belongs to the sensuous construct as such; this alone is beautiful, and contains all that contributes to its beauty" (p. 208). Philosophical investigation into arts inquiry and thought such as Dewey's and Langer's has heavily influenced educational research.

In fact most policy documents provide convincing statements as to the benefits of the Arts in education:

The arts are integral to our sense of identity—as individuals, as communities and as a nation. Through the arts and creative cultural expression we learn about ourselves: who we are, where we have come from and what we feel, value and believe (National Education and the Arts Statement, 2007, p. 4).

Eisner's (2002) work discusses how the arts can benefit education generally. He suggests eight offerings that 'Education can learn from the arts' with the sixth acknowledging that "Education can learn from the art that the limits of language are not the limits of cognition. We know more than we can tell". This is important to recognise when exploring the inter-relativity between literacy learning and the arts – that words alone cannot convey all meaning inherent in arts practice. The arts are naturally multimodal.

Artists often find it difficult to explain the intrinsic nature of their particular art form and therefore often find themselves 'saying it' through their artistic practice. This has clearly impacted on the amount of research available on literacy and the arts. Handerhan (1993) argues that research into literacy education has tended to stem from west-centric views where literacy is often defined as reading and writing traditional forms of text and often measured through standardised tests. She also states that language as a symbolic form is privileged over other cognitive processes that are often more evident in the arts (p. 245). These could be possible reasons as to why there is limited research on the arts and literate practice.

Some notable work in this area is Albers and Sanders (2010) work on literacies, the arts and multimodality. Much of this work however, is from an English education perspective and is concerned with reading and writing practices in the arts. This paper therefore aims to determine the answers to: What is the relationship between the arts and literacy? and What does it mean to be arts literate?

### **Theorising the Arts and Literacy**

There are a number of impacting factors that contribute to theorising literacy and literate practice in the arts. Research on literacy and the arts has tended to focus on one of three areas: (1) The distinctiveness of arts inquiry and thinking about art, (2) the various forms of communication and meaning making in the arts, and (3) how the arts can improve literacy learning outcomes. For the purpose of this paper the areas of 1 and 2 will be explored. This literature review presents information about both in an integrated way.

#### ***Artistic inquiry, thinking and meaning making***

When exploring the literature on artistic inquiry and thinking, the study of aesthetics and aesthetic education proliferates. According to Smith and Simpson (1991) aesthetics is a “branch of philosophical activities which involves the critical reflection on our experiences and evaluation of art” (p. 20). Artistic thinking enables us to view objects from a particular point of view. Greene (1991) discusses the fact that arts teachers should provide for their students many opportunities to ‘perceive’ and ‘notice’ what they see or hear in an ‘artistic’ way. This enables students to “challenge expectations, to break stereotypes, to change the ways in which persons apprehend the world” (p. 155-156).

These types of artistic skills include critiquing, evaluating and applying knowledge, which in turn assists students in creating their own art. The ability to describe an artwork’s form using terminology such as “unity, balance, harmony, rhythm, theme and variation, development and tension” (Smith & Simpson, 1991, p. 23), as well as identifying the artist’s intent, is an important component of arts inquiry. So too is reflection (G. Barton & Ryan, 2013). Similar to New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2004; Street, 2003) contemporary art interpretation extends to consider the important dimensions of the social, economic, cultural, political and environmental influences on arts practice. Aesthetics and reflection allows the thinking around art to not only consider physical, visual, aural content but also how an artwork may move us or meaningfully engage us (Dillon, 2007).

Becoming literate in aesthetic discourse becomes an integral part of the student’s practice in making meaning through art. Being able to describe, critique, and master relevant arts vocabulary and technique is essential to the process of creating art. When arts students learn

to see in aesthetic ways and use this knowledge and inspiration from other's artworks to create their own, the process of creativity takes place.

The literature points to the idea that the concept of creativity is difficult to define and is: a "nebulous" and ultimately "slippery" concept – all the more so when considered within differing educational contexts (Spendlove, 2008, p. 10).

