

From Experiential Learning to Aesthetic Knowing: The Arts in Leadership Development

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Abstract

The Problem.

Following executive students in a series of choral conducting workshops, this article explores the growing practice of arts-based leadership development. Based in experiential learning, arts-based learning claims to have great potential in connecting intellect and emotions, to meaningfully challenge norms and assumptions, and to value the relational and subjective aspects of human experience. However, to date, there is a lack of empirical, participant-focused work exploring the “what” and “how” of arts-based leadership development as well as its impact on professional practice.

The Solution.

Through observational and interview data gathered at a European business school, this research takes a grounded, participant-centered approach to exploring the experiences of participants in three choral conducting masterclasses. The findings support the effectiveness of arts-based methods for leadership development; potent learning emerges. Moreover, nuance is added to understandings of how and what learning takes place, describing a process of learning as sensemaking to aesthetic knowing. The development outcomes centered on relational dynamics of leadership and the aesthetics of power and responsibility, with longer-term data showing positive impact on the professional practice of participants.

The Stakeholders.

This article speaks to HRD researchers, professionals, and development practitioners. Of interest for all three groups, the study overviews the growing trend of arts-based methods in leadership development while providing insights into how learning gets done, what is learned, and sheds light on longer-term impacts of this form of experiential learning.

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Introduction

Executives conducting choirs are not staples of leadership development menus. Neither is the growing host of arts-based pedagogical fare. With foundations in experiential learning, the arts are gaining ground in leadership development, seeking to engage business professionals with artistic thinking and practice. Those involved with these approaches argue they have great potential in connecting intellect and emotions, to meaningfully challenge norms and assumptions, and value the relational and subjective aspects of human experience (Adler, 2006; Barry & Meisiek, 2010a; Sutherland & Purg, 2011; Taylor & Ladkin, 2010). This study engages with this practice through observational and interview data with participants of leadership development choral conducting masterclasses at a European business school. The experiences of these executive management students are explored asking if, how, and what learning was happening.

After situating the work theoretically and outlining the methodological approach, insights are discussed substantiating the value of these approaches. Mobilizing participant-centered data nuance is added to understandings of arts-based learning processes as well as descriptions of learning outcomes around the relationality of leadership and the nature of power and responsibility.

To start, the arts and leadership movement is placed within the theoretical arenas of experiential learning, sensemaking, and aesthetic knowing and discussed through dominant discourses around mastering craft, the use of metaphor, and organizational aesthetics.

Underpinning Theory

The growing practice of, and research into, arts-based methods in leadership development flows from the recognition that traditional, rational-oriented means of doing education do not meet the challenges found in organizations today (Adler, 2011; Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Donaldson, 2002; Edwards, Elliott, Iszatt-White, & Schedlitzki, 2013; Ghoshal, 2005; Grey & Mitev, 1995; Khurana, 2007; Mintzberg, 2004). This stems from the wider adoption of experiential learning methods in executive education and leadership development (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002; Vince, 1996; Weick, 2007).

Arts-based methods follow the experiential learning path—the transformation of experience into new knowing through perception, cognition, and behavior in an adaptive process (Kolb, 1984). The term *experience* used here, specifically aesthetic experience, comes from the work of Dewey (1934): “Those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being ‘real experience’. . . It may have been something of tremendous importance . . . or it may have been something that in comparison was

slight” (p. 205). Whether tremendous or slight, experience becomes experience when one series of moments stands out in comparison to others. This occurs at the intersection of engaged participation within an event and making connections between that event and one’s self. Connections arise through sensemaking, the activity of giving meaning to experience (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). It is a collaborative, socially situated practice, influenced by others and by context (Holt & Macpherson, 2010).

