Visual Arts Education in the South Pacific

Dr Peter M Thursby
Peter Thursby has considerable experience working in the South Pacific, developing educational programmes for schools and tertiary institutions, producing quality education materials, art and design training workshops and programmes working with artists for vocational and training purposes.

The artistic heritage of island countries of the South Pacific are rich in examples of art and artefacts, song, dance, oral history and performance. Carving, barkcloth, fine mats, house construction, baskets and decorative patterns incised into artefacts all attest to the richness of the South Pacific material culture. The place of school education as a key social institution engaged in transmitting artistic knowledge, skills and practices is very problematic. A brief review of school education around the South Pacific indicates very few school systems with a comprehensive plan to offer instruction in the arts and those that do often can only offer a piecemeal program that is dependent upon the availability of limited resources.

Most educational systems in the South Pacific have established educational priorities for primary and secondary education, or are currently in the process of establishing such priorities, with the assistance of outside donor agencies. Policy and planning initiatives are most often designed to achieve "core" objectives, or introduce the most needed educational priorities and reforms to meet critical needs such as literacy, numeracy and infrastructure to support these core needs. The provision of such "core" needs has a serious financial implication for island education systems as they struggle with a growing demand for educational places for the young, limited numbers of well-trained teachers and a shortage of effective teaching/instructional resources to aid learning.

There is also an issue of what are the most important subjects to be offered in primary and secondary schools. Over the past twenty to thirty years as Pacific Island countries gained independence decisions on what students should study at school has been widely debated within government, towns and villages. For example, in the mid-1970s in the Solomon Islands a government inquiry entitled 'Education for What?' which held extensive consultations to learn what the Solomon Island people wanted from their education system. The results indicated a desire for both a core curriculum of subjects that would offer young people opportunities for employment, particularly white collar jobs in the developing economy and also opportunities to engage in cultural activities that would enhance and strengthen their knowledge of their cultural heritage.

Unfortunately, the chance to offer a comprehensive school curriculum that acknowledged both the importance of artistic knowledge and skills as well as the desired "core curriculum" was not able to be achieved. Available resources placed limits on what could be done and most education bureaucrats and governments believed the arts were best left to the community through village and home life. Schools, especially secondary schools, catered to the arts through kastom days and special cultural celebrations that encouraged students to present their heritage through displays and performances.

School subjects offered throughout much of the South Pacific were a core of vernacular language and/or Pidgin English (in the early years), English (gradually introduced from primary school), mathematics, environmental studies/science, and social science. For
example, in the past decade the core studies within the Samoan education system at the secondary level were Samoan, English, mathematics, science and social science. Recent developments in Samoan education to be examined later in this article will address further initiatives being taken to expanded upon these options.

In the twenty-first century Pacific Island education systems are reviewing policy and developing strategic plans to better meet the community needs, especially the pressure to provide an educated workforce for the diverse needs of a modern outward-looking economy that trades regionally and globally. Many education systems are beginning to introduce, or are looking at, a comprehensive school curriculum that includes technical and vocationally-oriented subjects, especially for secondary and post-secondary education as employment levels rise and governments review their human resource needs. Resources continue to be a problem, educational developments occur slowly and initiatives are not always entirely sympathetic to the arts. The richness of the artistic heritage has tended to lull educational planners into believing the community is the best place for the arts to flourish, especially when resources remain scarce.

There are some important arts education developments happening in the Pacific but they are often patchy and somewhat dependent upon key education planners accepting and supporting, the introduction of the arts. Not all Pacific Island countries will be mentioned in this brief overview. In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa there are important achievements in introducing the arts into schools. There is also a need to press hard for the continuation of these developments and to show the Pacific community that student achievements in the arts are of value to the whole community and should be an important part of a formal "core" of studies. In Papua New Guinea secondary arts education curricula was introduced nearly thirty years ago and has developed slowly to the point where a decade ago the Department of Education published a comprehensive syllabus and curriculum in Music, Visual Arts and Performance. Not all secondary schools are able to offer the syllabus because of limited resources, however, the infrastructure is there to supply trained arts teachers through universities in Port Moresby and Goroka.

In the Solomon Islands in the early 1990s the then Curriculum Development Centre of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources established a community-based committee to review the existing secondary arts curriculum which was oriented towards the production of designed, utilitarian objects. The committee recommended a more relevant, broadly-based approach that included Visual Arts, Music and Performance with an emphasis upon the study of Solomon Island art forms as part of cultural heritage. The curriculum committee ultimately published a new secondary creative arts syllabus, Forms 1-5, that featured art production/performance, cultural study and historical study of arts forms from the Solomon Islands, Pacific region and the world.

