

Preface

Rationale and Aims of the Book

Jean Luc Nancy (2003) suggests that every culture is “in itself ‘multicultural’...a melee that within any ‘culture’ brings out a style or a tone; equally, however, it brings out the various voices or vocal ranges that are needed in order for this tone to be interpreted” (p. 283). Nancy also suggests that every culture, singularly drawn or drawn among other cultures, shares two properties: *having-in-common* and *being-in-common*.

These properties are even more poignant in a discussion of arts education around the world. With burgeoning interest in arts education as situated and lived/living practice, we note a paucity of treatises that focus on Southeast Asian perspectives of pedagogies and practices, particularly in understanding how communities of arts-practices across this region engage *through* education. This is all the more given more recent colonial provenance of the Southeast Asian region socially, culturally, economically and politically speaking. While contemporary practices secrete policies involving *privileged presence* of post- and neo-colonial infrastructures, it is the practices as locally situated which best underscore the impermeability of policy.

A book focusing on arts education practices in Singapore is not an example of insularity or even cultural essentialist discourse. As of January 2011, 3.8 million (about 74.29 %) of the five million people residing in Singapore are Singapore citizens or permanent residents; slightly more than one out of four persons living in this city-nation is neither citizen nor permanent resident (Singapore Government Statistics 2011). Given Singapore’s current demographic reality, *having-in-common* and *being-in-common* takes on a very different significance when commonly shared not only includes basic amenities and opportunities but also access to education, culture, social networks and practices of the Arts.

This edited book hopes to contribute by addressing the growing interest in and importance of localised context within arts education practices, making *context* therefore, a central theme in coming to terms *with* a broader understanding of the arts and arts education as global and glocal policy and practice. The book seeks to

provide a vehicle for the dissemination of research findings from case studies and autoethnographies about exemplary arts teaching in Singapore and provide a platform to negotiate generalities and particularities, global and local, formal and informal, through exegetical commentaries and critical dialogue between the local and regional/international discourse within each chapter. The situatedness of all chapters within a specific geographical location, lived and living practices in Singapore, drawing on the myriad network of social, cultural and historical contexts of the arts and arts education in Singapore, serves as points of departure engendering international dialogue on arts education.

The research narratives also point to the strengths in Singapore's positioning of arts education through government support in the last decade, propelling a string of initiatives that springboard development of arts education towards: (i) a robust creative and critical thinking arts curriculum; (ii) development of high-quality school arts ensembles; (iii) arts learning through technology and multimodalities; (iv) embodied learning in the arts; (v) the establishment of a specialized arts school; (vi) active reflective inquiry in arts pedagogy and practice towards learner-centered possibilities; and (vii) a thinking-through and negotiation about an arts identity grounded in localised, Asian and global perspectives.

Context in Arts Education

The meaning of any art form is tied closely to the context in which the arts making happen. Arts education, by association, is not simply transmission of "facts" but an education that is deeply embedded within social and cultural contexts. Culture as Nieto (1999 as cited in McCarthy 2009) explains, "is not static, and cultures are always hybrid and multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by a broad array of social, economic, and political factors; full of inherent tensions; and constantly being constructed by human beings" (p. 30). Beyond considering the complexities by which social and cultural contexts constantly change forms of that art and its practice, an arts educator needs also to consider the complexities of the arts classroom, "a site of multiple subcultures based on ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, religious tradition, and generational difference" (McCarthy 2009, p. 30). The arts educator also needs to be cognizant and reflective about his/her context, to be clear and honest of a particular situatedness: acknowledging influences of academic and arts training and be mindful of his/her identity in the arts anchored in a complex range and interaction of variables. What Glover and Hoskyns (2006) illustrate through music educators and musicians at work, is the way

each [would] have learned their skills through a different mixture of self-teaching, alone or with peers, formal or informal tuition, apprenticeship, periods of part or full time study and learning 'on the job' through regular performing or participation in groups or bands. Rock and pop, folk and traditional, classical and jazz musical styles are each rooted in different learning styles and teacher-learner relationships, as are different instrumental or vocal

traditions. Each tradition brings with it a form of discourse, practice and learning assumptions that musicians import into their work with young people (p. 85).

The Significance of Context

The word ‘context’ is derived from the Latin verb *contexere* which means “to weave together”, (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 2007). Understanding and interpreting context is central, if not crucial, to social and cultural anthropology and has taken significance over recent years in other academic disciplines including education and in this instance, arts education. But what is the meaning of *context* in arts education and how is it defined and selected and by whom?