The end products of this learning are understood as aesthetic knowing (Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007). The importance of aesthetic knowing is manifested through the perspectival and circumstantial incongruity present in (post)modern societies. As social beings, particularly within contemporary business contexts, individuals and groups are required to be ever more adaptable, facing discontinuous change, unfamiliar perspectives, and new circumstances (Giddens, 1991, 2003). There is an increasing reliance upon aesthetic sensemaking (meaning making based on the feelings about what’s going on) to inform actions. As one does so, one develops new action strategies through the transformation of the feelings, senses, and emotions experienced. This type of knowing is “. . . skewed toward knowledge drawn from more aesthetic experience or knowledge used to construct, represent, and interpret the felt meanings and sensory experiences related to organizational life” (Hansen et al., 2007, p. 546). The literature on arts-based methods describes this sensemaking and aesthetic knowing through arts experiences in three primary ways: mastering craft, engaging metaphorically, and organizational aesthetics. Each is a distinct means for developing new aesthetic knowing, though they can be used in combination.

Mastering craft. Artists exemplify extraordinary mastery of craft(s) in the pursuit of unique, evocative products, be they plastic (e.g., paintings) or performative (e.g., music). Artists persist to master skills, developing their craft to exceptional levels so they can employ them in new and imaginative ways. In this sense, the craft of art is about creating exemplary arrivals (Barry & Meisiek, 2010b), the harnessing of mastered craft to create unique, evocative, artistic products such as concert performances, paintings, or theatrical productions. In the pursuit of exemplary arrivals in leadership—high performing teams, organizations, products, services, strategy, and so on—development practitioners and researchers have leveraged artistic practices (e.g., music, painting, acting) to enhance the crafts of communicating, observing, listening, and motivating (Barry & Meisiek, 2010a; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Darsø, 2004; Koivunen & Wennes, 2011; Nissley, 2010; Sutherland & Purg, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002). In this vein, the outcomes of sensemaking around craftful experiences are seen as developing transferable skills (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Examples include executives learning through an actor’s rhetorical abilities, or a musician’s listening skills.

Engaging metaphorically. Down a more cognitive path, the arts have been employed metaphorically, to enrich thinking and reasoning. By the juxtaposition of two seemingly unconnected ideas, metaphors help us see new perspectives, question and reveal

underlying assumptions, and engage in creative deconstruction (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Mantere, Sillince, & Hämäläinen, 2007; Palmer & Dunford, 1996). As metaphorical explorations, music, theater, and dance have been used to reframe the experience of organizational change (Mirvis, 2005), challenge the command and control paradigms of leadership (Barrett, 1998), and parse the ephemerality of organizational structures (Hatch, 1999; Ropo & Sauer, 2008). The fundamental value is to enhance our mental creativity, open new perspectives, and challenge the way things have been done.

Organizational aesthetics. The final dominant area of arts-based methods research issues from what Taylor (2002) coined “aesthetic muteness.” Contemporary organizational life has been criticized for being dehumanized, being calculatedly instrumental, freezing our abilities to creatively change (Taylor, 2008), and ignoring the felt, sensory and emotional—the aesthetic—dimensions of human experience (Strati, 1992). The organizational aesthetics line leverages the foregrounding of the senses, feelings, and emotions in art to develop more imagination, awareness, and attention to the subjective aspects of business and organizational life (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). The practices of musicians and conceptual artists have been employed to explore authenticity and embodiment (Ladkin, 2008) and the relational nature of leadership (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011). Artistic making, the creation of artistic products such as dolls (Gaya-Wicks & Rippin, 2010) and masks (De Ciantis, 1995), has been used for self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-therapy. In the broadest spectra, the aesthetics of poetry, painting, and design have been called to develop “a leadership based more on hope, aspiration, innovation and beauty than on the replication of historical patterns of constrained pragmatism” (Adler, 2011, p. 208).

Although the arts are increasingly present in leadership development, their use has outpaced research on the practice. The growing number of studies has tended toward the conceptual and, where empirical, focused on short-term implications. As researchers have noted (Barry & Meisiek, 2010a; Springborg, 2012; Sutherland, 2013; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009; Woodward & Funk, 2010), there are core questions requiring exploration:

Participant learning: Are participants learning, what are they learning, and how are they learning?

