

## **Inside...The Guildhall School of Music & Drama**

Peter Renshaw

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### **SUSTAINING A LEARNING CULTURE IN ARTS TRAINING INSTITUTIONS CHANGING PRIORITIES**

No higher education institution responsible for training visual or performing artists can fail to reappraise its priorities if it is to respond creatively to the needs of our rapidly changing world. Yet many colleges remain rooted in the past, blinkered by outworn assumptions, whilst others have become locked into bureaucratic, mechanistic procedures resulting from the demands of the quality assurance industry. This can quickly lead to the death of the creativity, artistic spirit and breadth of perspective that so often lie at the source of innovation and development. Such an ossified outlook prevents any institution from playing a significant role in sustaining a learning society, which the Dearing Report (1997, para. 23) identified as the central aim of higher education.

There is now both an economic and an educational imperative for arts training institutions to reshape their future, always connecting to changing contexts and patterns of work. The curriculum can no longer ignore the transformation engendered by the current revolution in knowledge and understanding. Harnessing the power of information technology, making new connections through the globalisation of culture, respecting the diversity of cultural values, strengthening our interdependence within an increasingly interconnected world, exploring the intersection of the arts and science: all these factors have to be understood and acted on as institutions begin to identify a new vision and redefine their roles and responsibilities.

### **Organisational change and sustainable development**

This fundamental shift in the character and purpose of colleges will only be realised if curriculum development and new initiatives in teaching and learning are grounded in organisational change that is global and non-parochial in outlook. Paradoxically, the integrity and autonomy of an individual institution is likely to be strengthened by being connected to other institutions, systems and perspectives in the world. But, as the capacity for choice is widened, as the scope for individual freedom and mobility is opened up, and as boundaries become blurred, institutions have an increasing responsibility to ensure that the quality of reciprocal relationships, both within and between institutions, is strengthened and respected. Understanding the importance of mutual trust, empathy, cooperation and of valuing individual differences is critical to sustaining development in any organisation.

It is undeniable that people work best when they feel valued. This principle applies equally to artists, teachers, managers and students, and it should underpin the human fabric of any arts institution. By harnessing individual strengths and different outlooks towards a common goal, a college can begin to build up a feeling of collective ownership and a sense of shared responsibility. The synergy arising from an institutional conversation that respects and listens to different points of view provides a catalyst for innovation and collaborative ways of working. This can gradually result in more creative, flexible approaches towards leadership and management. The following statement about managing diversity reinforces this observation.

As more people are empowered to deal with issues created by differences and are in touch with their leadership skills and responsibilities, the organisation is then in a powerful position to establish specific strategies to capitalise on its diversity and the synergy of differences as sources of collective growth, creativity and strength (Walker, 1994, p. 219).

There is little doubt that as our understanding of the complexity and inter-connectedness of human systems and organisations becomes clearer, a forward-looking view of sustainable development has to recognise that the different elements in any system tend to co-evolve, more like an ecology of interacting parts (Mulgan, 1997, pp. 143, 169-170). Exploring this biological model further, Mulgan (1997) states that:

Organisations operating in open systems work more efficiently if they can respond to change and reshape themselves to exploit it. The useful metaphors that guide their design are more likely to be biological ones, concerned with adaptation,.... rather than mechanical ones. The structures they need to develop are more likely to

be parallel than linear, where decisions are taken in a cascade of interdependence, with each element simultaneously reacting to the others rather than to a single line of command (pp. 175-176).

The implications of this organic model of organisational development are far-reaching, both for the management and structures within institutions and for the nature and substance of inter-connections between institutions. Sustainable development, which is inextricably dependent on creative and innovative partnerships, can only be enriched by a deeper understanding of ecological forms of development. In time, a network of interdependent partners could evolve into a common framework with each element assuming responsibility for itself and for the whole. The European Union, with its many existing educational and artistic partnerships, could provide the context for this inter-connected development.

