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Human Sculpture: A Creative and Reflective Learning Tool for Groups and Organisations

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Human Sculpture: A Creative and Reflective Learning Tool for Groups and Organisations

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Abstract

This paper considers a particular creative process, entitled 'Human Sculpture,' as a professional reflective learning tool for groups and organisations. Along with other arts-based learning processes being used in professional management, the authors argue that the embodied characteristic of human sculpture can assist people to generate awareness of their senses and aesthetic sensibilities. In doing so it provides a unique form by which to generate information and to discuss that information. The metaphorical and artful nature of human sculpture engenders a different quality of discussion and an alternative journey by which to reflect on individual, group, and organisational life. This paper draws on the masters and doctoral research of the authors as well as their professional practice.

Keywords

Aesthetic, Arts-based learning, Creativity, Dramatistic approach, Human sculpture, Professional development, Organisational development, Reflective practice, Tool of articulation

Setting the scene

Globally businesses and governments recognise that creativity, innovation, and a more skilled and creative workforce are necessary in the 21st Century (Business Council of Australia 2006; PMSEIC 2005; Cox 2005; Oakley 2007). Oakley (2007) provides a review of the business and policy literature for educating a creative workforce and highlights the current and future skills required in the workforce, which include the need for communication, leadership, entrepreneurship, team work, creative skills, cross-cultural understanding, and problem solving. Oakley (2007) also identifies that habits and skills associated with the arts and artistic practice can help drive innovation. Increasingly, arts-based learning is being called upon to provide organisations with new learning models and tools, and in turn, is emerging as a new pedagogy in management education (Darsø 2004, Taylor & Hansen 2005; Kerr and Lloyd 2008; Nissley 2010; Seifter & Buswick 2010).

In this paper we explore how human sculpture as a creative learning process can act as a learning tool and metaphor within the context of professional management education. Human sculpture offers an embodied reflective space to creatively explore and draw out a range of insights into individual, group, and organisational life. As a group facilitation tool, Human Sculpture expands on Eisner's (2002) view that engaging in art can promote imaginative capacities, represent what we cannot actually see, provide a visual model to experience the situation in a new way and allow people to frame and reframe different approaches to the same situation. In the process people can explore and develop various skills outlined by Oakley (2007).

Human sculpture¹



In using human sculpture as a reflective learning metaphor with groups, participants are invited to create individual figures or shapes in a multi-figure sculpture using their own bodies. The sculpture might be themed or unthemed, in that the group may be asked to make a sculpture that represents a specific issue, or simply to make a spontaneous sculpture.

The tool is as much a way of observing the group process of building the sculpture as about the finished sculpture.

The discussion that follows is an integral part of the process, and may focus on the process of shaping the sculpture, the group dynamics, as well as the look or meaning of the final sculpture.

¹ We would like to thank the directors of International House for allowing us to use the photographs included in this article.

The process may seem familiar to some people versed in experiential methods, yet as facilitators using this form of intervention we have uncovered only minimal reference to it, specifically the work of Virginia Satir (1972) in family therapy, who used human sculpture to help families in crisis to articulate, through sculpture, the nature of their problematic situations.

The practitioners

The authors both employ human sculpture as one of the arts-based activities in their repertoires of practice for working with groups of people in the community and in organisations. While they both employ the same metaphor, their different backgrounds bring different approaches to the way they work with this process. Geof Hill initially investigated his use of the tool in an action inquiry study. Cathryn Lloyd (2011) investigated her use of the tool in a practice-led doctoral inquiry.

As Cathryn Lloyd (2011:11) proposed, to have an aesthetic experience is to perceive and feel with the senses as well as with the intellect. She referred to Taylor and Carboni (2008: 22) who suggest *“at the heart of aesthetics is knowing gained directly from our sensory experience”*. Strati (2000) adds to that and observes that the heuristic action of aesthetics is *“feeling through physical perceptions”* (2000, 16). Aesthetic knowing or experience in this case goes beyond notions of beauty or art (Gagliardi 1999). In this sense, Gagliardi's (1999) understanding of aesthetic experience, which includes:

- (i) a form of sensory knowledge which is often tacit and ineffable
- (ii) a form of action, expressive, and a mode of feeling
- (iii) a form of communication different from speech, which to the extent that expressive actions or the artefacts produced, become the object of sensory knowing and a way of passing on and sharing particular ways of feeling or *“ineffable knowledge”* (Gagliardi 1999, 312) fits well with the concept of a creative intervention such as Human Sculpture.

Lloyd will often initiate a discussion and exploration of what it means to have an aesthetic experience. In the case of human sculpture this is done ahead of asking people to use their own bodies to develop sculptures around a specific theme. In a recent workshop using sculptural stories (human sculptures) participants were shown images of figurative and abstract sculptures along with a discussion about the aesthetic communication sculptures evoke.

As part of the process participants were also asked to undertake some quick improvisational movements individually and collaboratively. This was to warm people up to the process and to get them connected to their bodies. They were then asked to split into two small groups and spend some time discussing their organisation. They were then asked to reflect on their organisation and create a living sculpture to represent it metaphorically.