Professional impact: How impactful are arts-based learning interventions and are there longer-term effects?

The research presented here followed a methodological path to investigate these lacunae through observation of, and interviews with, participants of choral conducting masterclasses focused on leadership development. Following the “Method” section, findings are discussed within the context of the theoretical landscape outlined above—arts-based learning as experiential learning, via sensemaking, to new aesthetic knowing. What the results highlight is learning that goes beyond the transferable skills or predominantly cognitive aspects of development described in the mastering craft and

metaphorical engagement arguments. Participants described learning happening primarily in the organizational aesthetics vein, principally around the feelings, senses, and emotional nature of organizational life, leadership, power, and responsibility.

Method

This study explores the above questions from the perspectives of student-participants. The data come from three different leadership workshops, held at an internationally recognized and accredited European business school. These workshops brought students together with choirs in so-called “conducting masterclasses.” Two of the conducting masterclasses, one from 2012, the other from 2013, were part of the final module leadership curriculum of the school’s Executive MBA (EMBA); the third was part of a 2-week summer school for Early Career Managers (ECM) held in 2013. Participants involved in the EMBA program came from 15 different countries (primarily European, but also including students from North America, Africa, and the Middle East) and were experienced practitioners with a minimum of 5 years of mid-to-senior management experience. They ranged in age from 30 to 58. Participants in the ECM came from 12 different countries (primarily European, but also including students from Africa and Asia). They had a minimum of 3 years of professional work experience and had either just entered or were about to enter a management role. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 35.

Two different facilitators delivered the workshops (both were experienced conductors and leadership development practitioners) and involved two different choirs (both professionally active chamber choirs of approximately 30 singers). Although the events took place at different times, with different students, choirs, and facilitators, the format for each was the same. The day-long workshops began with an introductory lecture-conversation on leadership (approximately 2 hours). Following this, the choir entered, singing as they came into the classroom, breaking the more traditional learning environment. Throughout the masterclass (approximately 4 hours), students sat within the choir and engaged in three distinct but intermingled activities: (a) observing how work gets done in a choral organization, (b) group discussions about organizational life and the nature of management and leadership, and (c) the management students conducting the choir. As the works performed by the choir were technically demanding compositions, the students did not join as singers (though many were moved to hum or tap-along with the music!). As students volunteered to conduct (none of whom had previous conducting experience), facilitators followed a masterclass approach of providing in-the-moment feedback and discussion on their leadership practice. This was done conversationally and involved seeking constructive criticism from choir members and fellow students. Table 1 outlines the general structure of the 1-day workshops. Based upon field notes, it briefly summarizes the general observations of what was going on during each stage of a masterclass workshop.

The primary data collection involved observations of and conversations with facilitators, participant observation during the workshops (captured as field notes), and semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, randomly selected, within 24 hours of

Table 1. Workshop Structure.

Approximate timing	Activity	Interaction description
08:30-10:30	Introductory lecture-conversation on leadership	Facilitator-led conversation focusing on the relational nature of leadership
10:30-11:00	Coffee break	Informal conversations between participants and facilitator
11:00-11:30	Entry and introduction of the choir	Following the coffee break, participants returned to the classroom after which the choir entered, singing. Following the entrance of the choir, the facilitator introduced the choir and facilitated a "getting-to-know-each-other" session where participants and choir members introduced themselves to each other in small groups
11:30-12:00	Choir performs with facilitator	Following the introductions, the facilitator conducted the choir through a few pieces, asking the participants to observe, question, and comment on the organizational behavior of the choir (how the choir works together) and the role of management/leadership in the working of the choir. The goals of this session were to get participants curious about how the choir works, make connections between the choral organization and organizations familiar to the participants, and to allow participants to gain some familiarity with how a conductor works with a choir
12:00-13:00	Masterclass Session 1	Each masterclass session involved participants volunteering themselves to conduct the choir. The facilitator worked with each participant-conductor to draw insights into their leadership practice. This was done conversationally through questions, feedback, and seeking observations, advice, and discussion from the choir and the rest of the participants
13:00-14:00	Lunch break	Informal conversations between participants, choir, and facilitator
14:00-15:30	Masterclass Session 2	Continuation of the masterclass format
15:30-16:00	Coffee break	Informal conversations between participants, choir, and facilitator
16:00-17:30	Masterclass Session 3	Continuation of the masterclass format
17:30-18:00	Wrap-up	During the final session, the facilitator drew on full group reflection and conversation to draw key insights created during the day

