



McCabe Photography

The art experience

To deal with constant challenges and rapid change, we need to break out of our narrow definitions of the world, says David Kayrouz. Art-based learning helps make us aware of how we might tackle more complex issues.

Many people today struggle with the idea of trying something new and the risk it involves. Certainly as adults we make a goal of thinking and acting rationally, we don't want to waste resources or valuable time—or worse still make fools of ourselves. It's a natural response—or is it?

To add to our risk aversion, education has for some centuries

focused on the rational skills of critical and analytical thinking. But these merely expand our knowledge, without increasing our ability to use that information. For most of us only a small part of our potential for learning, and therefore change, is formally educated. Creative thinking or imagination classes were never part of the school curriculum. But this is exactly what we need to respond to the many

challenges we meet every day that don't fit into the 'We've already got the answer' category.

And this is what happens in workshops that use art as a way of learning. Driven by the qualities needed for change, art is the training ground that develops our imaginations, mostly by revealing and building on what we already know.

This is well illustrated when, in a Creative Pathways workshop, I ask a group to paint or sketch a scene familiar to them all, such as the entrance to their workplace, which they all pass through daily. It is immaterial how technically accurate the drawings are, they always communicate sufficiently what the creators can recall and visualise.

But it's in the discussion following the drawing that new perspectives emerge. Gradually, everyone finds out what others in the group have seen and remembered. The common surprise is that when everyone's work is combined, most details of the subject scene are present in considerable detail. Members of the group start realising the elements in other people's work add to their own picture and then they realise that by taking in other people's unique viewpoints they will gain new perspectives—someone will actually know the brand name of the carpet!

Using imagination requires engagement, being there, being present, and people soon catch on to how important it is for learning. They also understand that this is a collective experience. For visioning, this exercise often leads to discussion about how a group can get a better understanding of their business environment—what they are aware of and its implications, ways to increase awareness and the effect of creating and communicating a clear 'picture' for the team's future. Some teams go on to explore that future in paint.

To deal with constant challenges and rapid changes we need to break out of our narrow definitions of the world. Since art-based learning entails improvisation, and is a safe vehicle to experiment and learn with, it helps to make us aware of how we might tackle more complex issues.

Sixty minutes or so with a paint brush can trigger deep insights into ways to address and resolve conflicting ideas, by simply creating more open communication.

A department of loan managers within a bank provided a recent example. Working in a tightly controlled and regulated environment, they had alienated themselves from other parts of their organisation. They could not see how creating new internal communications might improve and support their service. They were more concerned that the ambiguity and diversity it caused would be an obstacle to efficiency rather than a tool to produce additional business contacts and support from within their organisation.

During a Creative Pathways workshop, I challenged them to



David Kayrouz conducts a workshop with staff at Russell McVeagh.

find recognisable images within random splodges of paint—first as individuals and later in groups. The process was timed and after a lot of laughter and animated activity we discussed the results.

For everyone the outcome clearly showed the benefits of embracing ambiguity and diversity. They realised they could not complete the exercise *without* embracing these qualities and, even more importantly, they found they generated more novel ideas when they included their colleagues. By necessity they had to listen more openly to exchange ideas about what they were seeing. Diversity of opinion became an asset.

One participant's telling remark after this session was "for me it felt like learning another language—one that is infinitely full of possibilities and opportunities". The experience then became the benchmark for adopting new approaches.

Painting encourages fruitful insights into the many ways we communicate. It helps us to see and exchange values unbound by language. Another participant commented that "with brush and colour, what begins as child's play soon reveals itself to be a powerful tool for deeper discovery and ideas generation".

In an opening exchange such as 'painted introductions', a group can not only inform others about the usual facts such as family size, occupation, interests and so on but also readily convey individual values, insights and humour in ways they cannot easily put into words. "It was an opportunity to experience a different way of working and of perceiving our work," said one organisation's leader after a workshop. "It gave us freedom to express issues that one doesn't discuss or even notice." This was a comment frequently echoed by others who have done these workshops.

