Riding the Seesaw Between Artist and Administrator

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Abstract

The road toward arts administration often begins with art practice. This can be problematic, as artists are educated and trained to be practitioners of their art form. Experience and education in the requisite administrative skills is too often learned on the job, as one is thrust into a new role with entirely new and separate responsibilities and different priorities. This disparity can lead to confused priorities, disorganization, and lack of professionalization of administrative services. Beginning with an examination of classical pragmatism and its historic emphasis on plurality, coherence and integration, moving into the contemporary applications of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy capable of navigating the tensions that exist within the fields of public administration, I hope to inform current and future arts administration practice with regard to the training of practitioners recast as administrators. We balance tensions between artist and administrator both individually and organizationally and this paper proposes that Pragmatism is an effective and useful philosophy for maneuvering that space of difference. This paper takes an epistemological approach to examine the current condition and then calls for further research and program development for the training arts administrators.

Keywords: pragmatism, tension, arts administration, professional development

Riding the Seesaw Between Artist and Administrator

The road toward arts administration often begins with art practice. This can be problematic, as artists are educated and trained to be practitioners of their art forms. Experience and education in the requisite administrative skills is too often learned on the job, as one is thrust into a new role with entirely unfamiliar and separate responsibilities. The reasons for the transition from artist to arts administrator are many, with job security being chief among them. Another reason that many artists step into the role of administrator is the desire to bring their artistic vision to fruition (Choinière & Moran, 2012). Although educated and skilled as artists, these individuals have not received the business, management, or organizational education or training required to effectively and successfully manage the administrative side of an organization (Olshan, 2017).

Artists who think like administrators might feel the administration squelching their creativity. While administrators who think more artistically might find their methods unique compared to other administrative professionals. This paper seeks to take an epistemological look at this condition and direct future research to confront this duality. Rather than viewing art making and arts administration as two disparate components, is it possible that these distinct roles might be able to hold hands and walk together toward a common goal, finding strength in their differences?

I recall a long, rickety seesaw in a playground I frequented as a young child. My push off the ground sent my playmate down as I soared into the air. Our glee required the partnership and labor of one another in equal measure. Pushing, pulling, working together toward mutual joy. I fully realized the necessity of this tension when my playmate became tired of the game and hopped off the seesaw unannounced, sending me forward on the bar as I hurtled toward the

ground. A trip to the emergency room and two stiches in my mouth later, I understood clearly that a seesaw requires two unique and separate partners. This is how I now see pragmatism. It is the seesaw. It is the bridge between areas of distinction. It fills the space of difference and connects using those differences as strength.

Hawkins (2016) identified the obligation to be vigilantly aware, as arts professionals, of the arts administrator's organizational role within their communities. When determining the current community atmosphere of arts organizations, I had conversations with the executive directors of both the Florida Department of Cultural Affairs and the Council on Culture and the Arts who both confirmed these shortfalls (Personal correspondence, February 2018). When asked, "What is the greatest need, other than funding, facing arts organizations in your jurisdiction?" Both directors answered that professionalization of administrative services and administrative development were the greatest weaknesses of the arts organizations in their purview. In the pursuit of artistic excellence, administrative tasks are too often relegated to under-qualified individuals or else neglected entirely. In a study of the Denver arts and culture sector, McClearn (2010) found that "Some of Denver's cultural nonprofits were led by artists and arts appreciators, not professional marketers, fundraisers, and managers savvy in the ways of business, politics, and policy" (p. 189). For long-term success, professionalization of both art services and administrative services must be prioritized.

Dewey emphasized the importance of diverse perspectives and believed strength was found therein (Neubert, 2008). He had a strong understanding of the requisite and reciprocal interdependent relationship between methods and subject matters (Neubert, 2008). I propose that there is a philosophical way to address this problem. To address this dilemma, I suggest we must first make three assumptions. First, artists and administrators play fundamentally different roles.

Second, while the final goal of artistic excellence is shared by both artists and administrators, their aims along the way are different and sometimes at odds. Third, sometimes the artist and administrator are the same person and this conflict of roles is playing out within the individual. This paper seeks to inform practices for both artist-administrators and arts administrators working with artists.

