Performing the Arts of Possibility
Possible Selves and the Education of Tomorrow's Arts Leaders

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Journal Content Area Intended:

Student Conception of Learning

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Abstract

Engaging undergraduate arts administration students in coursework and motivating their career choices through possible selves-oriented curricula and course delivery is an effective means of nurturing intrinsically motivated, productive, confident learners and future arts leaders. Possible self orientation helps young adult learners transitioning from adolescence to adulthood and from novice to professional to identify, explore and ultimately pursue arts administrative career options that align with and help ground their broader personal and professional development goals. As a result, aspiring arts leaders develop greater levels of confidence in themselves and their abilities, are driven by meaningful life goals, and are primed with essential tangible and intangible skill sets and proficiencies which enhance their hiring prospects and which afford critically-needed visionary leadership capability to the field.

Key words

arts administration, possible selves, curriculum development, transformative learning

Introduction

"Find out what is waiting in the wings of your life··· there are unlived potentialities within you, interests and talents that you have not yet explored." William Bridges (Bridges, 1980, p. 81)

This article explores integration of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) theory with traditional approaches in the education of Arts Administration undergraduates as a means of facilitating high impact learning and holistic practice by future arts leaders in and beyond the classroom. It draws inspiration from the idea of "making the impossible possible," (Strickland, 2007) exploring the power and potential of what MacArthur Award-winning author and cultural entrepreneur Bill Strickland refers to as "dream" or what herein is explored as "possible self," (Markus & Nurius, 1986) in scaffolding the training of future arts administrators. This article draws significantly upon its author's quarter century of arts administrative experience, including the executive management of multiple institutions across multiple disciplines and regions in America, from an iconic, historic dance company to a reputed classical repertory theater, to an original Multi-arts producing and training institution. Also lending to the authoritative perspective of this article is the author's decade of experience designing and delivering arts administration curricula and courses at the undergraduate level, combining experiential authority with current, authoritative research into possible selves theory and its efficacy in education and professional development.

"Education is not only about building certain predefined skills but also about realization of self, the full potential of self and the ability to use those skills and knowledge for the greater good of self and of others" (Khan & Law, 2015) Herein is explored the instrumentality of possible selves in the education of undergraduate arts administrators by aligning documented possible self outcomes with desired parallel outcomes in the field of performing arts and their administration. The greatest hope is that possible self approaches in our training might afford future arts administrators the context and capacity to dream of their highest individual and professional potential, and of the potential for the arts to transform lives and the lives of communities through inspired leadership.

Literature Review

In researching this article, which included literature review of nearly sixty published works resulting in the thirty cited herein, the author found no evidence of existing research aligning possible selves with the field of arts administration nor with the graduate nor undergraduate training of future arts administrators. The paucity of research may be attributable to the fact that arts administration as an area of formal academic pursuit is still, as the Association of Arts Administration Educators notes, in its adolescence (AAAE, 2016), having been born in the mid-to-late 1960's, partly in response to the then-fledgling National Endowment for the Arts' call for training of arts administrators, teaching institutes and seminars (NEA, 1965, p. 28). While graduate programs may be experiencing the inevitable challenges and opportunities of adolescence, undergraduate programs are still in their infancy, with the earliest of forty-five programs on the AAAE roster having begun within the past two decades. (AAAE, 2016)

Possible selves is still a relatively new area of study, having first been articulated in 1986 (Markus, 1986). A wealth of subsequent research, focused on its applicability in general educational and/or professional development settings (eg. Leonardi, 2007; Pizzolato, 2006; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2009; Rossiter, 2003) is referenced herein. Prior research into its application in specific areas of professional development focuses significantly on teacher training (eg. Pimmer & Schmidt, 2007⊠ Ruvolo & Markus, 1992⊠ Rossiter, 2007) with a smattering of possible selves analyses of adult professional vocational development, particularly among vocational coaches/instructors, therapists, doctors and clergy. (eg. Ibarra, 1999; Ronfeldt 7 Grossman, 2009).