Nevertheless, not all arts training institutions fit comfortably into this organic model of change. Some conservatoires, for instance, remain embedded in a legacy of tradition, characterised by hierarchical structures that reflect the paternalistic style of management and artistic leadership still prevalent in many symphony orchestras and opera companies. Although in Great Britain arts organisations have been encouraged to adopt a broader view of their role in society, by diversifying to meet changing cultural, educational and performance needs (Arts Council of England, 1997, p. 17, para. 43), many continue to be dominated by mechanistic structures and procedures. These fail to provide an enabling environment for fostering the personal and artistic development of professional musicians. Neither do they constitute an appropriate role model for an educational institution like a conservatoire, although some people might claim that it is the job of a college to induct its students into the dominant norms of the profession. In many cases this could be seen as a recipe for stagnation and no dynamic training institution is likely to take such a narrow view of its task.

The strongest challenge to an organic approach to organisational and curriculum development lies in the quality assurance exercise, which is rooted in a mechanistic performance management culture and circumscribed by the limitations of a restricted code of language. No one concerned with enhancing quality would question the importance of accountability and greater transparency, but procedures have to be found that are nurturing and sustainable, rather than constraining and limiting. Arts training institutions, at their best committed to fostering autonomy, creativity and the critical spirit, are well placed to challenge the likely uniformity and leaden mediocrity that can result from the straitjacketed approach of the quality assurance industry. For this challenge to succeed, colleges necessarily have to create a learning culture that is responsive to organic modes of organisational change.

## **Towards a learning culture**

### **Cultural change within institutions**

If there is any validity in the organic view of organisational development and if the idea of sustainable development is predicated on the growing interdependence of contributory partners, then arts training institutions necessarily have to reappraise the culture within which they work. The most enlightened of these institutions are already at the cutting edge of change and they lead the way in artistic vision, creative innovation, international collaboration and community development. Although traditional values need to be respected, professional arts training now has to be informed by a dynamic view of a contemporary living culture illuminated by a broad global perspective.

In short, colleges have to shift from a teaching to a learning culture. This move towards a more self-aware and self-critical culture opens up enormous possibilities for new forms of arts practice, teaching, assessment, research and continuing professional development.

An example might be taken from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama which, over the last eighteen months, has been reformulating its objectives and seeking ways of sharing its evolving philosophy and practice throughout all departments in the institution. This has involved listening and responding to the deeply felt needs of staff and students, with the intention of change being allowed to grow organically within the institution. Through a variety of formal and informal processes, the School is aiming to create a crucible for artistic and educational development by focusing on the following goals.

1. Creating a culture which fosters collaboration, innovation, personal motivation and reflection, mutual tolerance and respect, professional integrity and a lateral approach to problem solving.
2. Implementing a curriculum which aims at high standards of performing skill and at the development of individual autonomy, curiosity, leadership, flexibility and risk-taking through imaginative forms of teaching and learning.
3. Achieving an educational environment which supports outstanding practice-based research, continuing

professional development and innovative approaches to the design and delivery of teaching.

4. Forming significant local, national and international partnerships and collaborations with professional and artistic organisations and educational and community groups.
5. Having an efficient and cohesive administration that fully supports a creative environment. (Guildhall School of Music & Drama, 1998)

The process used to articulate these goals has enabled the School to arrive at a collective vision that provides the framework for the next stage of its development.

## Research

Central to any learning culture is research. Increasingly, arts training institutions need to become artistic laboratories in which performance practice, creative processes and ways of learning are all informed by research and development. Staff and students need to be given opportunities to work at the frontiers of change by questioning the assumed limits of traditional practices, creating new forms of artistic understanding and ways of perceiving, and shaping new ways of learning and teaching. Such pioneering activities constitute a form of research – conducted in and for the arts, rather than simply about the arts. This distinction between different kinds of research was acknowledged in the Dearing Report (1997, Recommendation 29), where it was proposed that a new Arts and Humanities Research Council should be established in Great Britain.

By broadening the definition of research to include practice-based work, arts training institutions can draw in a wide range of artists and help artistic practice to be underpinned by informed critical reflection. If artists are involved in defining the parameters of this practice-based or artistically orientated research, and in establishing the criteria for assessing quality, it will play a central role in the continuing evolution of arts practice (Arts Council of England, 1997, p. 12, para. 27).