Emerson (1908) noted the give and take of societies acquisition of new knowledge, new methods, or new practices. "What is important is that the mind should be sensitive to problems and skilled in methods of attack and solution" (p. 78). This advises the incorporation of multiple views, a plurality of education, experience and practice toward achieving a desired end. Through a lens of pragmatism, perhaps artists and administrators might find a path forward using their unique traits, their plurality of expertise and experience, to strengthen organizations as a whole. Rather than approaching organizational objectives at odds, with a philosophically pragmatic perspective, there is push and pull and collaboration, toward stronger, more sustainable arts organizations.

Classical Pragmatism

Pragmatism, as theorized by William James, observed the history of philosophy as a "clash of temperaments" between the "tough minded" and the "tender minded" (Hookway, 2013, p. 2). Without attempting to identify either artist or administrator as the tough or tender minded, it is still exceedingly relevant that pragmatism has shown itself capable of dispelling these clashes through discourse, reflection and evolution. James situated pragmatism as a mediating philosophy that had the potential to settle disputes that would be, otherwise, perpetual. In his view, conflicts that appeared to have no solution, could, in fact, be dissolved through a pragmatic approach. John Dewey, as a philosopher, is uniquely situated to help us confront the clash of

temperaments within arts organizations, for he insisted that his philosophies should ever be recontextualized for applicability in new contexts, eras, and places (Garrison, 2013). Challenging dualism in almost every arena, most notably for this discussion, Dewey challenged the dichotomy between theoretical beliefs and practical deliberations (Hookway, 2013).

Dewey saw a connection between work and practical wisdom (Higgins, 2010) recognizing the need to undertake the restructuring of concepts that had been previously defined as binary opposites (Higgins, 2010). He rejected "a system in which 'cultural' and 'utilitarian' subjects exist in an inorganic composite where the former are not by dominant purpose socially serviceable and the latter not liberative of imagination or thinking power" (Dewey, 1916, p. 257). According to Dewey, science was taught as a practical utility and art subjects only as having cultural value. He rejected this on merit (Dewey, 1916). The aim of education is a working balance (Dewey, 1910). His interpretation of pragmatism promoted a commitment to organicism, rejecting dualism, with an overarching belief in harmonies.

Dewey explained art itself as contradictory, comprised of physical objects that create internal experiences. Life is a continual process of transforming and overcoming to attain higher significance. Harmony and balance result from the resolution of tensions, not the perfect execution of some mechanical process (Leddy, 2016). Dewey saw no intrinsic separation between the aesthetic and the intellectual, relying on words such as coherence, integration, whole, complete (Leddy, 2016), expressing an implied unity of purpose but also clearly denoting individuality within the whole.

In the context of the arts organization, pragmatism allows for both the success and health of the individual artist as coexisting and even contributing to the success and sustainability of the organization. For Dewey, individual success required a share in forming and directing one's life.

This speaks to the individual voice of the artist. Group success required individual members to live in harmony with one another, each individual uniquely fulfilled and contributing toward the fulfillment of the others (Festenstein, 2014). This represents the organizational whole. The relationship between individual and whole resonates with the arts organization in which the artist and administrator each seek individual goals but are also able to direct those goals toward a common, mutually beneficial, end result.

For the arts organization, the end result here envisioned is one in which both artists and administrators function with the necessary training and expertise to equally and equitably satisfy both the artistic and administrative objectives of the arts organization, achieving creative fulfillment as well as organizational stability. Dewey believed that value judgments had to be made as a means of strategic course changes intended to solve problems, never settling into complacency (Anderson, 2014). The content of these value judgments has to do with their contribution and consequences as means to an end goal (Anderson, 2014). "The test of a value judgment – whether it "works" – is whether it successfully identifies an action that overcomes the obstacles, clears up the confusions, resolves the conflicts, satisfies the needs, avoids or eliminates the dangers, and so on" (Anderson, 2014, p. 7). This can be a guiding philosophy for the arts administrator as they attempt to serve the needs of the artist while also safeguarding the health of the organization. The point of examining means and ends is not just to determine if one will lead to the other, but also to appraise the value of the end itself (Anderson, 2014).

