



Learning Through Art in Management Education: A Humanistic Framework for Developing Complex Human Skills

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ABSTRACT

Management education faces a persistent challenge: many of the capabilities most demanded in complex organizations—empathy, interpretation, communication, creativity, presence and judgment—are difficult to develop through lectures alone. This conceptual review examines arts-based learning as a pedagogical pathway for developing complex human skills in management and leadership education. Building on experiential learning, reflective practice and arts-based management literature, the article proposes a four-stage learning cycle: encounter, interpretation, experimentation and transfer. The framework explains how theatre, music, visual arts and narrative can create emotionally salient experiences that make tacit assumptions visible and provide low-risk spaces for behavioural rehearsal. The article also identifies limitations, including facilitator competence, cultural accessibility and the danger of using art as entertainment without explicit learning transfer. Practical design principles are offered for universities, business schools and corporate academies. The paper argues that art is academically valuable not because it decorates learning, but because it gives learners a different medium through which to perceive, feel, test and reinterpret human behaviour.

Keywords: arts-based learning; management education; human skills; experiential learning; leadership development; creativity

Manuscript type: Conceptual review / integrative review

INTRODUCTION

Organizations repeatedly report the importance of communication, adaptability, creativity and collaboration. These capabilities are frequently called soft skills, a label that understates their complexity. Technical knowledge can often be codified. Human interaction is more ambiguous: the same words can motivate one person and alienate another; a leader must read context, emotion and silence as well as data.

Management education has therefore expanded beyond lectures and case analysis toward simulations, coaching and experiential learning. Arts-based methods belong to this broader shift. Theatre can expose status and presence; music can illuminate listening and coordination; visual art can slow perception; storytelling can help people examine identity and meaning. Scholarship on arts and management suggests that artistic processes can support reflection, creativity and organizational learning (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

This article develops a humanistic framework for arts-based management education. It asks how artistic experience becomes learning rather than entertainment and how that learning can transfer to professional behaviour.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Kolb's experiential learning model emphasizes learning through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Schön (1983) similarly highlights reflective practice in situations where professionals must act under uncertainty. These theories are particularly relevant to leadership because leadership problems are rarely solved by applying a formula unchanged.



Art adds a distinctive feature: ambiguity. A painting, scene or piece of music can sustain multiple interpretations. Learners must notice, interpret and explain rather than search immediately for a single correct answer. This can develop tolerance for uncertainty and make assumptions discussable. Artistic activity also involves embodiment. Voice, posture, rhythm and spatial awareness are not abstract concepts; they are experienced physically.

METHODOLOGY

The article uses a narrative-integrative review of literature on experiential learning, reflective practice, arts-based management development and humanistic education. Recurring mechanisms of learning were coded conceptually and organized into a four-stage pedagogical cycle. The framework is intended as a design model that can subsequently be tested in comparative educational studies.

THE E-I-E-T LEARNING CYCLE

The proposed cycle consists of **Encounter, Interpretation, Experimentation and Transfer**.

Encounter. Learners engage with an artistic stimulus or practice. The encounter should be sufficiently rich to provoke attention rather than merely illustrate a pre-existing lecture point.

Interpretation. Participants articulate what they noticed, felt and inferred. Differences in interpretation become learning material. The facilitator connects observation to concepts such as power, trust, conflict, identity or coordination.

Experimentation. Learners try alternative behaviours. In theatre, they may repeat a scene using a different listening style. In music, they may explore leadership without verbal instruction. Experimentation turns insight into embodied rehearsal.

Transfer. The final stage asks where the learning matters at work. Participants identify a concrete behaviour, conversation or decision in which they will apply the insight. Without transfer, an artistic exercise can be memorable but educationally shallow.

APPLICATIONS ACROSS ART FORMS

Theatre is particularly useful for communication, conflict and role awareness because it makes behaviour observable. Improvisation develops responsiveness and acceptance of emerging information. Music provides a strong metaphor and practice field for interdependence: ensemble performance requires individual competence, attention to others and a shared temporal structure. Visual art develops observation by asking learners to distinguish what they see from what they assume. Narrative and literature create access to perspective-taking, ethical ambiguity and identity.

The educational value does not depend on artistic talent. A learner does not need to become an actor or musician. The objective is to use artistic processes as laboratories for human behaviour.

The proposed cycle also connects arts-based management development with broader traditions of aesthetic, transformative and adult learning. Dewey (1934) treated experience as central to aesthetic meaning, while Mezirow (1991) emphasized reflection on assumptions in adult learning. Within organizations, arts-based approaches have been associated with alternative forms of sensemaking and attention (Barry & Meisiek, 2010), and prior reviews have argued that their value depends on how artistic processes are translated into managerial learning rather than on artistic performance itself (Nissley, 2010).



Scholarly Contribution and Testable Propositions

Table 1 summarizes the proposed framework and its principal analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Analytical framework for the E-I-E-T learning cycle

Stage	Core learner question	Facilitator task	Evidence of learning
Encounter	What am I noticing and experiencing?	Create a relevant artistic stimulus	Attention and engagement
Interpretation	What does this mean, and what assumptions am I making?	Surface multiple interpretations	Reflective depth
Experimentation	What changes if I behave differently?	Enable safe rehearsal	Behavioural flexibility
Transfer	Where will I use this at work?	Connect insight to a concrete context	Application intention/behaviour

Research propositions

- P1. Arts-based learning will produce stronger behavioural transfer when structured debriefing explicitly connects artistic experience to workplace situations.
- P2. Ambiguous artistic stimuli will strengthen perspective-taking when psychological safety permits learners to compare divergent interpretations.
- P3. Embodied experimentation will add value beyond conceptual discussion for human skills that depend on voice, presence, listening and interaction.

DISCUSSION AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Four principles emerge. First, the learning objective must precede the artistic activity. Second, facilitation is central; debriefing converts experience into articulated learning. Third, participation should respect cultural and psychological boundaries. Forced performance can undermine safety. Fourth, transfer must be explicit and observable.

Arts-based learning should also be evaluated seriously. Measures can include reflective depth, behavioural observation, self-efficacy, peer feedback and transfer after several weeks. Evaluation protects the method from the criticism that it is inspirational but unmeasurable.

The approach is especially relevant in an AI-rich educational environment. As information becomes easier to generate, the comparative value of education may increasingly lie in developing discernment, presence, collaboration and ethical imagination—capacities that require lived practice as well as knowledge.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Evidence in arts-based management education remains heterogeneous. Future research should compare specific art forms, identify which mechanisms produce which outcomes and test durability of transfer. Randomized or quasi-experimental designs could compare arts-based modules with conventional workshops while qualitative studies could examine how learners make meaning from the experience. More research is also needed outside Western business-school contexts.

CONCLUSION

Art can function as a rigorous pedagogical medium when it is connected to clear objectives, reflection, experi-



mentation and transfer. Its value lies in making human complexity experienceable. In management education, where many critical capabilities are relational, embodied and contextual, arts-based learning can complement analytical methods and help learners move from knowing about leadership to practising how leadership feels and works.

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