

Short Paper Submission

Special Track

- Philosophy of leadership and coaching

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Title: **Regionally Speaking: Cultural Leadership and Capacity Building in the Asia Pacific Region**

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Abstract:

This paper examines leadership development in the cultural sector in ASEAN and Australia. It is based on the premise that models for leadership need to be culturally attuned. The model uses the framework of *Narrative Inquiry* and sets out to test whether this methodology can be used as an effective training tool for adaptive leadership in changing political and economic times.

The project's overarching title 'Regionally Speaking' is deliberately evocative rather than didactically expressive. It emphasises the need for granularity and inflections of artistic and cultural meaning. It is also the manifestation of a new ethos of practice, advocacy and capacity building. Last but not least it is simply a representation of individuals and their societies. Arts and creative practice take the stage as a subject for interrogative space rather than as an object to bolster other agendas.

The researchers' main quest is to reveal and analyse the many factors which influence artistic and cultural practice in the Region and their intersection with states' practice. The project asks the question: rather than simply mapping a region can one go beyond plotting points on a map, or describing institutional architecture, or fabrics of networks, to reveal the complexity of the region and the roles which arts and cultural practices play within it?

The study which focuses on the ASEAN bloc and Australia had its genesis due to a number of factors: a) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) half century and there was a call by the Asia Europe Foundation to undertake a cultural mapping exercise; b) the authors' experience in Asia led them to conclude that

traditional leadership models were primarily Western centred and did not necessarily translate well into capacity building in the region; c) the view that for any study to be effective that measurement tools needed to be internalised in the study itself and undertaken by participants over time. From this emerged a fluid cultural leadership incubator which would involve varied governmental and non-governmental partnerships, academics and the narrator/participants.

The research began in what would appear an unlikely country and region, 'Malta', at a gathering hosted by International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA) and Arts Council Malta (ACM) which was holding its 7th World Summit on Arts and Culture. We started here to understand how this network of agencies, whose role it is to assist artistic and cultural development, might inform the research. It also presented us with an opportunity to be in a place which has experienced a parallel history to that of the ASEAN region. Malta and its geographical position, mid-point in the Mediterranean sea between two continents and with links to greater Asia has within it a confluence of arts, cultures, religious practices and trading routes, surrounded by the geopolitics of today. It is positioned literally and metaphorically at what might be called a point of journeys and 'migration'. The opportunity to hear and engage with a polyphony of perspectives with representatives from Africa, Asia, North and South America, the Pacific, Europe and Australasia would, we thought serve to structure our own inquiry and research questions.

In this project the very nature of the ASEAN 'bloc' is scrutinised. It is a region characterised by remarkable diversity (political, social and economic) and ASEAN's purpose and membership has gone through a number of changes since its inception. We were left with the question: how can one go beyond plotting points on a map, or describing institutional architecture, or fabrics of networks, to reveal the complexity of the region and the roles which arts and cultural practices play within it?

We developed an interactive model which would engage and inform diverse interlocutors from all forms of artistic and cultural practice building upon the breadth of resources in the field. It laid emphasis on 'people to people' connections and capacity-building in the sector, shying away from managerial terms such as 'leadership' but wishing to engage in inquiry about effective artistic and cultural management and policy making practices.

The framework we designed was a regionally based longitudinal investigation. In order to fully represent the diversity of the bloc we identified and engaged regional rapporteurs who could contribute to and inform the project from within each of the ASEAN countries. The project regional researchers' role was to engage with and reveal traditional and contemporary artistic and cultural practice. Their challenge is to reveal these given the diversity of and ever-changing dialogue within the region. We developed broad themes which could generate common starting points and create space for cultural inflection (both within nations and externally). This project therefore is not therefore a traditional static mapping exercise (where regional cartography changes all too frequently) but a plotting of a journey with shelters along the path.

We have therefore undertaken an ambitious but hopefully rich framework, as the regional researchers became owners of the thematic journey, embodiments of their practice and narrators of their own stories, at a confluence of cultural and political discourse. (It's now happening in real time). As with any aspirational project, where one releases oneself from the centre of the process, the outcomes are uncertain, but the aim is to move from a static flat tool to a dynamic instrument through which subjective voice presents a layered picture, over time and in and out of a region which can provide some insight into cultural practice at the regional level. It is hoped that it will inform both ASEAN's cultural perspective (both possibilities and limitations) as well as policy at a local level. As a capacity building exercise, it aims to equip the ASEAN regional researchers with expertise and courage to develop their nuanced layers of description and analysis, and gain political voice and agency by presenting their findings at significant occasions such as the Asia ASEM councils, international conferences concerning culture and diplomacy and Arts Festivals. Phase II of the project introduces our ASEAN bloc leaders to emerging cultural leaders in Australia.

In February 2018 this project will expand to include Australian participants who will work alongside their ASEAN counterparts. It will be interesting to observe whether the thematic approach will be sufficiently robust to accommodate a regionally and culturally different group.