the completion of the masterclass. Detailed notes were kept on each student-conductor (their name, when they conducted, observations of their conducting experience). Interview informants were randomly selected from this list. In all cases, students approached for an interview consented. Five follow-up interviews were completed between 6 and 12 months after the initial event. During the interviews, participants reflected on and described their experiences. The interviews were carried out in an open-ended manner. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Working with these data, researchers followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008) of iteratively building categories from initial open codes. The methods are interpretative, recognizing that researchers are curating experiences, interpreting them, and constructing meaning with research participants (Charmaz, 2006). To substantiate validity, the analysis involved multiple individual readings of all transcripts, reflecting back to observational field notes, and a series of four in-depth analysis meetings in which individual analyses were presented, and codes were debated and refined into categories. Throughout, a multi-perspective approach was taken, allowing multiple voices to expose multiple realities from personal experiences (Ropo & Sauer, 2008) seeking “divergent generalizability” (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

From an aggregated initial set of 42 open codes, these were first divided into two areas based on the research questions: “learning” and “learning outcomes.” Within the learning set of codes, discussed below as “how learning gets done,” there were initially 29 open codes. Connections between these codes spoke to process areas. The first process area referred to triggers that drew students into a learning process (the initial open codes included “attention grabbing” and “a spark”) and how the triggers led to an emotional, high sensory-state experience (the initial open codes included “high emotions” and “buzzing senses”). These were grouped into the categories of sensory triggers and aesthetic experience. The second process area referred to how learning happened once the aesthetic experience began. The categories that emerged involved sensemaking (the open codes included “seeking meaning” and “questioning what’s going on”), associative work (the initial open codes included “connecting to current job” and “drawing on professional experience”), and aesthetic knowing (the initial codes included “gut-knowing” and “emotional insight”). Within the learning outcomes, the category of power and responsibility emerged with a group of open codes referring to “influence,” “feeling responsible,” and “responsibility awareness.” The remaining open codes spoke to relations between conductor and choir such as “eye contact,” “connecting with the choir.” These were grouped under the category of relationality and leadership.

In what follows, findings are first presented around “how learning gets done”—the processes underlying student learning involving (a) sensory triggers to aesthetic experience and (b) sensemaking, associative work, and aesthetic knowing. Second, the focus comes to “learning outcomes”—the learning created by students during and after the workshop focusing on (a) power and responsibility and (b) relationality and leadership.

Insights

How Learning Gets Done

I felt really excited, that I can say . . . and motivated and maybe . . . inspired. (Dan, ECM Student)

And the power you feel while conducting and at the same time the responsibility you have, it's . . . it's, I mean, exactly as in leadership and as in, in the business world. So it matches absolutely 100 per cent. (Elena, EMBA Student)

Dan and Elena's sentiments are indicative of the enthusiastic discussions observed during the masterclasses and experienced across the interviews. The choral conducting experience was a unique, rich, and relevant learning environment. In particular, the research found learning centered on organizational and leadership aesthetics—the feelings and sensations of people working together and the nature of leadership in action. More specifically, insights are presented on “how learning gets done” as experiential learning through (a) sensory triggers that bring aesthetic experiences into relief where students (b) engage in sensemaking through associative work, comparing and contrasting these experiences to their own professional practice in ways that transform these experiences into new aesthetic knowing. Finally, two principal areas of impactful participant learning are discussed: (a) relationality and leadership and (b) power and responsibility.

