



# A Room with a View

- Arts For Transformative Educational Change -

Lynn FC Yau

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For  
AFTEC colleagues & Artist-Educators  
without whom none of what we do is possible



# Front Room

**E**M. Forster’s novel, *A Room with a View*, is the inspiration for the title and framework of this publication. The novel explores changing norms and thoughts in a restrictive society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Pushing the metaphor further, a room without a view has no vision. A room with a view allows insight. It takes courage to change, particularly for the young people in Forster’s novel.

The room is the self. It is not so much the room as the view that matters. The window, which shows the view, is the changing experience. It brings a new perspective of the world, new ways of feeling, liberation of the spirit and new paths of understanding to the soul.

The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection (AFTEC) turns 10 in December 2018. It was given a “room” to embark on its life journey by the Leisure & Cultural Services Department’s (LCSD) Venue Partnership Scheme also established in 2008. LCSD offered 13 venues and a subsidy for competitive bidding. We were awarded the 480-seat proscenium arch theatre at the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre in the same year and as such, we have been “resident” there for a decade as well.

The acronym AFTEC was coined from its full name for convenience. Little did we know that 10 years on, the acronym would be re-interpreted at an AFTEC board meeting by Co-chair Marissa Fung Shaw. AFTEC, the company, now likewise stands for the nature of our work: Arts For Transformative Educational Change, the subtitle to this book.

During this decade, the original “room” has grown from just a venue, a physical space that we could create in for 56 days a year to one that signifies a bilingual arts charity that staunchly believes in and replays the power and the potential of the arts to make a difference and transform young lives.

Since our inception, we have grown to work collaboratively with non-arts sectors for innovative and wider impact. In 2012, AFTEC pioneered the credit-bearing Performing Arts module in *Medical Humanities* with the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine at The University of Hong Kong. In 2014, we created the first *Relaxed Theatre* for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders and learning difficulties.

This vignette explores Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) not, however, in its usual meaning of quantifiable

measures in evaluation -- although there are sprinkles of those as well -- but more from the view of the organic & spiritual growth of the company. In other words, what we see as crucial and missing constructs in working with young people.

The book is divided into four sections, all related to rooms and perspectives through AFTEC's experiences with arts-in-education.

The *Front Room* serves as the Foreword; an overview of where we have been in the past decade, at the front line and working from the nitty gritty to macro strategies.

The *Class Room* begins to explore education as a whole and the issue of the underprivileged status. The *Head Room* that follows examines the kind of academic studies that focus on the cognitive and how this cannot be the only approach to teaching and learning. Needless to say, the *Heart Room* discusses the importance of being sentient beings as part and parcel of young people's growth.

Coming full circle, the booklet returns to Forster's novel. The last section, *A Room with a View*, offers further insights into the arts for transformative educational change.

Two signature projects will be featured to illustrate the discussion in the main. *Sm-ART Youth* is a creative and critical thinking project for underprivileged children from 9-11 years old. Each cohort grows with us for

three years. Programmes include classroom activities and cultural days outside of school. The curriculum encompasses all art forms. Volunteers are given regular training throughout the year. Postgraduates also join us as part of their credit-bearing practicum. This project began in 2012 and currently involves four schools and 80 students.

The *Bravo! Hong Kong Youth Theatre Awards* is now into its 4<sup>th</sup> cohort, conceptualised in late 2011 for a 2013 launch. A bilingual acting and life-skills project for 13-18 year olds, it is open to all full-time students every other year. Each cohort accommodates no more than 50 young actors after a rigorous selection process. The project is 1.5 years long with a *Bravo Hong Kong* segment that includes workshops, theatre productions and community service. A final selection is made after one year for further and higher-level training with our Learning Partners, *The Cloudgate Dance School* in Taipei and *The London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art* (LAMDA) in London as the *Bravo Asia* and *Bravo International* legs respectively. The project gives priority to underprivileged youth.

This publication is a tribute to our Board of Directors; Vicki Ooi, our visionary Artistic Director, our strategic partners, sponsors, Artist-Educators and especially our AFTEC colleagues without whom we could not have achieved much. Thank you also to my sister, Amanda for editing & Three Sixty for their pro bono design. Thank you all so much. Words cannot describe the gratitude we have for you all.



*Sm-ART Youth* cultural outing 2017



*Sm-ART Youth class in progress 2018*



# Class Room

Growing up in Hong Kong, the configuration of local school classrooms left an indelible impression on me. Row upon row of 40 plus wooden chairs and desks with tops that can be opened for storage, were crammed more or less neatly into every space available; all the attention is focused in a single direction towards the teacher — the authority figure and the single source of knowledge.

Cities planned on a pervasive grid system provided a constant focus of comparison as well. I wondered if such classrooms and cities would affect our thinking, teaching, learning and development. A quick conclusion is that they did, and still do.

Schools then, and to a large extent now, were not places in which differentiated teaching and learning styles were encouraged. The education system in Hong Kong was derived from the British system. As a colony, the grooming of young minds was very much inclined towards providing well-educated and obedient civil servants.

Indeed, many education systems in the world as in Hong Kong are a throwback from the industrial era in which mass production and reproduction were foundational and as a means to catering to large numbers. So if classrooms mirrored a city, all the cars a similar model, the houses much the same, the people dressed alike . . . the chances were that you would conform a lot of the time.

The catalyst to create an alternative approach to teaching and learning came initially from observing my nieces and reading their homework, in particular how they were marked. And so it was in 2011, with curriculum development and teaching experience under my belt, I found myself tackling these thoughts when the *Sm-ART Youth* project was mooted and then taken to one

primary school in 2012.

In fact, *Sm-ART Youth* became the cornerstone upon which all other AFTEC projects were subsequently based. Now in its seventh year with four primary

*“Not only did I learn to use my brain, but there can be more than one solution to any problem ... If I had not joined Sm-ART, I might still think there was only one answer to everything.”*

*Ka Nok (11 years old)*

schools, *Sm-ART Youth* was sponsored from the start by The *Jean CK Ho Family Foundation* which is managed by Jean Ho, Chairperson and Dr Liliane Chan, the Administration Director.

The first meeting with Jean and Liliane was an immediate meeting of minds on the limitations of the education system which, over time, developed into a jointly-held deep belief that it was vital to provide quality teaching without being condescending or patronising to children just because they were young. Most delightful of all, the foundation did not believe in the singular quantitative approach: they did not want a project for 200 children. The pilot at St Bonaventure Catholic Primary School catered for 20 Primary 4 students. It would become a three-year project with Bronze, Silver and Gold levels, consisting of weekly classes, volunteers training and cultural outings, with the volunteers as support.

