Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding through Singing – the View from a UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning

To begin with an obvious but necessary observation, I am neither a specialist in music nor, specifically, in singing. Later in this program, you will hear from my colleagues about their interesting and powerful research programs specifically dealing with singing and music education. My own perspective is that of an arts educator with a theatre background. I hope that this point of view, particularly as reflected in my responsibilities as holder of the UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning at Queen’s University will be useful in setting the stage for the research reports that will follow. The focus of my own work on the AIRS project will be the potential of singing to foster intercultural understanding. At this early point in the research it is worth asking how singing can fit into an international agenda for improving understanding among cultures.

There is a clear and pressing need to move forward on intercultural understanding. As President Obama observed in his recent speech in Cairo, having acknowledged the great tensions between the Islamic world and the West, specifically the United States, he said:

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart or whether we commit ourselves to an effort, a sustained effort to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

It’s easier to start wars than to end them. It’s easier to blame others than to look inward. It’s easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. (Obama 2009)

History does not paint an encouraging picture of humans choosing the right path. Estimates vary widely but it appears likely that more than 180 million people died in wars of various kinds in the twentieth century (White 2005). While many of these casualties were the result of wars between nations, many others resulted from inter-cultural conflicts between regions of a single state. The names of some of these states will remind us all of the size and scope of the problem – Ruanda, Yugoslavia, Congo, South Africa, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Burma, Somalia, Peru, Mexico and the Middle East, generally.

Perhaps it is unnecessary for me to detail the unspeakable effects of cultural distrust and misunderstanding. We see examples daily in the news media. But, what does singing offer that might, in some small way, contribute to a reduction of this kind of violence and discrimination? If the roaring guns of our own military forces are unable to quiet the violence, how can a song have any effect?
The predominant agency in the world that recognizes singing as a part of its mandate is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO. A key factor in motivating UNESCO’s interest has been a perceived capacity of the arts to foster social cohesion and a culture of peace based on cross-cultural understanding. This motivation was implied in an international appeal for the promotion of arts education and creativity at school as part of the construction of a culture of peace, issued by the Director-General of UNESCO in 1999. He wrote:

At a time when family and social structures are changing, with often adverse effects on children and adolescents, the school of the twenty first century must be able to anticipate the new needs by according a special place to the teaching of artistic values and subjects in order to encourage creativity, which is a distinctive attribute of the human species. Creativity is our hope. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 40)

More recently, the UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education made the connection between artistic education and inter-cultural understanding more explicit. Education in and through the arts stimulates cognitive and creative development and has the capability of making how and what learners learn more relevant to the needs of individuals and of the modern societies in which they live. Such factors are necessary in this increasingly complex and troubled century for creating good citizens, for promoting a culture of peace and for ensuring a sustainable future. (UNESCO 2006, 4)

A concern for promoting inter-cultural understanding continues to motivate UNESCO which will play a leading role in promoting 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures in accordance with a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2007.

Acknowledging that singing is one of the most accessible forms of musical expression available to people around the world, the AIRS (Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing) project seeks to provide a multi-national, multi-cultural body of research into singing as a medium through which to foster inter-cultural understanding.

These are admirable objectives. Both UNESCO and the AIRS project seek to break down cultural barriers through the arts and, particularly, singing. Both are committed to the proposition that singing and the other arts have a role to play in this process. But, what evidence do we have that such a goal is achievable? My colleagues will speak to the capacity of singing, as a unique form, to effect a cultural change. I will address the question more generally. Why should we think that the arts might hold the power to change human perceptions and behaviours?

There is a deep connection between the arts and communal engagement. This is, of course, the fundamentally social nature of the arts. Victor Turner writes, “When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one.” (47) In making his point, Turner was not referring only to the arts but more broadly to that category of human expression that we call ritual. This brilliant and influential social anthropologist saw a close structural relationship between ritual and the theatre.
Ellen Dissanayake (1995), having made a study of ritual in animal behaviours, makes a similar connection between ritual and all of the arts. She writes:

Certainly the arts arose and developed together with ritual ceremonies. It is as if the deep importance of these ceremonies, centered as they are around vital human concerns, demanded that they be made special as a way of acknowledging the seriousness of what they addressed – nothing less than survival. . . To me, it seems ethologically sound to look for the peculiarly human characteristics of art in the circumstances that gave rise to ritual ceremonies (67).