The discussion was used as a way for individuals to share their stories and to find common ground or expose differences. The way Lloyd works with sculptural stories is quite fluid. She generally sees them as a living breathing form that provides a way to express a story without words in the first instance. The narrative can be unpacked afterward to generate meaning, understanding, and knowledge. Participants will often ask if they can move. Lloyd doesn't have any hard and fast rules and so tends to leave it up to them. Ultimately it's whatever works best to support the group to express and articulate their ideas.

Lloyd & Hill propose that their choice of creative interventions, particularly the choice of human sculpture, can generate a different perspective and quality of discussion and information-gathering in professional reflective practice. This is in part due to the process offering participants the opportunity to draw on their own creativity to inquire and generate meaning about issues, concepts, and relationships not only cognitively but in a kinaesthetic, embodied, and intuitive way. McCaughtry & Rovegno (2001:492) describe the physical qualities of meaning in movement as bodily kinaesthesia. Gardner (2004) also acknowledges bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, the link between mind and body. He notes that the *“divorce between the “mental” and the “physical” is often “coupled with a notion that what we do with our bodies is somehow less privileged, less special, than those problem-solving routines carried out...through the use of language, logic, or some relatively abstract symbolic system” (2004: 208).*

Matthews (1998:237) suggests that this somatic awareness or experiential knowing, feeling, and acting can result in a more holistic perception of the inquiry. Due to the embodied nature of the process it tends to inspire and trigger different conversations often leading to stories which would probably never be revealed. For example, human sculpture became a catalyst for a participant to reflect on their leadership style in another context. They commented that it was being in the human sculpture process that allowed them to recall and reflect on what happened and how, if they were to find themselves in a similar situation, they would probably respond differently.

Lloyd & Hill suggest that the power of this intervention device lies in the facilitation process by which it is used. They propose that engagement in an artful process such as human sculpture promotes a quality of expanded consciousness and human potential, a state of being that uses our senses and encompasses the body, mind, heart and spirit (Darsø 2004, Kerr & Lloyd 2008, Wheatley 2008). Lloyd & Hill suggest that engaging in an artful process, particularly one that requires us to bring our bodies as well as our minds to the experience, allows people to engage with their own being which can create a shift from the expected to the unexpected. This realm of moving into the unexpected can include ways of perceiving a situation and ways of resolving a problematic situation that had not previously been considered.

Engaging in an artful process requires a certain amount of spontaneity, risk-taking, self-confidence and self-trust along with a preparedness to experiment and play, and to be open to what the experience may offer. For some this may be the first time they have expressed their whole being in a creative way, or it may be the first time they have expressed anything in a creative way. For others it may be some time since they have tapped into their creativity and the process can reignite that sense of the creative self. Some find the experience ‘liberating’ while others are challenged and struggle to make connections. Given that, Lloyd & Hill argue that while the choice of creative intervention selected to help people to a place of inquiry needs to be carefully considered, the role of the facilitator also requires consideration. Even the choice to include human sculpture in a larger educational process is a considered choice of the facilitator. Part of the success of the creative process is in the ability of the facilitator to assist the participants to explore some of the issues that arise from the activity. The choice of an activity is one element. Recognising and facilitating opportunities that allow people to articulate their views about issues, and to have others listen to them, are also key aspects to the process.

In the following sections the authors describe the various ways human sculpture can be considered and used as a creative facilitation process.

Human sculpture as a reflective tool

There is considerable discussion in the literature about the importance of reflective practice to enable practitioners to review and improve their practice (Dewey 1933; Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Hatton & Smith 1995; Moon 1999, 2004, 2006; Schön 1983, 1987; Bolton 2005; Brookfield 2010). While reflective practice may be seen as a good thing to do, one of the difficulties facing professional practitioners is time (Gray 2007) and the demands of the workplace are often not conducive. Moving to a place of reflection can also be challenging and confronting (Brookfield 2010; Johns 2009). Lloyd & Hill propose that while artistic interventions can also be challenging and confronting they do in fact offer an alternative method for professionals to take a step back. The value that human sculpture brings is that it can engage the whole being and acts as a tool of articulation by offering another language to reflect on and articulate the issues at hand.

Human sculpture as metaphor



Human sculpture provides a bridge between talking about issues in the abstract, or metaphor, and discussing real issues. The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). It can offer a unique ingredient that helps to explore feelings and aesthetic experiences, and foster unconscious learning, explore feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness as well as ill-defined and complex problems (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Schön 1987; Öztel & Hinz 2001).

There is also the belief that the tool of human sculpture acts as a gestalt. People project onto the situation what they see in their own life. Someone who is aware of their own agenda of repression might comment that what they see in the sculpture is an act of repression. For example, a person adopting a central position in a sculpture may see themselves as a key player in their particular organisation or they may be seen by others as a key player in an organisation. Taking this position of dominance in a human sculpture does not necessarily mean that that is what they do, but the event of them being in a dominant position in a sculpture provides the catalyst for talking about what happens when a person is in a dominant position and everyone else feels that that dominance is unhelpful.