Prior assessments cannot determine new courses of action, because current situations will have evolved and old strategies might no longer be applicable or effective (Anderson, 2014). Within a pragmatic outlook, "truth" requires re-direction, re-adaptation, and re-organization. In order to achieve any and all of these, reflection is required. This reflection is not intended to lead

to compromise, because as Dewey asserted, too often, mere compromise results in confusion. Rather, he endorsed more careful assessment of culture, function, and effectiveness to accurately and justly construct a functional and fair course of action. It is fear only that nurtures the belief that function and cultural significance are mutually exclusive. They can coexist and the arts organization must actively seek that cooperation (Dewey, 1916).

While there are historic reasons for the duality within arts organizations, there is philosophical precedent encouraging arts administrators to reject that duality in favor of a more holistic approach. "It is not possible to divide in a vital experience the practical, emotional, and intellectual from one another" (Dewey, 1980, p. 55). Arts Administrators must find their way between two perceived extremes. There is selection and rejection in every thought. Someone is making a value judgment subjectively, according to his own selective interests (Garrison, 2008). The challenge, in this context, is how to come to a satisfying agreement between artist and administrator with regard to those value judgments.

Pragmatism allows the acceptance of distinctly separate aspects of particular characteristics and their role in composing "personal identity within personal identity within a pluralistic community" (Garrison, 2008, p. 7). For the arts organization, this refers to the artist (personal identity), who becomes an administrator (personal identity), who works in service to the arts organization (pluralistic community). The artist within and the administrator within the same individual will have differing priorities but both can service the organization. Pragmatism enables making these connections toward tying separate items into a cohesive, single whole. There is cohesion for the balanced mind, willing to embrace plurality. Contrast is equally as valuable as likeness. Comparison requires contrast in logical decision-making (Dewey, 1910).

Dewey cited the dualistic philosophic controversy between empiricism and rationalism as the source of much flawed decision-making. For this, he saw pragmatism as a solution, as a connecting philosophy, capable of balancing the historic tensions (Dewey, 1949). Pragmatism focuses on experience, consequences, context, and problems. It incorporates evolution with an emphasis on process. Additionally, pragmatism seeks to incorporate dualisms, such as artist-administrator (Shields, 1996). Pragmatism is uniquely appropriate as a philosophy for this discussion because of its acceptance of dual roles, administrator/artist (Whetsell & Shields, 2011). Whetsell and Shields (2011) are writing about public administration, but I argue that the duality between academic and practitioner that exists in public administration is comparable to the arts administration dual interests of artist and administrator.

Philosophical pragmatism not only allows a hybrid approach to arts administration, but it actually demands that the pragmatic administrator do so (Whetsell & Shields, 2011). "The public administration practitioner toils in both the worlds of praxis and poiesis" (Shields, 2004, p.355). Arts administration exists in the worlds of practice and production, administration and creativity. Pragmatism, which places such emphasis on theory and language as essential tools enabling exploration, meaning, comprehension, and fusion, is perfectly situated to guide us as arts administrators (Shields, 2004).

Pragmatism as a Seesaw for Other Disciplines

Through extensive research and publication, Patricia M. Shields (2011, 2008, 2005, 2004, 2003, 1996) has argued that pragmatism is the ideal philosophy to bridge the difference between practitioner and researcher in the field of public administration. Instead of requiring unanimity, pragmatism sees difference and embraces it, taking a deliberately pluralistic path (Whetsell & Shields, 2011). The emphasis on lived experience makes Dewey's pragmatism relevant for

public administration (Shields, 2006). This is important for the arts organization where the

tensions between researcher and practitioner translate to tensions between artist and

administrator. Because of the integral role of researcher and practitioner, in public

administration, classical pragmatism might be the only philosophy that can truly bridge the gap

between competing and divergent roles played by researchers and practitioners (Shields, 2005).