In visual arts the Solomon Islands Creative Arts Syllabus aimed to assist secondary students to develop basic skills in making art (two and three-dimensions) and over five years of secondary schooling develop and apply these basic skills in design, painting, crafts and sculpture to the production of works of art that expressed their creativity. The syllabus outlined creative processes that assisted students to become more knowledgeable of their own artistic heritage and provided experiences in art making techniques and experiences with materials that would allow them the freedom and independence to create art as self-critical learners. There exists in the syllabus the potential for a mix of traditional and western art making techniques. In support of the study of cultural forms the National Museum of the Solomon Islands offered schools access to their collection and provided
travelling exhibition boxes containing art and artefacts to schools outside Honiara. At this point in time only four secondary schools in the Solomon Islands have had the teaching personnel and resources to implement the Form 1-5 Creative Arts Syllabus and only in the visual arts strand.

One of the problems for school systems in places like Solomon Islands and Vanuatu has been the limited opportunities to provide formal studies in arts education at either primary or secondary level. Neither country has a primary arts education syllabus and Vanuatu has not yet prepared a secondary arts education syllabus. Primary education in both countries has opportunities for students to make visual art and participate in performances such as choral singing. The arts are not offered at primary level as distinct subjects with a developmental core of knowledge, skills and understandings that contribute over time to the development of the whole child. Most often the visual arts are seen as an adjunct to other subjects, such as social studies, and art is used to illustrate particular ideas and concepts.

Recent educational initiatives in Samoa are very promising for the introduction of formal studies in the arts. Policy developments and planning within the Department of Education with support from donor agencies has led to the introduction of limited creative arts studies in primary schools and the preparation of a draft syllabus document for the introduction of performing arts, music and visual arts into secondary schools. Of added significance for the future development of the arts is the ability of the School of Education, National University of Samoa, to provide training in music, movement and visual arts as part of their pre-service teacher education program. This already occurs in primary teacher education as all primary education graduates complete at least two creative arts education subjects in their Diploma in Education program. Future directions planned for secondary education suggest that there will need to be further co-operation between the Department of Education and the National University of Samoa to provide well qualified teachers able to implement the proposed secondary arts syllabus.

An underlying problem experienced by all Pacific Islands education systems is the cost of western art materials and the reluctance of many young Pacific islanders, who are conscious of the artistic media and techniques of the west, to accept anything other than the "newer" media. Computer technology has also become part of the push to open up artistic expression through digital media. Contemporary imagery generated by computer, silk screen production methods and production of art works that have a ready market through tourist outlets are all making their mark upon the artistic practices of contemporary Pacific Island artists resident in their homeland. At the present time there are limited opportunities for practising artists, commercially successful art practitioners and performing arts groups to play a role in heightening awareness of the possibilities and contributing to the artistic development of the young learner. As always, cost plays a part although the very successful Wan Smol Bag Theatre in Vanuatu has made an impact as an arts in the community organisation intent upon using theatre as a means of advancing community development. Similar theatre groups in Papua New Guinea have also made a mark. These organisations are dependent upon outside funding and over the years the benefits are many fold as young actors gain a theatre education and contribute their knowledge and skills to the further social development of their country.

So too, attempts both successful and not so successful, have been made to involve artists from the community in the formal education program of their local and regional schools. In
the Solomon Islands the Creative Arts Syllabus, Forms 1-5, encourages teachers to invite artists (for example carvers, weavers) from the local community to demonstrate their artistic skills, teach those skills and talk with students about their work as part of the continuing tradition of Solomon Islands arts. The lack of success of such artist-in-schools ventures is not always the result of a lack of interest or desire on the part of either the artist or the educator. Often it is because the artist cannot economically afford the time necessary or the system has not yet come to terms with the value of such linkages. Again, it often comes back to a belief that the home and the community can provide such artistic opportunities.

Many education systems in the Pacific have recognised the importance of a comprehensive school curriculum that includes the arts. Many cannot afford the cost of implementation at a time when literacy and numeracy remain important priorities. Nevertheless, a reading of educational aims for schooling in those same countries will often emphasise, along with equity, relevance and quality of education for all, the important role schools play in promoting cultural understanding and providing opportunities for students to engage in creative thinking and problem solving experiences. The arts promote innovative ways of learning, encourage creative responding to phenomena and involve young people in creative processes that develop their problem-solving skills. Educators throughout the Pacific need to keep promoting the arts as fundamental to the education of young people and donor agencies must continue to recognise the value of the arts and assist with funding.