While there is some contention on the definition of creativity itself, Sternberg and Lubart (1995) believe that it "is the process of generating ideas that are novel and bringing into existence a product that is appropriate and of high quality" (as cited in Wright, 2010, p. 3). This discourse aligns with theories on aesthetic education and forms of expression such as those through the written word. Greene (1991) highlights that to achieve aesthetic literacy teachers, in particular, may "uncouple certain phenomena from the context of ordinariness" (p. 153) and encourage their students to view things in "uncustomary ways".

Interest in and exploration of creative practice has largely stemmed from various research on different ways of knowing. Theories such as Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* (1985, 1993) and Elliot Eisner's *Artistic Intelligences* (as cited in Leland, Harst & Helt, 2000) have greatly impacted on research in the arts. Gardner and Eisner both argue that logical and mathematical, as well as verbal intelligences, are privileged more than others in institutional contexts such as schools. This devalues other ways of knowing that are more expressive and often feature in the arts.

By 'expressive ways of knowing' we mean those forms of expression that engage the learner's imagination and intuition. Our analysis of imagination and intuition as intrinsic elements of holistic learning is rooted in...an extended epistemology (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks & Kasl, 2006, p. 27).

An extended epistemology, according to Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl (2006), takes into account expressive ways of knowing as well as the specific content knowledge associated with the arts. This, they say, enables transformative learning and is integral to studying the arts. Expressive ways of knowing and meaning encompasses the notion of multimodality and multiple forms of communication. Wright (2012) states that "through the arts, people of all ages make an object at their own contemplation" and that the "arts give shape to formless ideas – they are a vehicle by which we can express our growing awareness of ourselves and the worlds in which we live" (p. 2). In the arts there are many ways in which to express ideas and feelings. This aligns with much literacy research and also the concept of multimodality.

Literate practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is complexly multimodal. A mode according to Bezemer and Kress (2008) is a "socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning" (p. 171).

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) highlight how “perspectives on literacy is the basic assumption that meanings are made (as well as distributed, interpreted and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is one” (as cited in Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). Modes such as visual – use of line, shape, form, colour and texture; embodied – gestural, other movement, facial expressions; aural – various sound sources and silence; textural – physical features and composition; written – diverse symbol systems including language, notational forms, graphics; are all executed. Artistic knowledge, expression and communication can be conveyed through just one mode or in combination with others, an ensemble, and while the arts share this feature they also can be defined in their own distinct ways.

### ***Literacy and curriculum research***

A relatively new research movement labeled *New Literacy Studies* (NLS) has shifted focus from considering literacy “as an issue of measurement or of skills” to “social practices that vary from one context to another” (Street, 2008, p. 3). Similarly, David Barton (2007) acknowledges that NLS views literacy practices as ‘socially situated events’ (p. 37) that are shaped and changed by the practice that surrounds them (D. Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000). Barton and Hamilton (1998) suggest that literacy events usually focus on a written text and take into account the talk around the text (p. 8). While focusing on written text is important in the arts, it is art itself that often is the focus of this talk.

If we take into account curriculum or content-specific literacies such as the arts, we are faced with very complex processes in the practice of literacy. In the middle years of learning for example Culican, Emmitt & Oakley (2001) agree stating that:

Schooling in the middle years challenges students to develop control of the literacy demands and learning expectations of increasingly sophisticated and specialised areas of knowledge represented in the curriculum. As knowledge becomes more specialised within these areas, so too the literacies associated with the ways this knowledge is constructed and represented becomes more complex (p.4).

Recent studies have begun to focus on the unique approaches to literacy and associated practices in distinct curriculum or content areas (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Collazo, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The increased research interest in curriculum literacies is a result largely due to educators, teachers and parents still wanting to find answers to why some children and young adolescents struggle in and with school. There is a fantasy or myth associated with literacy learning in that the job of Early Years’ teachers is to lay the basic foundational skills by the time children enter their 2 digit milestone (age 10). Yet statistics tell us that by the time children are entering their second year of high school 7.6% of young adolescents are below reading, 15.4% below writing, 9.5% below spelling, and 10%

below grammar and punctuation benchmarks in Australia (National Assessment Program results, ACARA, 2011). Frost (2003) has found similar results in the USA stating that only about 70% of students entering high school complete their education (as cited in Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008).