*Sm-ART Youth* was founded on the belief that the classroom space and setting mattered; skills in critical thinking and questioning provided the basis for self-awareness and introspection; outcomes were far more the point than output hence the process of learning far outweighed the product; depth was favoured through generative topics; and time was given for each child to grow. The arts, defined in their widest sense, became roads and avenues to teaching and learning.

The classroom was also truly a “class” room. In this project, we facilitated the learning only of underprivileged and/or disenfranchised children. All were from low socio-economic status (SES). To this day, a child having both parents in an intact family unit is the exception. When it did occur, the parenting and relationships were less than desirable; the norm being single parent and/or new immigrant families, or families in which children were cared for by guardians, in the main by elderly and illiterate grandparents. Many live on the Government’s *Comprehensive Social Security Assistance* and almost all had a diverse range of subsidies.

Over the many years of being involved in the arts, I have witnessed one phenomenon: the arts are great social equalisers, vehicles that neither class nor background of a young person mattered.



*Sm-ART Youth* outing, Shalowan Village 2017

Irrespective of SES, standing before artworks (performing and visual) everyone has the same chance. The young person can be privileged or underprivileged but gather one of each in front of an art work and both young people will gape in wonder or frown in confusion. It is irrelevant if the privileged child is top of her class or that the vulnerable cannot write an essay. The imagination, or the lack of it, is the basis on which conversations can start on an equitable platform.

Governments in many countries are aware of economic destitution. How many, however, are conscious of a Poverty of Imagination, an equally serious phenomenon? The former, at the very least, can be treated with policies and funding. The latter knows no bounds. A society’s ability and subsequent fallibility in being unable to reinvent itself and be competitive in economic terms, is in danger of losing sight of its goals.

It is perhaps time that in addition to the Gini coefficient, we contemplate the possibility of creating an Imagination Index. A city and its people are often encouraged to be “creative”. How we facilitate the growth of the imagination should be the priority question of governments in Hong Kong and around the world. But how can this be achieved? How can we, as individuals, parents and Artist-Educators hope to offer the next generation some remedy to this situation?



Cultural outing workshop

# Head Room

**H**ong Kong has a population density of almost 7,000 persons per square kilometre in a total area of just over 1,106 km<sup>2</sup>. In the United Kingdom, the population density stands at 272 persons per square kilometre compared with 35 in the United States and 18 in Finland<sup>1</sup>.

Physical space in Hong Kong is minimal and we live figuratively and literally piled on top of each other. Head room is limited as a rule, except in factory buildings. Most of the population resides in comparatively cramped conditions — small flats, sub-divided flats and luxury nano-flats, if that is not an oxymoron. It has also gone to some of our heads that space and its acquisition is the be-all and end-all of living a worthwhile life.

Before the days of the internet and personal handheld devices, young people would take to parks and outdoor spaces. With electronic devices, children & youth centres have been vacated and replaced by another realm of head room: the iCloud, world wide web and their content. Companionship has changed from human to android. Refuge commonly sought among friends face-to-face has morphed to solace on 6-inch screens. The world and its layers of meaning have shrunk to that.

Tiny accommodation and handheld devices: our lives have become ever smaller and more constrained. If our living conditions are such, then how has being squeezed into a small space affected us as a city? Might our increasingly inward-looking mindsets be the result of the drastic need for escape and some personal inner space? How has this impacted on the way we think as a society and our teaching and learning? I have no definitive answers except to offer what we have witnessed in our projects and experiences at AFTEC.

Compartmentalisation or silos are all too familiar in many education systems. Since the Enlightenment when the arts and sciences became divided, the schism has taken on a ferocious life of its own. The Industrial Revolution, with its unwavering focus on mass production, ensured that only the tangible and the replicable counted. While factories churning out the same products spurred economic growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sciences were propelled to the forefront of civilisations while the arts were relegated to the back room. Education focused on deductive teaching and learning for utilitarian purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST>

Today, STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) are still perceived to be far superior to the arts and humanities. Aside from global prizes being awarded in the main to scientific discoveries and contribution, locally the Research Grants Council are also biased largely towards STEM work. Young people grow up in physical boxes at home and mental ones in school. Their abilities are measured against economic propensities and the jobs to come. The side-effects of the Industrial Revolution have molded us for almost two centuries and its impact is far from waning.

True, we need to be pragmatic. Exams and tests are here to stay although the cost to true human interest in learning is yet to be fathomed. By dint of sheer numbers, summative assessments of the kind we have in many education systems around the world provide administrative efficiency and some form of measurement. So the question is not a binary one: to have or not have exams. It is about how we work on an enabling environment so that we have assessment FOR learning and not assessment of learning.

The issue with head space academic teaching and learning is its singular acceptance that there is only one route to assessing competency and ability: if one is linguistically and mathematically inclined, you are smart? And if you are not, are you un-smart? But HOW are you smart? Is your smartness different from mine? Quite likely. Why can we not include the other intelligences as detailed by Howard Gardner through his theory of Multiple Intelligences? Instead of only quantitative measurements of validity and reliability, can the constructs shift to understanding, application and civic contribution? Can the KPIs revolve around curiosity, motivation and risk-taking instead?

In *Sm-ART Youth*, *Bravo* and other projects and programmes, we have sought to experiment with familiar and alternative KPIs, in order to give the interest in learning and responsibility back to our young people through the arts as an alternative approach.

*“You feel like you can never know enough...you only have one perspective. If you can learn about things from different perspectives, it will be amazing ... I want to spread this learning, this attitude of positive learning and knowledge.”*

Jess

*“I realised I was ignorant ... Reflecting showed me where I went wrong and what it is that I’m lacking ... to really know where I can work harder and improve ... Each time is a learning experience.”*

Kareena

Adam and Brenda<sup>2</sup> are *Bravo* graduates from different cohorts. They are good examples of how they “failed” in secondary school and yet have become highly-motivated young people through theatre. Their “failure” lies squarely on our adult shoulders. At school, I also believed that getting ahead academically proved my worth as a young person. I was always either at the bottom (mostly) or top (occasionally) of the class but never realised until much later that it was probably not my fault but the system’s. But that is another story.

Adam and Brenda would be regarded as failures in the education system. One is an immigrant from China who did not learn the English alphabet until he arrived in Hong Kong at age 10. Both were in the lowest of low banding schools. They both chanced upon drama initially as an outlet and despite applying to *Bravo* at the last minute, both were selected. They are from low-income families, one from a very challenging family background. Thanks to the visionary support from *The*

*Lee Hysan Foundation* led by Cecilia Ho and Clifford Chow<sup>3</sup> and team who believed in our untested concept, Adam and Brenda were able to grow all the way to LAMDA in London through “scholarships” for four-weeks of training and cultural experiences in the *Bravo International* final leg of the project.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect identities.

