

The Soul Deficit: Art-Based Learning as a Disruptive Humanistic Technology for Leadership, Well-Being and Civic Regeneration

Dr. Ignacio Bonasa Alzuria

Founder and President, Liderarte; President and Founder, University of Happiness and Well-Being.

Abstract: Contemporary societies face a paradox: they have become technologically powerful and emotionally fragile at the same time. Organizations invest in digital transformation, productivity systems and artificial intelligence, yet many individuals experience disconnection, burnout, meaninglessness and civic fatigue. This conceptual review argues that one of the deepest crises of the present age is not merely a skills gap, but a soul deficit: a progressive weakening of empathy, purpose, imagination, ethical sensitivity and human connection. The article proposes art-based learning as a disruptive humanistic technology capable of reconnecting leadership, well-being and civic regeneration. Drawing on experiential learning, transformative learning, arts-based management development, humanities education, positive psychology and arts-and-health research, the paper introduces the 4A Model: Learning, Attitude, Soul and Action. The model frames art not as decoration, entertainment or cultural luxury, but as a pedagogical vehicle for human transformation. The central contribution is threefold: it reframes art-based learning as an applied methodology for human development; it proposes the concept of humanistic technology to describe non-digital methodologies that produce human capabilities; and it offers a practical framework for organizations and educational institutions seeking to cultivate leaders who are competent, conscious, compassionate and action-oriented. The article concludes that the future of leadership and education will not be secured by more information alone, but by deeper human formation.

Keywords: Art-based learning; humanistic leadership; well-being; humanities; organizational development; 4A Model; civic regeneration; transformative learning.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has produced extraordinary technological acceleration. Artificial intelligence, automation, data analytics and platform economies are redefining how people work, communicate and learn. However, this acceleration has not necessarily produced wiser, healthier or more humane societies. Many organizations are more connected in technical terms and more disconnected in human terms. Meetings multiply, dashboards expand and productivity indicators become more sophisticated, while many professionals silently experience exhaustion, anxiety, loneliness and loss of meaning.

This article begins from a provocative hypothesis: the central challenge of contemporary leadership is not only digital transformation, but human transformation. The problem is not that organizations lack tools. The problem is that they often lack soul.

The term soul is used here not in a religious or metaphysical sense, but as a humanistic construct: the integration of dignity, meaning, sensitivity, ethical awareness, emotional depth and commitment to the common good. A person or organization with soul is one that does not reduce human beings to resources, indicators or productive units. It recognizes people as whole

beings: cognitive, emotional, relational, creative and moral.

In this context, art-based learning emerges as a powerful and underused methodology. Art has traditionally been associated with beauty, expression, culture and entertainment. Yet art is also a way of knowing, sensing, questioning and becoming. Music, theatre, painting, poetry, dance, storytelling and symbolic creation allow individuals to explore dimensions of experience that conventional training often leaves untouched.

This article proposes that art-based learning should be understood as a disruptive humanistic technology. It is technology because it can be intentionally designed, applied, replicated and evaluated. It is humanistic because its purpose is not to automate the person, but to awaken the person. It is disruptive because it challenges the dominant assumption that learning is primarily cognitive, instrumental and utilitarian.

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARTICLE

The article makes four original contributions to the literature on arts, humanities, leadership and well-being. First, it proposes the concept of the soul deficit as a diagnostic category for interpreting a contemporary crisis of meaning, empathy and ethical sensitivity in organizations and societies.

Second, it reframes art-based learning as a humanistic technology rather than an ornamental cultural activity. Third, it introduces the 4A Model - Learning, Attitude, Soul and Action - as a conceptual framework for translating artistic experience into human development. Fourth, it connects leadership development, organizational well-being and civic regeneration within one interdisciplinary model.

This contribution is intentionally conceptual. It does not claim that the 4A Model has already been empirically validated as a psychometric instrument or causal intervention. Instead, it offers a structured theoretical model that can guide future empirical studies, applied programs and evaluation frameworks. Its value lies in giving conceptual clarity to a field that is rich in practice but often fragmented in theoretical articulation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From Instrumental Education to Human Formation

Modern education and organizational training have often prioritized utility, efficiency and measurable performance. This orientation has produced important achievements, but it has also narrowed the meaning of learning. When education is reduced to employability and training is reduced to performance, the deeper task of human formation is weakened.

Humanities scholars have long argued that literature, philosophy, history and the arts cultivate capacities essential for democratic life: critical thinking, imagination, empathy, dialogue and ethical judgment (Nussbaum, 2010; Greene, 1995). These capacities cannot be fully developed through technical instruction alone. They require symbolic experience, interpretive depth and encounter with human complexity.