This is a topic on which I have spoken and written with reference to theatre education, specifically, process drama. I have explored the idea (O’Farrell, 1996) that drama, when seen through the lens of ritual form, focuses not on the individual, but on the collective. When drama is used in education, it focuses not on the acquisition of a predetermined quantity of information, but on the collaborative generation of ideas within an experience of flow. Central to this approach to education is the framing of a period of unbounded creative collaboration by the structure and associated symbolism of ritual. I would like to rehearse these points briefly with you now.

The framing of lessons with specialized opening and closing activities is a normal practice for teachers of all forms of process drama. Teachers of drama typically begin a lesson with a game or formally structured exercise to prepare students for more challenging, open-ended activities to come. They often close a session with another game or relaxation exercise. In doing this, the teacher expects that the framing activities will enhance the drama work that forms the core of the lesson. Their experience tells them that students who have been separated from the roles and activities that characterize their normal, everyday lives are more likely to focus on the dramatic situations in which they project themselves, more inclined to explore a variety of dramatic forms of expression, more apt to develop a supportive and trusting sense of community and more likely to generate ideas that are honestly expressive of their own point of view.

This three-part structure of a typical process drama lesson – warm-up, creative activity and cool-down – closely parallels the three-part structure that distinguishes a ritual. The external framework of a ritual effects a formal separation of participants from their normal social status, from usual norms of behaviour and from conventional modes of thinking. The initial phase achieves this separation by removing participants physically and symbolically from their everyday life. The final phase returns them to society often with a new status, usually with a new understanding of the cosmos.

The internal experience of a ritual is dependent on this separation. In the central phase of the ritual process – identified by Turner as liminal in the case of religious ritual and liminoid in the case of secular arts – an extraordinary phenomenon takes place. Because they have been released from the normal expectations of society and placed within a self-contained, non-judgmental community, participants are empowered to explore alternatives – alternative identities, alternative modes of behaviour, alternative ways of looking at society, alternative means of symbolizing their identity and their outlook.

When the separation has been fully effected and the creative process has been set in motion, participants often find themselves involved in an experience of flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes flow as an optimal experience, “when consciousness is harmoniously ordered” (6). People who encounter flow, are able to make meaningful
patterns of all that they experience. People who experience flow together, tend to bond into supportive, egalitarian communities – communities that function on lateral rather than hierarchical principals of organization.

This is how I try to explain how drama partakes of the structure of ritual to enhance the education of young people. Dissanayake has gone further in that she relates all art to ritual form. A key argument that she makes, drawing on parallels between art-making and ritual, is that, in both cases a defining element is the process of “making special.” She reaches this conclusion. “My position, lone as it might be, is that making important activities special has been basic and fundamental to human evolution and existence, and that while making special is not strictly speaking in all cases art, it is true that art is always an instance of making special.” (92)

So, an argument can be made in support of the proposition that the arts, and, in this case singing, by allowing participants to re-invent their personal and social identities through a process of “making special”, can have a salutary effect on human behaviour including inter-cultural understanding. I will leave it to the music specialists who are present to suggest whether any of this relates specifically to the field of singing. I am inclined to suggest that it does. But, if there is any truth to these claims, why are the arts not central to school curricula around the world? Are any concrete steps being taken to alert teachers, parents and policy makers that the arts have such a powerful role to play, not only in the cultural lives of individual students, but also in the ultimate survival of the human species?

The positive news is that change is in the wind. With leadership from UNESCO and a variety of NGO’s around the world, arts educators (and here, I refer to both artists and teachers) have begun to come together to make a common case for arts and learning. We have been setting aside our old turf wars and working toward a new understanding of how we can collectively change the way that governments, schools and community organizations view the arts.

I have already noted that UNESCO, following its mandate to promote a quality education for all has taken measures to advance the inclusion of arts in school curricula. In fact, the call to action issued in 1999 was only the beginning of UNESCO’s advocacy efforts. Once the appeal had been issued, UNESCO staff members and interested member states sprang into action to initiate a process that could eventually lead to meaningful change. Several regional conferences or symposia were held in various parts of the world, bringing together practitioners of arts education, researchers and policy makers to “test the waters” and determine if there was, indeed, a possibility that the arts could have the kind of impact that the appeal had anticipated.