<sup>3</sup> In 2012 when discussion started, Gigi Li who was in charge of the project.



Diverse learning styles in progress 2018

Most fortunately for us, the foundation believed in the arts changing lives via quality nurturing and not quantity. We really push these young people and neither patronise nor condescend to them; we also do not offer unearned praise if their efforts were poor. The programme is no easy ride. Despite an attrition rate of around 20% during the early stages of the training in the *Bravo Hong Kong* segment, most of the young actors pushed through, including Adam and Brenda.

*Bravo International* in London proved an even tougher challenge for these two young actors, who both had very minimal English language skills. They were petrified when they had to order coffee in London but ordered they did. This is a simple example but we believe that it was challenging them to theatre training at a higher level than they could conceivably manage that inspired them to rise above their own limitations.

Brenda had become intoxicated with *Shakespeare's Richard III* after a self-initiated trip to *NT Live* in

Hong Kong with her other theatre friends during the Hong Kong segment of *Bravo* training. On the tube in London, she would read each word out loud from the play asking another actor with good English to correct her when she stumbled.

In a bookshop in London, Adam bought three theatre publications all in English. I saw his book about masks by chance one evening — it was meticulously underlined here and there with Chinese translations of unfamiliar words written down.

Were either of them able to read and comprehend English books and unabridged Shakespeare? Unlikely. Were they disingenuous? Certainly not. One was fascinated by masks;

the other by a misshapen King. They had started to learn how to learn through drama.

This was an attitudinal breakthrough and make-over.

The two young actors had achieved little so far in their lives. Their head space was limited by physical surroundings and a learning system that provided a one-

*“It’s not just about the acting. On a personal level it’s about your character and how you can change. Even if you don’t become an actor after Bravo... you can still learn and develop a new attitude. I think this is what society really lacks.”*

*Calista*

size-fits-all growth. Yet to this day, they are still motivated and go-getters. What happened? We only opened a door; they did the rest. They had found a way and the motivation to expand their “head room”. In fact, back in Hong Kong, they had grown larger than their homes, their housing estates, and even their schooling.

*Bravo* was created out of a heartfelt recognition that we should provide non-standardised approaches in teaching and learning so that young people with different abilities can be valuable to society. Their transformation did not result from our complimenting them at every turn and by milking the audience for applause as the ultimate recognition of their achievements. This would have been an insult to their intelligence.

We came to set learning levels higher than their abilities. We deploy the multi-layered avenues that the arts can offer to give ample room for each to flourish, at depth, to make connections across divides and sectors. We experiment and explore how a growth mindset can create and nurture flexibly-minded and adaptable human beings, breaking free from a traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century fixed mindset.

Indeed, AFTEC’s journey has evolved constantly over the past 10 years and will doubtlessly continue to do so. Our first step was being awarded our “head room” at the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre in the LCSD’s venue partnership scheme in 2008. As we embarked down the road in Learning & Participation, it became clear that minds and spirits could be expanded by authentic and genuine learning experiences. We realised that merely providing an entry point to the arts was insufficient to our growing philosophy.

Thus it was decided that AFTEC would become an arts-in-education organisation.

Artistic Director, Dr Vicki Ooi, the soul and spirit of AFTEC, created and kicked off the first programme, *From Page to Stage*<sup>®</sup> with a theatre production focus.

Eponymously, *From Page to Stage*<sup>®</sup> took a well-known novel and adapted it into a play for the stage thereby breathing life into literature. Vicki is a renowned and respected theatre director. As one of the very first stage directors to bring Western plays in translation to Hong Kong in the late 1970s when Cantonese renditions of famous classics were unheard of, little is known of her second area of prowess – adapting novels into 80-minute long stage productions.

Vicki started with *Dracula*, the Gothic horror novel by Bram Stoker. With very restricted funding, the adapted play was staged as the first *From Page to Stage*<sup>®</sup> for secondary schools. In addition to the production, AFTEC Artist-Educators visited schools before and after the shows at the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre.

Theatre-in-education became the first stepping-stone upon which AFTEC subsequently further

developed in the arts-in-education direction.

We produced three shows annually and attracted very low attendance<sup>4</sup>. Many did not know where the venue was located either, or if they did, thought it too “far away”.

We had very limited marketing resources. Schools found it difficult to re-arrange timetables so that an afternoon could be cleared for attending a theatre performance, let alone having to hire coaches and cross the harbour.

The most challenging aspect, however, was a pervasive lack of knowledge about theatre and the arts beyond the standard music and visual arts classes in schools and competitions. These were all that many teachers knew as teacher training in tertiary institutions focused, in the main, on practical curriculum-related subjects.

For two years, not one school in the Eastern District of Hong Kong Island, where the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre is

*“I started to really look forward to the next lesson, knowing that we had only just touched the surface and looking to go deeper ... Acting is not just about what goes on your face and above the neck. It’s about the whole body, even right down to your fingertips.”*

Keyboard

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<sup>4</sup> 2008 was the Lehman Brothers global fiasco and 2009 was the casualty.



*Franky, From Page to Stage®* production adapted from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* 2017

located, bought a single ticket. The reason, as explained to me by a retired school principal subsequently, was because schools in that district were ultra conservative and academic pursuit was the only thing that mattered. The breakthrough finally came in the third year and I took my colleagues out for a meal to celebrate.

By 2012, we had shown sufficient track record to be supported by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust for a three-year grant, which was thereafter extended for another round. After a decade, now into its 11<sup>th</sup> year in 2019, *From Page to Stage®* reaches over 12,000 students and teachers annually with an average of 28 shows. In total, we have produced over 26 classics for *From Page to Stage®*, *Classics for Juniors*<sup>5</sup> and *Young Company* productions in Chinese and/or English.

By 2010, it was already evident to the AFTEC team that building audiences was not simply about bums on seats. That numbers game was much like an addiction, with an immediate feel good factor but which might not be sustainable if quantity was all that we aimed for.

We realised that audience building defined as getting people through the door was not the only objective. It was too simple and simplistic a goal. Could we in addition, make a real social impact for the long term?

Increasingly concerned about the progressively dystopic world we live in and the legacy we will leave younger generations, we began to see very clearly that arts organisations needed to take on a much more civic role.

After all, the arts are human-centred and like medical practitioners, our work is crucial to the fabric of our social culture and the quality of being. Complementary to doctors, artists work with the body, mind and spirit.

AFTEC's Performing Arts module created for the credit-bearing *Medical Humanities* curriculum for *The Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine* at *The University of Hong Kong* since 2012 is a case in point.