"The ability to base your life on sound, substantial dreams is a fundamental requirement of living a meaningful and successful life." (Strickland, 2007, p. 222) Bill Strickland, referred to later in this article, exemplifies the application of possible self in conceptualizing and scaffolding an individual's process toward self-discovery and fulfillment which is, in its most promising manifestation, the realization of a creative, meaningful, and intrinsically successful life. The concept of possible selves, introduced in the journal *American Psychologist* in 1986 by social psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Paula Nurius, posits that the possible self construct affords individuals "a conceptual link between cognition and motivation" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954) through the process of clearly articulating for themselves images of whom they want to become. Specifically, individuals construct schema around not only what they want or wish to

become (ideal self), but also what they do not (feared self). (Ibid) The ideal self construct is balanced with the feared self in order to reinforce motivation (toward the ideal and away from the feared) (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007) The goal is to devise a repertoire of possible selves that can be viewed as "cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats." (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954)

This cognitive approach to one's future, Markus and Nurius hypothesized, would provide evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self and thus motivate frameworks through which to make sense of past and present behavior while mapping the path to an ideal future. (Ibid, 955) Possible selves encourage self direction and determination, initiating intrinsic goals rooted in personal meaning (Ball, 2000) which facilitate the development of long term perspectives and help manage the relationships forged between the world and the individual within it. (Savickas, 1997) These imagined selves can be important motivators in many domains, including academic pursuit. (Leonardi, 2007) Possible selves approach in the learning process leads to a broader transformative experience which is forward-focused and thus alters the student's perception of past and present learning in relationship to future aspirations. (Mezirow et al, 2000)

Mezirow's transformative learning approach "has greater focus on the future and ways that past knowledge and the self are altered." (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 63) This approach spurs more profound change within the individual than the simple acquisition of new knowledge and qualifications. "Possible selves give specific cognitive form to our desires for mastery, power or affiliation and to diffuse our fears of failure or incompetence." (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 960) As people's learning manifests in self-development, a series of new ideals and concepts of what is possible arise. (Lee & Oyserman, 2007) Possible selves-based education, partly as a result of its inherently empathic and self-oriented contextualization to one's own past, present and future but also to the world around her, decreases reactive response to opinion, bolsters awareness of self and aides in the processing of information regarding academic and professional pursuits as well as the self, more efficiently toward desired results. (Cohen, Deuberley & Mallon, 2004)

The future time perspective aspects of the approach are particularly relevant to academic achievement wherein perceived instrumentality and valence (DeVolder & Lens, 1982) reinforces a cognitive aspect rooted in the ability to anticipate in the present, the long term consequences of a potential action. (Leonardi, 2007) "Effective performance is not just a question of having requisite skills and abilities⊠ it is also a matter of motivation." (Ruvolo & Markus, 1994, p. 95) Motivation is derived, in part, from a sense of self-efficacy which influences choice, heightens performance and gives the individual a sense of competence. (Bandura, 1977)

The possible self construct is explored by Rick Hoyle and Michelle Sherrill as not only self-enhancing, but more importantly self-regulating, in nature in that it requires specific behavioral strategies for pursuing self-regulatory behaviors which engender a positive feeling of the self as part and parcel of the motivational capability. (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006, p. 1677) The authors reiterate the work of Oyserman and Markus (1990) which addresses the necessary balance of "hoped for" and "feared" selves or self outcomes in an additive process which helps the individual broaden the possible self repertoire by exploring motives of avoidance, as well as aspirational, behavior. Hoyle and Sherrill contextualize possible selves and particularly the

avoidance/aspiration balance as essential to forming behavioral standards which "map well into hierarchically organized control process models of self-regulation the highest level in the structure being that of "global ideal." (Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006, p. 1683)

Strickland invites the reader in his book, "Make the Impossible Possible," to engage in personal goal setting which goes well beyond "competitive self-interest" in forming dream-based behavioral standards\ aligned with our "responsibilities as a citizen of the planet" (Strickland, 2007, p. 226) The key, he posits, is to function from a place of passion, rather than ambition, as "passions force us to define our values and to develop the strengths and skills we need to realize our dreams." (ibid, p. 156) Similarly, Plimmer and Schmidt refer to the higher aspiration potential of possible selves as conducive to the formation of higher, holistic schema which are rooted in self values, roles, lifestyles, self beliefs, skills and interests. (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 64)

