

Careers in the arts

BY JOANNE WOOD

For a variety of reasons, not least of all the recent economic recession, scholars considering pursuing careers in the arts have traditionally experienced increasing pressure from parents to select other options.



However, government investment into South Africa's arts and culture industry,¹ the projected growth of the creative economy and acknowledgement of this industry as "one of the identified drivers of sustainable economic opportunities and livelihoods for local communities",² as well as a trend towards increased accessibility to the arts, all suggest that a fulfilling future in this sphere is possible. Can we assist students to develop successful careers in the arts and if so, how do we go about it?



Joanne Wood

A multidisciplinary skills set

"Arts qualifications have traditionally lacked focused attention on the development of business skills. When scholars are selecting a tertiary education course, it is imperative that they consider holistic courses that focus on the development of fundamental financial acumen," says Brenda Sara, Life Orientation teacher at St John's Diocesan School for Girls.

Sara represents a new generation of life orientation teachers who take career guidance very seriously. She appreciates the societal shift from the traditional perception of the struggling musician, unemployed actor and destitute artist, towards a modern, well-rounded, artistic professional. This artist runs his own ceramics studio, plays a key role in a company for actors or dancers, or has a small yet dynamic music school that operates from home and contracts to local schools. This artist encompasses a dynamic mixture of skills that balances her artistic and creative flair with key interpersonal, communication and business skills that enable her artistic work to be

competitive in the contemporary economy. According to Aletta de Wal, an artist advisor and marketing strategist from Artist Career Training (an holistic artist support organisation in California, USA), one of the five common traits of a successful artist is the fact that they "understand the entrepreneurial aspects of making a living as an artist".

Anthea Oliver, head of life orientation at Somerset College, states that "in support of scholars interested in pursuing careers within the arts, facilitating the development of a multidisciplinary set of employability skills should be an integral component of a school's life orientation programme. We have implemented the *Decisions* career development manuals in our school. Designed by Achieve Careers, they assist scholars to amass a relevant skills set including networking and problem solving."

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Comprehensive research

I was recently approached by a scholar who was interested in furthering his studies in music. He was adamant that this was his ideal career, but was under considerable pressure from his parents to pursue something more 'respectable', such as law or accountancy. Their rational concern hinged on financial and job security.

Upon being questioned further, the scholar admitted that he had conducted only cursory research into his chosen field. I urged him to undertake an informational interview (a structured conversation with pre-determined questions) with at least three young, dynamic professionals within the field who have studied music and are making a success of their career. Armed with their feedback, he will have a far more plausible case with which to approach his apprehensive parents and is likely also to address some of his own concerns, simultaneously.

According to Sharon Brummer, head of life orientation at Redhill School: "Active research, such as speaking to professionals within the field, is an effective way of understanding the breadth and variety of career options available within the arts."

Financial feasibility and your dream job

A fulfilling career is one that allows an individual to utilise and develop her strengths while simultaneously enabling her to explore her passions and establish financial independence. It is imperative for all three components to be present, in order to attain career satisfaction.

Characteristically, within the arts, the 'interests' or 'passions' component is dominant. Scholars need to analyse critically whether this is the case for them and, if so, how can other two components can be developed? According to Melanie Williams, head of life orientation at Cannons Creek Independent School: "The artist is usually energised by the 'stuff they love to do'. Historically, famous artists, dancers, writers and musicians – Van Gogh, for example – lived in poverty, suffering in order to express themselves creatively. As a result, parents fear a future of financial struggle for their artistically talented offspring. Creative scholars need to spend time brainstorming exactly what they are good at (i.e. establishing a niche) and identifying appropriate income strategies."

Twenty-six-year-old South African Mark Kay is turning the idea of the artistic financial struggle on its head. Having achieved an Honours degree in speech and drama, Kay is one of four directors of the Actors Unemployed Company (AUC), a small production house founded in 2007 and growing exponentially ever since. The like-minded team of young theatrical dynamos makes it their goal to "enjoy ourselves, while still being able to pay the rent". Adds Kay: "My brother is a stockbroker and was traditionally the successful one in the family. However, with the recent recession, even his industry has experienced setbacks, while the AUC has had a positive year financially. I am fortunate to be in the position of owning my own company, enabling me to do what I love while achieving financial success."

No place for whimsy

There are countless other examples of young, dynamic South Africans who are making successful careers for themselves within the arts and who can mentor pupils on the cusp of



leaving school. Planning for a career in an arts-related field requires thorough research and planning, and should not be based on whimsical aspirations, leaving success to chance. If scholars have a passion for the arts, and are able to couple this with broader skills and business understanding, their creative talents can ensure a profitable and fulfilling career. It's up to

Life Orientation teachers so assist students to compile a well-signposted road map for their futures. ❀

Founder of Achieve Careers, Joanne Wood, career development coach and employability specialist, authors the Decisions career development manuals and programme for Life Orientation teachers and Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 scholars, currently implemented by 24 schools in South Africa. For more information, please visit www.achievecareers.co.za or contact Wood at cell phone: + (27) 82 3000 493.

References:

1. See http://www.dac.gov.za/projects/investing_culture.htm.
2. Joffe, A. and Newton, M. (2007) *The Creative Industries in South Africa*. Report prepared by the Human Sciences Research Council for the Department of Labour, available at: http://www.labour.gov.za/downloads/documents/research-documents/Creative%20Industries_DoL_Report.pdf.

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