

The Renaissance Art Academies: Implications for Leadership Education Practices and Research

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Abstract

Taking the perspective that leadership education is similar to art education created a bridge connecting the leadership education literature with the large and rich body of literature on art education and art history. A survey of the more prominent Renaissance art academies was employed to illuminate the education practices of that extraordinary time, and then consider whether these practices had application to modern day leadership education. Results directly challenged the efficacy of the skills approach to leadership education, affirmed the importance of the mentoring method, supported the communities of practice method as a powerful tool for leadership education, argued for the idea of a talent for leadership, proposed designing leadership games and simulations that included positive and negative consequences, and stressed the importance of creating college and university based leadership academies.

The Renaissance Art Academies: Implications for Leadership Education Practices and Research

The Renaissance was that period of time in human history when Western Civilization exhausted by famine, plagues and incessant warfare teetered on the brink of chaos only to incredibly remake itself in a grand explosion of energy and inventiveness (Manchester, 1993). Sandwiched between the Middle Ages and the Reformation, it was the period that spawned artists, explorers, poets, philosophers, and reformers. It was the age of Michelangelo and Raphael, Columbus and Magellan, Machiavelli and Erasmus, a mafia of profane popes and Martin Luther as well as a host of extraordinary others who collectively inspired and shaped Western assumptions, beliefs, customs, expectations, ideas, and values. Incredibly, all continue to resonate in the modern mind. The period also bequeathed a treasure trove of artistic works that to this day still produce awe and wonder.

For many people, the Renaissance brings to mind the stunning and awe inspiring works of art produced in that period like Michelangelo's masterwork, the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Along with these timeless works of art and the artists who produced them came the influential art academies. These were the greenhouses where the young and the talented sought to develop their own distinctive artistic styles and attract the attention of art patrons. Of relevance to leadership educators is that each academy had a particular conceptual framework that guided the academy's approach to developing the artistic capabilities of its students. Also, the art academy system embodied a set of teaching methods, practices, and ideas that are instructive and thought provoking especially for current leadership education practices and research.

Taking the perspective that the practice of leadership is much like the practice of art, which has been proposed by other researchers and scholars (Cohen, 1990; Nahavandi, 2006; Walters, 1987), then the Renaissance art academies may provide some useful insights for leadership educators.

The purpose of this paper is to survey some of the more prominent Renaissance art academies, identify their particular approaches to art education, and extend their education insights to present day leadership education practices and research. Furthermore, this review will explore Renaissance art academy practices that support educational practices being presently used by leadership educators, challenge some, and suggest potential avenues for future research.

The Academy of Fine Arts Florence: the Invention of the Academy

The Renaissance was a particularly important period for painters, sculptors, and architects who at the time were considered only craftsman, and thus not worthy of the high social standing accorded to professionals (those with university degrees). That all changed with the founding of the Florentine Academy under the sponsorship and protection of Duke Cosimo de Medici. Because of the aura of Medici power and the presence of famous instructors like Michelangelo, those with artistic talent for painting, sculpting, or architecture enjoyed a substantially enhanced social regard. Furthermore, the invention of the academy gave legitimacy to academy members that resulted in the study and practice of art becoming a worthy endeavor within the contemporary notion of learned societies.

The Academy of Fine Arts Florence revealed the advantage of the art academy model. First, the interaction of artists and scholars within the rarified atmosphere of a learned institution resulted in a collaboration of minds that otherwise would not have happened to the extent that it did. Second, academy members helped each other by discussing ways and means to achieve their desired effects in their

work. Third, the Academy of Fine Arts Florence sponsored regular debates, discussions as well as shows and lectures on art history, theory, and practice. The final advantage of the academy model was that it enabled young artists to connect with both wealthy patrons who could support their continued development as well as attract the attention of artistic mentors, who were vital to a student's continued artistic refinement and success.

Academy of Fine Arts Florence: Modern Applications to Leadership Education.

The foremost implication for leadership educators is the invention of the academy. Professional leadership educators have long had to struggle to gain the acceptance and recognition of practitioners and academic colleagues, many of whom still question whether leadership studies is in fact an academic discipline. Perhaps the Renaissance art academy concept offers a means for overcoming this rankling issue.

The means to gain credibility might lie in creating leadership academies in university settings that enjoy the support of prominent alumni and administrators. Just like the Florentine Academy that had the backing of Medici power and prestige, it legitimized the art academy institution and gave to its students a degree of social status. Perhaps leadership educators should re-direct their efforts from engaging in the eternal debates over what is leadership and whether leadership studies is a legitimate academic discipline to concerning themselves with creating leadership academies. Perhaps the time has come for institution building.