The arts introduce ambiguity, metaphor and emotional resonance into the learning process. Unlike purely technical content, art does not merely transmit information. It provokes interpretation. It invites the learner to stand before a question rather than consume an answer.

Experiential and Transformative Learning

Experiential learning theory emphasizes that meaningful learning emerges from the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Individuals do not learn deeply only by receiving concepts; they learn by experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing and experimenting. Art-based learning intensifies this process because it creates

emotionally charged, embodied and symbolic experiences.

Transformative learning theory adds that adult learning becomes significant when individuals critically examine their assumptions and reconstruct their frames of meaning (Mezirow, 1991). Art can create the conditions for such transformation. A theatre scene, a musical metaphor, a painting exercise or a poetic narrative may reveal hidden beliefs, emotional patterns and relational dynamics more powerfully than a conventional lecture.

In this sense, art-based learning is not an alternative to rigor; it is an alternative route to depth. It offers a language for dimensions that are difficult to capture through linear explanation: conflict, fear, loss, belonging, aspiration, trust and purpose.

Arts-Based Methods in Leadership And Management Development

Research on arts-based methods in management development has shown that artistic practices may support leadership growth through mechanisms such as skills transfer, projection, embodiment, sensemaking and artifact-making (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009; Schiuma, 2011). These mechanisms are especially relevant in contexts where leaders must deal with uncertainty, complexity and human emotion.

Leadership is not only decision-making. It is also perception, presence, listening, narrative, rhythm, interpretation and influence. The arts train precisely these dimensions. A conductor, an actor, a painter, a dancer or a poet works with attention, timing, silence, emotion, body, form and meaning. These are not peripheral leadership capacities; they are central to leading human beings.

Arts-based leadership development therefore complements competency-based approaches. Competencies indicate what a leader should do; artistic experience can help a leader feel, interpret and embody how that action becomes humanly meaningful.

Arts, Health and Well-Being

In recent years, the evidence base on arts and health has expanded significantly. Artistic and cultural participation has been associated with mental health promotion, emotional regulation, social connection, prevention of isolation and improved well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Clift & Camic, 2016). Arts-based interventions do not

replace clinical care, but they can complement health, education and organizational strategies by addressing dimensions of human experience that purely biomedical or managerial approaches may overlook.

The relevance for organizations is clear. Burnout and stress cannot be addressed only through productivity tools or resilience slogans. They require spaces for meaning, expression, belonging and emotional repair. Art-based learning can offer such spaces when it is designed ethically and professionally.

This approach is consistent with broader well-being frameworks that consider flourishing, autonomy, positive relationships, purpose and psychological growth as essential dimensions of human development (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a conceptual review and theory-building methodology. It does not present a systematic review, meta-analysis or primary empirical study. Instead, it integrates selected contributions from six theoretical and applied domains: experiential learning, transformative learning, arts-based management development, humanities education, positive psychology and arts-and-health research.

The literature was selected through purposive theoretical sampling. The inclusion criteria were: conceptual relevance to art-based learning, leadership, well-being or civic formation; recognized influence within the field; methodological or theoretical usefulness for

model-building; and applicability to human development in educational, organizational or social contexts. Authoritative institutional reports were included when they provided relevant frameworks for arts, culture, health or education.

The synthesis followed four interpretive steps. First, key concepts were identified across the selected literature. Second, recurring mechanisms of transformation were compared, including experience, reflection, emotional resonance, meaning-making, embodiment, relational awareness and behavioral commitment. Third, these mechanisms were organized into a four-dimensional framework. Fourth, the framework was translated into practical implications and future research directions.

The result is the 4A Model. It should be understood as a conceptual output designed for future testing, refinement and application. Its purpose is to provide a bridge between theory and practice, not to replace empirical validation.

CONCEPTUAL OUTPUT: THE 4A MODEL OF ART-BASED HUMAN TRANSFORMATION

The 4A Model proposes that art-based learning generates transformation through four interconnected dimensions: Learning, Attitude, Soul and Action. These dimensions are not isolated variables, but stages and forces within a cyclical process. Artistic experience creates learning; learning can modify attitude; attitude opens access to deeper meaning and values; and this inner transformation must become observable action.