When these regional events proved successful, UNESCO, in collaboration with the government of Portugal, held a World Conference on Arts Education in Lisbon in 2006. This was an event of considerable significance, bringing together for the first time on a global scale teachers, artists, advocates, researchers, policy makers, students and educational administrators to consider the value and practicability of arts and learning. There were two, important, outcomes from the event in Lisbon. First, there was a document – the UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education (2007). Framing its contents in terms of UNESCO priorities and protocols, the Roadmap articulated a shared vision of arts and learning and made recommendations for future work in the field. The second outcome of the Lisbon Conference was an announcement that a second World Conference would be
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held in Seoul, Republic of Korea in 2010. The two conferences, therefore, can be seen as milestones on the road to increased and improved arts education around the world – the journey to take place over a four-year period, with the Roadmap as a resource to guide our collective crossing from Lisbon to Seoul.

I mentioned that Non-Governmental Organisations have also been proactive in seeking a collaborative approach to advocating for the arts and learning. Of particular interest are three, well established international associations of artists and educators. These are the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA), the International Society for Music Education (ISME) and the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA). Although each of these organizations had met with some success in promoting their individual art forms over the years, they took advantage of the opportunity offered by the Lisbon Conference to form a new and potentially more influential joint project. Immediately prior to the opening of the Lisbon conference, the presidents of these NGO’s came together to issue a joint proclamation which effectively established the World Alliance for Arts Education. Since that time, the Alliance has held two international conferences of its own called the World Creativity Summit (one in Hong Kong and one in Taipei). Another will take place in October in the UK. It has recently invited the participation of the World Dance Alliance in its Presidential Council. The new coalition has been identified by UNESCO as an important collaborator in the development of the Seoul Conference and as a key ally in the common cause for advocacy.

Here in Canada, the same collaborative spirit has been active. A group of Canadian artists and educators who attended the Lisbon Conference, came together after that event to keep the flame alive. This group has held two national symposia on arts and learning. The first took place at the University of Ottawa in May of 2007. The second was hosted at Queen’s University by the UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning in October of 2008. These symposia aimed to follow up on the themes of the Lisbon Conference and to provide leadership and support to the Canadian contribution in Seoul. In both events, considerable emphasis was placed on productive action. The first produced an action plan to guide the Canadian response to the UNESCO Roadmap. The second, saw approval in principle for the founding of a new and inclusive interdisciplinary network of Canadian artists, educators, community and business leaders, academics, researchers and representatives of government and non-governmental organizations whose common mission is to share their collective experience, to advocate and promote arts and learning. On December 3 and 4 of this year, a third Canadian symposium is planned for Toronto. It will be held in the Royal Conservatory and will serve as a regional summit of the World Alliance. The theme of this event will be Advancing Canadian Action in Arts and Learning.

Having mentioned the UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning at Queen’s University, let me say a few words about the role that we intend the Chair to play in fostering networks and promoting arts education both in schools and in community settings. The creation of Chairs and UNITWIN networks among universities is a mechanism that UNESCO has developed to promote its priorities in the public sector. The UNESCO Chair that was established in 2007 at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University is the first to address the issue of arts and learning. The projects and activities of this Chair will involve people in both “developed” and “developing” countries in a spirit of democracy and solidarity. The focus is not merely on transferring knowledge from the “have” country to the “have-not” country but, rather, on setting up conditions in which colleagues from both hemispheres can work collaboratively, respecting the contributions that each can make.
The Chair at Queen’s is currently committed to two international projects, one a research study into the question of creativity in arts education and the other a development project in which a team of colleagues are producing an electronic course for teachers of drama/theatre. As evidenced by this mini-conference, the Chair has also become associated with the AIRS project. Other project ideas are under consideration. The Chair has also hosted or partnered with four web-cast symposia which make use of information technology to engage artists and educators around the world and plans to web-cast other events. One of these events featured artistic and educational gifts for a culture of peace.

So, much is being done to promote arts and learning across Canada and throughout the world. A great deal remains to be done, of course, and the task will never be completely finished. For example, on the day that I was completing this paper, I learned that young Zimbabwean musical artists Mokoomba were denied visas by European authorities and had to cancel a projected tour of the continent. It is very difficult to share cultural understandings through song or any other medium if one culture denies access to another. (Jeunesse Musicales International 2009) However, a refreshing breeze of enthusiasm and optimism for arts education is blowing across the world just now and we can only hope that it will leave some more enlightened policies and, perhaps even some cross-cultural understanding in its path.

References


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Biography

Larry O’ Farrell is Professor of drama and arts education in the Faculty of Education, at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario and holder of the UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning. He completed two terms as President of IDEA, the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association. His specific areas of research interest include case studies of drama/theatre and education, drama education for peace culture, teaching playwriting, ritual in drama education and arts curriculum policy.