It was challenging especially in the early years. Students who fought tooth and nail to gain entry into the prestigious medical school had spent years perfecting their science grades. Many proved to be skeptical and uncooperative. Over time, and with the unwavering vision and support of the late Professor LC Chan, Drs Julie Chen and Harry Wu, we were able to cultivate a humanitarian outlook even among these young scientists. The point was not that these A++ students needed to fully understand why the arts might prove crucial in their work of doctoring, it was to offer them an opportunity to reflect on the part the arts could play in their lives in time to come. With the arts taking root in the sciences, the aim is that doctors-to-be will have room to be knowledgeable clinicians as well as humanitarian practitioners. After all, the heart is a formidable muscle of empathy, a huge dose of which the world needs today.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the primary level version of *From Page to Stage®*

# Heart Room

This brings us to the following truth – that sentient beings with diverse consciousness and aspirations are and have always been viewed as secondary to hard quantitative data. Our education system and society at large today clearly mirror this.

However, the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century mean our young people need very different kinds of skills to cope with the modern world — ones that more textbooks and exams cannot provide. What young people really need now are inter-disciplinary, communication, collaborative, creative and critical thinking skills.

The arts have almost always been equated with emotions and soft skills, as compared with hard skills attributed to STEM which are mostly defined as being the “better” set of skills. Ironically, anyone with any serious interest in the arts will recognise that they are anything but soft. The physical requirements, commitment, perseverance, let alone the hours and effort put in by professional artists into

their creations (very often down to the last minute) are in no way less rigorous, less demanding physically and intellectually, less critically-informed than what professional scientists experience.

Conversely, what scientists undergo can be equally as imaginative, interpretative, multi-layered, as well as emotionally exhilarating and draining as what artists go through. In this vein, I highly recommend the book by world-class geobiologist Hope Jahren’s *Lab Girl* (2016) in which her journey is filled with as much of the science of trees as the aesthetics, passion and empathy for them.

If the arts consisted only of emotions and are by definition “emotional”, then certainly dealing with them can get messy. Nevertheless, human beings do not come as neat packages with linear wiring and deliverables

like vending machines. We are not Artificial Intelligence; we are flesh, blood, head and heart and this reality needs to be dealt with.

*“If Bravo only took place over 4-6 months, we wouldn’t be able to see enough growth. The programme as it is, we have more experiences which means we make more mistakes, but that’s how we can grow.”*

*Raphael*

In our work at AFTEC over the years, of all the emotions that hinder young people's development (and indeed adults as well), fear is the over-riding factor. Hong Kong's overall culture is one of caution. Living in a city that plays safe is conducive to a steady pace of life. The flip side is that we are un-adventurous and thus less competitive and creative. We fear making mistakes, not being in with the crowd, failing to conform. We stick to tried and tested formulas lest we falter.

The majority of young people we facilitate are from local schools. On the doorstep of programmes that we run, participants mirror the city's phobia more often than not. Primary school children fare somewhat better in that they are still curious and more likely to step out of their comfort zones to play and be adventurous.

In *Sm-ART Youth*, the first year of each cohort is very much about creating a safe space, breaking down fear barriers and gaining trust. From age 12 onwards, the situation changes drastically. The majority fear giving the wrong answer, not giving the teacher's set answer and being laughed at. The erosion of self-confidence and self-esteem has their source in the classroom. In time, they know their views do not count so why should they even bother to try? Gradually, this habit becomes what Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett calls a "great deadener".

Ultimately, I think our fears are indicative of inner worlds that cry for approval and are at a loss to articulate what life means to us. That is why it is much safer to conform. If most of the ships are sailing due east, it is perceived to be embarrassing, uncomfortable, anti-social and finally, inconceivable that we sail in any other direction but eastward.

Hence, primary children must attend tuition daily after school so that they will perform better at exams and enter a better secondary school enabling them to be admitted into a better university, thus, graduating with a better degree to find a better job. Linearity is logical. Unfortunately, in the last decade, we have witnessed the results of that straight line. Painfully, we have too often

seen vacuity behind the eyes of children and young people. They are there but they are not there. They are physically present; mentally elsewhere and in spirit, there is little sense of being. Some of them might as well be robots already.

The *Heart Room*, paradoxically, is where the heart is not. Emotions are not considered worthy of discussion in the education system with the exception of Civic

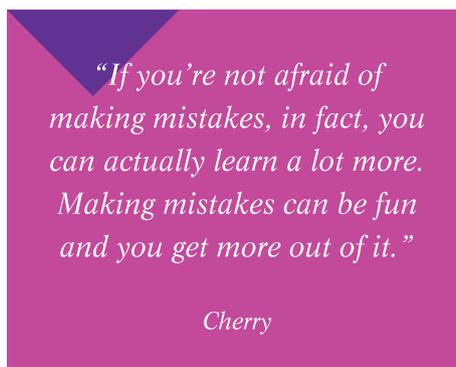
Education classes. Even then, they are likely to be couched in top-down didactic morals and values that are taught but not lived experiences, explored, understood and seen as being human. If emotions are displayed, they are generally considered outbursts and out of line.

We speak of the arts giving self-confidence and self-esteem. That comes through introspection, knowing the self as opposed to who you are told to be. This does

not mean being selfish. This is a first step towards self-awareness. As in a compass direction, one must determine one's goal and direction and then relate it to others.

Carmen is an example. As a young actor with the Bravo project, she was at LAMDA in London for four weeks of intensive acting training and cultural explorations. Carmen is from an underprivileged family. Quiet and reserved, her acting skills were not as strong as many of the others. She was diligent, took instructions well and every step was circumspect. Risk-taking was not her middle name.

As a hard-working young person, Carmen would complete her homework at school. At home, her only company would be "mindless games" on her mobile telephone. In both her reflection notebook and at the exit interview, she had one refrain: she would be at a loss when she returned to Hong Kong. Carmen knew games on the phone were an empty pre-occupation. Post-LAMDA, she expected herself to reach out to friends more and spend time at arts events together. The catalyst for change was predicated on challenges in the arts (in this case, acting) and being immersed in



a cultural life that at once captures intellectual imagination and affective connections.

What the eyes saw, the mind analysed and aligned with the heart. The acting training made sense because of the outings and the outings were mirrored in the discussions.

In *Sm-ART Youth*, we regularly discuss children with their parents. At the start of the academic year for a new cohort, we interview prospective children with parents. Given a finite number of places, we select those whose parents do not answer questions on behalf of their children. Those who insist on speaking for their children create unhappy kids who in time, relinquish speaking, give up trying to express themselves and look vacuous.

