

Introductory talk for day 2 of the conference 'Curious Hands'

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Good morning.

My name is Evert Bisschop Boele. I am professor of Arts Education at Hanze University of Applied Sciences. We do a lot of practice-oriented research about education in music, in the visual arts, in literature and poetry; in primary schools, in secondary schools, in out-of-school practices in arts education, in daily life. In formal, non-formal and informal settings, as we say.

My own background is in music. My office is in the conservatoire. I felt a bit like a guest, yesterday. And I do today, but a bit less – because the theme is 'Sound'.

I would like to say a thing or two about the Curious Hands project, of which this conference is part. And specifically about the 'curious' part in it. Because that word goes a long way back.

When I became professor of Arts Education, I went looking for alliances within our university. One of the alliances I made was with a professor from the School of Education. At that moment, she had been working, with colleagues from Groningen University, on a nationwide project in the field of science and technology education in primary schools.

That project was, in Dutch, called the Talentenkracht-project; the power of talent. But the English translation was Curious Minds.

When I started exchanging ideas with this colleague, I was soon struck by the similarities between her way of thinking and mine. I was developing a concept in music education called 'idiocultural music education'. In it, we tried to reposition the pupil towards the center of music education.

It was based on my observation that when I was trained as a music teacher, the focus was on music, and a bit on teaching, but not so much on children as human beings, and about the possible values of music in their lives. So when I started teaching, I taught about music, yes; but it took some time to get the pupils really into my focus.

And it still is the case that in current music education, the professional discourse is always a lot about music, and also about the musician and the music teacher. But rarely really about the pupil. And although here are differences between the arts disciplines, this remains a broader problem in the arts education domain in general.

In the Curious Minds approach, I discovered, the basic idea is to look at every individual pupil as gifted, as talented. As filled with possibilities to develop. In the Curious Minds approach, the focus radically shifts towards the pupil. Education is seen as a social setting in which the teacher tries to shape the dynamic relationships between teacher, pupil and task (matter/space) in such a way that development is fostered. And on the background you will find a fundamentally different way of looking at development, and education, and the world, rooted in Complex Dynamic Systems Theory.

In Curious Minds I recognized my ideas. To be precisely: in the 'Curious'. But it was in the 'Mind' idea that we differed. In the Curious Minds approach, the focus was on science and technology. On developing scientific reasoning in children. It used the empirical cycle as its basis.

And soon the question was born: what happens when we want to 'translate' the Curious Minds approach to music, to the arts? When we shift our attention from the mind to the body? From

scientific reasoning to 4E cognition? From the empirical cycle to the creative cycle, or the design cycle, or – maybe better – to no cycle at all?

Then, serendipity happened. Ann-Sophie and me met, at some dinner. There was a call for research funding called ‘Smart Culture’. I was interested in translating Curious Minds to arts education. Ann-Sophie was interested in the material aspects of arts education – in workshops, in materials. We both knew promising colleagues who might want to do research.

So we wrote the Curious Hands project application. And here we are: Imka and Vanessa, and in the background Ann-Sophie and me.

I tell you this because it may be nice to know that this is not a stand alone project. For me, it is part of a portfolio of past, present and future projects aimed at recentering the pupil in arts education. And part of that portfolio is filled with ‘Curious’ projects. Projects about curiosity, about improvisation, about creativity for sure. But also literally ‘Curious’ projects. We adopted an issue of a Dutch journal in arts education and called it ‘Curious Minds – Arts Education’. In the conservatoire, we had a small project called ‘Curious Teachers’; and we are looking forward to start with a further project called ‘Curious Ears’.

At first sight, the relationship between the overall Curious Hands project and my wish to a return of the pupil in the center of education may not be directly clear. Are we not studying the task – making – rather than the pupil. Are we not focusing on materials, on spaces, and on their sounds today?

That is true. But at the same time, my ambition is to explore in this project how we can use the idea of learning making as a way of learning, as a pupil, what your place in the world might be as a maker. To discover and develop yourself as a maker. Which is different for every pupil.

