

**JUST IMAGINE:****PLACING CULTURE AND IMAGINATIVE EDUCATION AT THE HEART OF MODERN SOCIETY****MAX WYMAN OC**

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**KEYWORDS**

*Arts and Culture, New Approach, Public Policy Framework, Economic, Social and Individual Wellbeing, Sense of Place, Diversity and Inclusion, Innovation*

**ABSTRACT**

*Common attitudes to arts and culture in Canada and other developed countries in the West suggest that its proponents have difficulty establishing the sector's importance relative to pressing social issues such as health, the environment and homelessness. Its low ranking in public policy priorities parallels the comparative neglect of the humanities in general, particularly in the area of education.*

*However, compelling arguments exist to support the view that the cultural sector merits a renewed and increased commitment of support in order to realise its potential contribution to a prosperous and harmonious participatory democracy. The situation calls for a re-evaluation of the sector's values for society and a reframing of the arguments for its support.*

*A new approach to education – integrating creative activity into the learning process – is central to this vision. Simultaneously, renewed effort is necessary to build the public will to drive changes in public policy that will allow citizens to appreciate and enjoy the full benefits – personal, economic, social and educational – of engagement with creative activity.*

*Both these ends will be served by a sustained campaign of advocacy that takes the cause to the streets and encourages every citizen to recognise the sector's value and demand to be empowered to take advantage of its individual and communal benefits.*

In recent decades, considerations of the arts and culture as contributors to the economic, social and creative wealth of Canada and the personal enrichment of its citizens have played only a minor role in Canada's public policy framework. A common attitude to the sector was summed up recently by a Toronto columnist: "Music, books, movies, plays, paintings and the like can be extraordinarily meaningful parts of our lives and relationships. I just don't happen to think that the government should pay for them."<sup>i</sup> The purpose of this paper is to propose a new approach that would embed considerations of arts and culture within the public policy framework and enlist political and public support for a new deal placing culture at the heart of the socio-political agenda.

Federal, provincial and municipal support for a wide range of arts and cultural activities in Canada has been provided since the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts half a century ago. Quebec, in particular, has an extensive network of support mechanisms for what it calls its "national cultural policy". The excellence of the work of the Canadian creative community is widely recognised, and artists as diverse as Margaret Atwood, Atom Egoyan, Michael Ondaatje, Jeff Wall, Arthur Erickson and Karen Kain command international respect.

However, as a nation Canada appears to place a low priority on support for the arts, culture and creative engagement. Despite relentless lobbying by the professional cultural community, there has been no sustained political effort at the federal level to embed it in public policy as a significant contributor to economic, social and individual wellbeing. At election time, the issue rarely surfaces, and while citizens responding to polls regularly rank arts and culture among their highest priorities, they equally routinely relegate them to the bottom of the list when spending plans are set. The former director of the Canadian Opera Company, the late Richard Bradshaw, one of the most vociferous advocates of substantially increased public funding, used to try to shame government into action by commenting that the entire Canada Council budget was roughly equal to the amount given to the three opera companies in Berlin, whose 3.5 million residents also have access to seven orchestras, fifty theatres, 170 museums and 300 galleries.

It is time to devise a new approach, one that will enlist the understanding, goodwill and clear intent of the broad Canadian citizenry in bringing about substantial policy change, and empower citizens to take full advantage of a significant benefit that belongs to all – to treat the arts and culture "like water," to borrow musician David Bowie's happy phrase.<sup>ii</sup> This paper will examine the arguments that are commonly used in support of this repositioning, and suggest an approach on two fronts:

- a campaign of advocacy and consciousness-raising that highlights the values to the individual of engagement with creative activity and positions it as an essential element of a healthy and productive society;
- a radical rethinking of the educational curriculum, restoring a central role to creative activity as both a subject and a learning tool.

The thread that unites these approaches is one of our greatest natural resources, the human imagination.

Those who seek to improve conditions for cultural and artistic activities often build their case around three broadly-based arguments related to the quality of life and the added values that engagement with culture brings to society:

- the economic value, both in direct contributions to the public purse via the labour force and associated services, and through indirect prosperity generated by the clustering of the “creative class” in cities and regions;
- the social value in terms of liveability, social harmony and community identity, as well as reduced crime and improved health;
- the educational value in terms of creativity, learning skills and academic performance.

The argument for culture as an instrument of identity and prestige has also become popular in areas of government dealing with international trade and commerce.

Though some might take issue with the commodification of culture that is implied in these arguments, they are prominent elements in the armoury of justification that is used to address the vexed and vexing issue of cultural support. They can all be described as instrumental benefits, in the sense that art and culture is treated as a tool for the generation of economic growth or social improvement. This has caused significant in-fighting within the cultural sector over whether or not it is even appropriate to argue the merits of the cultural sector in these instrumental terms.