a. From sensory trigger to aesthetic experience

The excitement, motivation, inspiration, and power that Dan and Elena described began with what has been categorized as a sensory trigger—the presence of singing:

And, just the moment they [the choir] entered, the energy and the power was on a very, very high level. (Ella, EMBA Student)

The choir's entry, the sounds of people making music together, significantly changed the tone of the development space. As a trigger, the sensory impact of singing proved to be a catalyst for development. It grabbed participant's attention, immersing them in aesthetic experience. This is what Dewey referred to as “real” experience, a felt, sensed, and emotional event that stands out as significant in comparison to other moments. Once the trigger was pulled, the students described a turning point, a point of departure. Something “new,” “different,” “unique,” was happening.

However, although most found the entry of the choir to be highly significant, that trigger and consequent aesthetic experience was the beginning, an entry point into a new learning opportunity. That described by the participants as most impactful occurred when they were themselves conducting:

Because, when you try something you have experience. You have your own feelings, and you are accepting the feelings from the others, and feedback from the others. And, that's

important! Very much! Because, you stand up, you are standing there and performing . . . And, that's good! (Lucy, ECM Student)

Lucy's reflections open a door onto the sensemaking with which the participants engaged. From sensory trigger to aesthetic experience, the students described how they worked with the feelings they were having, what they felt from others, and with the feedback they received. This sensemaking revolved around associative work and created new aesthetic knowing. Importantly, following the initial sensory trigger, the students spoke of their experiences as a totality. They did not highlight a particular moment or specific action as the source for their learning. The learning emerged as they made meaning of the experience as a whole.

b. Sensemaking, associative work, aesthetic knowing:

You can sense some things, but this was like confirmation . . . of what you sensed before. (Susan, EMBA Student)

So . . . that is, that is something which comes out . . . um . . . from the art, but that is something that I knew from life. From the experience with the people and from myself . . . when I got this, I say yes [snaps fingers] that's it! (Tom, EMBA Student)

The sensemaking emerges through associative work (Sutherland, 2013), relating the choral experience to their known professional contexts, creating meaning through comparison and contrast. Both Susan and Tom do this by alternating between reflections on the experience and past experiences (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991): sensing things, connecting to things one "sensed before," coming to finger snapping insights.

The work of sensemaking began with attention grabbing sensory triggers that brought aesthetic experience into relief. Once in relief, the experience became the focus of associative work. This associative work followed a process of articulation leading to the transformation of experience into new knowing. Participants tended to do this through metaphor:

. . . in this meaning, it's a song which has, let's say, some melody, some rhythm, something. The . . . conductor can influence many things but there are things which he has to understand and he has to accommodate in himself . . . And on the other side . . . um . . . the group of the singers is really, um, watching him, what he is doing. They are reading him, what is his feeling of the music, what . . . what is his feeling of the market, what is his feeling of the company situation. (John, EMBA Student)

John's reflection indicates the dialogic process participants go through. He employs the ability to use language as a resource for creative knowledge construction (Mantere et al., 2007; Ropo & Sauer, 2008). Based on the metaphorical engagement line presented above, he thinks metaphorically starting with the musical activity—the melody, rhythm, the role of the conductor, the interplay between conductor and singers. Then

there is the metaphorical switch, the music becomes “the market” and the conductor’s activity the manager’s feelings, the singers become colleagues “reading” the manager.

John has moved from a sensory trigger (the choir singing) to having an aesthetic experience (feelings, senses, and emotions). He has engaged in sensemaking through associative work (using metaphorical thinking) to transform experience into new organizational aesthetic insights (how people “read” a manager’s feelings, in addition to reports about the market and company situation). At the moment of the metaphorical switch, like Tom’s finger snap, new aesthetic knowing has been created. What makes the knowing aesthetic, as discussed above in relation to the work of Hansen et al. (2007), is the nature of the learning through the transformation of the felt, sensory, emotional aspects of the participant’s experience.