Additionally, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) found that “there are differences in how the disciplines create, disseminate, and evaluate knowledge, and these differences are instantiated in their use of language” (p. 48). While Shanahan and Shanahan provide examples in History and Science, this can also be applied to the arts. Their solution focuses on a model of ‘literacy progression’ from basic to intermediate through to disciplinary literacy skills. “*Basic literacy* skills take into account decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words that underlie the majority of reading tasks; *intermediate literacy* skills listed as common to many tasks, including generic comprehension strategies, common word meanings, and basic fluency while *disciplinary literacy* are skills specialized to history, science, mathematics, literature, or other subject matter” (p. 44).

In this sense, as children enter high school the literacy demands put upon them become highly technical and specialised in terms of text and vocabulary (Freebody, Chan & Barton, 2013). In addition to these complexities it is how these literacy skills relate to other extraneous ways of knowing unique to the particular subject areas under investigation that must also be learnt. However, research into this area is in its infancy. In the arts there has been some attempt to investigate what literacy looks like but these studies tend to either come from an English education perspective or explore how the arts can improve literacy outcomes.

Much educational research currently questions the standardized approaches to learning and offer creative solutions to the continuing problem (Comber, 2011; Ewing, 2011). Moje et.al. (2004) for example, believe that for adolescent literacy investigation it is necessary to also consider funds of knowledge and the types of discourses that students engage in both in and out of school. This view takes into account the various ways of knowing that may or may not compliment more traditional, linear and logical approaches to literacy learning.

### ***The arts and literacy***

Unfortunately, there is limited research on literacy and literate practice in the arts. Therefore this paper aims to fill this gap and focuses on the perceptions of arts educators from secondary schools and higher education institutions. Without this knowledge the notion of literacy and learning will continue to privilege concrete and linear ways of knowing. Exploring arts practice is important as children/students studying the arts often work within more intrinsic and ethereal modes of learning and these extend to experiences outside the school context.

To consider artistic thinking and inquiry from a literacy perspective enables us to value different ways of knowing and modes of communication as integral to artistic practice. Not only are students required to read and write about art but they must also apply this knowledge in creating their own artwork. Handerhan (1993) believes that many approaches to the exploration of literate practice fail to take into account more artistic and aesthetic cognitive processes that underpin arts practice. Not only do these processes act as the key functions in an arts classroom but increasingly multimodalities (Chan & Unsworth, 2011; Jewitt, 2008), and technologies (Kress, 2003; Unsworth, 2001) also impact on arts literate practice (Street, 2008). The complex literacies and modalities – visual, aural, embodied and so forth - associated with the arts and the practice that goes with these can enable profound learning experiences through self-expression and identity building for students. An ongoing, positive and equitable dialogue between the arts and literacy is critical for educational practices to move forward.

### **Background: The arts and literacy**

The project *The arts and literacy: exploring theory and practice* aims to investigate deeply the relationship between the arts and literacy by asking: What does literacy look like in the arts? and What does it mean to be arts literate? There are three phases of the project with the first phase now complete. The first phase of the project aimed to identify what arts educators (who were also practising artists) in higher and secondary education contexts consider as literate practice in their distinct art form including: Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts. As such the following questions were asked:

- a. What is distinct about the arts in regard to teaching and learning?
- b. What are the ways of knowing in the arts?
- c. What does art literacy mean? When is a student art literate?
- d. What modalities are used in the arts?

### ***Method***

This project has multiple phases including interview data, videoed classroom material, samples of student work, and implementation of a model for theorising the arts and literacy. This paper will report on interview data carried out with Phase 1 participants. All interviews were transcribed and then verified by the participants in the study. Results will be presented via identification of common themes in the responses provided for each of the questions. Thematic analysis is used as it allows a personal narrative approach in the reporting of findings as well as highlighting the aspects deemed important in regard to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear & Gliksman, 1997). According to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) the approach to recognising patterns within the data enables thematic

analysis and categorisation to occur. This approach provides the opportunity to discuss interview data in deep and rich ways.