Research into the use of clearly articulated, well defined possible selves by college students in the classroom reflects positive impacts on the learning process, with results trending toward higher academic performance and stronger postgraduate career attainment. (Rossiter, 2003 ⊠ Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007) "Possible selves support career decision-making and provide a much richer foundation to build a 'bridge to the future' than traditional approaches" (Martz, 2001, p. 131) They narrow the gap of where the individual is and where they seek to go or whom they seek to be through a vivid imaging which brings the concept of an ideal future self closer and thus enhances motivation to attain it. (Kanfer, 1994) The resulting motivation spurs more strategic approaches to mapping, decision-making (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 966) and a more concentrated and consistent focus on self-directed and incentivized activity toward the attainment of individual goals. (Oyserman, 2007) "Students with highly elaborated possible selves are more likely to set higher career goals, put actions in place to realize these, and, overall, to achieve better graduate outcomes than students who have underdeveloped future possible selves, or whose orientation lies in the present rather than the future." (Clegg & Stevenson, 2009)

"Well elaborated possible selves are likely to include some rehearsal and simulation, which also improves performance." (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007,p. 66) "If we are faced with an inchoate, unpredictable and continually challenging world, then graduates will have to have powers of self-reliance in order to cope with and to act purposively in that world." (Barnett & Hallam, 1999, p. 138) The aspiring professional arts leader will face a world of uncertainty, a field continuously in flux, requiring self-reliance, as Barnett and Hallam advocate, as well as a resilient and adaptive disposition. Research suggests that students who experience threats to their carefully constructed future career related possible self tend to be more persistent and, as necessary, adaptive in their approach to overcoming the threat and/or revising their self construct accordingly. (Pizzolato, 2006) Markus and Nurius assert the power of "clearly elaborated and regularly rehearsed positive possible self constructs in helping to ward off actions of subsuming to moments of failure." (Markus & Nurius, 1989, p. 963) Bolstering an undergraduate's confidence, particularly in the face of inevitable setbacks and moments of uncertainty stemming from a collision course of post-pubescent physical and emotional turmoil, as well as the pressures of university and pending "real world" life, is essential to ensuring his success in transitioning from college student to arts leader.

Perchance to Dream

"Life is not something you wait for, or chase after or try to possess⊠ it's something you must create, moment by moment, on the foundation of your dreams." Bill Strickland (2007, p. 221)

In his book, <u>Make the Impossible Possible</u>, motivational speaker and author Bill Strickland reflects upon his path from uninspired and at-risk adolescent on the streets of 1960's Pittsburgh to the MacArthur Genius Award-winning entrepreneur, social change agent and arts proponent that he became. In addition to his own evolution, he chronicles that of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation and its subsidiaries, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and Bidwell Training Center, which he shepherded from small and struggling civic organizations to extraordinary centers of excellence and aspiration which avail young people and adults to educational and cultural opportunities which foster "innovation, creativity, responsibility and integrity." (Strickland, 2007, p. 15) The impact which Strickland and his Manchester Bidwell institution has had in turning around young lives through the power of imagining, and immersing themselves in what is possible, is impressive. His unwavering commitment to the power of individuals to imagine, and actually construct for themselves extraordinary future successes, is inspiring − and acutely relevant to this discussion.

The importance of dream in catalyzing an individual's life and/or professional path is particularly salient as personified in one who has demonstrated the concept of dreams in action throughout his late adolescent and adult life. Strickland's life of action was spurred by an introduction to the art of creation at the potter's wheel. Pottery and other arts and cultural activities continue to play a significant role in his life and in the transformative, inspirational atmospheres and immersive activities which form the heart and soul of the institutions which he built. Of the power of the arts to contextualize and help orient people's lives, Strickland writes: "Art is a bridge. It connects you to a wider world, to a broader experience... Don't try to tell me the arts don't have the power to change a human being... our students stop defining themselves by what they can't do and get the first glimmer of what a meaningful life might feel like." (Strickland, 2007, p. 15)
It could be argued, then, that artistic expression is the vessel by which the dream is borne upon its journey of manifestation. Teachers, particularly those who teach or otherwise integrate arts in the classroom, can draw inspiration from the power of Strickland's testimony and the efficacy of his life's work in helping transform the lives of thousands by helping them to identify, articulate, and purposefully reach for their dreams, their greatest life aspirations.