John’s insight was one of many described by the participants. In the following section, attention is turned to learning outcomes, structured under two banners: (a) relationality and leadership and (b) power and responsibility.

Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes that emerged in this study revolve around organizational aesthetics. Although there are examples of craftful insights—principally dealing with communication and the importance of more transferable skills such as observing and listening—the dominant learning discussed was around awareness and attention to the subjective aspects of leadership and organizational life. These were aggregated into two categories: relational insights into leadership and the sensual experience of power and responsibility.

a. Relationality and Leadership

I think that there was not one single person I did not feel I am connected to. And, I think that made me emotional, as well. Each one of them was watching me with big, open, positive eyes and there is not one single of them that we did not look each other in eyes. And, I think that’s important. (Bella, EMBA Student)

Bella describes a fundamental leadership insight. Leadership is an emotional, embodied, and interactive phenomenon between people.

The connection was actually like there were little strings between us. (Dan, ECM Student)

When you translate it into, into the business world. You have to feel, you have to know the people. (Elena, EMBA Student)

I felt enormous energy. I felt engaged, even when I was in the audience listening and looking at others . . . I was in this bubble with all these people, with eye contact, communicating, feeling the energy. (Susan, EMBA Student)

Most interviewees, like Susan, Dan, and Elena, excitedly discussed *feeling* “strings,” “energy,” “connections”—the relational aspects of people doing things together. This is aesthetic knowing. It is not textbook learning or case study debates, it is experiencing and reflecting on what it is like for people to manage, lead, and work together. These reflections yielded subtler and more sophisticated development in management and leadership than the narrative of top-down authority based on title (headship). On their own, students “got” that leadership arises from processes of social interaction in which relational dynamics contribute to leadership as an outcome (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Moreover, they came to see leadership as emergent and distributed, in ways that agree with work of scholars exploring complexity leadership theory (Uhl-bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) and distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2008):

So, this is some, this kind of mutual activity correspondence or listening or . . . in that sense . . . a dialogue. Dialogue, by not talking, for sure. (Ella, EMBA Student)

. . . about leading yourself, leading others, and following. I mean, we have to switch roles, quite often. And there is nothing wrong with it. (Tom, EMBA Student)

Both Ella and Tom speak to leadership as a “mutual activity” of groups, that leadership is not something contained in the individual; at times people lead, at others they follow. These realizations—that “there is nothing wrong with it”—came as a relief to many participants. This countered their lived experience of being expected to be “the boss,” the absolute leader.

Flowing from these relational experiences and insights came profound learning around the nature of power and responsibility in leadership practice.

b. Power and responsibility

The exercise was really revealing to me . . . um . . . like I didn’t realize how much, um, responsibility managers have with power and the leadership . . . And with my own experience, it was really revealing. (Christine, EMBA Student)

Having in charge that kind of power, gives very sensational responsibility. It gives you completely different way of thinking and feeling. (Bella, EMBA Student)

These responses, echoed by other participants, are striking. Christine and Bella are experienced managers at the end of an Executive MBA program. One would not expect them to be surprised by the sense of power and responsibility. Yet here, standing in front of a group of singers, the feeling of power, its sensual, aesthetic nature suddenly became real:

I felt in a way overwhelmed by the presence of the choir. I felt ok, so, this is for real. And yes, if I do this they really do that. And, so . . . their commitment was actually raising my responsibility. (Ben, EMBA Student)

By standing in front of the choir, without the trappings of the executive suite or buffering secretaries, participants were exposed (perhaps also vulnerable) to the relational nature of power and responsibility. Many of them, like Tom's shared leadership insights above, began to seek feedback and reassurance:

I was looking for the contact . . . and . . . I received feedback from them actually. (Susan, EMBA Student)