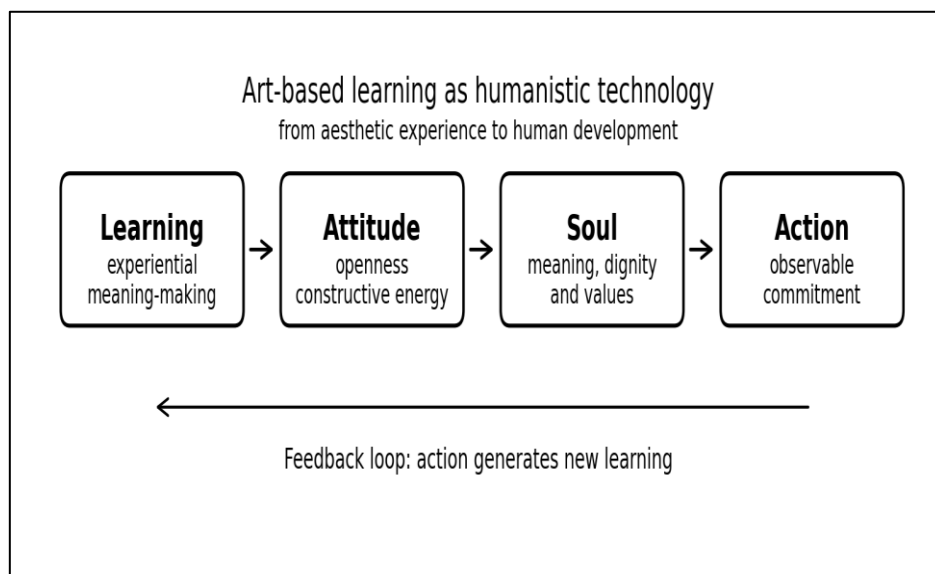


Figure 1: Cyclical logic of the 4A Model.

Table 1: Operational synthesis of the 4A Model.

Dimension	Core question	Art-based mechanism	Human capability	Possible indicator
Learning	What experience changes perception?	Embodied, symbolic and reflective experience	Meaning-making, attention, self-awareness	Reflective narratives; learning transfer statements
Attitude	What disposition enables transformation?	Curiosity, emotional safety and reframing	Openness, resilience, constructive energy	Observed participation; pre/post attitude scales
Soul	What gives depth and ethical orientation?	Metaphor, beauty, memory and moral imagination	Purpose, dignity, empathy, ethical sensitivity	Purpose clarity; values alignment; qualitative themes
Action	What changes in behavior?	Commitment, practice and shared ritual	Leadership behavior, civic engagement, team habits	Action plans; follow-up commitments; behavioral observation

Learning

The first dimension is Learning. In the 4A Model, learning is not understood as passive acquisition of information, but as lived experience. Art-based learning places the participant in contact with metaphor, emotion, body, imagination and reflection. The learner does not simply receive content; the learner participates in an experience.

This dimension challenges the conventional classroom. A painting can teach perception. A theatrical scene can teach conflict. A musical ensemble can teach coordination. A poem can teach ambiguity. A dance exercise can teach presence. Art makes learning memorable because it involves the whole person.

Attitude

The second dimension is Attitude. Transformation requires not only knowledge, but disposition. Many people know what they should change, yet they do not change because their attitude remains defensive, resigned or fragmented.

Art can shift attitude because it lowers resistance. People may reject advice, but they often open themselves to a story, a song, an image or a symbolic exercise. Artistic experience can create emotional safety, curiosity and openness. It allows participants to explore vulnerability without feeling directly judged.

In organizational terms, attitude is crucial. A team may possess technical competence and still fail because of distrust, cynicism or fear. Art-based learning helps reframe difficulties, activate constructive energy and cultivate relational presence.

Soul

The third dimension is Soul. This is the most distinctive element of the model and the one that requires the greatest conceptual precision. Soul is defined here as a composite humanistic construct formed by meaning, dignity, ethical sensitivity, emotional resonance, relational presence and commitment to the common good. It is not proposed as a religious category, nor as a validated psychometric scale. It is a conceptual lens for naming the depth dimension of human development.

A soulless organization may be efficient but cold, profitable but harmful, innovative but exhausting. A leader without soul may achieve results while damaging trust, belonging and psychological safety. A society without soul may become rich in infrastructure and poor in compassion.

Art reaches this dimension because it does not speak only to reason. It touches memory, longing, grief, hope, beauty and moral imagination. It helps individuals ask essential questions: Who am I? What do I serve? What kind of leader do I want to become? What kind of organization are we building? What kind of society do we want to leave behind?

