

Why studying arts like acting or dance can better equip business students for the post-COVID world

July 20 2021, by Lucy Gill-Simmen



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COVID has seen the idea of caring for your employees take on a [whole new meaning](#). As workplaces reopen and companies deal with the socio-

economic fallout of the pandemic, leadership specialists [increasingly stress](#) the importance of maintaining this focus on human needs.

Beyond the immediate imperative to keep employees safe in the midst of the health crisis, [business](#) administration specialist [Hubert Joly](#) [underlines](#) how managers need to consider the longer term mental health needs as well as sense of purpose and social wellbeing of their workforce.

Historically, the so-called [soft](#) or [people skills](#) required to do this were not the primary focus of a business and management education. Rather, [management theory](#) centered around what managers do: planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling.

This focus has long had its critics, of course. One answer, which is backed up by [years of research](#), is that when business students engage with the arts and humanities at university level, it can equip them with the additional skills that they need.

Soft skills

Returning to the office post-lockdown has put [kindness](#), [compassion](#) and [empathy](#) at the top of employee wishlists. Workers now expect their managers to be [more supportive](#).

Although [long recognized](#) as important leadership skills, the pandemic has made these more salient. And with [changes to the workplace](#) like remote working and increased use of virtual technology likely to be [here to stay](#) to some extent, the greater demand for such skills may be permanent too.

When teams were sent home amid lockdown procedures, our ability to collaborate was also [dramatically reduced](#). Collaboration has [long been a](#)

[focus](#) of workplace culture and managerial methods. [It is key](#) to quality of work, innovation and employee engagement.

Companies emerging from the pandemic are therefore understandably keen to get their employees working effectively together [once again](#). This also makes [cultural intelligence](#)—defined as the skill by which you understand other cultures, learning from ongoing interactions and adapting your thinking accordingly—even more [important](#) than before.

How can arts studies help?

Students themselves are conscious of the importance of human-centric skills, as well as critical thinking and creative problem-solving. A [survey](#) of 1,000 Australian students in 2020 found that 88% believed [soft skills](#) to be necessary for their future career, with 78% agreeing such skills would give them an advantage in an increasingly automated workplace.

These findings are confirmed by [a 2021 study](#) among undergraduate aviation students in Australia. The respondents thought non-technical skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and emotional intelligence would be highly necessary in the post-pandemic economy.

Human-centric skills are best learned by doing. This kind of experiential approach is something the arts have [traditionally offered](#). Unlike a standard management lecture, where students will sit and listen to lecturers passing on their knowledge, arts majors—[student](#) dancers interacting in a dance routine, for example—focus on ideas and expression.

Since the 1980s, management education specialists have noted the impact of including [poetry](#), [music](#) and [literature](#) in business courses. In a 2002 study, American management theorist Robert Mockler looked at how drama, too, could [be used](#). He highlighted the leadership lessons to

be found in Shakespeare—from Henry V and Coriolanus to King Lear—and the presentation, [self-awareness](#) and leadership skills to be gleaned from [taking acting classes](#).

Business students are more likely to be found in a financial accounting lecture or an organisational change dynamics tutorial than learning about storytelling. Yet storytelling serves as a [powerful tool](#) for communication both inside and outside organisations. Narratives enable companies to develop their own personas and for brands to forge [customer relationships](#).

Beyond techniques, [a simple visit](#) to an art museum can readily enhance the [critical thinking](#) skills for any student—not just art history majors. The arts engage us, as the audience, mentally, physically, and emotionally. And they prompt us [to understand](#) and improve the world and ourselves. This may be one of their most powerful uses in education.

To this end, [prospective students](#) interested in pursuing a business and management degree should be encouraged to immerse themselves in additional arts and humanities courses. Even better, they could seek an [interdisciplinary degree](#) where arts and humanities are embedded in the curriculum.

US business schools often dabble in the [liberal arts](#). But in the UK, [business students](#) will need to dig a little deeper to find a way to integrate the arts into their studies. There are [professional development courses](#), which include acting classes to promote self-awareness and creative writing classes.

Students can also acquire these skills by themselves. In [A Whole New Mind](#) management specialist and author Daniel Pink recommends taking [drawing classes](#) and heading to storytelling festivals. It's about developing the right side of the brain, the side [most often associated](#) with

soft skills.

More information: Arvind Malhotra, The Postpandemic Future of Work, *Journal of Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01492063211000435](https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211000435)

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Provided by The Conversation

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