To contextualize is also to frame, “it is our sense of relevance, driven by our theoretical outlooks and practical dispositions towards the work, that defines where these frames are to be placed” (Dilley 2002, p. 454). Taking the cue from social and cultural anthropology, there are two processes of construing context

for us within our own bodies of knowledge; and for them within theirs. The conjunction of these parallel processes in the course of fieldwork or in our writing about the field and its subsequent dissemination to other readers may generate further contexts of knowledge through a dialogical relationship...but context is expandable, infinitely so; and we must never lose sight of the fact that a claim about context is precisely that- an articulation concerning a set of connections and disconnections thought to be relevant to a specific agent that is socially and historically situated, and to a particular purpose (p. 454).

The interest here involves a contextual framing that places the arts educator and the arts classroom as a specific site for contemplation about pedagogies and practices. Through the rich, thick descriptions in the case studies and autoethnographic accounts, one begins to see an expansive and changeable arts education context of global and local flows that weaves into the glocal, of colonial and postcolonial positionings, of a tugging between the formal and informal, and the uneasiness of letting go of generalities to the ambiguity of particularities vital to negotiating artistic processes *in and of* learning.

To stay relevant and meaningful as authors and authorisers of their context, arts educators must constantly re-think, re-analyze and re-frame their processes and engagement with the arts, to always contextualize and situate their practices in the arts classroom in view of changing sociocultural and demographic contexts. This edited book begins by amplifying the multiple yet understated nuances in particular contexts within arts education practices in Singapore and critically reviews these practices through an exegetical commentary and critical dialogue between each chapter author and a regional/international scholar. The outcome for the reader, it is hoped, will generate further contexts of knowledge in arts education because of the dialogical relationship purposefully created within the structure of the book.

Overview of Parts

The general structure of each chapter consists typically of three delineated sections: (i) a report of original research based on a case study/autoethnographic account of arts teaching or perception about arts education within the Singapore formalized school system ranging from primary to tertiary education; (ii) an exegetical commentary about the report by a regional/international scholar on the pedagogies and practices employed in comparison with current trends in the particular arts field; and (iii) a reflective dialogue between the author(s) and the regional/international scholar, getting at the tensions and issues surrounding the contextualized practice.

Part I describes the particularities of the arts landscape in Singapore discussing the ever-evolving state and context of the arts in the city-as-nation. It emphasizes on how the arts are identified and implicated in Singapore's unique history, looking at socio-economic policies affecting arts practices and practices of the arts, and Singapore's unique demographic situation and its fluid interaction with the global environment. Part I thus provides a macro perspective on the position of the arts in Singapore, contextualizing for the reader subsequent chapters in the book, to engage with themes and ongoing conversations on the arts and culture in arguably the most progressive nation in the Southeast Asian region. Supplementing Part I are also two recently completed journal articles: (i) Mapping research in Visual Arts education in Singapore (Cheo and Millan 2012); (ii) Mapping musical learning: An evaluation of research in music education in Singapore (Lum and Dairianathan 2013) that speak to an overview of Singapore's music and visual arts education landscape through a mapping of local research over the past three decades.

Parts II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV and XV look at specific discussions on local arts education in three broad categories: (i) general arts education in Singapore schools which includes arts programmes in curriculum time and after-school arts activities; (ii) arts education at pre-tertiary level; and (iii) arts education in tertiary and teacher training programmes.

General Arts Education in Singapore Schools

Part II provides a critical opening counterpoint to this section that is timely in Singapore's arts education history, with governmental support for arts education at its height, moving away from a tradition of generalist arts teachers into a recognition and need for specialized arts educators in the primary schools. The tensions and issues of training for generalist vs. specialist teachers in a changing musical landscape is fleshed out by Dairianathan and Lum through the journey of an experienced general music teacher encountering the teaching of creative music activities (namely composition and improvisation) for the first time. It brings into question the requisite skill set a generalist music teacher is required to have in order to facilitate creative music activities (read mostly compositional and improvisational activities) in the music classroom. It suggests that teacher control (read levels

of freedom), confidence and competence, which goes beyond skill sets, are at the heart of an engaged creative music making endeavor and posits a closer look at local music teacher education that has often favored a more structured pedagogical perspective anchored within a perceived necessity on having a foundation of an Anglo-American Western classical music tradition.