One recent study points out that the social and political pressures of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – pressures that developed what became known in the U.S. as the “culture wars” – forced arts advocates to set forth arguments and evidence proving that the arts promote economic and social benefits that contribute to political agendas.<sup>iii</sup> This pressure for “justification” has led the British writer and arts manager John Tusa to define the plight of the cultural sector in this way: “The arts stand naked and without defence in a world where what cannot be measured is not valued; where what cannot be predicted will not be risked ... where whatever cannot deliver a forecast outcome is not undertaken.”<sup>iv</sup>

Certainly, an inherent problem exists in trying to defend and promote something whose worth often cannot be defined and measured by conventional means such as cost-benefit analysis. And it is not uncommon to hear the assertion that those working in the field of arts and culture should live or die, like those working in any other business, on their success in the market-place. In an era of economic uncertainty and soaring costs in areas such as health, education and public safety, it is also easy for governments to argue that culture is a dispensable frill. Going short on indulgences in times of restraint is something we can all understand. (Contemporary attitudes to culture have a disturbing sameness throughout the West. Even in Berlin, another great musical force, the conductor-pianist Daniel Barenboim, has had to fight to stop cuts.)

However, strong arguments can be made for the claim that engagement with the arts, culture and creative activity cannot be assessed solely by common business metrics, that it in fact delivers value both for the individual and for society that far outweigh its cost, and that, far from being an either-or choice, it makes clear sense to include arts and culture as an essential social service and as a vital contributor to the sustainability of the societies in which we live.

The 2007 report from Canada’s External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities made the important point that the discussion of sustainability has so far omitted culture, though it argues: “We easily understand the importance of economic, social and environmental sustainability to the wellbeing of and future of our cities and communities; these three dimensions are familiar in most discussions of sustainability. Important as they are, they do

not address some of the fundamental issues of how to create sustainable communities, such as developing civic pride, creating a sense of place and fostering diversity and inclusion. Cultural sustainability ties together the other three dimensions, and is essential to community success.”<sup>v</sup>

Others have written extensively about this “four pillar” model of sustainability. Australian cultural analyst and commentator John Hawkes, for example, argues that effective public planning must be developed on a framework that includes a cultural perspective as well as the traditional considerations of environmental responsibility, economic health and social equity.<sup>vi</sup> The message is clear. As we come to a new and better understanding of the effects and significance of cultural activity on social harmony, the economy and public health, it becomes time to take the next step and incorporate that understanding into public policy.

### **But what does it mean to me?**

When we discuss the role and treatment of the artist and creative activity in modern society, it is important to remember the significant effect that engagement with cultural expression has on the individual – the way it provokes us into new ways of thinking. Cultural activity is an essentially human, individual engagement. It is the way we look for the truths that lie at the interior of our being. It offers an alternative path to wisdom. We must also never forget that essence of absolute joy, unjustified by any reason other than its existence, that creative engagement provides. The comfort, provocation and puzzlement that occurs when an individual engages with art – as a watcher, a reader, a listener, a creator – is intensely personal. This is why we engage with art in the first place, and why, as individuals, we give it value.

Of course, the arts and culture also enrich the individual in many other ways. They can build self-esteem, empower risk-taking and provide a means to make public statements. By reflecting aspects of life and society, they help to explain who we are, to make our identity visible. They give us context, individually and collectively. They show us different points of view and different experiences. They often ask questions we might not voluntarily engage with, uncomfortable questions we might not be able to handle in any other way. They encourage us to consider our moral priorities, to imagine alternatives, and to integrate moral sensibility into that process.

Seen in this way, culture sounds dauntingly ephemeral and abstract, which may be one of the reasons that modern society – certainly modern North American society – has consigned the work of its artists to the fringe of the public agenda. It does not impinge on our daily lives.

Another reason may be its apparent inaccessibility, and (related to that) its tendency to challenge our assumptions and make us think in new ways about the world and the way we live in it. We have allowed culture and the arts to be defined by their remoteness – as if difficulty of access is somehow a virtue. Many are uncomfortable with the institutional cultural settings we have built, and puzzled by the works that are created by our artists for display both in those settings and in the public spaces outside. The artist tends to use unorthodox, often intuitive means to question the status quo, and while society as a whole can be alerted to new ways of thinking about how we organise, govern and explore our lives together, the individual members of that society can find the process discomfiting. Creating new comfort zones of understanding and acceptance for art and culture is therefore crucial to embedding culture into broad social policy.

Another stumbling block along the way to centralising culture in our social and political agenda is the uneasy relationship that has always existed between the arts and government. It is the nature of politicians and bureaucrats to be suspicious of artists and what they get up to, since subversion (in the form of examining alternatives to the status quo) is an essential element of their activities. On top of which, there's the ongoing problem of difficult art, and the way certain politicians like to foment public ill-will over this or that piece of supposedly offensive artwork.