The Narrative Method

From the very outset of this project, we as researchers faced a unique problem: the initial project scope called for a cultural map of the ASEAN region. Yet, the question arose: how can one go beyond plotting points on a map, or describing institutional architecture, or fabrics of networks, to reveal the complexity of the region and the roles which arts and cultural practices play within it

We were reticent to follow the well-used but more static form of cultural mapping. In our view the data sets gathered through the cultural mapping process simply gave preference to the essential qualities of the sector, its institutions and infrastructure. Yet obscured the rich complexity of human social and cultural experiences, which we (and ASEF) were seeking to reveal.

Instead, narrative inquiry or “the study of the ways humans experience the world,”[1] offered appeal. As social beings, we find meaning and make sense of our own lives and the world we live in through the stories people use, tell and even live.[2] The fact that narrative inquiry has at its core a focus on the study of experience, as it is lived,[3] holds relevance to a wide range of disciplines from anthropology to cultural studies to communication to international relations and diplomacy.[4]

For this project, narrative inquiry offered us the chance to develop something broader and more ‘alive’: an informed engagement and representation of the cultural sector’s role in the construction of the ASEAN region. By engaging with ‘the storying experience’ of arts practitioners—one from each ASEAN nation, we

sought to explore and illuminate the concept of an ASEAN cultural identity from the perspective of these individuals, all of whom are engaged in artistic and cultural practice in their nation, the region and the wider world.

It is an ambitious but novel approach. Megan Daigle makes this point when she notes that “storytelling presents a challenge to traditional ways of writing, thinking and knowing in the world of international politics.” Yet, it is an important challenge – particularly in a world where issues of representation, cultural and linguistic misunderstanding, reciprocity and power relations loom large. As Daigle notes, in addressing this challenge narrative “facilitates an understanding of the way that the international acts at the level of individual lives and bodies—and vice versa.” [5]

For this project narrative opens up new possibilities for examining the ASEAN region from within, while working across a number of fields of inquiry that impact on traditional and contemporary arts in the region.

The approach presented several challenges. The first of these was to engage participants— one from each of the ten ASEAN nations and secondly to identify potential participants from the Australian continent who would be both diverse and representative of the cultural sector. The second challenge related to process. Our aim was to develop an inclusive, participatory format that engaged our participants as directors and producers of the narrative process. We undertook this through workshops. The first convened in Malta on the sidelines of the International Federation of Cultural Councils and Associations (IFACCA) 7th World Summit on Arts and Culture. The second workshop was held in Singapore in and around the headquarters of ASEF. It was during these workshops that the participants decided upon the name for the project: Regionally Speaking. The name itself is significant, denoting the fluid nature of the conversation they were having within each other from an ASEAN perspective while, and the potential to extend and include voices from across Asia and eventually to Europe. The third will take place in Brisbane, Australia in June 2018.

Our job as researchers is to ensure that the voices from within the arts and culture sectors of each of the nations within the ASEAN region are heard and to determine whether there is a commonality of discourse with Australia. We do this by bringing their autobiographical narratives to the fore. We don't presume to change those individual voices or stories – and so allow them to stand in their original form. However, we are also keen to reveal the collective experience that emerges from their multiple voices. To this end, we seek to delve into the narratives to tease out, understand and perhaps interpret the common themes and areas of divergence. In doing so, we are trying to bring greater understanding and visibility to the place and relevance of arts and cultural practice within the region as a broader landscape.

The study was developed in the following manner:

Regionally Speaking: Framework

A set of questions were developed and agreed by the participants as a framework for the written narratives centering around the following themes:

- Your Story
- Your Nation's Story
- Your Region's Story
- Your Regional Connections
- The Collective Voice
- Individual Reflections

Each of the narratives begins with participants sharing personal stories about how they came into the sector. Each reflects a unique, individual experience, but we find across these experiences themes relating to opportunity, identity, voice and impact. Each theme is explored in turn.

Findings were grouped in the following manner:

- Opportunity
- Identity
- Voice
- Impact
- Reflecting on Nation

We undertook this task, admittedly as outsiders to ASEAN ourselves, but as individuals with deep and enduring connections to the Asia Pacific Region, and an interest in understanding the interplay between and potential for cultural understanding and diplomacy in a regional context. Eventually (and this would mark some success in the process), we would expand this process to the Pacific. We should also be written out of the role of facilitators as the participants own, design and run future workshops and engage as drivers of the process, gaining voice in the region and beyond.

The significance of this work is the development of a culturally attuned model of regional leadership development responsive to the inflections of individual political and economic circumstances, sensitive to larger state action, and enabling points of dialogue, communication and exchange.

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[1] F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry," *Educational Researcher* 19(5), 1990: 2-14.

[2] Bruner 1986, Giddens 1991, McAdams 1985, Neimeyer 2004

^[3] McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013

^[4] See for example, W.J.T. Mitchell (ed) *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Clandinen and Rosiek 2007; Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008); Meegan Daigle, "Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45(1), 2016: 25-42.

^[5] Meegan Daigle, "Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45(1), 2016: 25-42.

^[6] Artis pro Activ coalition's Founding Manifesto.