Three examples drawn from the work of the Guildhall School help to illustrate the importance of this growing area of research and demonstrate its critical place within the development of a learning culture. Firstly, a pilot project in instrumental learning is providing a collaborative environment for staff and students to investigate the multi-dimensional nature of instrumental and vocal teaching. Three fundamental questions which reach into the heart of music-making underpin the research:

- why, how and for whom do we make music?
- by what processes do performers find the nerve centre of a piece of music, and so communicate it as living and relevant to their listeners, as an enrichment of a shared imaginative experience?
- how, in the learning process, can we nurture the personal fulfilment of musicians, *and* build skills appropriate to meeting the needs of a contemporary culture?

A team of tutors and students, led by a Research Coordinator (Gaunt, 1998), is exploring new ways of addressing such key aspects of instrumental learning as:

- personal vision; instrumental skill; artistic awareness; self-awareness; freedom of movement; reflective engagement in the learning process; interpersonal skills; the ability to communicate a unique voice; having a sense of place within the community.

A research paradigm is emerging based on a biological model – a cell – that has a scientifically precise structure but simultaneously relies on principles of continual change, interdependence and adaptability. As such it reflects the complexities of instrumental learning.

Secondly, a cross-arts and cross-cultural project is providing an opportunity for artists from different disciplines to develop more collaborative modes of working, both artistically and educationally, generating new processes, practices and structures. The proposed programme comprises four distinct, yet inter-related projects.

1. A research project between musicians of the Guildhall School and visual artists of the School of Communications at the Royal College of Art. The aim is to investigate the nature and potential of the multi-disciplinary collaborative process, with special reference to examining the place of shared vocabularies in the visual and performing arts.

2. A collaborative project exploring and challenging apparent aesthetic borders between approaches to performance in classical and contemporary popular music, with the aim of establishing an artistic laboratory for experimenting with and evaluating new modes of performance practice.
3. A cross-arts collaboration between actors, a designer, technician, composer and music technology aiming to find a shared artistic vocabulary through devising and composing new material to suit different audiences.
4. A research project developing new forms of cross-cultural arts practice in the community. Using collaborative creative processes new material will be explored, new connections opened up and a new artistic language developed that will lead to new forms of arts practice.

Underlying this programme is a commitment to life-long learning, in which students, young professionals, experienced artists and teachers can integrate within an evolving artistic community, thereby enhancing the quality and relevance of training, research and continuing professional development.

The third example of practical research arises from the partnership between the Guildhall School and the Amani Ensemble in Tanzania, funded partly by the British Council. This group comprises two former Guildhall students and six Tanzanian artists, two of whom will be participating in the Guildhall's new modular programme in continuing professional development.

The work of the Amani Ensemble is closely connected to the concept 'ngoma', which is a Kiswahili term embodying a whole way of life including music, song, dance, drama, story-telling and ritual. 'Ngoma' entails an organic process containing a web of social and cultural meanings rooted in the context of life experience. By using the process of 'ngoma' the Amani Ensemble is devising new works that are relevant to today's social, educational and cultural needs. It is creating a new artistic language, a new aesthetic, that is enabling Tanzanian people to be exposed to a new artistic tradition, which nevertheless has its roots in the past.

As the Ensemble begins to integrate new forms of 'ngoma' into urban and rural life through different artistic and educational processes, its developmental programme is underpinned by a research perspective that is also informing the community profile of the Guildhall School in London. This provides a good example of a strong global partnership using similar principles and procedures in very different local contexts.

### **Continuing professional development**

The Dearing Report (1997, para. 69) argued strongly that in a culture of lifelong learning staff development, working in partnership with research and development, should receive much higher priority than it has had in the past. As arts training institutions move towards a learning culture which embodies different forms of teaching, assessment, research and arts practice, this has major implications for staff development. Challenging new initiatives cannot be expected to take place without the necessary professional development and support.

For example, the growing emphasis on self-directed learning and reflective practice in both individual tuition and collaborative work, raises the question of students becoming more responsible for their own assessment. One central principle underlying student self-assessment is that it must reflect the culture of any particular department as well as relate to the aims and objectives of a specific course. Also, it can only function effectively in a listening environment based on mutual trust between staff and students. But it cannot be assumed that these conditions prevail in all institutions, each of which has its own history, preconceptions, identity and tested ways of working. It is quite understandable that some staff feel threatened and undervalued if change is imposed without debate rather than allowed to grow organically through constructive discussion and example.