Aspire to Be⋯

"To understand the heart and mind of a person, look not at what he has already achieved, but at what he aspires to." − Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman (1918)*

A decade of experience in recruiting, advising and teaching students of arts administration at the undergraduate level informs the author that the typical undergraduate arts administration program applicant has little inkling of what, exactly, the field of arts administration is, nor what

professional role she aspires to play, nor what prominent arts leaders she seeks to emulate. Likely, the applicant will have stumbled upon the program with a general idea that the equation of business plus arts yields a more desirable result than that of studying arts, alone. A general lack of future-oriented perspective and lack of understanding of the field on the part of entering undergraduates creates challenges for the arts administration program coordinator, professor and/or advisor to keep students actively engaged in the classroom, enrolled in the program, and motivated for future success.

In addition to the fact that the arts administrator is less visible than her performing counterparts who strut their stuff upon the stage, the fact that arts administration as a degree offering is relatively new, particularly at the undergraduate level, contributes to the lack of aspirational context. While graduate programs such as those found at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and the American University in Washington, D.C. took root between the mid-nineteen sixties and mid-nineteen seventies, undergraduate programs have only begun to establish themselves over the past two decades. Yet, it is clear that the training of both undergraduates as well as graduate students requires the kind of visionary and adaptive approach which is articulated here.

The teacher of an aspiring arts leader must first introduce to him the breadth and depth of career opportunities available in the field of arts administration and then facilitate exploration of the various administrative roles that will be available upon transition to the professional self which he hopes to become. The exploration, and ultimate identification with, these roles is a process of finding the possible self and, as such, helping to orient and motivate students by inviting self reflection, evoking specific, future self constructs and instilling a sense of purpose and direction upon which to organize individual action. (Markus & Nurius, 1986) The process of exploration and identification with possible personal and professional ideal selves is akin to the process of the actor exploring and identifying herself with a role, or with her ultimate sense of self as an artist. As the American acting teacher Stella Adler might articulate it, the artist must constantly be in search of and reinforcing the "who are you" (Adler, 1988, p. 15) or the "true dimension"(ibid) in order to find his ultimate "aim." (ibid) So too must the administrator who seeks to support the artist's quest, engage in the process of finding her method of fulfilling the true dimension of her own professional, and life's, path. The path of discovery for the arts leader and the artist is quite similar, and should be, as the ultimate aim for both is to serve the art.

The concept of possible selves was first introduced by psychosocial researchers Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius in a September, 1986 article for American Psychologist, wherein the authors describe the process of individuals creating clearly-articulated, detailed concepts of their ideal future selves as a means of motivating and contextualizing life's work. Thus establishing a clear vision for the ideal future self, the authors suggest, provides a conceptual link between cognition and motivation in framing individuals' goals and hopes. The possible self is rooted in and draws upon an individual's understanding of who they have been, who they are now and who they hope to become and as such foster intrinsic, more so than extrinsic, goal orientation. (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 64) Bill Strickland posits that intrinsically-oriented selves are rooted in passion, which demands faith and creativity in the striving and in the functioning of, while

extrinsic orientation is rooted in ambition, shaped by the opinions and demands of others. (Strickland, 2007, p. 156) The passion which roots an intrinsically-motivated arts leader is a passion for the arts which he serves and the transformative power which the arts have to change lives and communities.

This process of exploring and defining possible selves is particularly prescient for those seeking to build careers in the performing arts, in that the elements of self-exploration and discovery in training, self-inspiration in artistic creation, and self-immersion in the conveyance of character is foundational. Experience advising and teaching hundreds of arts administration students across multiple arts disciplines over the past decade shows that a vast majority of those students come from a performance orientation and have typically trained in one or more disciplines during their primary and/or secondary education experience. The concept of identifying and implicating oneself throughout the creative process, therefore, is familiar territory and a logical point of reference for the undergrad arts administration major to engage in possible selves approaches to her future as an inspired and inspiring arts leader.