### ***Participants***

Participants in this phase of the study include nine (9) teachers of the arts in secondary schools or higher education contexts. All of the participants were also practising artists – whether an actor, film-maker, dancer, painter or musician. The participants include: Beth, a secondary dance teacher who teaches dance from Year 8 to Year 12; Frank, a dance lecturer who is responsible for teaching university students how to become professional dancers as well as dance teachers; Nicole, a drama lecturer who had in the past been responsible for curriculum writing for the arts; Nathan, a media arts lecturer who also had a vested interest in curriculum development and teaches students to become media arts teachers; Simon and Tim who are both music lecturers specialising in music industry and composition studies respectively; Ben a secondary music teacher who teaches music from Year 8 to Year 12; Georgia, an arts and early childhood lecturer; and Heather, a secondary visual arts teacher.

## **Findings**

### ***A dichotomic view of literacy***

It was clear in the interview data that a dichotomic view of literacy was taken by the arts educators. On one hand the participants talked about the idea that arts students need to be able to read and write about art from a critical perspective. This aligns with a critical literacy approach to learning about a ‘text’, in this case art. The second concept of literacy in the arts was then to take this information or knowledge and apply it in creating new art-work and therefore relating to the journey to becoming an ‘artist’.

The respondents all commented on the fact that the use and understanding of subject specific vocabulary and the ability to use these in critical discourse about art were important skills to have as an arts’ student. This aligns with research in literacy education where being literate is taken to mean being able to read and write effectively (see Freebody, 2007, p. 8). Beth for example works in an Australian secondary school where all Year 9 students have to sit the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and therefore her response was heavily influenced by a whole school approach to have Year 9 students write persuasively in each of their subject areas.

“Literacy I guess comes down to the structure of assignments and, right down to how paragraphs are structured and sentences. I guess the main thing we do in Dance is evaluate, and so we look at more strong evaluation words and, how can you use that to really prove our point basically... we’re doing a persuasive writing task at the moment to align with NAPLAN so we’re looking at a musical theatre piece and they have to



persuade me if they think it's entertaining and everyone would appreciate it". (Beth, interview transcription)

While Beth lists particular process skills in writing, such as sentence and paragraph structure, she also indicates the type of words that dance students need to include in their writing such as "strong evaluation words" in order to persuade an audience about a particular artwork.

Similarly, Frank a higher education dance teacher believed that in "the most superficial sense of literacy, the terminology of ballet is in French, so in order to be able to study and learn and teach ballet you have to know: plié, tendu, développé, glissade etc." (Frank, interview transcription) The technical terminology associated with dance, were important to both Frank and Beth.

In music there was also recognition that technical terms are very important to know particularly when students are talking about or composing music:

"Obviously [there's] written literacy we would write notes, write notes down about styles, contexts as well as that, there's the verbal description of what is happening in sound. What else, and there's obviously just traditional musical literacies, ta's and ti-ti's and do's re's and mi's. We use sol fa's as literacy here which is not universally used but we use that and hand signs is physical isn't it?" (Ben, interview transcription)

While Ben discusses being able to write about music and also write the traditional music notation he presents this through a particular methodological approach to teaching and learning music – the Kodály method. Despite this singular philosophical approach Ben (interview transcription) does recognise that music has a "whole pile of sub-discourses and that it depends on what you need". He explains further saying that a sound engineer would need a completely different set of literacies than an orchestral musician, "So there are a wide range of literacies and I think that music shares that with every discipline". Simon provided a similar response in saying that music as a discipline is pluralistic. This was confirmed via Tim's response below:

"Multiple musicianships and we also have multiple representation systems, and so the representation system needs to suit the particular cultural framing of the music and so the important thing about that kind of notion of literacy which is how we represent music is that it's firstly appropriate and secondly is able to communicate as clearly as possible what's happening. And obviously common practice notation is a highly evolved form of that, you know computer programs like Sibelius and Finale have actually extended that practice in a lot of ways, because it works really well in the digital world. I mean literacy for a musician then is being able to communicate to

others through represented/through other symbolic forms”. (Tim, interview transcription).

Tim introduces us to extended practices of literacy in terms of “cultural framing” and via technology in a digital world, opening up the multiple ways that symbolic form can be represented.