### **IMAGINATION: THE KEY INGREDIENT**

For those who believe that every possible avenue of persuasion must be explored in order to surmount these stumbling blocks, the instrumental arguments are essential equipment. But if we were to look for a single unifying reason to place cultural activity at the core of our lives together, it would rest on the importance of the individual imagination to the continued success of the human experiment. The need to foster the development of the ability to think creatively is a fundamental requirement in the imagination economy of the new century, for the wellbeing both of society itself and of the individual wishing to participate productively.

As a species, we are under intensifying pressure to come up with innovative ideas and solutions to the challenges of the world we live in: mass poverty, environmental degradation, global health threats, genetics, issues of human rights, terrorism ... the list of challenges addressed by writers such as Ronald Wright, Jane Jacobs, Daniel H. Pink and John Ralston Saul is large and ever-growing. These challenges are forcing us to find new ways to find solutions, and it is increasingly understood that scientific truth alone is not enough. We need to develop not only the ability to reason, but the ability to imagine other alternatives.

“Innovation isn't linear,” says Queensland University of Technology professor Brad Haseman. “It operates in a complex system, and that's where artists live and work. Innovation is what they do with the symbolic forms they create ... artists also have greater understanding about risk-taking, about analysis and interpretation, approaching it quite differently from the way science approaches risk ... it's the way artists engage with curiosity that makes them innovative.”<sup>vii</sup>

To build a society of innovation and imagination, one reasonable assumption might be that we would lay the foundations through our system of education. Many studies have shown how exposure to the arts, and imaginative education that incorporates creative activity into the learning process (that is, learning *through* the arts, as well as *in* and *about* the arts), helps achieve a wide range of learning goals, and seeds the development of involved and creative citizens. In Tucson, Arizona, for instance, results from a three-year study of classes in city elementary schools showed children who participated in Opening Minds Through the Arts, a programme that integrates arts education with the core curriculum, scored up to 25 per cent better in reading, writing and math tests than children in classes without those programmes.<sup>viii</sup>

A young person who is exposed to the arts at school also has an enhanced potential to become a more creative, imaginative, empathetic, expressive, confident, self-reliant and critically thinking human being. Kieran Egan, the Canadian education professor whose theories form the basis for the work of the Imaginative Education Research Group at Simon Fraser University, argues that “attention to the imagination is a better means to achieve the ends

desired by those who currently direct public schooling” and that “the sidelined and neglected ‘frill’ is actually the most effective tool we have for efficient and effective learning.”<sup>x</sup>

It is increasingly recognised that teachers, artists, parents and students themselves have a significant role to play in promoting arts and learning both within our schools and within community-based educational programs. These assertions were reinforced by the findings of the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2006. The Roadmap for Arts Education produced by that conference<sup>x</sup> affirms that education in and through the arts stimulates cognitive development and can make learning more relevant to the needs of modern societies. In the words of one participant in a province-wide “arts summit” in British Columbia in 2006, “If we do not provide an arts-enriched education, we are denying not only our youth the joy and fulfilment that a passion for the arts can bring, we are robbing society of an essential creative driving force.”<sup>xi</sup>

These benefits are widely understood within the education community, but a number of significant challenges – among them conflicting demands for “basics” education, and the difficulties encountered in trying to standardise the measurement of imaginative activity – obstruct significant curriculum change. In addition, despite the growing body of evidence of the value of arts and learning that has emerged worldwide in recent years, no systematised approach to its teaching yet exists in our education system.

To complicate the situation further, the whole notion of education *through* the arts, using imaginative activity as a learning tool to deliver the benefits described above, is still imperfectly understood. Educators are reluctant to take on the task of teaching subjects or teaching in ways for which they have not been adequately prepared. And, in a system dependent on grading students on the basis of measurable results, there is an understandable resistance to taking on something as difficult to measure as creativity and the imagination. Considerable research time is being devoted to the development of a means of evaluation that is less focused on the product and more on the process but which can still be accepted and used as a measuring tool.

What might be useful ways to create the necessary coalition of the willing? What might that campaign’s message be? How can it be encapsulated in a manner that is succinct enough for broad general consumption but nuanced enough to be applicable to the multifarious contexts within the cultural sector? How do we develop the public and political will to take full advantage of the potential benefits?

For the cultural sector to have any chance of achieving these transformative aims, it will be necessary to reframe the arguments in a way that will give the issue broader general appeal – to politicians, to bureaucrats, to educators and most specifically to the public at large. What is needed is a new trademark for cultural engagement – something that takes it out of the “Golden Castle of Culture” and into the marketplace, into the streets, into the parks, into our homes and our lives. Something that makes culture, once again, a vital force in our communities. As ordinary and as special as the provision of health services and clean water: a necessary part of our daily lives. Like sport.

