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The Effects of Arts-Based Learning on Individual Well-Being and Organisational Change

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of arts-based learning (ABL) on individual well-being and organisational change. Through a literature review, the article explores the research evidence that showcases the various benefits of ABL. These benefits include improvements in physical health, enhanced psychological outcomes, increased employee creativity and motivation, fostering collaborative behaviour, effective team-building, and improved

communication with co-workers. The study provides a classification of ABL methods and emphasises the role of arts in organisational learning and creating innovative, healthy, and collaborative workplaces.

Keywords: arts-based learning, arts participation, well-being, organisational change, artistic interventions

JEL Classification Codes: M53, M14, I31

Introduction

The interaction with art differs from every day, ordinary experiences. When individuals describe their encounters with artworks, they often refer to a complex mix of emotions and psychological states, and sometimes, even profound and cathartic feelings that leave a lasting impact on their lives (Pelowski et al. 2016). At the same time, more and more studies show that art may have long-term effects on individual physical health, mental health, well-being and organisational change. As a result, art and culture have increasingly been included in therapeutic approaches to enhance individual health conditions and used by different types of organisations (such as companies, NGOs, local governments, schools, etc.) to stimulate changes at both the individual and collective level.

In this paper, we discuss the impacts of artistic participation and arts-based interventions. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, we analyse the research evidence that demonstrates the wide variety of art-related benefits associated with art, ranging from improved physical health and enhanced psychological outcomes to increased employee creativity, more effective team-building, and improved communication with co-workers. The study primarily focuses on the *arts-based learning (ABL)*, an approach that emphasises the role of art in organisational learning and highlights the potential of artistic interventions in fostering more innovative and healthy workplaces. The article is structured as follows. First, we examine the positive effects of engagement with the arts, focusing on receptive (passive) cultural participation. Next, we explain the ABL approach and describe its effects on business organisations and their employees. Then, we analyse real-life examples of artistic interventions and provide a typology of ABL methods. Finally, we discuss the shortcomings of the existing evidence and suggest recommendations for future research.

The wellbeing effects of participation in the arts

Researchers have been long interested in exploring the effects of artistic and creative activities on health and well-being. Various forms of cultural and artistic participation and engagement have been examined, distinguishing between participatory engagement – which involves active participation and creation of visual arts, drama, music, or other art forms – and receptive cultural engagement, which refers to attending arts-related events and venues such as museums, galleries, concert halls, and theatres (Tymoszuk et al., 2020; Węziak-Białowolska, 2016).

Salutogenic effects of creative, artistic, and cultural activities have been well recognised. Previous research on health effects of these activities has shown positive associations with well-being, including life satisfaction, a sense of purpose in life, and positive affect (Koch et al., 2019; Renton et al., 2012; Valentine & Evans, 2001; Wang et al., 2020; Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2018). These activities have also been associated with a lower risk of mental illnesses (Fancourt et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020), improved quality of life (Kaltenegger et al., 2019; Nenonen et al., 2014), increased empathy, and enhanced social connectedness (Hacking et al., 2008; McCarthy et al., 2004; Novak-Leonard et al., 2014; Polzella & Forbis, 2014), among other positive outcomes. Regarding physical health outcomes, there is evidence of associations between cultural and artistic participation and engagement and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease (Renton et al., 2012) as well as reduced all-cause, cardiovascular disease, and cancer mortality (Bavishi et al., 2016; Bygren et al., 2009; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019; Konlaan et al., 2002; Väänänen et al., 2009).

Longitudinal evidence suggests that more frequent engagement with receptive arts, such as visiting museums, galleries, and exhibitions, but not necessarily theatre, concerts, and opera, is associated with decreased subsequent loneliness (Tymoszuk et al., 2020). Cross-sectional associations have also been reported between visiting museum and art exhibition, attending concerts, being in theatre and cinema, and lower depression and anxiety scores (Cuyppers et al., 2012). Furthermore, evidence has shown that middle-aged and older adults who visit museums at least every few months have a lower incidence rate of dementia over a 10-year follow-up period compared to those who visit less-frequently (Fancourt et al., 2018).

