

Project Zero and Its Impact

AN ENIGMATICALLY NAMED
LITTLE THINK TANK THAT
ENDURED AND GREW



By Ellen Winner

Chapter 57

Five Professional Development Programs

Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection, Hong Kong

This is a story of how the PZC radically transformed an arts educator, turning her into a pioneer working to radically change schools in Hong Kong. It's hard to believe that a five-day conference (that's how long PZ conferences used to last) could have such a powerful effect, but Lynn Yau is certain that she is who she is today because of that week at PZ.

Prior to attending the PZC, teaching and learning was not even a glimmer of an idea on her career horizon. Lynn has a background in English and comparative literature and an abiding interest in the arts. In 1998, she wanted to contribute meaningfully to Hong Kong and took a huge plunge by turning her lifelong passion for the arts into her career. In 2002, Vicki Ooi, a leading theatre director in the city and one of Lynn's colleagues, suggested that they both attend the PZC. At the time, Lynn knew something about PZ but did not know about the PZC. She described a transformation in her mindset as a consequence of her week at the PZC:

That week truly changed my thinking. That week was like being out of my skin and out of the world. I had never thought about arts in education til that week. A totally new way of thinking. They threw open questions at us that I'd never thought about in my life. It is no exaggeration that suddenly a lightbulb went on in my head. And it has lit my path forward to this day.

After the PZC, Lynn went on to get a masters degree in education, and also enrolled in PZ's online courses in Multiple Intelligences, Teaching for Understanding, and Assessment, and eventually served as a coach in some of these courses.

Educators in Hong Kong, Lynn said, do not think of the arts as a mode of thinking. I call her a pioneer because she went against the grain, taking the arts seriously as cognitive enterprises. PZ founder Nelson Goodman would have approved! Most local schools in Hong Kong use traditional teaching methods rather than inquiry-based learning. Inspired by her experience at the PZC, Lynn wanted to change this – helping children and young people learn how to learn rather than filling them up with information that they can easily get from the internet. When she approached a university suggesting they offer a degree in creative teaching and learning, the door remained firmly shut.

In 2008, Lynn founded a company called [The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection or AFTEC](#) – a professional development non-profit. Its mission is to change the thinking behind teaching and learning through the arts, moving away from traditional teaching to a PZ-like model of inquiry-based learning.

In a 2023 [blog](#), Lynn described her company as “researching pedagogies that could be adapted to the local context, respecting Chinese values yet applying them with an innovative lens.” She explained to me, “We extract what we need and then we localize,” – a stance akin to Tina Blythe's conception of adaptation with integrity (mentioned in Chapter 1). Her company brings teachers

and teaching artists together to co-design lessons that integrate academic subjects with one or another art form with the goal of motivating students and fostering student-centered learning. Teaching artists are called “creative practitioners.” One of Lynn’s goals is to raise the profile of teaching artists as a profession – to be considered just as valuable as being a full-time practicing artist.

PZ Frameworks Used

The company has adapted aspects of Visible Thinking, Studio Thinking, and Teaching for Understanding to promote creative learning and thinking through authentic arts integration. See-Think-Feel-Wonder has become manna to the teachers, Lynn said, but it takes time to know how to use this well. Teachers who have gone through her program use this every day, and it has become a habit of mind for the students.

Inquiry-based learning is at the heart of the company’s model of creative learning and their curriculum. Lynn said that this was due to the influence of PZ. The curriculum is designed to foster the five Creative Habits of Mind proposed by Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton from the [Centre for Real-World Learning](#) at the University of Winchester in the UK: Collaborative, Inquisitive, Persistent, Imaginative, and Disciplined. The company uses PZ’s Visible Thinking strategies (i.e., thinking routines) to foster these habits of mind.

The first *Studio Thinking* book, published in 2007, provided a foundation for professional development in Lynn’s company and is used for teachers of the visual and performing arts. Observe and Reflect are constants. Express and Envision have adapted to become Listen, Feel, and Imagine. Stretch and Explore has been adapted to become Interpret. The seventh skill added, Value, encapsulates the remaining Studio Habits.

The company works intensively with schools over long periods of time. Funded by the Jockey Club, the company piloted the “Jockey Club Arts-based Cross Curriculum Creative Learning Project” for three school years, from 2021 through 2024. The curriculum was tried out in ten primary schools that included a range of SES backgrounds, with 20 teachers (two at each grade level per school), 13 teaching artists (called “creative practitioners,” and 600 students. Participating teachers had all chosen to participate, and all of the schools had principals interested in exploring student-directed learning. Lynn describes their three-year pilot program in her blog as one of “deep observation and continuous trial and error.”

The key part of this new curriculum was arts integration. Teachers of various academic subjects each chose a core subject and an art form (most often visual arts) as well as another applied creative domain (e.g., architecture, costume and prop design, woodworking) with which to link their curriculum. Working with creative practitioners, teachers developed units integrating the arts and creative activities with their subject area.

The curriculum radically shifts the school environment:

- Students are given choice. For example, when involved in a visual art project, they can choose from different stations each featuring different kinds of materials.
- Teachers engage in process-oriented teaching rather than “chasing after products” which, Lynn writes in her blog, “lowers the value of teaching for creativity.”

- Students learn by doing, punctuated by pausing to discuss and reflect.
- Less is more: Content coverage is reduced to allow for deeper engagement “as students cultivate a habit of thinking for themselves by themselves.” Lynn writes that this gives “teachers breathing and head space. For too long, teachers have been bound by timetables that support boxed-in thinking and textbooks that seldom look beyond its content albeit they attempt to provide a worldview. Real and authentic learning is the key.”

The children in these classes were “waking up and becoming motivated because they were given choice and were being heard,” Lynn said. The teachers who were involved began to train the other teachers at their grade level so that the entire grade level was engaging in the same kind of pedagogy.

The company is now embarking on a four-year scale-up project (2024-2028) to train creative practitioners at tertiary faculty and postgraduate levels and in arts companies as well. In turn, these practitioners will go on to train 80 teachers a year in primary and middle schools (with preference given to those in low SES communities).

In sum, Lynn Yau has created an organization not unlike PZ. Both organizations share the goal of making significant, lasting school change. Both share a focus on the arts, though not all of PZ’s projects involve the arts. And both carry out long-term professional development in the hopes of creating lasting change.