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The Art of Management

MBA & THE ARTS



By Wendy Amundson

Many MBA programs around the world are embracing arts-based learning as a means to help their students develop or enhance such important leadership qualities as insight, creativity, teamwork, and social responsibility. Once thought to be at the opposite ends of the personality scale, the “flaky, fluffy” world of artistry and the “rigid, rational” world of business are learning that there’s value in working together. There’s a reason, say proponents of arts-based management education, why successful business strategies are said to be the result of beautifully orchestrated plans.

Artists Taking Residence On MBA Campuses

At a growing number of MBA schools, you'll find arts-focused courses being taught side-by-side with more traditional business disciplines. At MIT's Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Mass., MBA students explore leadership styles by taking on roles in Shakespearean scenes. Students at McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management in Montreal are exposed to arts-based learning in their very first course, Global Leadership, which uses improvisational theatre actors, filmmakers, and other artists to spark their imaginations, learn the value of teamwork, and discover how business success and social concerns can go hand-in-hand. Clark University's Graduate School of Management has sent their MBA students into the community to analyze the creative economy of Worcester, Mass. And at the IEDC-Bled School of Management, the school's entire philosophy is arts-based, starting with the location and architecture of the school itself, which fosters creative thinking through its magnificent views of Slovenia's Lake Bled, and working and learning spaces that all feature prominent works of art.

Each of these schools has taken a different approach to incorporating arts-based learning into their MBA programs, but all are strong believers in the value of teaming the arts with business. There are dozens of additional examples from MBA programs around the world. Organizations have also sprung up to champion arts-based learning in management settings, including Americans for the Arts, Arts & Business UK, and the Arts, Aesthetics, Creativity, and Organization Research Network (AACORN).

Countering Economic Downturns With Arts-based Learning

What has caused this growing interest in arts-based learning as part of management education? Nick Nissley, dean of Business Technologies at Cincinnati State, tackled that question in his recent article in the *Journal of Business Strategy*, "Arts-based learning at work: economic downturns, innovation upturns, and the eminent practicality of arts in business."¹

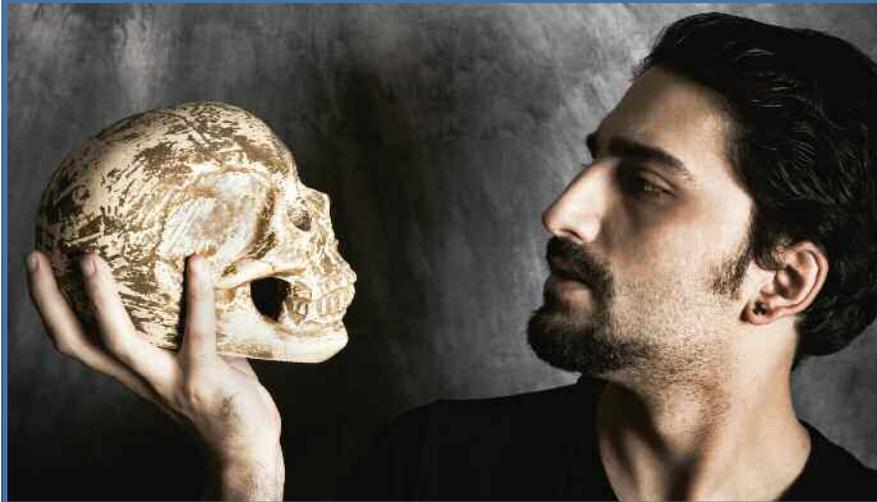
To set the context, Nissley defines arts-based learning as "a wide range of approaches by which management educators and leadership/organization development practitioners are instrumentally using the arts as a pedagogical means to contribute to the learning and development of individual organization managers and leaders, as well as contributing to organizational learning and development."

Nissley isn't surprised that the renaissance in arts-based business education is occurring during challenging economic times. In fact, he believes the poor economy is one of the catalysts for the move towards arts-based learning. "Enlightened and strategic-thinking business leaders understand the relationship between the arts and innovation," he said. "Economic adversity can inspire extraordinary innovation, if we choose to engage the arts as enablers of business creativity."