*“Bravo really helped me with my confidence. I used to have trouble looking at people in the eye for more than 10 seconds ... I didn’t think I could afford to be alone and stuck in my room all day all night long now. I really don’t want to be stuck in that hole anymore ... Now I really feel so alive.”*

Brandon

We would ask parents to name areas of improvements they would like to see in their offspring and they readily reply. Next, we would ask for the children’s areas of strengths and almost always, there would be silence with one or two saying sarcastically, “Computer games” while the others would laugh or nod in unison. The fact that many parents can only name weaknesses and not strengths is truly alarming.

We would then show them a drawing with erratic and messy lines in dark colours. When asked, most parents would say that the student is messy and the drawing is “not pretty”. A few parents (generally mothers), however, did understand: that the child’s drawing showed unhappiness and frustration. These mothers were



Eastern half mask, LAMDA 2018



Western half masks, LAMDA 2014

almost without exception from the grassroots without any experience of the arts, yet they were instinctively empathetic and felt for the child who was clearly having a bad day.

This is the power of the arts: wordless, yet nonetheless filled with humanity. And this is where change through the arts can occur. The door to the *Heart Room* needs to be opened to effect teaching and learning in order to give a sense of being alive back to the individual.

Education is far from just being data to be input into the head — both the heart and the head need to work in tandem.



Second *Bravo* Cohort, Tate Modern 2016



# AFTEC Room with a View

Through trial and error based on project experiences, we formulated an AFTEC-specific Theory of Change (TOC) for young people in 2017<sup>7</sup>. This ground-up exploration can be summarised into five stages as in Figure 1.

The head and the heart have always been part of AFTEC's philosophy and pedagogy because the very nature of the arts connect, connote, communicate, engage in complex creative collaboration and are cornerstones of critical thinking and being human. In recent years, this combined educational practice is what is now being referred to as Socio-Emotional skills that “regulate one’s thoughts, emotions and behavior”<sup>8</sup>.

After much lobbying by progressive educators around the world, the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) worldwide tests for 15 year-olds now finally includes these human skills as part of their testing, thus accepting their place in personal growth and maturation for young people.

Damien is a young Bravo actor from an underprivileged background who completed the 1.5 year training in the graduating class of 2018. One of the cultural outings in London he took part in was to the British Museum, a

gargantuan national treasure trove that cannot be seen in a month, let alone a day. With his group, Damien visited the Parthenon, more popularly known as the Elgin marbles — a large space filled with classical Greek marble sculptures, many depicting larger than life generals and soldiers on horseback.

We could hardly believe he and a few other young actors could have had such an emotional reaction to the cold marbles. He explained that from History class in school, he was already cognizant of them albeit only on the page. His instant recognition of some of the Parthenon artworks drew tears to his eyes. His intellectual understanding was actualised through the real works. Everything made sense to him suddenly.

In theatre, in the arts in general, socio-emotional constructs are foundational and ever present. But we cannot assume they will simply work their magic

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.aftec.hk](http://www.aftec.hk) for 2016-17 company report.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/education/school/UPDATED%20Social%20and%20Emotional%20Skills%20-%20Well-being,%20connectedness%20and%20success.pdf%20\(website\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/school/UPDATED%20Social%20and%20Emotional%20Skills%20-%20Well-being,%20connectedness%20and%20success.pdf%20(website).pdf)

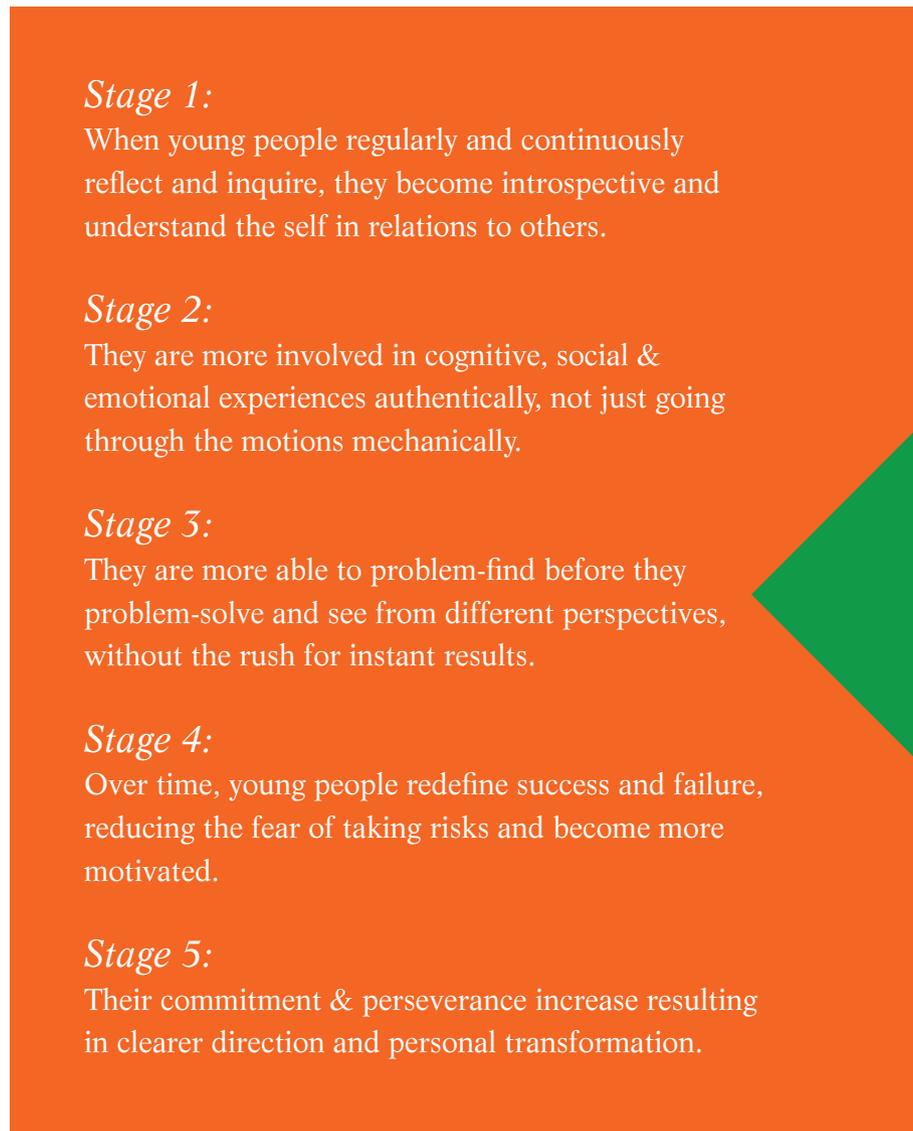


Figure 1: AFTEC's Theory of Change

without intervention. The key issue is whether the constructs are understood, extrapolated, why, when, what and crucially, how. Secondly, textual information is not enough; experiences count. Thirdly, embedded practices are the bedrock to the arts for change. As such, one-off experiences and even short-term ones are less effective as new habits of mind need time to take root, let alone be digested, absorbed and re-enacted. In *Sm-ART Youth*, *Bravo* and other projects across the

board irrespective of age and as far as practicable, we have discovered that for the AFTEC pedagogy to be effective, all three criteria need to be in place.