Despite numerous examples of the beneficial effects of active and receptive engagement with arts-based and cultural activities on health and well-being, the specific pathways through which they lead to improvement remain unclear. However, a recent systematic review by Fancourt et al. (2021) shed light on some potential mechanisms. First, psychologically arts-related activities have been found to positively influence affective states, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being,

resilience as well as psychological capabilities and resources, sense of self, and personal transformation. Biological mechanisms involve the reactions of endocrine, immune, and central nervous systems to arts-based activities, which in turn affect the multisystem biological responses, including the cardiometabolic system, and physical performance. Third, social mechanisms are related to social component of arts-based activities and their impact on improving social relationships and building social recourses. Fourth, behavioural mechanisms explain how arts-based activities can contribute to the development of habits, individual behavioural decisions, behavioural drive, and behavioural development, as well as enhance behavioural group processes. At individual level, these mechanisms can lead to modifications in health behaviours, which at the group level, can positively improve health care delivery and performance. While these mechanisms can work in isolation, synergistic effects are more likely to occur.

Recent research suggests a social gradient in arts and cultural engagement. To ensure that people can benefit from the salutogenic effects of these activities, it is crucial to promote equal access to arts and cultural events, programmes, and venues (Fancourt et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2020).

Arts-based learning

With the growing body of evidence showing the positive effects of the arts on psychological outcomes and cognitive abilities, there has been an increasing interest in using artistic interventions to enhance learning and development in non-artistic domains. Art-based Learning (ABL) refers to the purposeful use of the arts as an educational tool to enhance employee skills in areas such as creativity, leadership, interpersonal communication, and teamwork. ABL has been incorporated into professional training programmes across various fields. For instance, in nursing education, ABL has been widely utilized to foster learning abilities, support reflective practice, increase empathy levels, and improve attitudes toward others (Rieger et al. 2016). Art-based training using theatre methods has been particularly effective in fostering social skills and interpersonal competencies (Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska 2022). Theatre acting requires individuals to understand the motivations and mental states of others, as well as to be sensitive to their emotions and states (Smith, 2006; Goldstein, 2009). Therefore, it is closely associated with emotional and cognitive empathy and can effectively contribute to the development of empathic skills.

ABL has gained popularity for fostering employee skills in business organisations. The value of art in business is associated with its ability to stimulate innovation,

enhance creativity as well as facilitate organisational change (O’Dea et al. 2020). Art and creativity are intrinsically interconnected, as artworks are both products and representations of the creative process. Artists are commonly perceived to possess higher levels of creativity compared to others and are considered the “creative core” of modern societies (Florida 2012).

Moreover, researchers in the field of creativity distinguish between “big C” creativity and “little c” creativity. “Big C” creativity pertains to eminent artists and inventors who produce outstanding artworks and make ground-breaking discoveries. On the other hand, “little c” creativity refers to the generation of “small” ideas and solutions in everyday life, such as creating a new recipe or teaching a dog a new trick (Merrotsky, 2013). While artistic production is associated with “big C” creativity, studies demonstrate that participation in artistic activities can also enhance creative everyday problem-solving contributing to “little c” creativity.

For example, An & Youn (2018) conducted an experimental study that demonstrated a significant effect of participation in art-related activities on performance in idea-generation tasks, such as product design and brand-naming. In their study, while the artistic activities in the experimental group were not directly oriented towards business-relevant problem-solving (participants were asked to look at prints of artworks painted by Vincent van Gogh or write about one’s own thoughts and feelings after reading the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind”), experiencing the works of art triggered a sense of inspiration and motivation, which in turn facilitated performance on creative tasks.