And here the ‘Curious’ comes in. For me, the ‘Curious’ is connected to openness. Openness for pupils to discover what makings materials and spaces affords for each of them. Openness to discover that we are all makers, but in different ways. Openness to the endless forms and manners of making in that world out here, where you as a pupil always already have a place while developing that place at the same time, all the time.

In the terms of ecological psychology: to discover how the world may afford you as a maker. Based on an idea of affordances where the affordances of the material or the space or the sound are not ‘in’ that material or space or sound. They are just as much ‘in’ the pupil. Because affordances are relational.

In the words of James Gibson himself: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.”

If our teaching opens up the world for our pupils as a world of affordances, of possibilities to be taken up by each pupil in his or her way, that would be great. And if the art teacher would look at his or her pupils as human beings discovering the potential role of art in their lives, that would be great too. And if our Curious Hands project sheds some light on all this, that would be even greater.

One of the questions then also becomes: what is the role of the artist in all this? There is always a danger that artists who turn into teaching think that teaching is about becoming an artist. That their world is the world. That the professional artist is the role model of art education. In arts education

discourse in the Netherlands, this is still a very dominant idea. I hope our Curious Hands-project will set us thinking about that question as well.

Having said that, some small words about the theme of this morning: 'Sound'. The role of sound in practices of making.

As a music educator and an ethnomusicologist, my personal focus of course draws my attention immediately towards music. And from there, I broaden my vision. I become interested in music which incorporates 'non-musical' sound – Charles Ives, John Cage, John Lennon's Revolution nr. 9.

I am inspired by composer Murray Schafer's idea of the Soundscape – and I tend to identify Murray Schafer as a composer and a music educator, rather than as a sound scholar.

I appreciate that in my own discipline, ethnomusicology, some scholars change the discipline's name into – ethno-muse-ecology. I admire Steven Feld's seminal – and difficult – study of the Kaluli, called Sound and Sentiment.

But I can't get rid of that music, personally.

However. I am aware that, when we discuss the role of sound in making, the attention focuses on sound, not music. One of the ways in is to see sound not only as a product of material practices, but also as a specific material in itself. The vibrating air, touching the vibrating ear drum in the inner ear.

Vibrating air – available without human intervention. The wind in the trees. The singing bird. The hum of the machine.

Vibrating air, available for human intervention. Sounds to amplify. Sounds to modify. Sounds to subject to noise reduction.

Non-vibrating air, available to be set into vibration by human intervention. To form sounds. To form words. To form songs.

Can we then start to think about hearing and listening in terms of Gibson's ecological perception? To think of sound – and maybe even music – in terms of affordances? And of affordances as the in-between between matter and human being? To think of sound as an actor in actor-network-theory? As an actor in the practices of making we study? What happens if we do so?

May we then think of musicians as specialists in hearing and listening, just like we sometimes present visual artists as specialists in seeing and looking? I know my colleagues at the conservatoire will be surprised to death, because it is not about music; but let's see what happens.

Will it open up new ways to discuss the soundscapes we live in? I think so. Although it is not my field, I know it is already happening. And many of you present will probably be able to tell me, tell us a lot more about that. I am looking forward to that.

This conference, and the whole Curious Hands project we are running, is about the embodied, material and spatial character of making, and of making in education, and the specificities of art-as-making. I am convinced that our thinking, in the project and in this particular day of this conference, will not restrict itself to the sonic aspects of making in the visual arts and its place in arts education.

It will set us, or at least set me, also thinking about the sonic character of education in general. About the sonic character of life. And about the sonic character of music, and music education. On our musicscape as integral part of our soundscape.

I am sure we will learn today, through listening and discussing. Through the production and the reception of the sound waves we will produce today. In the form of noise, of sounds, of words – maybe even in the form of a bit of music, like we did with Erika yesterday.

I am so much looking forward to it!