Action

The fourth dimension is Action. Humanistic learning must not remain in emotion or inspiration. It must become behavior, decision and commitment. The 4A Model therefore concludes with action: concrete changes in personal habits, leadership practices, team rituals, organizational culture and civic engagement.

Art-based learning becomes transformative when it produces observable commitments: a different

conversation, a repaired relationship, a more ethical decision, a new team practice, a social initiative or a more conscious way of leading. The model is cyclical rather than linear. Action generates new experience; new experience generates new learning; learning reshapes attitude; attitude opens the soul; and soul gives depth to action.

DISCUSSION

Art as Humanistic Technology

The concept of humanistic technology is intentionally paradoxical. Technology is often associated with digital systems, machinery and artificial intelligence. However, technology may also be understood as a disciplined method for producing a desired effect. Under this broader meaning, art-based learning can be considered a technology: it has materials, processes, facilitation methods, outputs and possible impacts.

The difference is that digital technology often seeks to optimize external processes, while humanistic technology seeks to deepen internal and relational processes. It does not accelerate the machine; it humanizes the system. This distinction is essential in an era in which organizations may become more technically sophisticated while becoming less emotionally intelligent.

Leadership Beyond Competence

Many leadership programs focus on competencies: communication, decision-making, strategy, negotiation, innovation and team management. These competencies are necessary, but insufficient. The crises of the present age require leaders capable of empathy, moral courage, imagination and self-awareness.

Art-based learning develops precisely these less visible dimensions. It helps leaders experience uncertainty, listen to silence, read emotion, inhabit complexity and create meaning. It teaches that leadership is not only a set of techniques, but a form of presence. This idea resonates with work on psychological safety, resonant leadership and meaningful work (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Edmondson, 1999; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Well-Being beyond Wellness Programs

Corporate well-being is often reduced to activities: mindfulness sessions, sports challenges, nutrition talks, mental health webinars or flexible work policies. These initiatives may be valuable, but they can remain superficial if they do not address meaning, belonging and emotional truth.

Art-based learning offers a deeper approach because it allows people to express what is difficult to say directly. It opens symbolic spaces where pain can become insight, vulnerability can become connection and experience can become wisdom. In this sense, art-based well-being is not merely recreational; it is formative, relational and cultural.

Civic regeneration

The implications of art-based learning go beyond organizations. Democratic societies need citizens capable of empathy, imagination, dialogue and responsibility. Polarization grows when people lose the ability to imagine the inner life of others. The humanities and the arts cultivate that ability.

Civic regeneration requires more than laws and institutions. It requires emotional citizenship: the capacity to care, listen, interpret, disagree without dehumanizing and act for the common good. Art-based learning can contribute to this civic formation by creating shared experiences of meaning and recognition.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The 4A Model can be applied in several contexts. In leadership development, organizations can use theatre, music, visual arts and storytelling to work on presence, emotional intelligence, communication, conflict and purpose. In team development, artistic practices can help groups explore trust, coordination, diversity, rhythm, belonging and collective creativity.

In educational institutions, the model can support interdisciplinary programs that connect arts, ethics, citizenship, well-being and employability. In public policy, art-based learning can be used in community programs aimed at social cohesion, intergenerational dialogue, mental health promotion and civic participation. In corporate well-being, art can move wellness from individual self-care to collective meaning-making.

For evaluation, the model suggests combining qualitative and quantitative indicators. Qualitative data may include reflective journals, participant narratives, observed behavioral commitments and facilitator field notes. Quantitative data may include validated measures of well-being, engagement, psychological safety, burnout, empathy, purpose and team climate. This mixed approach prevents the model from becoming merely inspirational while also avoiding the reduction of deep human experience to simplistic metrics.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article is conceptual and does not present primary empirical data. Therefore, the 4A Model should be tested through qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research. Future studies may examine the model in leadership programs, educational settings, corporate well-being interventions and community development projects.

Possible research questions include: Does art-based learning improve self-awareness and leadership presence? How does artistic experience influence psychological safety in teams? Can the 4A Model reduce burnout indicators in organizational contexts? What mechanisms explain the relationship between art, meaning and behavioral change? How can art-based learning be evaluated without reducing its human depth to simplistic metrics?

Future research should also address ethical risks. Art-based methods can evoke vulnerability and emotional exposure. Facilitators must be trained to create safe environments, respect boundaries, avoid manipulation and recognize when participants require professional psychological support beyond the scope of an educational intervention.

CONCLUSION

The future will not be human merely because human beings inhabit it. It will be human only if people, organizations and societies intentionally cultivate humanity.