The idea of communication through symbolic form is often discussed in the literature on the arts. Terms such as form, colour, texture, line, articulation, tenor etc. have inherent meaning and are imbedded in artistic practice. Whether in the early years of learning (Wright, 2010) or in higher education contexts students of the Arts are constantly applying these concepts to their artistic practice as well as their talk about art.

Nathan, when discussing Media Arts also moves the concept from ‘reading and writing’ of art to adding levels of higher level thinking and abstraction by expanding literacy to a form of critical literacy:

“If you use the term ‘media literacy’ just as a term and if you Google it online and, you know all of that sort of stuff then the kind of overwhelming sense that comes through is that media literacy is about teaching kids how to think critically about the media, it really is kind of about that... And so ultimately in that sense media literacy would, for many people, is a form of critical literacy... Media Studies has always had this focus on looking at, you know representations for example; let’s look at the ideological underpinnings of gender texts or...representations of race and class and all of those kinds of things”. (Nathan, interview transcription)

In drama, Nicole also took this notion of reading and writing a little further by saying that in regards to “the notion of literacy they have to be able to make as well as read, you know, so that’s essential” (Nicole, interview transcription). Making for Nicole, was the number one component of drama. This opinion was also expressed by the visual arts educators: “I think that gets back to being able to actually read the language of art and creating art” (Heather, interview transcription) however, Heather then goes on to indicate that the notion of reading art has to move students further into the discourse of art.

The second view of literacy therefore, was applying new vocabulary and arts concepts learnt critically when creating art. This allows a deeper, more analytical and expressive interpretation of arts practice. This view of literacy was process focused and acknowledged the importance and necessity of arts students being able to ‘read art’ through a critical lens. By this the educators unanimously indicated that as a musician/artist/film maker/actor/dancer one needs to be able to critique others work and be influenced by this work through their own

practice. In doing this they are engaging in the ways of knowing unique to the Arts as a discipline. They are participating in the discourse of art. This was when the respondents indicated that students became ‘arts literate’ or as Ben puts it: “Oh well that would be when they can function”. (Ben, interview transcription)

For Heather, in her work with secondary visual arts students, this ability to *function* was her desire for them to ultimately be “damned good gallery goers... and to do that they need to be literate in art and this idea of art and the Arts in general (Heather, interview transcription).

Heather explains further:

“An art literacy is understanding that a work doesn’t have to be real to be good necessarily or successful. Most students when they come in here realism is where they’re at, that’s what’s important to them so they’re either taking ‘nice’ photography so aesthetics is their number one, I guess criteria for a work...Being able to walk into a contemporary gallery and see works that are using particular materials or objects and so on and start to actually be able to piece that together into some sort of an analytical response to the work and then realising that they then need to back that up with research into if they’re really interested in what the work means, research into the artist into the background into the social, cultural aspects of the time”. (Heather, interview transcription)

Here Heather starts to expect students to not only know about particular mediums but also the sub-text of an artwork and what the cultural and social influences are on the work. Her comment that “a work doesn’t have to be real to be good or successful” (Heather, interview transcription) indicates some sort of ethereal component to art as an object but also the inherent practices that occur in and around art.

For music, expressive communication through sound was highly valued. The concept of musicality is one that has been discussed in the literature (Elliott, 1995; Vella, 2000) and is often acknowledged to be highly subjective. Tim however, eloquently describes what it means when a music student becomes literate:

“When the representation system becomes invisible... I mean the literacy enables you to analyse scores and look at concise forms of other people’s work which improves your work like; ‘my thoughts about musicianship are that I want to be more expressive tomorrow than I am today and I want to know how other people are more expressive by studying’ so it’s when it becomes a conversation a discourse when you are actually initiated into a discourse and you can actually communicate in that discourse”. (Tim, interview transcription)

Being able to participate into the discourse of the arts is integral for all arts students. It is not just about being able to create or make but rather know what influences you; how you master the technicalities of the artform; knowing the media/um with which you work; and understanding that all practices are embedded socially, culturally and politically.