Part III highlights the breakthrough of researchers in creating through digital platforms and arts practices, a/venues to help Singaporean youths deemed academically weak in the public school education system. These youths are enabled to express who they are in the world through *performative digital narratives* they created as part of a longitudinal digital storytelling project that was undertaken in their English Language classroom. These Singaporean youths became agents of and agency for their own learning and were able to express—through multimodalities of voice/s—their subjectivities and shifting identities. Working across artforms, these participating youth composed their digital stories using a range of visual, aural and written texts such as photographs, video footage, art works, original and recorded music, dramatic soundscapes, voiceovers, titles and credits.

Part IV indulges in the musical self, of free improvisation as a means to understand and converse with oneself and how this reflective musicking in its sincerity can then be articulated and shared with students, to encourage them to use music as a means to reflect upon their culture and daily lives regardless of background and proficiency.

It serves to highlight the power, influence and motivation for students of having arts educators (classroom teachers in this instance) as practising and accomplished artists in their own fields. As the author posits, “Contextualized free improvisation promotes the structuring of musical thoughts into one more embedded in daily life rather than one contrived, formalized and indoctrinated. They are emotional, mundane, virtuosic, intellectual, gruesome, all expressions of the expressive and constructed ‘I’ of the moment. Hence, it is a musical diary for self-indulgence, self-release, self-growth, balancing external realities with inner realities, and mediating life through sounds.”

Part V provides a rare insight into the positioning of dance within the Singapore education system. Being situated within the physical education curriculum, dance as a subject is oftentimes relegated to fitness without much consideration for its aesthetic components. An argument for and against changing the dance curriculum to “fit with the times”, catering to young people’s personal dance interests and motivations are presented through an analysis of a survey and focus group interviews done with a group of secondary and junior college students.

Musical and dance ensembles from Singapore schools have acquired a habit of winning awards at local and international music festivals and competitions—a track record for the last few decades. This award winning mindset could not be made possible without kindred support of and for these ensembles by school leaders and administrators in many schools. Yet little is known of the ‘workings in the kitchen’; the processes involved in nurturing these ensembles that leads them to excellence in achievement. Part VI will explore the successes of a primary school

band through a qualitative examination of the dedication and hard work of its members and conductors, highlighting the working ingredients that are similar and different with other international settings.

Part VII examines the notion of arts partnership in schools, focusing in on the Singapore Schools Project (SSP), an initiative to introduce artists (particularly theatre) into the classroom with the intention of providing a different perspective to arts education within the school curriculum: to explore different ways that the arts can be linked to the curriculum and offer teachers different tools to develop projects with their students without the usual attendant assessment demands. The authors propose three core elements needed for arts partnerships: (i) Critical reflective practice; (ii) Experimentation in arts education practices; and (iii) Committed engagement to an attitude of collaboration that includes a two-way critical reflection to underpin the ‘doing’ of arts partnerships. The authors suggest that these core capabilities need to be practiced to achieve both policy and ground level sustenance of effective partnerships. The project also revealed how partnerships, when viewed as a process of ‘becoming’, allowed for discussion and paved ways for seeing alternative perspectives to teaching the arts and by extension, to classroom teaching and management.

Arts Education at Pre-tertiary Level

The establishment of a specialized school of the arts (SOTA) in 2004 signalled the Singapore government’s resolve to cultivate excellence in specialist arts domains within the local educational system. Policy and practice exemplified in SOTA as a niche area in the vast pre-tertiary public school system, emerges as a potential model of and for arts education in Singapore as a model *beyond* the arts. What SOTA claims as an arts-infused curriculum can be adopted in other schools that may not necessarily be focused on the arts, but recognize the value of the multiple artforms—visual arts, music, theater, and dance—in the development of well-rounded and holistic young citizens of Singapore. Given the possibilities, prospects and problems, a study of SOTA might be meaningfully pursued through more research questions regarding SOTA in particular and the arts education in Singapore at large. Parts VIII, IX and X give a glimpse of the uniqueness and contribution of SOTA to the Singapore arts education landscape.

Part VIII investigates the experiences of flow among 14 adolescents, giving a glimpse into the thoughts and opinions of students within SOTA, about their engagement with the hard- and heart-ware of SOTA. It speaks about students’ flow experiences and positive environmental factors provided within the school which affirms the heartware beyond the hardware that the Singapore government has invested to the development of creativity and critical thinking within Singaporean students and towards the arts and arts education in general.