This finding suggests that creativity elicited through the experience of art can transfer to domains outside of the arts and be effectively used in business-related contexts. Similar effects were demonstrated by Felsman et al. (2020), who evaluated the effects of theatre improvisation workshops on divergent thinking. Theatre improvisation is a group activity where performers spontaneously create situations and action without prior preparation or scripts, emphasising shared responsibility and mutual support. Effective performance in theatre improvisation requires active listening, openness to others’ ideas, and building upon them. In two experiments conducted by Felsman and colleagues (2020), participants either took part in theatre improvisation exercises (experimental group) or engaged in social interactions presumed to rely strictly on social scripts and schemas (control group). To measure changes in divergent thinking, participants were asked to list as many different uses for a “remote control” and “a paperclip” as possible before and after participating in the workshop. Additionally, assessments of uncertainty tolerance and affective well-being were also conducted. The results showed that participating in the improvisational theatre compared to other social interactions, not only improved divergent thinking but also boost positive affect and enhanced uncertainty tolerance.

Among various ABL methods, improvisational theatre has gained significant prominence in business organisations due to its capacity to enhance creativity at both the individual and collective level (Nisula & Kianto 2018). Research shows that providing employees with training in theatrical improvisation can enhance important competences such as openness to new ideas, support for others' ideas, and active listening. As a result, it can stimulate collective creativity, which involves the collaborative generation of ideas and solutions based on the interdependent contributions of individuals and teams (Nisula & Kianto 2018).

Furthermore, active theatre participation has been shown to enhance psychological traits closely associated with human creativity, such as empathy and self-esteem (Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska 2020) and thus indirectly improve creativity levels. Empathy and self-esteem were found to have a twofold connection with creativity. On the one hand, studies demonstrate that creative individuals tend to be more sensitive to external stimuli, allowing them to accurately perceive and understand the emotions and feelings of others (Carlozzi et al., 1995). On the other hand, individuals with high levels of self-esteem have been found to exhibit greater creativity. Self-confident individuals are more willing to think out of the box and express their unique ideas (Cantero et al., 2016; Cast & Burke, 2002; Williams, 2002). In a recent meta-analytic study by Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska (2022), significant effects of active theatre participation, including techniques such as drama therapy or improvisational theatre, were observed on social psychology outcomes such as empathy, communication, tolerance, and social interactions. The results of the study suggest that participating in theatre activities can indirectly enhance collective creativity by improving social orientation.

Arts-based learning in business: examples

Companies have increasingly employed arts-based learning techniques to foster employee skills and facilitate organisational change (O'Dea et al. 2020). While there is a wide variety of ABL methods and techniques, three broad categories can be distinguished: (1) *Art in the office*, (2) *Transfer of artistic skills*, and (3) *Arts-led training*.

Art in the office refers to the installation of artworks in the workspace and providing opportunities for art-inspired employee interactions. For example, Unilever, a global consumer products company, introduced an art-based learning programme called "Catalyst" to encourage creativity and risk-taking among managers (Boyle and Ottensmeyer 2005). The company purchased an art collection and initiated a series of art-focused interventions. Staff members were involved in selecting the paintings and curated the hanging. Furthermore, artists transformed social areas

of the company to challenge employees' perceptions of their working environment and inspire discussions about new product design ideas.

Displaying art in the workspace can have a positive effect on employee performance, mood, and physical well-being. Research on the relationship between office interior design, and physical, psychological, and social well-being indicates that working in aesthetically pleasing environments leads to fewer distractions, reduced stress, improved interpersonal relationships at work, and higher levels of job satisfaction compared to working in aesthetically unpleasant office spaces (Colenberg et al. 2021; Vilnai-Yavetz et al. 2005). Meinel's et al. (2017) systematic literature review on creativity-enhancing workspaces has shown that artworks and decorative elements in the office inspire creatives in their daily work and foster generation of new ideas.