Innovation is critical to moving out of economic downturns, said Nissley. "There is a growing sense in business education that leaders in organizations are too often limited in the range of competencies they use—that rational analytical competencies are obviously valuable, but insufficient by themselves." To support his point, Nissley quotes Albert Einstein, who said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

What The Arts Bring To Business

While there are still some who resist the notion of using arts to teach leadership skills, there is a growing percentage of management educators who are embracing the complementary relationship between these two seemingly disparate disciplines. Nancy Adler, who holds the S. Bronfman Chair in Management at McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management, is also a renowned artist who once kept her two professions distinctly separate. They are now intimately joined in the management seminars she teaches, as well as in her art exhibitions. In addition, Adler created a *Leadership Insight* journal, which was published in 2010, that features her paintings, thoughtful questions, and inspirational quotes from



“Arts inspire people to hear more, see more, and feel more...”

global business leaders.² Management professors around the world are now using the journal to help MBA students and managers reflect on the larger world from new perspectives and on their own role in the world.

In the journal, Adler quotes poet and corporate consultant David Whyte, who draws clear connections between the artistic and business worlds: “A good artist, it is often said, is fifty to a hundred years ahead of their time. The artist must depict this new world before all the evidence is in. ... Leaders must learn the same artistic discipline, they must learn to respond or conceive of something that will move in the same direction in which the world is moving, without waiting for all the evidence to appear on their desks. To wait for all the evidence is to finally recognize it through a competitor’s product.”³

Prof. Danica Purg, president of IEDC-Bled School of Management, also draws comparisons between the two fields. “The arts involve business, and business involves art. Artists create products (paintings, performances, etc.) and engage with art markets. Management and leadership are activities with artistic overtones,” she explained. “If you think about the world of business we often use art metaphors—such as ‘singing the same tune’ or ‘that’s music to my ears’—and describe beautiful products, services, and management in aesthetic ways. So balancing art and leadership/management starts with a realisation of

their similarities, and then seeing how their differences are opportunities for learning on both sides.”

The inspiration for IEDC’s arts-based philosophy is the belief that arts inspire people to “hear more, see more and feel more,” said Purg, quoting organizational development guru Edgar Schein. “In the realms of management and leadership, where individuals and groups work amidst enormous complexity and divergent pressures, the arts offer richer, more sophisticated and sensitive ways of approaching management and leadership,” continued Purg. “Our integration of arts-based methods is our way of developing the best, most reflective, most holistic leaders for the betterment of the global future.”

According to Ted Buswick, co-author of *What Poetry Brings to Business* and executive-in-residence for leadership and the arts at Clark University’s Graduate School of Management, an arts-based approach to business issues provides a balance to the analytical, quantitative, linear, and goal-directed approaches emphasized in most business schools. He offers some examples of how arts can be used to develop management and leadership skills and qualities.

“At the most direct level, arts can be used to teach a specific business skill where there are fairly obvious parallels, such as using improvisational theater techniques to improve presentation skills,” he said. “Taking it a step further, arts can be a useful medium for demonstrating

how interdisciplinary activities can enhance overall creativity, or for sparking discussion about a challenging topic. But the arts can also open up the mind in such a way that it can change behavior. By using or observing creative skills, students are taken out of a purely analytical framework, and that helps them view not only business issues, but the world at large, from a different perspective. That changes the way they see things, and ultimately the way they do things.”

A Look At Some Successful Arts-based MBA Programming

While the number of MBA programs that incorporate arts-based learning has grown substantially over the past few years, the approach and scope of the programs vary widely. Here are a few examples of how different schools have integrated arts-based learning into their MBA programs.

MIT Sloan in Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Sloan offers many of its arts-based learning programs during its Sloan Innovation Period (SIP), an intense week of experiential learning that takes place between the two regular six-week sessions of MIT Sloan’s full-time MBA program. “The purpose of SIP is to offer our students immersive leadership and self-reflection experiences,” said Debbie Berechman, executive director of MIT Sloan’s MBA program. “It’s also a way to introduce them to different types of learning that may be less comfortable to them or topics that may seem less immediately relevant to a business career.”