The manner in which the academies were organized and operated fits well with the modern concepts of communities of practice and mentoring as strategies for improving individual capabilities. Communities of practice represent a refinement of the situated learning model advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991). It is, "groups of people who share a common concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.1). And that is what the academy structure did. It brought together highly talented individuals with a common passion for artistic expression that fostered learning in an environment (the studio) that was functionally similar to where the learning was applied. And all practice was performed under the ever watchful eye of a master, since all students began as apprentices.

In a modern sense, the masters acted like coaches or mentors. For instance, in Rembrandt's studio, Rembrandt himself, would correct and make comments on his students' drawings, usually in a few sure pen lines empathically altering the relations of figures to one another. Later, art historians who actually examined the

students' corrected works found that the students' revised drawings showed they had indeed learned the lesson (Goldstein, 1996).

Roman Accademia di San Luca: Theory Building and Talent Identification

The Accademia di San Luca was another of the important Renaissance art academies. It rivaled the Florentine Academy in terms of faculty, being comprised of some of the most influential artists in Europe, and powerful patrons that included the Papacy. It was founded by Federico Zuccaro with the expressed intention of elevating the institution of the art academy to the high regard accorded to the university.

Zuccaro introduced noteworthy educational ideas that distinguish the Roman Accademia di San Luca from other Renaissance academies. The first was that practical instruction was only one part of art education. Another was theory-building, the creation of some kind of coherent mental framework or theory that would capture what art was and the elements that comprised the creation of art. He argued that art students needed to have a conceptual foundation of how art was created and that it must come before even the development of the manual dexterity of drawing (Elkins, 2001).

A second educational idea he proposed was the need to regularly challenge students with competitions to reward the talented and select out the less capable. He based this proposition on his belief that artistic inspiration entered the mind of man as a spark of the divine mind. To put it into a more secular expression, artistic inspiration was a talent and no amount of training and practice could make up for the lack thereof. It was a gift of Nature; it was innate.

A third distinguishing feature of the Roman Accademia di San Luca was the drawing "alphabet." Novices would begin their training by mastering the ABCs of drawing heads, feet, hands, and facial expressions. It was assumed that by assembling the parts art would be created.

In the end Zuccaro's insistence on theory building and abstract esthetics regarding the nature of art was rejected by working artists because they perceived his obsession with theory-building as having no practical use. To most artists, "theory" was nothing but a description of their manual activity. From their perspective it was simply no theory at all. As Hoover (1992) has noted, "a theory is a set of related propositions that suggest why events occur in the manner that they do" (p.34). Simply put, Zuccaro never put forth a theory of why art occurred the way that it did.

Roman Accademia di San Luca: Modern Applications to Leadership Education

An interesting technique employed by this academy was requiring students to first master the skills for drawing heads, feet, hands, and facial expression before beginning to create larger drawings with multiple objects, people, and scenes. Similarly, the Skills Approach to leadership education proposes that mastery of the discrete skills of leadership will result in better and more effective leadership.

From a leadership education perspective, it seems to make intuitive sense to assign effective leadership to a list of skills to be mastered. Yet, the outcomes of this technique based on the experience of this Renaissance academy and others suggest otherwise. While teaching discrete leadership skills may be necessary, it is not sufficient to nurture the leadership development process. It is the integration of discrete leadership skills in response to the leadership demands of the moment that produces the art of leadership.

Another sensitive, but necessary, issue addressed by the Accademia di San Luca and its director, Zuccaro, was the issue of talent. Zuccaro frequently conducted competitions to separate the gifted from the technically capable. He asserted that, “art is a God given gift for the lack of which no amount of study will compensate” (cited in Goldstein, 1996, p.46). Recent work by Hogan and Kaiser (2005) cite substantial research to support the idea that (a) there is a talent for leadership, (b) it can be measured, and (c) given the right developmental experiences, it can be highly refined.

The Accademia de Carracci: Imitation and the Copy

The Accademia de Carracci was a private academy that was inspired by the Florentine Academy. Its purpose was promoting the professional advancement of its students. It stressed drawing practice of the anatomical units of the body: eyes, ears, legs, feet, head, and so on. Also, it stressed careful and constant repetition until drawing the basic anatomical parts became automatic. Like Zuccaro’s academy, drawing practice was coupled with theory however problematic this must have been at the time.