The role of a public administrator is to translate a politically defined mandate into a

functioning program. Practitioner experience is acknowledged in daily practice, as well as in

official policy making and formal public administration education (Shields, 2003). In fact, the

very thing that sets public administration apart as a discipline is its reliance on practitioner

experience (Shields, 2003). The nature of experience is the link between the two extremes

(Dewey, 1934). "Why take something as valuable and integral to Public Administration as

practitioner experience, and toss it" (Shields, 2005, p. 509)? This requires the researcher and the

practitioner (Shields, 2008). A unique characteristic of pragmatism is the consideration that

theories must be linked to experience or practice, making it perfectly situated as a philosophy for

public administration (Shields, 2008), as well as, I argue, arts administration.

Public administrators face a multi-dimensional, pluralistic world. They serve a diverse

people, a multi-faceted federal system, an international stage and varied constituencies. Pluralism

is inherent to their work. The human experience is plural and diverse and cannot be tied to a

single explanation. Pragmatism allows for this (Brendel 2006). This is not so different from the

world in which arts administrators must operate. Juggling artists, donors, volunteers, audiences,

staff, and communities, in addition to weaving through a complex field of cultural policies, the

arts administrator operates in a world of pluralities.

Administrators cannot endlessly sit in conferences debating one another, like philosophers of old. They must act. The duties of their jobs demand it. Pragmatism supports this action by emphasizing that these actions be grounded in reflective experience and educated hypotheses. Any unwillingness to accept or acknowledge that previous endeavors did not work or could be improved only serves to substantiate preconceived positions, and that lack of reflective judgment does not fit within the philosophy of pragmatism. Actions must be always tied to inquiry and learning. Pragmatism requires reflections, and will not allow ideology that does not also incorporate a mechanism for reflection and revision (Shields, 2008). As Dewey insisted, pragmatism requires that recontextualization be a constant. Pragmatism is provisional because it does not adhere to dogma, but adapts and evolves.

By linking obstacles and practice with reflection, adaptation, evolution, and pluralism classical pragmatism provides a unique and specific framework for participation that adds insight to the "doing, making, and theorizing of the field" (Shields, 2008, p. 216). This incorporation of theory and practice is largely responsible for the developing of the powerful framework of public administration that incorporates practitioner experience and enables those practitioners to maintain a view of the big picture while engaging in their day-to-day minutiae (Shields, 2008). Likewise, the arts administrator is able to work with the artist in pursuit of creative excellence while maintaining an objective view of the needs of the organization as a whole. Classical pragmatism strengthens the field of public administration because it embraces the practitioner's existence in an atmosphere of knotted, murky, frustrating, and confounding definitive experience (James, 1907). Classical pragmatism speaks to both the discipline and the practice of public administration, and one without the other would leave the field impotent (Shields, 2004).

According to Dewey, society's progress in science and technology occurred due to the

interaction between practice and production. He situated pragmatism as the philosophy that utilizes theoretical knowledge and incorporates it into practical and productive reason. Public administration, as a field of study, simply cannot separate its theoretical musings from the routine experience of practitioners. Pragmatism focuses on inquiry, the very thing that gives experience its value. Inquiry is also the place where theory and practice join together (Shields, 2004).

According to James (1907) true ideas are those that can be incorporated, confirmed, authenticated and legitimized. The truth of an idea is not an inherent, stagnant property but rather, is discovered and discerned and made true by events. How true an idea may be is affected by the world around it, allowing it to become more or less true with continued challenging (James, 1907). Now I continue to challenge and stretch the truth of pragmatism as a valuable mediating philosophy by bringing it into the more specific realm of arts administration, and using it to address the perceived dualities that exist between artists and administrators.

Arts Administration

Does administrative success facilitate organizational stability, thus facilitating artistic freedom and innovation? Pragmatism's deep conception of experience and science demonstrates a method toward identifying an objective foundation for critique, reflection, and assessment of organizations and practices (Hookway, 2013). Through a lens of pragmatism it can be accepted that both artists and administrators hold distinct "truths" about the priorities and requirements of their roles. While these truths may not always be in agreement, they can both exist as "true" and commonality between them can be sought. Through the application of practices, the practitioners understanding of them grows (Hookway, 2013).