The MIT Leadership Center plays a key role in developing courses or evaluating courses developed by outside vendors to ensure they meet MIT Sloan’s academic standards. “The courses must have a strong, intentional connection to management education and must involve interactive learning,” said Tracy Purinton, associate director of the MIT Leadership Center. Purinton has also been involved in creating an interactive Web-based leadership development tool aligned with both a 360-degree evaluation model and the MIT Leadership Center’s Distributed Leadership (4 Capabilities) Model, which



Start small: “If it’s a new concept at your school, start small and give it time to grow,” said MIT Sloan’s Tracy Purinton. “Some of our initial seminars had as few as 12 students, but over the years, through word of mouth, they’ve become extremely popular.”

Balance reflection with speed: While McGill’s Nancy Adler is a strong proponent of reflection, she knows there’s value in a fast-turnaround, too. “The pressure of a tight deadline—as little as five minutes to complete a self-portrait, for example—can be a good way to help MBA students complete an artistic task they may have been uncomfortable with and for them to get past their narrow bottom-line orientation,” she said.

Connect the dots: “To increase acceptance and interest in arts-based learning, be intentional and explicit about the links between the arts-based course and the management and leadership skills it is developing,” said Debbie Berechman of MIT Sloan.

Hire wisely: “Arts-based learning in management is still new enough that you may not get multiple opportunities to make it succeed,” said Clark University’s Ted Buswick. “Hire the right people when you start out, because if the initial offerings aren’t good, the entire program may be written off.”

Go the distance: “Arts-based learning should be integrated into the curriculum, not treated as just a nice add-on,” said IEDC’s Danica Purg. “Be committed, uncompromising in quality, and approach arts-based learning as an integrated activity.”

includes visioning, relating, inventing, and sensemaking. “Students can use the tool to identify leadership areas they may want to work on,” said Purinton. The SIP courses are also keyed to these leadership areas so students can match their leadership needs with seminars most closely focused on developing those areas.

Some examples of arts-based seminars MIT Sloan has offered include:

- **Leadership as Acting.** Students in this seminar are given passages from Shakespeare (such as Henry V or Macbeth) and work in small groups to create and perform the scenes within certain parameters, including preparing sets and costumes. A variety of students play the lead characters to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of leadership and how choices and results can change depending on the leader. “Among the skills developed as part of this course are stage presence and voice projection; coaching—assisting other students with their monologue; and team work—working together to ensure that everything is ready for the performance day,” explained Berechman.
- **21st Century Visual Arts Workshop for Business Leaders.** In partnership with the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA), this two-day workshop focuses on boosting creativity, investigative abilities, and breakthrough thinking by working collaboratively with SMFA students on an animation project that combines business and artistic challenges. “There’s rich dialogue in both directions,” said Purinton, “The SMFA students help introduce the MIT Sloan students to key visual arts skills, while the MIT Sloan students share their management perspectives.”

Several of the SIP arts-based courses, including Leadership as Acting and Improvisation in Business, have become so popular that they have been expanded into six-week courses or longer seminars. “That isn’t to say all of the courses have been successful,” offered Berechman. “The students evaluate the courses and if they’re not getting out of them what we hope, we’ll either discontinue or modify that course. But for the most part, the comments about

our arts-based courses indicate that they have been very powerful experiences for the students,” said Berechman.

McGill University Desautels Faculty of Management in Montreal, Quebec, Canada: For the past five years, McGill’s full-time and part-time MBA students have launched their first-year studies with a three-day seminar, Global Leadership: Redefining Success. Nancy Adler, who both developed and teaches the course, uses her own art and that of others to broaden her students’ thinking on what it means to be a success, and what it takes to achieve success.

“Tomorrow’s leaders must borrow from the spontaneity, adaptability, inventiveness, and collaboration of the artist to tackle rapidly evolving and unpredictable problems,” said Adler, who has brought in such artists as improvisational theatre artist Rob Nickerson, and Academy-award winning filmmaker Beverly Shaffer to her classroom to encourage students to incorporate the creative, holistic thinking associated with artistic endeavors into their business tool box. Adler also introduces MBA students to the notion that businesses can achieve a healthy bottom line while also contributing to the world’s social and environmental well-being.