But what actually changes these young people? After all, although we put it a lot of hard work, it is they who transform themselves. The change is derived from a simple everyday term that we take for granted all the time: Understanding.



*Hiawatha* theatre production Hong Kong 2013



Understanding is both cognitive and emotional. Cognitive understanding, for example, is about comprehending a situation, be it the passing of a piece of legislation or that a fire is blazing at a public housing estate. It is what happened and why. Emotional understanding is about the feelings that arise in reaction to the unjust legislation biased in favour of a certain group; or the tragic fire that resulted in many deaths and which evinces the feelings of sadness for many families. It is about human connections.

Real understanding occurs when there is a revelation, the “Aha!” moment which brings about a new perspective and an insight, irrespective of age and size of realisation.

In schools, we teach to the test. Do we teach for understanding? Rarely in my experience. In the past decade, we realised that it is gaining understanding and insight that are the most powerful tools to transformation. Again, the head-heart equation.

Positive emotions include feeling loved, feeling proud, feeling happiness . . . the list goes on. These are easily understood. Less so the negative ones. More often than not, parents protect their children from experiencing them and we seldom bring them to the forefront of discussions, if we discuss them at all.

Nonetheless, far from being disruptive, emotions – both positive and negative – furnish us with plenty of meaningful teaching and learning opportunities. The two most recent examples over the past summer illustrate the point.

Part of the experience we offer to *Bravo* actors in London is cultural. This includes theatre productions, museums, parks and taking in the city over the four weeks of the project. These, however, are not simply visits or events where most of the time is spent running around or shopping. All are learning-related with group activities and presentations.

On yet another beautiful summer evening, we headed towards The Playhouse Theatre on the Embankment for *The Jungle*, an award-winning play that portrays life in the now-bulldozed Calais migrant camp in France.

As we gathered from different directions after dinner, we chose to meet in Whitehall Garden across the street from the theatre. A few of us arrived first and sat on a bench.

At the next bench was a man, white, in his late 50s and most likely homeless. When the largest group arrived, the man spat at them and shouted, “We don’t want people like you here! F\_ \_ k off!”. For all the young actors, it was a first experience of racial discrimination. They were shocked into silence. Vicki Ooi, AFTEC’s Artistic Director, took the group further into the park to analyse and discuss the incident with them.

The theatre production, *The Jungle*, was the second rude awakening of the evening. The audience was seated immersively, the theatre stalls transformed into part of a refugee camp. We were sitting literally within a few feet of the actors.

*“Looking at an exhibit, people don’t really analyse or understand the information given. They just absorb it without seeking a deeper truth or meaning. Now when I go to a museum, I will take that extra step to really understand what the piece may be about.”*

*Peter*

To say that the show was upsetting is an understatement. With actors from many different refugee nationalities surrounding us and with real TV footage, the migrant



*Bravo Asia* Cloudgate Dance School 2016

issues that characterise our contemporary world felt extremely poignant and urgent. Even with international movie star, Benedict Cumberbatch sitting in the audience two rows behind us, the play proved to be more far more arresting and one that brought home too many unpalatable truths.

The power of theatre cannot be ignored. By the end of the production, the young actors were all visibly shaken. Some were in tears; others very internalised, thinking, feeling. Outside the theatre, some of them gathered around. I spoke to them about empathy being a good value to have as an actor and a human being. This proved to be another teaching moment that matched both their cognitive analysis of the play and affective experience.

I have now used the word “empathy” for a third time in this publication. It is part and parcel of Understanding and a platform upon which the cognitive and affective is situated. Yet it risks being one of those buzz words that becomes inane unless we define it. *The Jungle* will serve very well to explain empathy and how the play elicited strong feelings and new thoughts in the young actors:

- In theatre, the audience **reads the emotions** of the characters through the dialogue but more importantly, from their facial expressions and body language. These two acting elements can actually be more forceful than words.
- When we can see from another person’s **perspective** and not only our own, this is empathy because we can imagine being in someone else’s shoes. The literal blood, sweat and tears of the refugees hit us hard as we understand the circumstances and the dangers.
- Through empathy, we are in touch with our **inner**

**world.** We have all experienced pain, therefore we can feel for the refugee whose young friend is killed by a bus. From our inner worlds, we are able to relate to others in similar situations.

*“Throughout the whole trip, I’ve also understood the importance of time management. Being a few minutes late might not be that serious. But when everyone has that in mind, it will become a major problem. Planning my time well did help me a lot.”*

Jason

*“I grew used to ... opening up and developing a really close connection. I also became extremely inspired by one girl ... as her kindness is so genuine and almost over-powering, that I have begun to pass on her kindness to other people.”*

Kaja

- In *The Jungle*, all the refugees from different nationalities and with different beliefs put aside their diverse views, disagreements, cultures and values to stand up to the army and tanks coming to steamroll their makeshift homes. This is not only about finding connection despite diversity and conflict, but crucially also the moral courage to do what is right. A **moral value system** is what shapes our identity and feelings.

- The resulting action that one refugee takes to look after a little girl who has lost her parents on the way to Calais is indicative of human **kindness**. This is a powerful emotion that allows someone to look beyond their own situation and perform a selfless task, which can be profoundly moving for the receiver and the giver, as well as for the onlooker.

- Another refugee decides to stay instead of evacuating the camp. The pain of knowing he might die a terrible death from the advancing army was contained within him.

He continues to make bread and remains entirely silent yet the audience can feel his extreme pain. **Self-regulation of emotions** allows room for empathy to be felt for others.

*Bravo* is a teaching and learning project. As such, we needed to bring perspective to the raw emotions that were running through the young actors’ minds and hearts that night. In addition to empathy, likewise they needed to learn to distance themselves and not sync with all the tragedies they witnessed, knowing full well that although staged, many of the situations could have been the reality.

They could feel for the refugees tonight, I advised them, but by the morning, they should re-focus on training at LAMDA which is after all, the primary reason for being in London. If they continued to feel deeply about the refugee issue, then they could turn that passion into proactivity by working in refugee NGOs when they grow up.