Dewey encouraged the recontextualizing and reapplying of the philosophy of pragmatism. "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" (Dellinger, 2016, p. 8). Just as the discipline of public administration would not exist without practitioners working on the front lines of policy implementation, so without art making, arts administrators would have nothing to manage (Shields, 2004).

The tensions between an artist and an arts administrator are not so different from the seesaw of my childhood. The aims can sometimes seem discordant. One primary tension exists while one seeks artistic freedom and the other seeks a balanced budget. However, the administrator without the artist has no product and the artist without the administrator has no outlet. As noted in the introduction, artists and administrators share the goal of artistic excellence and successful organizations, but the paths toward these ends are often divergent. Recognizing that artists and administrators come from these different perspectives, it becomes understandable that artists who are placed in administrative roles, without training or education toward their new duties, might have different priorities and impulses than trained administrators.

Arts administrators impose budgets and agendas upon artists who might feel these constraints to be stifling and restrictive (Choinière & Moran, 2012). However, the balanced budget releases the artists from financial insecurity, allowing maximum effort and energy to instead be invested in their art making. Pragmatism allows practice to influence and advance the character of art (Hookway, 2013). The administrative needs of the organization, to ensure success and stability, are allowed to influence the creation of the art product. Dewey viewed freedom as the "power to be an individualized self" (Festenstein, 2014, p. 5). Does the administrator's imposed structure and order provide that power to artists?

A second key tension exists as the artist strives to see each component of the creative process as it relates to the whole to be completed. The final quality of her product is entirely dependent upon the critical thought she brings into her process (Leddy, 2016). In the relationship between artist and administrator, the administrator might be the one providing that view of the big picture, focused on the macro view of the organization, while the artist is focused on her single contribution to that whole. "Production and consumption should not be seen as separate" (Leddy, 2016, p. 10). They are organic parts of the same whole. Experience is an ongoing evolution through which individuals actively relate to and with their surrounding environment, receiving input that aids them along the way (Hookway, 2013). Methods should be approached as devices to be evaluated on how successfully they achieve the desired objective.

Hawkins (2016) wrote about the tensions between communities and universities and the need for arts administration programs "to foster in students an understanding of cultural context, an appreciation for diversity, and the value of broader community-based representation in cultural policy and planning efforts" (p. 2). Just as artists make and envision connections that grant perspective on complex issues, the successful arts leader must also learn that problem solving is adaptive, and often, improvisational (Dellinger, 2016). If the field will allow it, the practice of art making can be a strength in the practice of administration.

Choiniere and Moran (2012) wrote about the final tension of note in this discourse. They argued that assuming roles of administration stifles, distorts, perverts and dilutes the potency and imagination of the artists forced into those roles. Artists cannot fully invest themselves in their creation while simultaneously considering marketability, grant criteria, budget realities, and so many more responsibilities. "Administration is eating away at us. It splits us up, it divides us…Administration is breaking us up. It's making us lose our integrity" (p. 30). This assertion,

that administrative tasks only wick time away from time that could be spent creating, and that the more one concerns oneself with administration, the less one is dealing with art, is understandable. "I cannot dream up a performance if I am also telling myself that it will be too expensive" (p. 31). Perhaps this is the very reason why trained administrators are so vital in the actualization of artistic freedom.

The value of an artistic background is precious. Artists know, from their own art making that if an artist asks for a certain supply, there is creative reason behind it. Artists know, from their own creations, that the execution of a vision requires investment and planning, support and commitment. However, administrators know that supplies are not free, investing in one resource limits potential to invest in others, and there is only so much time in an organizational calendar for events, so choices must be made. Dreams might have to be delayed or denied. Artists functioning as administrators must navigate how to remove their "artist" hat while still retaining all the valuable experience wearing it provided them.