The typical Carracci artist drew from the antique; that is, the sculptures, figures, paintings, and architecture of antiquity. For instance the artist might draw from the marble figure of Jupiter, which had been discovered during an excavation of an ancient site. The idea was that by copying these great works the young artist would learn from the masters.

Students studied anatomy, systems of proportion and rules of perspective. Importantly, they were expected to discern and integrate the knowledge, rules, and style of the artistic masters of antiquity into artistic strategies that culminated in some kind of well crafted painting or sculpture. It appears that the Carracci art students were expected to use what we now refer to as inductive reasoning to derive rules, styles, and techniques that they would then incorporate into their own works (Moore, 1998). However, like the absence of artistic talent, without inductive reasoning capacity, the pupil would not be able to learn from their hard work of imitating the masters. The student would be unable to reduce the whole into a set of cogent insights or observations. The Carracci Academy proposed that the “true” learning method was imitation, copying the works of highly successful artists and deriving their methods using inductive reasoning rather than deductive reasoning (Goldstein, 1996).

Accademia de Carracci: Modern Applications to Leadership Education

The instructional methods employed by the Carracci Academy essentially implied that the capacity for inductive reasoning was a prerequisite for learning from the great artists of antiquity. Here again, though indirectly, the notion of leadership talent presents itself especially since thinking abilities like critical thinking and inductive reasoning vary in the population (Moore, 1998).

Research is needed to verify whether those who have inductive reasoning capacity are able to derive important leadership insights from biographies, movies, or case studies of significant leadership success as compared to those with lesser inductive reasoning capacities. An example of such a case study would be the leadership lessons displayed by Chief Flight Director, Gene Kranz, during the spectacular rescue of the three astronauts aboard Apollo 13. It may well be that inductive reasoning is an individual difference variable that must be present in some measure for someone to derive useful meaning from case studies, movies, or biographies. Furthermore, if differences in inductive reasoning capacity do influence the recognition of important leadership lessons, can tools, techniques and strategies be designed to help those with lower inductive reasoning capacity to more effectively learn from case studies and other vicarious experiences?

The French Academy in Rome: Trial by Fire

Though technically not a Renaissance art academy, the French Academy in Rome was inspired by the Renaissance period and founded in the waning days of the Renaissance. It was intended to be an outpost of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris (Galitz, 2000).

Students at this academy were recipients of the Prix de Rome, a prize awarded annually to the top students of the Royal Academy in Paris. The winners were the survivors of a long series of competitions in which students had their artistic works rigorously evaluated by academy instructors. Prize recipients received three year scholarships to the French Academy in Rome courtesy of the French government (Goldstein, 1996). While in Rome students were expected to copy the great artistic works that were scattered all about Rome in museums, public areas, churches, and at St. Peter's Basilica.

In this academy competition became a large part of the student's life. Advancement through the curriculum of the Royal Academy depended upon whether a student's artistic projects were deemed meritorious and indicative of the student's mastery of the subject. Mere technical competence was insufficient. The student had to display talent. Thus, those of lesser talent or motivation were held back. Although this was an intensely competitive system, it did select out the more motivated and naturally gifted.

French Academy: Modern Applications to Leadership Education

What the French Academy in Rome has to say to leadership educators of today is that leadership learning activities with real consequences must be a part of the leadership education process. However, implementing experienced-based leadership development interventions with real consequences may be problematic. Nevertheless, since it was a mainstay learning tool in most of the Renaissance art academies, designing and implementing leadership experiences with real consequences is worthy of a serious consideration.

Summary and Conclusions

The turbulent Renaissance, the years of poisoning princes, warring popes, the all powerful Medici family, and religious conflicts seemed to be pushing Europe and Western Civilization to the point of social collapse. Yet, remarkably, out of this chaotic period appeared a group of artistic giants who left a legacy of artistic works so beautiful and profoundly moving that they have become icons of the age. The period also inspired the creation of art academies to promote the arts and train young artists.

As this survey revealed, by adopting the perspective that leadership education is somewhat similar to art education, a number of interesting and thought provoking ideas emerged that have relevance to current leadership education practices and research. Inferences drawn from this survey challenged the effectiveness of the Skills Approach to leadership education, affirmed the importance of the

mentoring method, supported the communities of practice method as a powerful tool for leadership education, argued for the idea of there being a talent for leadership, proposed designing leadership games and simulations that included positive and negative consequences, and stressed the importance of creating college and university based leadership academies.

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Biography

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