One of the tools she uses is the *Leadership Insight* journal, which pairs Adler’s art with provocative questions and quotes designed to encourage leadership-focused reflection. It includes such questions as “Now that you can do anything, what do you want to do?” and “What do you most want to do this year to make the world a better place?”

“Many of the world’s most influential leaders take time to reflect on a daily basis,” said Adler. “Both management guru Peter Drucker and philosopher Parker Palmer have concluded that reflection, or ‘leading from within,’ is required for profound action.”

MBA students in Adler’s seminar are often surprised by what they learn about their fellow students. “The most common comment I hear from them is that they never realized other MBAs were concerned about the environment, poverty, or the balance between home and professional life,” said Adler. “There’s an illusion that you can’t

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be a top-notch MBA and a human being. My main role has become outing MBAs’ humanity.”

Rest-assured, Adler doesn’t take traditional management measures out of the equation. “If your business isn’t financially successful, with a very healthy bottom line, it’s

not beautiful. I do not take the bottom line out of the equation. Doing well financially is absolutely necessary, but it is no longer sufficient for 21st century success,” she said.

Clark University Graduate School of Management in Worcester, Mass.: Clark has recently offered three courses that combine business and the arts, each from a different perspective. All have been elective courses available to both part-time and full-time MBA students.

Creativity, Leadership, and the Arts focuses on interdisciplinary thinking as a means of developing and improving creativity and leadership skills. “The emphasis is on how the arts can be used to enhance business decision making by improving their ability to think in ways that are interdisciplinary, metaphorical, whole-brain, and collaborative,” said Buswick. “We’re not teaching art to business people, we’re using the arts as a way of thinking.”

The teaching methodology is fairly traditional, using readings, discussions, and case studies to explore the use of arts in business, but the materials are less analytical than those used in most business courses. They include Daniel Pink’s *A Whole New Mind*, and *A Passion for Ideas: How Innovators Create the New and Shape Our World*, an anthology of interviews and commentaries on how new ideas are generated. Buswick brings in at least two guest speakers each session—sometimes from businesses known for their creativity, and other times guest artists. Other resources include the *Journal of Business Strategy*’s two special issues on arts-based learning, which Buswick co-edited. “What’s interesting is that this class has drawn a lot of part-time students, who tend to be older and have more experience in the work world,” said Buswick. “They really seem to be able to relate what I’m talking about to their own work experience.”

Clark’s second course, *Innovations in Management and Management Education*, is a nod to the growing acceptance of arts-based learning in management education. It explores the different approaches being used to teach leadership, creativity, and other transformative skills alongside traditional business skills. Clark recently offered a third course, *Analyzing Worcester’s Creative Economy*, which was co-sponsored by the Mosakowski

Institute for Public Enterprise at Clark and open to enrollment by any graduate student, as well as junior and senior undergraduates.

“Each student worked on two projects simultaneously, one specific to Worcester’s creative economy, and one that was important to the business field and was more firmly based in traditional academic research,” says Buswick. “This not only developed our MBA students’ research and interpersonal skills, it provided them with a strong base of knowledge on the economic and social value of the creative economy to a community. At the same time, Worcester was provided a snapshot of its current creative economy, along with a blueprint for potential changes that could strengthen the economy.”

IEDC Bled-School of Management in Bled, Slovenia: IEDC has embraced arts-based learning perhaps more than any other management school, incorporating as part of its mission the use of art “to foster creative thinking and innovative decision making.”

“While we must still provide students with first-rate skills in finance, accounting, marketing, and so on, we also need to help them develop themselves from the inside out, to create responsible, ethical, socially responsible leaders for the future,” said Purg. “It is incumbent on us as educators of tomorrow’s managers and leaders to strive to develop the human potential of each and every one of our students.”

While art is incorporated into everything from the mission to the building’s design and the artwork on the walls, IEDC also offers specific courses that are designed to deeply engage participants with artistic and creative processes. For example, as part of IEDC’s one-year and two-year Executive MBA programs, there are personal development modules dispersed throughout the program, with Arts and Leadership days incorporated into each module. Within the three-year President’s MBA program, Arts and Leadership is incorporated into a Leadership Skills Week that students are required to take before completing the degree.