Transfer of artistic skills refers to the use of competencies specific to artistic professions in non-artistic domains. For example, acting techniques are powerful tools for business communication and leadership (Ciecierska-Zajdel 2019). Business organisations such as the Boston Consulting Group, Johnson & Johnson, and CitiGroup have recognised the opportunity of using those skills to enhance business performance. They have employed professional actors to train their managers on improving the quality of conference presentations (Buswick 2005). During these workshops, managers learn to develop a charismatic stage presence, master body language, use their voice expressively, and manage stage fright.

Another form of artistic skills transfer are artists-in-residence programmes (AiR). The aim of AiR is to invite an artist, or a group of artists, to work in a company (typically in hi-tech or IT sectors) for a determined period. The goal is to create a new product or inspire organisational change by engaging with employees (O'Dea et al. 2020). Companies such as Microsoft, Adobe, Facebook, or Google integrate the artist's creative mindset into their R&D departments. This challenges the status quo and stimulates the creation of new solutions or innovative approaches to problem-solving. Concurrently, artists get access to tools, resources, and world-leading technology, enabling them to develop their own projects. For example, under "Experiments with Google" programme, artists received stipends and access to Google's AI platforms and other creative tools to carry out artistic projects at the intersection of art, artificial intelligence, and machine learning.

Arts-led training refers to artistic interventions used at the workplace as a strategic method to boost creativity, disruptive thinking, and idea generation, as well as to handle organisational crisis and the uncertainty of innovation (O'Dea et al. 2020). While the *transfer of artistic skills* concerns the "direct" transferability of skills and techniques from the domain of art to business organisations (e.g., acting techniques to enhance public speaking), the goal of *arts-led training* is different. It aims to stimulate employee creativity and self-expression, increase workers'

engagement, or boost social communication in a more “indirect” way: through artistic experience.

Artistic interventions designed to facilitate creativity and organisational change can take many forms. Improvisational theatre and dance workshops have been used to stimulate innovative competence in a variety of sectors and industries, ranging from banking to local governments (Nisula & Kianto 2018; Reinhold 2017; Yams 2018). Projective techniques, which refer to using art to foster collective reflection on work-related issues (e.g., employees discussing leadership and power relations using the works of Shakespeare or the jazz band metaphor), have been implemented by companies such as McGraw-Hill to explore new perspectives and initiate change (Seifter 2005; Taylor & Ladkin 2009). Artists-led innovation sessions, where performing and visual artists are employed to facilitate the generation of ideas (often referred to as “hackatons”), have become prominent in technology design companies (Sandberg 2019, O’Dea 2020). A study by Goldman et al. (2016) has shown that early career STEM professionals who participated in an arts-based innovation training displayed a significant increase in individual collaborative behaviours within a team context. These behaviours included emotionally intelligent behaviour, mutual respect, active following, trust in moving toward a solution, and transparency in communication, compared to those who undertook traditional innovation training.

Conclusion

There has been a growing interest in arts-based learning, both among researchers and business practitioners. Numerous studies on health and well-being impacts of art-based interventions indicate positive effects. At the same time, only a few of those studies are grounded in rigorous experimental research. Most of the existing evidence remains anecdotal and is limited to specific interventions and settings. Despite considerable enthusiasm for arts-based learning (ABL), there is a paucity of rigorous evaluation studies in this field. This is partly due to the relative novelty of ABL methods, which are still not fully understood. Moreover, there is a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate measures and assessment techniques to be used (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013). Additionally, some aspects of art-based learning, such as the wellbeing of artists who conduct the interventions and deal with the tensions between art and business worlds, are almost entirely overlooked in current research (O’Dea 2020).

Therefore, further research is still needed, especially considering the rising popularity of social prescribing. This approach recommends health-beneficial activities including engagement with arts-based activities (Drinkwater et al., 2019). Future

researchers should focus on developing methods and instruments for evaluating ABL. Policymakers should also promote arts-driven business innovations by crafting policies and programmes to support collaborations between art and business.

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