. . . to look at the people singing and to see if I am doing a good job. (Dan, ECM Student)

Even more than these reflections on the class experience, the learning that emerged for many actually impacted their managerial practice and their exercising of power. In a follow-up interview 6 months after the choral masterclass, Mark admitted,

For example, my bad habit was that I . . . how can I say this . . . too tight with people . . . I used too much power, to control the situation. Now, it is different. Now, I just want a clear understanding of the task . . . and then I just simply leave the people . . . And, if they need anything, I always try to help them. (Mark, EMBA Student)

Back in his work environment, Mark translated the experience into action. He recognized that his approach to power was too "tight," too controlling. Now he seeks shared understanding of the work at hand, then leaves people to it—but is present to help, to serve.

Even more evocatively, Tom said the following in a follow-up 12 months after the workshop:

. . . sometimes, it is imagined that leaders have to lead and have to direct and have to control and control . . . Well, it doesn't work this way . . . and this exercise with the choir really points this out.

I mean, the main connection is that this exercise really reminds you how important it is to remind yourself on a daily basis what leadership is really about . . . it is not ordering, screaming, yelling, wanting people to do precisely what you want them to do, but it is really listening, and getting the right mix. (Tom, EMBA Student)

In just a 1-day choral learning intervention, these managers found their understanding of power, responsibility, management, and ultimately leadership transformed. They developed deeper understandings of the relational nature of their professional practice, breaking the bonds of absolute boss-focused leadership. They came to feel and experience the power that a manager has when working with others. There was a re-understanding of the importance of listening, getting to know others, connecting with them, helping and serving, rather than directing and controlling. As learning outcomes, these relational and responsibility-oriented insights became part of a refinement of their professional practice, developing more people focused, humanistic qualities in contrast to the more often proclaimed needs for scientific, efficient

management. In the cases of Tom and Mark, these were learning outcomes that made a difference to their management practice months after the workshop. They were learning experiences that stuck and are enacted in their daily work.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

As the above learning outcomes show, arts-based methods help management professionals develop new insights into leadership and organizational life. Operating out of experiential learning fundamentals, learning occurs through the transformation of lived experience, more than rational-logical learning from texts, articles, and case studies. In arts-based learning, the aesthetic comes to the foreground. Consequently, learning with and from the arts constitutes an aesthetic way of knowing.

The fundamental value and validity of the work discussed here is the methodological focus on the perspectives of participants—what they describe as going on in these settings. What the research emerged through observation of, and interviews with, the students was the immediate, sensory trigger impact of the art—in this case, choral music. Although there was a shock value to this—it is unusual to have professional choirs and management students working together in the average business classroom—the sensory triggers were catalysts for relevant professional development. The presence of singing and conducting created *real* aesthetic experiences with which students made meaning through associative work. The learning that came out, new aesthetic knowing, was impactful.

As presented with the cases of John and Tom, this 1-day masterclass directly impacted their leadership practice. No longer were they chained by notions of command and control leadership. Their learning around the nature of leadership was profound, far more mindful, and attentive to the aesthetic-relational aspects of organizational life. Moreover, the appreciation of the nature of power and responsibility described by participants was potent. By engaging with a choir, they seemed to learn more about these phenomena in the world than any number of case studies, lectures, or assigned readings.

This is the first implication for practice, particularly important for HRD professionals as they consider the goals, contents, and methods for future development programs. Arts-based learning is effective, impactful, and has lasting effects in developing managers' understanding of the human nature of organizational life. If, as is argued by HRD researchers, practitioners, and a plethora of organizational scholars, one wants to create more humanistic organizations and businesses (and one should!), then there is a need to engage with the sources of being human—feelings, senses, and emotions. The arts are ripe for this.