Although organisational development and human resource practice responds to these issues, conventional approaches can be dry and detached. By contrast, the informal nature of art-based processes,



They realised they could not complete the exercise without embracing these qualities and, even more importantly, they found they generated more novel ideas when they included their colleagues.

such as painting, produce the engagement essential for making the learning stick and the creative insights and practices flourish. They capitalise on knowledge and insights that we already possess rather than providing new frameworks.

New Zealanders are resourceful and pragmatic by nature, which makes us great experiential learners. Making the workplace the context for that learning enhances the relationship between individuals and the company. Clearly people are interested in how the lessons from art can help overcome some common workplace challenges. But now it is time to find out how they can actually inform and complement the working practices of New Zealand organisations, making them both more creative and productive.

The days when one person can know all or lead effectively without the genuine support of others are quickly passing. We need eyes and ears all around us—we need to be able to work effectively and flexibly.

To excel means moving to new levels of collaboration demanding greater levels of support and trust. Companies that use art to draw out and enhance that collaboration will lead in growing the qualities needed to succeed in this environment. **et**

David Kayrouz is the director of Creative Pathways. He helps organisations and individuals unlock their creativity and innovation through arts-based workshops. Visit www.creativepathways.co.nz

Practical lessons on team dynamics

Early this year Laurence Moss, organisation development portfolio manager for a large local authority, had a problem.

His team of project managers and analysts, responsible for delivering big internal projects with the council, had doubled in size in a year and was experiencing “some of the typical challenges you get on growing teams”.

“We had gone from quite a small, almost family, culture to scaling up to quite considerable numbers of people and we lost some of that cohesiveness.”

There wasn’t a real sense of engagement—and there were some communication and relationship problems. Moss wanted his team members to stop looking to management for instruction, and start coming up with suggestions and solutions themselves.

Moss knew David Kayrouz and realised that the Creative Pathways approach might be what was needed to turn his team around. So he asked Kayrouz to put together an intervention workshop for 20 team members that would result in “more engagement, more volunteering of not just ideas but issues and concerns”.

In March they came together for the workshop, starting with what Moss calls “a fairly typical opening session”, explaining where the group had come from, what the issues were, and where it was headed in the future.

Then Kayrouz began a two-hour workshop. For the first exercise, he asked everybody to do a very simple painting to introduce themselves.

Not only did everyone explain why they had painted what they had painted, but others in the group gave their feedback on what they saw in the painted introductions. The feedback from other team members was interesting, says Moss, and led to good personal interactions and increased awareness of other team members.

“It got people to hold a different frame of mind.”

Then came the next exercise—Kayrouz asked everyone to paint their perfect place. But just as they were getting really involved, he stopped them, picked up their paintings, exchanged the paintings between individuals and asked them to carry on—making their alterations to other people’s perfect places.

“Some people were surprised at their own feelings in terms of frustration at having their work taken away from them,” says Moss. “It triggered a few people’s awareness of their own behaviour at work, which was a good result.”

“It really did trigger a real awareness about how they work with other people. That was quite powerful.”

A discussion on the different qualities of reason and feeling, of art processes and business processes, of order and chaos, followed.

But after lunch, the team came back together to discuss what they had learned.

“People started volunteering ideas about what the team could be doing better,” Moss says. “That was exactly what we wanted. It generated the interaction between people themselves rather than leadership asking and them responding.”

“People said it was the best of these types of off-sites they have done and were very enthusiastic. We struggled to end it because people were talking so much.”

“It was very synergistic conversation. It was all about how to improve things as a team and also improve the organisation over the longer term. All sorts of people were coming up with ideas and the ideas kept flowing and other people were building on these ideas and there weren’t any arguments.”

All suggestions were recorded, and some have since been implemented—with team members knowing that they are responsible for those changes, they can’t sit around waiting for someone else to issue instructions.

The workshop was so well-received eight members asked to continue on to Creative Pathway’s four-week ‘Surfacing Creative Behaviour’ programme, which looks in more depth at exploring creativity.

Not only was the initial workshop successful in turning around the team dynamic, but Moss says he’s also seeing further results from those taking the extended programme.

“Definitely people have been very enthusiastic about what they have learned from it and certainly it’s raised their self-awareness about how they have ideas and how they deal with that.”

—By freelance journalist Ashley Campbell