This is a cornerstone concept for successful arts administration educators to emphasize in their training of new administrators. Rather than discarding former training and experience in arts disciplines, arts administration educators should help students apply that experience in their new roles as administrators. The shift into administration should not be considered a career change but rather a career transfer, wherein previous knowledge is necessary and valuable as new skills and education are acquired to maximize success and competency.

Dewey asserted the priority of community over individuality. In this case, arts administrators prioritize the organization over the individual artist (Garrison, 2008). Dewey also believed the solution for the flaws and failings of modern democracy was more democracy (Dewey, 1946). Perhaps the cure for the ailments of administration is more effective

administration. Pragmatism values difference (Garrison, 2008), embraces wholeness and rejects duality (Reich, 2008). In searching for a solution that erases the attitude of artist versus administrator with a relationship centered model of artist with administrator, where both work side by side toward a common goal, using their individual strengths and complimenting one another through their differences, a lens of pragmatism is useful (Reich, 2008).

There can be a mutual recognition of difference and cross-border dialogue. Again, return to construction, deconstruction and continual reconstruction to achieve a diversity of flexible methods for solving diverse and changing problems. Methods are developed in social cooperation and should be tested continually through both application and experience (Neubert, 2008). The multiplicity of ends set by our emotional and practical subjectivity has to be brought into a working relationship with one another for a sense of self to emerge and stabilize, for meaningful communication to take place among persons and to enable people to live together amicably (Seigfried, 2008, p. 143).

Artists and the administrators who facilitate their work exist with tensions tugging between them as they each work to carry out their individual objectives. Through a lens of pragmatism both are able to see how these tensions can make each of those players stronger, as they rely on the strengths of one another. Rather than working through dualisms and difference, the two roles can play together, maximizing differences to achieve a common end.

Conclusion

Pragmatism is practical, pluralistic, participatory, and provisional (Shields, 1996). All of these characteristics make it the perfect philosophy to teach us how the seemingly contradictory nature of an arts administrator can function as well as how pragmatism enables us to identify

strengths in this hybrid position as arts administrators try to balance the tensions between artist and administrator.

Woodrow Wilson (1887) referred to administration as an "eminently practical science" (p. 197). Arts administration requires the practicality of pragmatism because they seek to meet needs and serve a societal purpose. Arts Administration requires the pluralistic approach of pragmatism because it operates in a multi-disciplinary field. Also, pragmatism works for arts administration because it allows for meta-physical experience as a valid basis for decision-making. "Public Administrators practice in a world of paradox and contradiction, disorder and pattern" (Shields, 1996, p. 391). Arts administrators practice in that same world. The arts are, by nature, participatory. Finally, the arts are provisional, seeking to reflect society and reflect upon society, and, naturally evolving as society also changes.

Let us imagine that the arts are the fulcrum, then pragmatism can become the connector on which the field of complex differences are balanced. How does this affect strategy for the future of the field? Realizing that many arts administrators enter their administrative careers with expertise and training as artists, it must also be acknowledged that not every administrator of a small arts organization will have the desire or resources to obtain a university level degree in arts administration. As artists, their priorities might differ from those they will discover as administrators. If arts administrators need to be educated and qualified (and they do), then the responsibility to recruit and educate might fall on degree programs and professional associations in cooperation with local arts agencies.

Correspondence with seven state arts agencies revealed that none of them provide technical assistance or training or even resources to arts organizations for the purpose of administrative success (personal correspondence, March 2018). How then, is the artist turned

administrator to navigate the new duties, responsibilities and priorities that present themselves when the hat shifts from artist to administrator? Writing as an arts administrator, I encourage future researchers to consider it our responsibility to facilitate the success of these artist-administrated organizations. What practical applications might the incorporation of pragmatism have in our organizations and educational programs? This is a worthy line of questioning as artists and arts organizations continually combat competitive marketplaces, increased free access through technology and financial obstacles to arts participation and should inspire future collaboration and research on the part of academics, arts administrators and artists. Remember, pragmatism will insist that we incorporate all viewpoints.

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