Staff development becomes critical in this transition from a teaching to a learning culture. For example, in conservatoires, where there is no substantial tradition of staff development, the following areas would benefit from being addressed in a coherent, adequately funded professional development programme:

- departmental and inter-departmental initiatives in curriculum development and different forms of performance practice
- co-tutoring, co-mentoring and collaborative teaching

- cross-instrumental learning
- skill-sharing in improvisation, creative processes, body awareness, listening skills, communication and peer learning
- different forms of assessment, monitoring and evaluation
- action learning connected to the curriculum, team-building and working life in a department.

If these kinds of opportunities are opened up in a sensitive, yet focused way, staff in colleges should be able to face a changing future with renewed skill, confidence, imagination and deeper personal fulfilment. In many cases this will probably entail the reallocation of resources and the reappraisal of existing practices. If priorities are to shift and changing patterns of work are to be sustained, the continuing development of staff becomes a major investment that has to be addressed strategically by each institution.

With the rapid changes taking place in the cultural industries, there is also a growing need for colleges to pioneer new avenues of training, research and development for professional artists, composers, choreographers, creative producers, directors and teachers throughout their careers. In an evolving culture of lifelong learning, continuing professional development programmes have to be responsive to changing arts practice. This entails offering innovative forms of delivery and creative involvement with the professional arts world and its broadest constituency within the wider community.

In Autumn 1998 the Guildhall School is initiating a modular programme of continuing education which will enable musicians to develop further the fundamental skills for sustained personal, artistic and professional development in the areas of creativity, flexible performance and communication.

The programme comprises four inter-related modules.

1. Fundamental skills in creativity, flexible performance and communication.
2. A mentoring scheme, relating to the specific context in which each musician works.
3. The creation and performance of new work in different community settings.
4. Practical research projects in areas such as:
  - the nature of workshop leadership
  - workshop-based practice
  - the criteria for evaluating the quality of process, product and performance in creative projects within the community
  - identity in collaborative music-making
  - musical language and creative repertoire: resonance and meaning in a multi-cultural context
  - The place of music and creativity in sustainable development.

With its commitment to extending the boundaries of performance practice, the Guildhall programme aims at developing and sustaining new audiences through its extensive network of professional and community partnerships in England and overseas. Ongoing work with different arts, educational and community venues include performances, workshops, placements and residencies, whilst the mentoring scheme, working closely with local, regional and national arts organisations, is pivotal in helping to create new audiences.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this conference is to identify ways of strengthening the relationship between higher arts education, the cultural process and the world of work. One of the points now widely acknowledged is that the arts have a significant role to play, especially through imaginative forms of education and training, in the cultural and economic life of any society committed to lifelong learning.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the most visionary arts training institutions lead the way in innovation and development which is helping to transform the work of the cultural industries. Moreover, their growing global perspective is providing a qualitatively different dimension to creative partnerships at both national and local level.

But resistance to change continues to present a challenge to those colleges and professional arts organisations that remain stuck in traditional practices which have less and less impact on the vitality of our cultural life. It is critical that all training institutions become catalysts for change by maintaining a dynamic relationship with innovative partners in the profession.

The creative synergy between training, development and changing patterns of work will only become firmly established in those organisations that have evolved a learning culture. This applies equally to professional arts organisations and to colleges. The coherence and interaction between these two worlds are fundamental to a vigorous cultural process.

One final note of caution. We are living in an increasingly utilitarian age dominated by cosmetic presentation and mechanistic systems of management and accountability. If we believe in the transformational power of the arts, our respective institutions have to build up a strong learning culture that at all times connects to the quality, integrity and deeper meanings embodied in artistic and human experience.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Renshaw is Head of Research and Development at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where he pioneered the work in performance and communication skills. Formerly Principal of the Yehudi Menuhin School and Gresham Professor of Music, he has lectured widely in Great Britain and overseas on music education and training. With his interest in change and professional development he has acted as an adviser to many arts organisations and orchestras. As a consultant he has worked with the Ontario Arts Council, the Association of Canadian Orchestras, Banff Centre for the Arts, Youth Music Australia, the University of Sydney, the British Council in Tanzania, the Irish Government and numerous music institutions in Europe. Currently he directs the Research Centre in Teaching and Learning at the Guildhall School and he is a member of the Board of the European League of Institutes of the Arts.