Creative Leadership, the first Arts and Leadership course in the Executive MBA programs, is taught by Purg and Dr. Ian Sutherland, director of IEDC’s PhD program,

who is also a pianist and choral conductor. “It starts with an overview of the importance and power of the arts, especially music, on all of us. Ian even gets the students to sing and rhythmically improvise,” said Purg. “He then teaches the students about the creative process, about questioning assumptions, thinking outside the box, and striving for novel, responsible solutions to problems. He uses examples of visual art, performance art, music, and other creative arts to show how artists are leading positive change in the world. The students then examine the leadership practices of artists to inspire them to lead in creative, responsible ways.”

Other courses use different artistic mediums to explore leadership themes, including:

- **Film.** Prof. Haris Pasovi, an acclaimed film-director from Sarajevo, uses films, such as *Braveheart* and *1492: The Conquest of Paradise*, to prompt conversations about leadership-in-action. “He helps students get to the heart of how leadership works by watching leadership unfold in dramatic form where they can focus on the dynamics of leadership-followership behaviour,” said Purg. “He is particularly successful in making the students think about the purposes of leading and managing, and how those activities are best focused on the betterment of society.”
- **Choral conducting.** In this class, taught by Prof. Peter Hanke, a Danish choral conductor, students learn the basics of choral conducting, and then, with Hanke’s help, conduct a local Slovene choir. “The outcomes of this workshop are very inspiring,” said Purg. “Students learn that leadership is not just about what you say or write, but that it is very much about what you do. They experience leadership as a holistic activity, one that is really more than the sum of its parts, and one that involves gestures, facial expression, and feeling the connection between human beings and working together to make something beautiful.”
- **Visual arts.** In this class, Prof. Arnold Walravens introduces students to visual arts from across historical periods, discussing the various world perspectives of the historical periods and the artists that created the works. As the students engage in these works they



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learn about “sensemaking”—making meaning out of complex experiences—which they apply in their everyday complex work realities. “Arnold also works with students to create parallels between their own leadership and management identities and different styles of art,” said Purg. “This gives them a powerful aesthetic connection to how they lead and how they want to lead.”

“Our students describe their arts-based learning experiences as stimulating, inspiring, and even life-changing,” said Purg. “For many of them, the positive experiences of the Arts and Leadership courses are the most profound memories of their studies, which stay with them throughout their work life and positively inform their business activities.”

The Future Of Arts-based Learning In Management

While each of these MBA schools approach arts-based learning in a different manner, their representatives are united in their belief that this is more than a pedagogical fad. “It’s not just business, but medicine, science, and other disciplines that are recognizing the utility of using the arts to help practitioners better understand the humanity of their fields,” said Buswick. “What can be challenging is measurement, because in many cases, the

impact of arts-based learning isn’t fully realized until sometime later. What research there is is short-term and more focused on skills than on long-term changes in behaviors or thinking patterns. Perhaps as the field matures, we’ll be able to conduct more definitive research.”

Berechman agrees that the impact of arts-based learning isn’t always immediately apparent. “Our arts-based learning workshops have been popular, but overall, every current batch of students will tell you that ‘soft skills’ classes are the least valuable,” she said. “But you talk to them a few years later and they’ll tell you stories of suddenly rising to the occasion during a management crisis and realize that they’re using the skills they learned in our arts-based leadership seminars.”

“Art doesn’t serve up answers to specific business problems on a plate,” concluded Adler. “But what it can do is get you to step back, reflect, and come up with your own solutions—solutions that are often beyond the constraints of accepted practice.” 🏠

Endnotes

1. Nick Nissley, “Arts-based learning at work: economic downturns, innovation upturns, and the eminent practicality of arts in business,” *Journal of Business Strategy* 31, no. 4 (2010), 8-20.
2. Nancy J. Adler, *Leadership Journal* (London: Routledge, a division of Taylor and Francis, 2010) <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415877626/>
3. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994), 241-242.