Part IX presents a case study that aims to document and analyse teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and practices in conceptualizing arts-anchored curricula at

SOTA. Using actor-network theory as analytic lens, the interplay of curricular beliefs, personal experiences and practices in a specialised arts school setting is explored to give a unique perspective on curriculum enactment and development in Singapore. Crucial questions that are addressed include: Does integrating arts into curriculum increase complexity and widen perspectives? In what ways does an arts-anchored curriculum promote teacher's thinking and learning? How do practitioners of arts and academic domains achieve the breadth and depth of discussion on their topic of choice? How is the core curriculum integrated with the arts-anchored enrichment? Rich narratives gathered in the field will render support in explaining significant propositions about how practitioners are involved in the curriculum modification process that meets the needs of the Singaporean arts-based school context.

Part X delineates the evolving signature pedagogies of artist-teachers and the complexity of intersections with students' learning and creativity. In particular, it focuses on examining and drawing out signature pedagogies of SOTA artist-teachers in the visual arts: (i) providing ways in which the artist-teachers dynamically explore, develop, and manifest artistic disciplines that embody their art form, (ii) how they create and foster construction of knowledge, (iii) instil values and foster habits of mind, and (iv) provide multiple, iterative, joint opportunities for students and teachers to engage in the arts.

Part XI reflects upon the changing landscape of the music syllabus requirements of the Cambridge 'A' levels in Singapore, specifically the inclusion of an Asian component that examines in-depth, the traditions of the Indonesian gamelan and Indian classical music. While the inclusion of the component is a clear indication of a move to diversify and expose students to a wider range of the world's rich musical culture and repertoire beyond a Euro-American classical paradigm, Onishi-Costes as a trained ethnomusicologist, was perplexed by the daunting requirements of the Asian component and questions the feasibility of such a curriculum and the ability of local music teachers with little or no training in these complex musical traditions, to be able to execute such a demanding task. This autoethnographic account points to the author's struggles and deep concern in teaching to the test and the growing content within the Asian component which now includes beyond gamelan and Indian music, African music, Japanese Noh and Kabuki and Chinese music. The author questions students' life-long appreciation of these musics in such hot-housing situations and makes a plea towards an understanding that "non-western classical musical systems require specialist teachers and long-term, rigorous learning just as much as western classical music."

Arts Education in Tertiary and Teaching Training

Part XII looks into a particular focus area (learner-centered pedagogies) of in-service professional training in music education within the purview of the Singapore Teachers' Academy for the arts (STAR), set within a framework of

theory-practice nexus in reflective thinking. Through a professional learning journey of two primary and two secondary music teachers, it gives good insight into the contextual workings and thinking behind Singapore music teachers' enactment and engagement with learner-centered ideas towards twenty-first century educational goals. Part **XII** provides useful implications and ideas for teacher professional development in reframing their pedagogies and practices, suggesting a sustained process in order for transformation to be possible and for the reflective inquiry process to go beyond thinking into actual enactment and embodiment.

Parts **XIII**, **XIV** and **XV** are critical accounts of three tertiary arts education academic-practitioners' contextualized approach to their teaching of drama, music and visual art in Singapore. These three parts reiterate the significance of knowing, understanding and embodying of context as situated practice with implications for pedagogical development.

Part **XIII** examines the work of dealing with Asian traditional theatre forms as an intertwining of 'arborescent' and 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) approaches to knowledge and culture. Drawing on responses from tertiary drama students in Singapore to the question whether and how this empowers a capacity for broader choices in a globalizing world, Part **XIII** frames Rajendran's pedagogical process as a contextually based attempt to draw links and forge connections between the immediacy of everyday life and the seemingly remote realms of tradition. This as Rajendran argues, engenders a critical curiosity about how the present is in many respects a 'multiplicity' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that allows for tradition to enrich and enliven the contemporary.

Part **XIV** traces a teaching journey in contextualizing and reconceptualizing a localized theory curriculum that started as a typically Western one but gradually transformed into one that seeks to better lay the music-theory foundation for a multicultural music curriculum. Whilst recognizing the differences between the social and cultural contexts of these various musical traditions, Chong contends that there are nonetheless commonalities that can be taught pertaining to a music-theoretic understanding of these musics.

Part **XV** delves into the author's approach to arts and art education as interdisciplinary, allowing for critical, creative and mutual cross-fertilization of ideas across other ways of knowing and experiencing. In the 'telling' of local courses designed, the author will point out learning notions of 'performance' in visual practice that encompasses the use of imagery in language, structured around a reduction and then extension of the senses. "Conceptual drawing" where synaesthetic tasks allow for the "translation" of sensory experience will also be discussed, centering around learning moments for students and educators to reflect upon.

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