On the bus back to the hostel that night, we continued the discussion: Hong Kong is a relatively safe city and compared with most Asian cities, very well off as well. Our population is 98% ethnic Chinese. How, we wondered, do the other 2% feel? I asked them about Mainlanders from China and the discrimination that they might perceive. I offered a thinking point: just as not all Hong Kongers are kind, so not all Mainlanders are ruffians. The young actors were pensive — you could tell from their eyes they were listening hard; the rest of the journey home was a very silent one.

I speak of that night in detail to make the point that the two events caused much discomfort on different levels.

Both situations undoubtedly caused fear and anxiety. Both provided teaching opportunities, one unexpected. That night could not have been more authentic and genuine in both the real (life) and imagined (stage) worlds.

*“Here at Bravo we are encouraged to ask questions ... I think this interactive style helps us to learn more and is more effective, because we had to do the thinking ourselves ... It leaves a much deeper impression.”*

*Jason*

At AFTEC, colleagues and I have seen too much mollycoddling of young people from parents and even educators. Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be easy. Global situations change at a pace no-one can fathom. We need to stop growing our young people in greenhouses, always safe from the realities of life, if they are to become resilient human beings. Through fear, there is hope. We need to permit young people to live vicariously or otherwise through

theatre and other art forms. Through the arts, they can gain opportunities for understanding and thus mature and change.

Introspection is the first step towards Understanding. It is core learning in all of our projects and programmes for all ages and levels. Introspection — knowing the self and asking questions — is Stage 1 in the Theory of Change. To actualise the TOC, we systematised a teaching and learning approach.

What we now describe as the Tangram Approach™ is a concept derived from the ancient Chinese puzzle. In our re-interpretation, the same seven geometric pieces of jigsaw for teaching and learning can produce a diversity of results and solutions for young people.

We can explain this through Taoist (道) philosophy: that although we travel the same road, the journey is different as each individual's experience



*Bravo Asia Ten Drum Village, Tainan 2014*



is unique. *Sm-ART Youth* and *Bravo* are frameworks within which outcomes may be similar but output is varied. We cannot expect everyone to achieve the same realisations and it is here that qualitative research gives life to quantitative analysis.

Within the Tangram Approach™ are seven layers, one of which is Reflections. Continuous and sequentially deeper and layered reflections have been an essential tool in our work with young people — again, age not being a barrier. This is not rocket science; it is a matter of:

1. Allowing each child and teenager to visually chart their own transformation from day one enabling them to witness their journeys with openness, honesty and understanding of personal growth without fear of being labelled a dismal failure or an overnight runaway success;
2. Being conscious of and accepting that there is an inner world and life for each individual. Our children are not robots for linear input and output of data - they are human beings and the “spiritual” domain has to be addressed;

3. Accepting that one hat does not fit all. Curriculum development and implementation in *Sm-ART Youth* and *Bravo*, while structured and framed in the macro vein, allow for micro individual and group dynamics that arrive at different destinations through positive and/or negative encounters.

Because of the power of introspection through reflections, a database is set up in the mind which the young person can draw from to relate herself to her inner world, others around her and a continuing eccentric circle of relationships. Reflections always start with very little writing (sentences in the main) or personal thoughts (generally facts). At the end of *Bravo International* in London, for example, each young actor would be writing three to five pages per day, quality notwithstanding.

Reflection notebooks have been collected over the years as they are testament to personal growth and whether

a project works and how it needs improvement. For us, narratives are the best way to speak of change as details can be included. In this day and age of KPIs and the permeation of corporate speak, we decided to set ourselves a challenge in late 2016. Could we evaluate the social impact of our arts projects? With no extra funding but with ample passion, we persuaded a company to undertake a low bono survey.

*“We underestimated the power of reflections - it’s not just about what we did that day. After four weeks of reflecting, it’s now a really strong habit that’s embedded ... to keep us thinking about how we can improve.”*

Haley

A Social Impact Assessment (SIA) was conducted for the *Bravo! HK Youth Theatre Awards 2017-18* cohort by i4socialimpact. For the duration of the project, a series of four questionnaires were given to all young actors to assess important areas to *Bravo’s* mission statement of youth life skills development.

A pre-project questionnaire was first distributed to young actors prior to their first workshop in March 2017 and the final questionnaire was provided after the actors’ last workshop a year later, but prior to the summer training at LAMDA in London. Some results can be found in the box that follows.

Findings from the data illustrate that after completing the *Bravo Hong Kong* 2017-2018 segment involving 28 young actors between 13-19 years old, all demonstrated positive change and growth in all key attributes. The largest areas of growth were seen in **Acting Knowledge, English, Self-Esteem, Teamwork and Problem Solving.**

### *Bravo Hong Kong Overall Satisfaction*

Young actors were overall very satisfied with the *Bravo Hong Kong* segment and provided an overall satisfaction of 91%. Indicators of actors' satisfaction can be credited to encouraging their **Acting Ambitions, improvements to their English, Discipline, and Public Speaking skills.** Actors were also very satisfied with their tutors, providing them with an overall rating of 94%. Additionally, a survey of parents' satisfaction with their child or young actor's experience in *Bravo* showed an overall satisfaction of 89%.

### *Bravo Hong Kong Behavioural Change*

In addition to charting attitudinal changes, we investigated behavioural changes as well. Findings show that there are positive changes in the majority of the attributes, with the highest seen in **Sociability, Goal Setting, Problem Solving, Acting Ambition and Self Reflection.**

### *Bravo International*

After the final audition with a panel comprising LAMDA's Principal, Lee Hysan Foundation representatives, external adjudicators and AFTEC Board representatives, 16 actors were provided with the opportunity to join *Bravo International*, the LAMDA intensive high-level training & AFTEC-led cultural experiences for four weeks in London this year after successfully completing the *Bravo Hong Kong* portion of the project.

### *Bravo International Overall Satisfaction*

Overall, students rated all key attributes highly, with the highest rating in their Reaction to the LAMDA segment, **Acting Ambitions, Network, Motivation, Discipline and Risk Taking.** Students were also very satisfied with the LAMDA leg of *Bravo*, providing an overall satisfaction of 95.7%. Tutors satisfaction also received a very satisfied rating of 95.6%. Additionally, a survey of parents also showed very high satisfaction with their child's experience in LAMDA with an overall satisfaction of 93.3%.

### *Underprivileged Young Actors*

*Bravo* gives priority to those from grassroot backgrounds. In addition to charting attitudinal changes, we investigated behavioural changes as well. Of the 20 KPIs in the *Bravo Hong Kong* segment survey, there were positive transformation in the majority with the following showing marked growth: **English, Acting Knowledge, Problem Solving, Goal Setting and Communications.**

Figure 2: *Bravo* 2017-18 Social Impact Assessment Overview



First *Bravo* Cohort announced for *Bravo Asia & Bravo International*



Collective thinking, British Museum 2016

The arts are not a panacea to any ills in society. To claim that would indeed be hubristic. Nevertheless, if we would like to see human hearts better directed towards doing the good and the positive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the time has come for the arts to be genuinely understood for their inherent power and potential than simply being seen as entertainment or elite preoccupations worthy only of a passing interest. Whether we are policymakers, educators, parents, we all wish to leave a better legacy to our children.