A second implication derives from this and relates back to the threefold breakdown of the arts-based literature we discussed at the outset. Although a significant portion of the literature, and the general arguments for the use of the arts in management and leadership development, outlines discrete, craftful, and ultimately transferable skills outcomes, what participants in this study described went deeper than becoming better public speakers, listeners, or team motivators. Although there is value in the arts

developing such instrumental craft, there is even more potential to transform people's fundamental understandings of leadership and organizational life. This is significant both for HRD researchers and those involved in planning and delivering organizational development. This potential lies within more subtle, emotional, and subjective experiences of leadership as a phenomenon from which managers can overcome the aesthetic muteness that permeates business organizations. The arts provide a space where these experiences can happen, where students can sense and articulate things like "strings" between people, energy, and the intangible connective tissue of an organization. The work around arts-based pedagogies strongly suggests this is fertile ground to throw off the cold, instrumental, hyper-rational shackles of traditional development approaches and to engage at a more fundamentally human level.

Yet, this requires more than participation in such events; it requires engaged, reflexive processing of these experiences. This is the final key implication, one implicating researchers. Experiential learning requires not only sensemaking during the events but also following the events. In a reflexive turn, one must recognize that the researchers are implicated in the learning of the students in this study. During the interviews conducted, researchers provided an additional reflexive sensemaking space. As has been argued by Cunliffe (2002, 2009), Gray (2007), Reynolds (1998), and others, learning is enhanced by reflexive practice. These opportunities need to be incorporated into pedagogical design both within and outside the classroom. In follow-up interviews, these, now former students, were eager to relive their learning experiences, to reconnect with them, and to, as Tom said, "remind yourself on a daily basis what leadership is really about." Although a daily basis would seem overkill, providing conversational space with neutral parties in the months after development or study programs officially finish would enhance and expand learning. These results highlight the need for more reflexive work to be built into development programs. HRD professionals overseeing organizational learning, as well as consultants and development practitioners in general, need to take this on board. To make the most of the learning opportunities happening, participants need space, time, and processes for reflexive work during and after learning interventions. This also has an implication for HRD researchers, the need to focus more upon the processes and outcomes of reflexive practice, its impacts on development, and especially how this affects professional practice after learning interventions.

Although we have come some ways to exploring and understanding learning processes and outcomes of arts-based methods, questions remain. For many participants, arts-based learning activities, such as conducting a choir, are risky. These are new experiences: unusual, different, "de-routinized" learning environments (Sutherland, 2013). Engagement requires accepting risk, failure, being vulnerable, as well as trusting yourself, trusting others, and trusting in these unfamiliar processes and activities. In future research, there is a need to better understand how these learning environments are successfully created and the roles of facilitators in dealing with such issues. This further substantiates calls in recent research to attend more to issues around building psychological safety and holding spaces, the importance of learning space aesthetics, and the agency of facilitators (Beyes & Michels, 2011; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Sutherland & Ladkin, 2013).

Future research should also explore what else is being learned. Our research found the learning went beyond craftful, transferable skills. This seemingly less-tapped potential revolves around the emotional, subjective, “irrational” outcomes of this type of learning. Although such outcomes are more difficult to articulate and describe than instrumental outcomes, it is an area requiring more study. What are the outcomes and effects of breaking through the aesthetic muteness of organizations? Following from this, an essential area for further research is increased focus on longer-term impacts. This study incorporated longer-term data. Evidence from these interviews, presented above with respect to the cases of Tom and Mark, indicates arts-based learning interventions do impact future professional practice. This longer-term view needs to be taken in future research focusing on the *if* and *how* of arts-based development to effect change in leadership practice.

In exploring these questions and issues, a qualitative approach, one based in grounded theory, seems the most fruitful avenue to take. Participants must be engaged directly, exploring their experiences with them to gain insights into what and how learning gets done. This is best achieved through theory building rather than theory testing or application of existing theoretical constructs. The learners need to speak.

At the close, the final message to impart is that this work, and the growing work of others, substantiates claims that the arts can complement traditional rational, scientific, efficient leadership-oriented curriculum. It is possible to foreground and champion the humanistic elements of management, leadership, organizational, and business development.

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