Recognising these impacts were something that each of the participants (particularly those in the higher education context) spoke about. They were very much aware that while there is a certain sense of freedom associated with arts practice, institutional demands had distinct and unavoidable impacts on their practice as arts educators.

According to Georgia being ‘arts literate’ meant that one had to be ‘educated’ by having knowledge and being able to participate in the language.

“I think literacy in some ways it means, you know loosely it means that you’re educated a bit, about it, that you have some information, you have some knowledge. But also, like the power thing it means that you can share in a conversation and be part of it, rather than, you know, you’ve got a shared language”. (Georgia, interview transcription)

Interestingly, Georgia implicates the role of ‘power’ in literate practice. This aligns with an anthropological and critical view of literacy in that the concepts of reading and writing and being able to operate in a literate world is knowing and playing the game. Literacy can play a powerful role in arts practice. For some, art stands up against certain social ideologies; it makes a statement. Walton (1993) refers to particular literate skills and asks whether they assist people capacity to interrogate these practices – so as to “unmask the ideological operation of texts” (p.61). Artists and their practice have long questioned the status quo and have done so successfully via visual, aural and textural modes but in education systems there is a limit to how far one can go.

Nicole for example, also discusses the notion that literacy is about being educated but cautions that this is determined by policy agendas. Nicole’s experience as a curriculum writer had a large impact on her view of literacy.

“I think literacy in some ways it means, you know loosely it means that you’re educated a bit, about it, I’m also very/highly conscious being a curriculum writer that what we would call ‘literacy’ is what we have given access to, as part of the curriculum, you know. So any of our students, like the students here in Queensland schools would be highly unlikely to be regarded at literate in terms of a performance of Wayang Kulit or (Street Wayang) in Asia, do you know, because our notion of literacy, apart from being framed by those process and by/is the elements and convention etcetera that we choose and select to expose our students to over a period

of ten or twelve years at schooling, are constrained by our own preconceptions of what is important to learn about that particular artform. So our notion of literacy in this sort of Western, you know society is not necessarily transferable to what would be regarded as dramatic literacy in another culture”. (Nicole, interview transcription)

In this sense Nicole acknowledged that the types of literacy students experience in the classroom are those that they are allowed to engage in or given access to. This is interesting to note in the arts particularly as issues such as classification and ratings of particular media limit what younger students are able to watch but also the types of philosophical approaches that are consciously chosen to frame arts curriculum documents may also limit the types of literacies and experiences that students are able to be exposed to in the arts.

Here multimodality featured and the fact that not all communication is reliant on the linguistic mode. Being literate in the arts was being able to show meaning via a number of modes including: visual, aural, gestural and spatial. This was described as being a one of the benefits of the arts. The arts educators acknowledged that artistic practice and interaction precedes the notion of literacy itself and in this sense the arts are able to provide opportunities for children and arts students to express themselves through artistic practice and experiences (Dewey, 1934).

“The term literacy frames, is a term which seems to appropriated or colonised what we would call, you know in aesthetics we’d call ‘symbolic form’ so I’d personally rather speak about symbolic form than literacy because I think that symbolic form precedes literacy and literacy names the symbolic form in some way so it actually precedes it – so the experience precedes the open naming of it”. (Tim, interview transcription)

It was through such views that the respondents also talked about the aspect of identity.

### ***The importance of identity: personal, social and cultural***

The notion of identity was prominent in the interviews. As an artist an important phase of learning is the transition from amateur to professional or novice to expert. In the two contexts of secondary and higher education this may mean different things however, there was consensus that the ultimate goal for the arts teachers was for their students to have a clear view of their own personal identity as an artist whether professional or someone with high level expert knowledge about art and its associated literacies and practices. Aside from learning about oneself through art the interviewees discussed the relevance and integral nature that both a social and cultural identity has in artistic practice and engagement in the discourse of art.

“As an artist it’s important for them to know where they’re coming from, so know who they are as an artist, what actually makes them tick, what’s important to them so

whether its issues that are important to them whether it's very self-driven...what I do is try and broaden their knowledge to encompass beyond themselves, so it's important they know themselves but then it's important to know what else is out there as well and who else is out there and how, for example, culture impacts a reading of a work and how it impacts the delivery of that work to an audience as well, you know depending on where its being displayed". (Heather, interview transcription)

Critical to the journey to becoming an artist is the process of self-discovery. This is often achieved through constant referral to others' work, investigating impacts on the student's own practice, and continuing this process throughout their career as an artist.