The arts, artists, and arts institutions dwell in the possible. Arts training approaches activate possible selves concepts in strengthening both training and performance. An actress invests herself fully in self-understanding and the quest for what the great teacher Michael Chekov iterated as the future of the actor or the ideal actor, wherein a knowledge of the inner life and power of the active and engaged artist effectuates a change in the future perspective and affords new ideas of the self and the art. (Chekov website, accessed October, 2015) A dancer seeks "a healthy aspect of self to tranverse the psychologically risky and subjectively enriching path of creativity" (Press, 2002, p. 111) in order to arrive at a psychophysically enmeshed and balanced realization of his greatest potential. Just as performing artists make connections and see aesthetic relationships which afford perspective on complex problem solving, so too must the effective performing arts leader learn that there are no clear cut methods for solving problems, "but an awareness and exploration of possibilities" (Adler, 1988, p. 15) which offer clarity in a world of supercomplexity. The concept of a supercomplexty relates to the world of the Twenty-first century in which the professional will face dilemmas of understanding of self in context of ever-shifting paradigms of action, and of "multiple and contesting frameworks of interpretation through which to make sense of one's world and to act purposively within it." (Barnett & Hallam, 1999) A supercomplex world demands pedagogical and andrological approaches which help the individual to acquire human capabilities of adaptation to "radical and enduring uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestability. (ibid, p. 142)

Artists, and arts institutions by their very nature are or should be forever adapting, forever transforming themselves in a quest for creative excellence and sustainability. William J. Byrnes, in the seminal arts administration textbook, Management and the Arts, writes of the necessity for administrators, and the arts institutions which they lead, to be adaptive in light of everchanging external factors which constantly impact the ecology of the arts. (Byrnes, 2014) In The Art of the Turnaround, preeminent arts leader Michael Kaiser writes of the primary impetus for transforming unhealthy arts institutions into thriving ones as being the conceptualization of

organizations living up to their greatest potential – the production and presentation of artistic excellence. (Kaiser, 2008)

Great arts institutions are founded on and daily energized by a vision, or ideal future concept, of how the art which they create, teach and share has the capacity to change lives, to change the world. Great arts leaders must have the ability to articulate, for themselves and for the institutions which they serve, a repertoire of clearly-defined possible "self" constructs by which to frame the work of attaining and sustaining visionary excellence and avoiding failure - creative, financial, or otherwise - in order to consistently unlock their institution's greatest potential. Buttressing the future arts administrator with modalities for surmounting the inherent challenges of managing the arts – particularly in the super-complex world in which we live – is essential to building her capacity to positively shape the future of the field.

The *Standards for Arts Administration Undergraduate Program Curricula*, devised by the Association of Arts Administration Educators in 2012 compels that, as traditional models of institutional leadership in the arts are being challenged, new paradigms arise which require leaders who can adapt and inspire, (Association of Arts Administration Educators, 2012) infusing institutional vision and mission with prescience and believability in order to engage and maintain a diverse multitude of stakeholders. Future arts leaders must therefore embody a certain transformative capability which ever-changing and dynamic internal and external environments of arts institutions will require of their leaders. (ibid, 2012)

The potential for possible selves to enhance undergraduate training of practitioners in any number of disciplines is significant and warrants further research. Consideration of possible selves approaches in orienting and contextualizing the training of arts administrators is compelling in that the very artists and arts institutions they will serve are forever aspiring toward ideal creation – of individual character, of performance, of institution, of self. Performing arts by their very nature inspire us to dream of what is possible in ourselves, in others, in our world. The ability for those who administer the arts to regularly articulate and define their own dream, their own ideal creation – of personal and professional identity as well as that of the institutions which they lead will help both leaders and institutions to facilitate greatness in the art form, and in the artists and communities, which they serve. Potential selves in the arts administration classroom can help aspiring arts leaders to identify and articulate ideal future roles they will play in advancing the arts, frame and motivate learning toward mastery of skills and professionalization of approaches necessary to fulfill those roles, and inspire greatness – in themselves and in the institutions they will lead.

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