There has been much research and innumerable publications dedicated to the subject of resilience. After 10 years of AFTEC, we see that young people are not as strong as they could be. In Figure 2, in which *Bravo* 2017-18 social impact results are illustrated, one can see that Risk-taking, one of the 20 attributes in the survey, only made marked growth after *Bravo International* in London.

Hong Kong is a risk-averse city, possibly because our migrant mentality has not been shaken off. It is safer, we may think, to stay put and make good. Perhaps







Combat Class, LAMDA 2016



Classic Theatre Stream with Joanna Read (LAMDA Principal) & Oliver Birch (Tutor) 2018

as a result, we stay in the comfort zone more than we should. This culture permeates and is learnt by osmosis.

*“During the first workshop, I was really afraid of the others laughing at me ... now I can cope with that... by taking more risks and asking more questions ... figuring out how best to express myself.”*

*Jack*

If we can add one further insight for consideration: success and failure needs to be redefined to move beyond the confines of the purely economic and academic.

Many young people we have worked with are despondent because societal examples of success and failure are narrow. They need to be given alternative education approaches that are founded upon being multi-perspective as the norm. Impossible

as this may sound, it is worth cultivating new mindsets and “heart sets”. We need to learn to teach and learn like artists for that strong sense of having diverse answers and possibilities in education, as in work and ultimately, life.

The two young people quoted over the page have re-examined success and failure in light of their experiences and have shown that their views have shifted and for the better.

In Forster's *A Room with a View*, George Emerson is the young man whom the protagonist Lucy eventually marries. His father brought him up to question and to be a thinking, feeling person.

“My father says that there is only one perfect view — the view of the sky straight over our heads, and that all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it.”  
(Chapter 15)

Bungled or otherwise, we all need to strive to create alternative approaches to education via the arts so that opportunities for transformation can be grown and made available.

Jiahao, Anna, Jeff and all the young people quoted in this publication have seen a new perspective; each of them can see how different their old life is from the new one, a life that offers so many things that they could not have previously conceived of.

Change, however, demands insight if they want to take the new to effect transformation in their own home. It demands courage to understand what it is they want to change.

*“I believe I have changed a lot after Sm-ART Youth. I am more mature now. I’ve learnt how to see things from different perspectives. I’m not so easily satisfied and can see beyond the small things.”*

Jiahao (11 years)

*“In the past, I equated failure with academic failure. After Bravo! I began to see it differently. Whether something is a failure or success lies entirely in your attitude. If you do not give it your best shot, that is failure.”*

Jeff



Physical training, LAMDA 2016



Third Bravo cohort at presentations, Hyde Park 2018





*The Book of Mormon* musical, West End 2018



Bravo 2017-18 cohort with LAMDA tutors, AFTEC colleagues Vicki Ooi (second row 3<sup>rd</sup> right); Lynn Yau (second row 2<sup>nd</sup> right) & Natalie Ting (first row 1<sup>st</sup> right)

It also demands help and support from families and friends, policy makers and organisations.

Change comes with self-understanding in the head and with a strong connection to the heart, as well as the courage to follow that understanding despite obstacles and difficulties. Arts for Change is what AFTEC hopes to achieve, to teach and support. We want to leave young people where they can build their own houses, with rooms with their own views, all looking to contribute meaningfully to society.

*“Success to me now is thinking things through and trying to understand something. Success is not about being the best and being recognised.”*

Anna

“I graduated from *Sm-ART Youth* three years ago yet I believe what I have learnt will stand me in good stead for a lifetime.

Before joining, my favourite expression was ‘I don’t know’. Sometimes, I really could not fathom an answer; mostly I was simply too lazy to think and gave standard answers. I had always accepted information passively and never thought of reasons or rationales.

*Sm-ART Youth* would not let us answer with ‘I don’t know’ or replicate others’ answers. When I started to think, it was challenging and sought permission from my mother to drop out of the project. Somehow slowly, led by Artist-Educators, I discovered even I could think of many ideas. I wrote them down and I was proud of myself.

Later, I no longer needed help with thinking; I was doing it automatically and not only during *Sm-ART Youth* classes. In my everyday life, I would wonder at the performance style that street performers chose wandering through Mongkok.

The greatest transformation is undoubtedly my mindset. I would think and not only from my viewpoint; I could now think from multiple perspectives.

I am now in Form 4. Homework load is increasing yet I still love to trace and chase the sources of knowledge I am getting from textbooks. What is the etymology of this saying? Why is it we use this formula to get an answer? After the answer appears, it stays clearly in my mind and even after a long while, I still remember it.

I disliked thinking to begin with, now it is second nature to me.  
All this is from *Sm-ART Youth*.”

**Wah Tsz Wai**

Lynn Yau has been the CEO of AFTEC since the charity's inception. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Literature, Master of Education in Curriculum Studies from the University of Hong Kong and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from the University of Bristol. She is the Hong Kong scholar for the Clore Leadership Programme 2010-2011 awarded by the Home Affairs Bureau & the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Occasionally, she forays into diverse pedagogical areas at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the knowledge from which has informed AFTEC's development.

The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection (AFTEC) is a bilingual Learning Theatre™ and a charity dedicated to nurturing the next generations of youth. We believe in the power of the arts to inspire, motivate and transform.

Established in 2008, we have reached over 180,383 participants and audience through diverse projects and programmes. Since 2009, AFTEC has been resident at the Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre as part of the Leisure & Cultural Services Department's Venue Partnership Scheme.

AFTEC was selected as a top 10 high impact NGO in the PwC Community Mentoring Programme on Social Impact Assessment in 2015, was the recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council's Award in Arts Education in 2014 & 2017, and a two-time awardee of the Springboard Grant under the Arts Capacity Development Funding Scheme of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Amongst others, AFTEC pioneered *Sm-ART Youth* (2012), *Bravo! Hong Kong Youth Theatre Awards* (2013), the Performing Arts module of the credit-bearing *Medical Humanities* at the University of Hong Kong's Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine in 2012, and *Relaxed Theatre* for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders and learning difficulties in 2014 in our theatre at Sai Wan Ho.

We depend entirely on donations, sponsorships and grants. Ticket income is minimal. Please contact us at [lynn@aftec.hk](mailto:lynn@aftec.hk) to give your support.





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