"They need to be able to critically respond to artwork as well as make artwork, okay, so, and take meaning from that to drive their own work forward. So making those connections between their own practice and other people's practice as well is really important and contemporary trends and theories of art are really important as well. So applying those findings from critically responding to work I think is really important and knowing how that can then feed into their own work is equally important. So we don't just give them simple problems to solve, as I mentioned before the critical thinking comes in when the students can actually set really complex problems themselves to solve, so they might have a thought inspired by another artist and then they need to actually work out how to make that their own, how to actually learn from it, take that knowledge integrate it and apply it in very rich ways, to make it their own". (Heather, interview transcription)

In this sense the notion of identity through the creation or making process then becomes integral to the arts' student literate practice.

### ***Where words have no meaning***

When talking with the participants in this research, many had to at some point 'show' me what they meant as verbalising the information was not the most appropriate form of communication. Many arms were waved in the form of a paint brush dotting the canvas; or a limb being extended to show energy lines through the dancer's body; or moving from one position to the next to display a certain choreography; or showing particular facial expressions; or singing a particular phrase to represent meaning.

"The other thing with visual arts, and I think it's probably true with all the strands of the Arts, is that they have this other amazing power that sometimes I don't think there's even words for but, but you can feel it...they have the power to make you feel dumb and stupid, and like people who are otherwise considered highly intelligent people will go 'Ooh I don't know what to say about that painting'". (Georgia, interview transcription)

Georgia again points to the concept of ‘power’ by highlighting that actually having the knowledge allows students to be able to talk about Art and therefore making them more ‘intelligent’ or articulate in the language of art. However, there are times where you cannot talk or write about it but rather ‘feel’ it. Georgia explains that referring to other artists’ work and being able to not only discuss it but let it influence your own practice helps create this feeling of power. Additionally, particular artworks or artists were referred to where the interviewees wanted to emphasise a point that they were explaining further.

“Have a look at Bonnard, here I’ve got a book of Bonnard’s work, have a look at how he’s done that tree”. (Georgia, interview transcription)

“We all know that what is written on the page is only a small aspect of that which is performed so if you give someone a piece of Bach well there are no dynamic indications, the music doesn’t even indicate the instrument on which the piece is to be played or the tempo, that’s all left to the performer”. (Ben, interview transcription)

“Try this colour on there instead of that colour’ or ‘try putting more background there’ or ‘try that colour beside that colour’ or ‘see how that goes this way – when you actually look at it does it go that way or does it go this way’”. (Georgia, interview transcription)

Such conversation leaves room for the creative or aesthetic aspect of learning and teaching in the arts. While there are certain symbolic representations available in the arts these are always interpreted by the performers/creators to make certain meaning. As Ben describes while there are basic guides to what should be played by the musician it is ultimately up to them as to how to express this information. This is often executed through multiple modes.

Multimodal approaches to knowing doing and being in the arts are prevalent. When the respondents were asked about which modes they used in their teaching they unanimously answered: “All of them”.

“All. See, I mean that’s one of the other things about drama it ‘easily’ uses all, because all are integral to it, it’s not a matter of; oh let’s use some visual stimulus, you know it’s just; visual, aural, gestural, proxemic, paralinguistics, projections, light, sound, you know bodies in space, levels”. (Nicole, interview transcription)

“Modality - it’s got to be audio, it’s got to be visual, it’s got to be kinaesthetic, it’s got to be all of those ways – and it’s not got to be sitting down and listening just alone”. (Tim, interview transcription)

Being able to express information through a variety of communicative forms is something that can empower students in the Arts. But as Georgia explains it can also make the teaching process a powerful experience also.