This article has argued that contemporary society suffers from a soul deficit: a weakening of meaning, empathy, dignity, imagination and ethical sensitivity. In response, art-based learning is proposed as a disruptive humanistic technology capable of supporting leadership development, well-being and civic regeneration.

The 4A Model - Learning, Attitude, Soul and Action - offers a practical and conceptual framework for transforming artistic experience into human development. Its central message is that art is not ornamental. Art is formative. Art teaches people to perceive, to feel, to imagine, to connect and to act.

The organizations and societies of the future will not be strengthened by efficiency alone. They will require deeper forms of human formation. Future empirical research should now test the model,

refine its mechanisms and examine its impact across educational, organizational and civic contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Adler, N. J. "The arts and leadership: Now that we can do anything, what will we do?." (2007).
2. Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. *Arts based research*. Sage, (2011).
3. Barry, D., & Meisiek, S. "Seeing more and seeing differently: Sensemaking, mindfulness, and the workarts." *Organization studies* 31.11 (2010): 1505-1530.
4. Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. "Resonant leadership: Renewing yourself and connecting with others through mindfulness, hope and compassion." *Harvard Business Press*, (2005).
5. Clift, S., & Camic, P. M. (Eds.). "Oxford textbook of creative arts, health, and wellbeing: International perspectives on practice, policy and research." *Oxford University Press*, (2016).
6. Csikszentmihalyi, M. "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience." (1990).
7. Darsø, L. "Artful creation: Learning-tales of arts-in-business." (2004).
8. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. "The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior." *Psychological inquiry* 11.4 (2000): 227-268.
9. Dewey, J. "Art as experience." *Minton, Balch & Company*. (1934).
10. Edmondson, A. "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams." *Administrative science quarterly* 44.2 (1999): 350-383.
11. Eisner, E. W. "The arts and the creation of mind." *Language arts* 80.5 (2003): 340-344.
12. Fancourt, D., & Finn, S. "What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review." *World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe*, (2019).
13. Fancourt, D., & Steptoe, A. "Cultural engagement and mental health: Does socio-economic status explain the association?." *Social Science & Medicine* 236 (2019): 112425.
14. Frankl, V. E. "Man's search for meaning." *Simon and Schuster*, (1985).
15. Freire, P. "Pedagogy of the oppressed." *Toward a sociology of education*. Routledge, 2020. 374-386.

16. Gardner, H. "Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences." *Basic books*, (2011).
17. Goleman, D. "Emotional intelligence bantam books." *New York* (1995).
18. Greene, M. "Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change." *John Wiley & Sons*, (2000).
19. Hatch, M. J., Kostera, M., & Kozminski, A. K. "The three faces of leadership: Manager, artist, priest." *John Wiley & Sons*, (2009).
20. Cole, A. L., Knowles, J. G., & Promislow, S. "Using an arts methodology to create a thesis or dissertation." *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues*. SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008. 511-526.
21. Kolb, D. A. "Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development." *FT press*, (2014).
22. Leavy, P. "Method meets art: Arts-based research practice." *Guilford publications*, (2020).
23. Mezirow, J. "Transformative dimensions of adult learning." Vol. 350. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-bass, (1991).
24. McNiff, S. "Art-based research." *Jessica Kingsley Publishers*, (1998).
25. Nissley, N. "Arts-based learning at work: economic downturns, innovation upturns, and the eminent practicality of arts in business." *Journal of Business Strategy* 31.4 (2010): 8-20.
26. Nussbaum, M. C. "Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities-Updated edition." (2016): 1-192.
27. Pratt, M. G., & Ashforth, B. E. "Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work." *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* 309.7 (2003): 327-333.
28. Ryff, C. D. "Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 57.6 (1989): 1069.
29. Schein, E. H. "Organizational culture and leadership." Vol. 2. John Wiley & Sons, (2010).
30. Schiuma, G. "The value of arts for business." *Cambridge University Press*, (2011).
31. Seligman, M. E. "Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being." *Simon and Schuster*, (2011).
32. Taylor, S. S., & Ladkin, D. "Understanding arts-based methods in managerial development." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 8.1 (2009): 55-69.
33. UNESCO. "UNESCO framework for culture and arts education." *World Conference on Culture and Arts Education*. (2024).
34. World Health Organization. "World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all." *World Health Organization*, (2022).

Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Alzuria, I. B. "The Soul Deficit: Art-Based Learning as a Disruptive Humanistic Technology for Leadership, Well-Being and Civic Regeneration." *Sarcouncil journal of Arts humanities and social sciences* 5.6 (2026): pp 1-7.