Using arts-based methods to create new metaphors, new connections, and new perspectives has “*the power to create a new reality*” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:145) and “*potentially rich strategic insights*” (Gray 2007:507). While there may be a level of ambiguity or uncertainty engaging in a creative process, human sculpture experimented with as a metaphor, can enable people to imagine and act out creative and innovative responses or solutions to organisational issues.

Human sculpture as a reframing tool

One way to resolve a situation is to help the person to describe it differently. This often activates a new set of solutions for what they perceive as problematic. Egan (1976:173) describes reframing as “*a different spin or frame of reference to consider a situation.*” This alternative frame may be more challenging. Mezirow (1991:168) describes one of the phases of transformation in transformational learning as ‘*exploration of options for new roles, relationship and actions.*’ Through a process of re-sculpting, participants are able to consider alternative ways describe a situation, and look for possible alternative action.



Human sculpture is based on the view that there are no single correct meanings and interpretations for any sculpture. As individuals share their perceptions they articulate their own view and have the opportunity to hear other views. This gives them alternative ways of seeing a given situation, which in turn may prompt them to reframe their position, including assumptions and beliefs, to gain a new perspective.

Human sculpture as an artful process

Human sculpture, as the name suggests, draws on and makes connection to the arts. However, in-depth knowledge of the arts and a formal understanding of sculpture is not essential to engage successfully with the process. Most people, with less formal education in the arts, have been exposed to art, without being conscious of their knowledge of art, are capable of reflecting on both the artistic value and the suggested meanings of the artwork. In this sense the art work resonates with their other knowledge, and the activation of this knowledge brings to their discussion a more eclectic set of frames of reference. Not only is this a broader set of frames, but also deeper, in that an artful process connects one with body, mind, heart and spirit (Darsø 2004, Kerr and Lloyd 2008, Wheatley 2005) offering participants a cognitive and embodied experience. It becomes a holistic learning experience.

Human sculpture as a tool for a creative workforce

Oakley (2007) highlighted the current and future skills needed for the workforce, identifying skills such as communication, teamwork, creative skills, cross-cultural understanding, and problem-solving. As participants experiment with and engage in reflective dialogue with others regarding their experience and observations of human sculpture, they recognise that others often see the same situation from different perspectives. In doing so they gain insights into what enhances the interpersonal dynamics of a group of people and what signifies when that group becomes a team. Problems, doubts, contradictions, dilemmas and possibilities identified within specific sculptures can be discussed, reflected upon, explored and sometimes resolved. All of this is drawn from a basis of enabling people to tap into their creative potential and be prepared to communicate their thoughts and intentions. Hill (1997) noticed in his use of human sculpture that it acts as a catalyst to help people address conflict in groups and organisations. On this basis we propose that creative conflict resolution is also

a skill required within a creative workforce and that arts-based learning processes such as human sculpture offer new approaches for exploring and managing conflict.

Intervention and curious questions

As has been briefly touched on, the role of the facilitator within any experiential process is crucial. An unfamiliar process requires a certain amount of scaffolding to enable people to at least get into the experience and to possibly transfer the learning that takes place into another context. This is often the case with artful interventions that encourage people to reflect and to tap into their creative potential and learn in a different way, compared to more traditional technical management training programmes. How much scaffolding or intervention is required will vary from group to group and it is the skill of the facilitator to recognise what is needed.

The dilemma with facilitation of an activity such as this, particularly where the valuable component is discussion about the process of the activity, is that the facilitator dominates the discussion. Sometimes a facilitator's perception of the activity, given that it is coming from a person with power, can overshadow other comments. For these reasons, as we work to facilitate human sculpture, we are mindful of using discussion encouraging techniques which encourage others to share their perceptions ahead of the facilitator giving what might be misinterpreted as a definitive response. We are mindful when we do comment on the sculpture to highlight that our comments are only based on our perceptions and frames of reference and are not offered in any definitive way.

There are strategies for facilitating and encouraging groups to share and discuss their observations. For instance, Geof Hill in his research defined one type of intervention as 'Facilitated Silence' (Hill, 1997). This was the choice from the facilitator, to say nothing and provide no comment in the expectation/hope that participants will feel empowered to comment. This choice not to intrude is seen as a way to develop the awareness and confidence of other people to comment and to articulate their observations.

For all involved, the participants and the facilitator, the ability to remain curious, ask curious questions, and at times sit with ambiguity is another key component. A key objective for the facilitator is to create an environment where questioning, risk-taking and reflective conversations are part of the inquiry process.

In closing

There is always a sense when one shares practice that the replication of the practice will generate the same results. Our views of research, particularly practice related inquiry, are that we can be generative rather than be generalisable. Our own practices inform us that each experience is unique. We see our work as inspiring other people to practise in ways that are congruent with their backgrounds and philosophical views. We hope that in sharing our experiences and perceptions we can generate discussion, not only about human sculpture which seems to experience a silence in the experiential learning literature, but more generally in the field of arts based learning as a pedagogy in management education. We also hope that this paper formalises some of the connections we make between our professional practice and formalised bodies of knowledge.

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