“[This] underlies my understanding of what makes powerful teaching and learning”. (Georgia, interview transcription)

### **Discussion and implications**

The arts have a unique relationship with literacy that no other disciplinary area does. This relationship is inherently a positive conversational one. Arts-literacy dialogues enable students to express meaning in ways that are distinct to arts practice. It has been argued that there are two views of literacy taken by arts educators. The first is being able to read and write about art from a critical perspective and the second, creation of art itself. These views of course interrelate, interact and interchange with each other regularly. One is not privileged over the other but rather inform each other.

Within each of the five art forms of Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts, distinct vocabulary, language and symbolic form exist. Common terms such as form, tenor, articulation, structure, shape, colour and line have well defined yet different meanings and applications in these subject areas. As a student of the arts it is important to build up knowledge of the technical language associated with its practices but then also know how to apply these in critical and evaluative discourse. This is often done by educators through the use of 'art' (a painting, an image, a recording, a script, a sculpture etc). Such artworks are used as an impetus to engage students in expressing opinion through the written word in the form of assignments, personal essays, reviews, persuasive text or other such genres of writing.

Once students are initiated into the discourse of understanding and critiquing art using relevant terminology a second notion of literacy comes into play – when the students themselves become artists. Of course arts making can happen before this but it is when the first informs the latter that students become more literate in the arts. This is often undertaken through the use of multiple modes and multiple literacies or representations to learning and teaching the arts. It is through expressive communicative devices such as embodiment, movement, sound, visuality and so forth that are extraordinary and empowering. And what makes this knowledge even more profound is that each and every one of the five art forms has their own individual methods and theories associated with their artistic practice.

In dance having an awareness and in-depth understanding of one's body – its potential and limitations; energised and relaxed techniques; the separation between the dancer and the person – are integral to the journey in becoming a dancer. Similarly, in drama knowing one's body and where it can take you in a staged context, communicating with others, but also drawing on others' past and present work is vitally important to theatrical experience and knowledge. The media arts enable students to become analytical thinkers in today's world of mass media, film and entertainment. Being able to critically question the social, cultural and political content and context in which media is initiated, created and displayed allows induction into the creative class of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the same way music permits access to



contemporary practice in working with and critiquing the various uses and organisation of sound. Having a command of musical vocabulary and a knowledge of a range of social and cultural contexts engages students and invites them into a diverse set of auralities to perform and compose. And finally, visual arts through the use and exploration of colour, line, form, and texture, students can express who they are and what they feel about the world around them through the creation of artworks.

While there were clear differences in the practice of each art form investigated there were an overwhelming number of similarities and overlaps in the approaches to and conceptualisation of literate practice in each of the arts areas. Literate practice in this sense is the ability to ‘function’, as Ben so well put it, in the particular art form in question. Knowing that the arts have not only a distinct body of knowledge but also ways of expressing these is vitally important in education practice. If we fail to recognise this value then the teaching of literacy and initiation and engagement in literate practice will continue to privilege more concrete and essentially measurable conceptions, methods, and skills through assessment in educational contexts. It has been shown that artistic practice and research is powerfully transformational. If we deprive children of these experiences there is potential for teaching and learning to be extremely detrimental to well-being and education of a ‘whole’ person.

### **Conclusion**

Despite some research that has investigated the unique relationship between the arts and literacy they tend to privilege either the arts over literacy or literacy over the arts. A meaningful dialogue between the two enables us to see what literacy looks like in the arts and also what it means to be arts literate. Not only are arts teachers responsible for engaging their students to critically read and write about art they also act as guides and mentors slowly drawing them into the world of becoming an ‘artist’. In this sense literate practice in the arts is as much a ‘socially and culturally situated practice’ as it is a personal endeavour.

Engaging in arts practice allows students to discover themselves through creative expression and in powerfully meaningful ways. In becoming arts literate they are able to communicate about others artworks: the social, cultural, political etc. implications associated with the work; the medium and also the choices made by the artist and why; whether or not they feel it is effective or not; and ultimately how this work impacts on their own artistic work and capacity. Continuing to view literacy from the mono-symbolic/expressive/modal stance will continue to de-value the ways in which arts teachers, students and professionals work and communicate on their own and with others. Therefore it is important to now envisage an educational approach that not only makes judgments and base accountability on measurable and standardised skills, but rather, the impact that arts approaches have made on students’ lives.

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