Sport is an interesting example. We know we’re not all going to become professionals, but it is something everyone does. We’re not afraid of it. Sport is something everyone is comfortable with. The provision of a new signifier for culture that restores it to the public domain and gives it the grassroots connection that will ensure grass-roots buy-in

to this process will be key to the success of this campaign. Story-telling (not in the language of the academic hothouse, but in the language of the people) will be an integral element. Tell people *ideas*, lay out theory, and after a while their eyes glaze over. But tell them stories and they respond viscerally. Those are the bits of the argument that stick.

Some members of the cultural community look askance when language like this is employed. The influence of modern marketing is looked on with deep suspicion. But Mark Leonard of the Foreign Policy Centre in London, who helped re-brand the “olde” England of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Cool Britannia of the 21<sup>st</sup>, says the key to that success was “not flags and logos but defining a story that is unique to the country and rooted in reality.”

This enlarged recognition of the value of art in the community is going to be fundamental to winning broad public and political support for culture. The more it can be shown to be of value to the individual – not through abstract ideas like economic spin-offs and social enhancements, but through real, feel-good learning and growing experiences – the easier it will be for the ideas to take root.

It’s clear that humankind does have a great capacity for change, as has been demonstrated in recent decades by the change in public attitudes to the environment. It is a change that has come about not merely by the imparting of knowledge (global warming means sea levels will rise) but by the development of understanding and the valuing of wisdom (we will interpret that knowledge in ways that will enable us to make the necessary changes to the way we live). Once we understood the whales, we treated them differently. In fact, the environmental movement is an area that cultural activists might usefully study.

It is also important to recognise that the world continues to change – not least the media through which we communicate ideas. The online world is creating not only a new *forum* of discussion but a new *form* of discussion – an interchange of thoughts and ideas where everyone feeds off everyone else: a kind of ongoing collective reflection on life. This is something quite new in human experience, and something that is still evolving. These new uses of technology must become a prime tool in this campaign, distributing the stories and arguments via blogs, webcasts, discussion groups and other forms of networking. What is also needed is a stockpile of strategic intelligence and analysis – hard research to buttress the passionate assertion heard so often from the field.

What will influence the success of any sustained campaign to enlist public support will be the recognition by artists and the cultural community that they are part of a larger society, in every sense. The arts and culture sector does not exist in isolation, and it will be vital to establish partnerships across many other sectors – health, social justice, multiculturalism, immigration – in a holistic way. Connections should be established among ministries in government, and across different levels of government; and with business, education and special-interest agencies of all stripes.

In the same way, it will be vital to demonstrate individual value. Successful campaigns for social change (anti-smoking, and health through exercise, for example) have succeeded because they have shown personal benefits. Similar considerations are likely to apply in any sustained campaign for culture. While it might deliver, like the anti-smoking campaign, serious benefits for society at large, it will stand or fall on the value it can demonstrate for the individual.

The key will be to embrace rather than exclude. To let people realise they don't need a code to get through the door. To find ways to connect the professional community with the amateurs, with the culturally diverse – let people know that the local potters' guild show is as valuable as the opening at the national gallery.

To make culture part of everyday government discourse in this way, embedded in the standard processes of politics and bureaucracy, would be a serious step toward public ownership. Culture might then more clearly be seen as what it should always have been – as integral and as ordinary a part of civil society as health, as education, as hospitals and bridges. Like water.

Just imagine.

NOTE: *Factual and anecdotal evidence to support the claims made in this paper regarding the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of cultural activity can be found at:*

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[www.creativecity.ca](http://www.creativecity.ca)

The Canada Council for the Arts. [www.canadacouncil.ca](http://www.canadacouncil.ca)

The Canadian Conference of the Arts. [www.ccarts.ca](http://www.ccarts.ca)

The Centre of Expertise on Culture and Communities at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver  
[www.cultureandcommunities.ca](http://www.cultureandcommunities.ca)

Hill Strategies Research Inc. [www.hillstrategies.com](http://www.hillstrategies.com)

Demos: The Think Tank for Everyday Democracy. [www.demos.co.uk](http://www.demos.co.uk)

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“The absolute transformation of everything we ever thought about music will take place within 10 years, and nothing is going to be able to stop it,” said the prescient David Bowie in an interview with the *New York Times* (*David Bowie, 21st-Century Entrepreneur*, by Jon Pareles, June 9, 2002). “Music itself is going to become like running water or electricity.” “Music like water” – an idea that might at the time have sounded like so much stardust – has since become common shorthand for anticipated changes in copyright, authorship and intellectual property.

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