

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council  
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2017**

**Plenary 1: Connecting the Arts with Audiences**

*In the Flow: A View of the Arts-in-Education*

**Full transcript of speech by**

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Thank you very much for having The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection (AFTEC) with you today. As you can see, we are into arts education and arts in education, and by the by, I will explain that.

Can I first of all say that maybe next year we should have some engineering companies, design companies, electricity companies, people in the business in the audience as well because the arts are for everybody. It's not just for those of us who believe in the arts. So you might think about that next year.

Obviously, we all need our programmes to connect to audiences and connecting the arts to the audience is definitely one side of the equation. May I, however, offer that there is another side to the equation which is to upscale the audience to the arts through arts and arts education, and arts in education. And by that I'm not simply referring to teaching a young person how to draw, how to sing, how to dance. I am seriously talking about the critical thinking side of arts education, making our young people thinkers. So, the creativity and the critical side I think we need to deal with.

By taking care of the audience through educational offers, as a matter of principle, and not when only there are resources, I think the audience will be able to meet us faster, halfway, and thereby completing a cycle, a cycle which is both enhancing and virtuous. This is how we believe we can deal with changes that are always on our doorsteps.

Definitely, you may well ask, it is already difficult enough us as the art sector to look after this enterprise, why are we dealing with arts education and art in education, and I use this interchangeably, why do it at all? I think there are three reasons.

First of all, we would like our audiences or our participants to be mindfully present and not just physically there. Secondly, if there is further recognition of the arts and its potential, I think the audience will move from looking, to seeing, from hearing to really listening, and from gaping, participating, to really engaging. Thirdly, I personally think, most important of all, is audienceship is about our collective audience making better informed, more valuable and sophisticated demands on the works of art and on the quality of the arts that we all do, and hence this is the macro-view of why an arts education is so important.

So audienceship to us through arts education and arts in education, is about the process. Of course, the product will come afterwards, and at AFTEC these are the three strategic areas that we work on: learning and participation, youth empowerment and, in particular, arts for change.

The education system as many of us know it in our countries really has come from an industrial age where we manufacture exactly the same mold. This is called a fixed mindset and it is completely right to say that with a fixed mindset, we are not going to be able to meet all the challenges and the changes on our doorstep. Or, as the very famous poet and creative writer, Peter Abbs, says:

*"Education systems nowadays are inimical to creativity and authentic learning. High-stakes testing or sink-or-swim mentality in our education systems make our societies risk averse."*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in order to change, we cannot be risk averse and therefore the arts and creativity are so important to all our work.

Arts are for all. We teach some medical students of the University of Hong Kong drama, music and dance. In the next three years, under the guise of The Hong Kong Jockey Club (the Jockey Club), we will be working with social workers in order to cascade the arts to as many people as possible. We take our young people through acting and life skills. In the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre, we have young theatre makers and they critique excerpts from plays, not simply act them. Children also can go to our immersive theatre. By the way, we also do relaxed theatre for autistic spectrum disorders, young people, learning difficulties.

AFTEC have just finished six successful years of "From Page to Stage" workshops and theatre production with the Jockey Club, and the programme is now sustained by a government organisation. For the 2018 project, we now have over 13,000 teenagers coming in for this single project, 28 shows, 99 secondary schools, and out of that there are 75 secondary schools that have returned to us again. 56 per cent have been with us for one to three years and 44 per cent have been with us for four to seven years.

We take risks in our programming because it is important for the organisation's growth and for young people and schools to know that the arts are simply much more than just learning how to dance.

What do we think is important? All those figures sound really attractive but, seriously, where do the arts lead us? I think it's a really amazing topic. Well, I'll tell you where it has led AFTEC for the last few years. So we have novices coming into our programmes. Then, we have excited novices and then we have regular novices. So you can see we have been on the novice level for the last three to four years. I am not complaining. I mean, having 13,000 people coming to your theatre is something to really be happy about.

But more importantly, we've taken a tangram approach, If you do not know what a tangram is, it's actually a Chinese puzzle with seven fixed pieces. And what is a tangram approach? We cannot be always teaching every single young person or adult in fact, so

why not give them the tools to be able to do this, with the tools to understand the arts, to appreciate it, to participate in it. Each young person with the same seven components under the AFTEC tangram approach, they will be able to interpret, they will be able to learn how to learn, and that is how they will adapt to change.

You will ask: can this tangram approach really reduce the linearity of novices from novice to excited novice to regular novice, towards a more organic model? I can resoundingly tell you that in our last nine years it is possible. However, there are no shortcuts. It does take time. And I think we have to slow down. I really think we have to stop, get the basics right. I won't leap, you won't leap, our young people will leap for us, and we've seen this happening at our programmes.

So we've been working on something looking like this, so bronze, silver, gold, novice, apprentice, or connoisseurship, using some of the bigger words, if you would like. These levels are now in-built into all our projects for a meaningful ecology. Of course, we're still evolving. We are a learning organisation. We will never stop learning. We are always making mistakes.



These are some of the quotes. written by 13 to 18 year olds as part of our Bramble Hong Kong Youth Theatre Awards (see powerpoint page 10), which have been ongoing since 2013. The top two will give you an understanding of how through the tangram approach they are getting deeper into acting skills and the totality of theatre. So depth and understanding, reading beyond words to make a genuine connection with the audience. They wrote it, I didn't write it for this conference.

The bottom two quotes are what the arts can really do to change lives. The greatest obstacle learning, this boy who is academically non-gifted but very good in acting. He has been totally changed because of theatre, not necessarily because of ours. And Kaya has discovered the value of kindness, that the empathy, the kind of human values, I think we tend to forget in the arts because all of us are so busy chasing funding to deliver our programmes that we forget certain things. This is called the growth mindset in which they need challenges, they are persevering, they work hard in order to master acting or dancing or whatever, they take criticism and, most importantly, they actually are inspired by other people's success and not threatened by it. I would call this the upward spiral, and it takes funders, artists, arts organisations, teachers, schools, government to work together, therefore we need a cultural policy that would work and that is integrative.

So at AFTEC we have witnessed that when the audience is facilitated up to the arts through the Tangram approach, programmes become more meaningful. Let me give you an example, Tiffany and Marco, 2013 started with us as a 15-year-old and a 16-year-old from very local schools or what we call lower-banding schools. At the very beginning, they don't speak English, they joined one of our programmes, and they are still with us five years on. Last summer, they were at were in London and they bought tickets to see Hamlet. These are young people who do not even see English theatre in Hong Kong!

So the point really is the arts do change lives. The matter is what do we do in arts education in order to motivate them? Hopefully, over time, they will change. In a city where everything about being the fastest to the finishing line is considered generally to be the only kind of success, I think those of us in the arts really must stop and pay attention to the values of the arts for a change.

By having arts education as the foundation to this audienceship cycle, the programmes that companies produce will make further sense and will be further appreciated. Funders' dollars will go a longer way. So we're looking at blue chip funding, ladies and gentlemen, not hedge funds, because we are dealing with human beings here. As much as I love the digital aspects of life, I really think for once we've got to stop and get in place really good arts and education programmes so that the young people will leap ahead and make great changes for us. Thank you very much.

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