

# Cultivating Core Competencies for Arts Management Professionals in the Cultural Industry: A Case Study of Exhibition Curation Practice

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**Abstract:** Within the transformative context of the global cultural and creative industries, the role of the arts manager has evolved from administrator to strategic leader, entrepreneur, and community facilitator. This necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of professional training paradigms. This paper synthesizes extant literature and practice-based analyses to construct a comprehensive framework for cultivating the core competencies required for contemporary arts management professionals. Identifying five interconnected competency clusters—Strategic Vision & Critical Thinking, Project Management & Logistical Execution, Audience Engagement & Digital Literacy, Financial Acumen & Entrepreneurialism, and Ethical Leadership & Collaborative Practice—the paper posits exhibition curation as a critical pedagogical nexus for integrated competency development. Through a detailed examination of the exhibition lifecycle, the paper delineates how this multifaceted practice serves as a microcosm of the cultural sector's demands. It further proposes innovative, experiential pedagogical strategies—including deep Project-Based Learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and structured industry immersion—and addresses prevailing challenges in academia. The paper concludes by advocating for an agile, hybrid educational model that bridges theory, practice, and ethics to prepare future professionals for leadership in an increasingly complex and dynamic field.

**Keywords:** Cultural and Creative Industries; Arts Management Education; Core Competencies; Talent Development; Exhibition Curation Practice; Experiential Learning; Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

**DOI:**10.12417/3029-2344.25.11.020

## 1. Introduction

The 21st-century cultural and creative industries have undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from a peripheral, heritage-focused sector to a central engine of economic growth, urban innovation, and socio-cultural discourse. This sector is now characterized by technological disruption, audience democratization, blurred boundaries between commercial and non-profit models, and heightened scrutiny regarding social impact and ethical practices. Within this complex ecosystem, the arts manager operates at a critical intersection, tasked with stewarding cultural value while ensuring organizational viability and public relevance.

This evolution renders traditional, siloed educational models insufficient. The contemporary arts manager must be a polymath: a visionary who can curate compelling narratives, a strategist who can navigate market and policy environments, an operational expert who can manage complex projects, a communicator who can engage diverse publics across multiple platforms, and an ethical leader who can address issues of inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural equity. Consequently, the central challenge for higher education and professional development is to design pathways that effectively cultivate this hybrid, integrated skill set.

This paper addresses this challenge by investigating the following research question: What constitutes the core competency framework for arts management professionals in the contemporary cultural industry, and how can these competencies be holistically developed through practice-oriented pedagogies, with a specific focus on the integrative practice of exhibition curation? Exhibition curation is selected as the primary case study due to its inherent complexity. It encapsulates the entire spectrum of arts management work—from conceptual ideation and scholarly research to financial planning, logistical orchestration, audience interpretation, and public presentation—making it an ideal laboratory for competency synthesis.

## 2.A Framework of Core Competency Clusters

Based on a synthesis of management theory, cultural policy, and professional standards, we propose a framework of five dynamic and interdependent competency clusters essential for effective arts management.

Table 1: Core Competency Clusters for Arts Management Professionals

Competency Cluster	Key Constituents	Manifestation in Exhibition Curation
Strategic Vision & Critical Thinking	Contextual & trend analysis, conceptual development, critical theory application, mission alignment, long-term planning.	Formulating a curatorial thesis; positioning an exhibition within artistic, social, and institutional contexts; making critical selections that advance a narrative.
Project Management & Logistical Execution	Planning, scheduling, budgeting, risk management, contract negotiation, installation design, conservation oversight, crisis response.	Managing the end-to-end exhibition timeline; coordinating loans, transportation, and insurance; overseeing safe installation and de-installation.
Audience Engagement & Digital Literacy	Audience research & segmentation, interpretive planning (text, audio, multimedia), marketing strategy, social media/digital content creation, data analytics, emerging tech application (VR/AR).	Developing accessible didactic materials; designing public programs; executing digital marketing campaigns; creating online extensions or interactive gallery experiences.
Financial Acumen & Entrepreneurialism	Budget development, fundraising/grant writing, sponsorship cultivation, pricing, revenue generation (merchandise, events), financial monitoring, innovative business modeling.	Securing project funding from diverse sources; managing exhibition income and expenditure; exploring commercial partnerships and ancillary revenue streams.

These clusters are not discrete but interact fluidly. For instance, an ethical decision about community collaboration (Ethical Leadership) directly impacts the exhibition narrative (Strategic Vision) and its associated public programs (Audience Engagement).

## 3. Exhibition Curation as an Integrative Pedagogical Nexus

Exhibition-making provides a bounded yet complex "real-world" project that forces the integration of all five competency clusters, transforming abstract knowledge into applied, professional judgment.

### 3.1 The Exhibition Lifecycle: A Stage-Gate Model for Competency Development

The process of creating an exhibition mirrors a comprehensive product development cycle, offering a structured yet adaptive framework for learning.

Phase 1: Research & Conceptualization (Incubating Strategy): This phase demands deep critical thinking. Students must identify a relevant theme, conduct rigorous art historical and contextual research, and formulate a defensible curatorial argument. This involves analyzing cultural trends, engaging with theory, and aligning the concept with institutional or project goals.

Phase 2: Planning & Resource Mobilization (Mastering Operations): Here, the vision meets reality through project management and financial acumen. Tasks include drafting detailed budgets, creating production schedules, writing grant proposals, and negotiating loans and contracts. This phase teaches resource constraint management and the translation of creative ideas into actionable, funded plans.

Phase 3: Coordination & Production (Executing Collaboration): This operational core tests logistical execution and collaborative practice. Students must coordinate a multitude of actors—artists, shippers, insurers, designers, fabricators, technicians—often under significant time pressure. It cultivates skills in communication, negotiation,

problem-solving, and team leadership.

Phase 4: Interpretation & Engagement (Connecting with Publics): The focus shifts to audience engagement and digital literacy. Students develop interpretive texts, plan educational events, design marketing materials, and potentially create digital content. This phase emphasizes empathy, clear communication for diverse audiences, and strategic use of digital tools to extend reach and impact.

Phase 5: Evaluation & Legacy (Leading with Reflection): The final phase reinforces strategic thinking and ethical leadership. Students collect and analyze visitor feedback, assess financial and social impact, and consider the exhibition's legacy (e.g., publications, digital archives, community relationships). This fosters a culture of evidence-based reflection and responsible stewardship.

### **3.2 Bridging Divides: Theory, Praxis, and Ethics**

Curatorial projects dissolve artificial boundaries between academic disciplines. The practical challenge of, for example, presenting complex post-colonial theory in an accessible manner requires simultaneously applying scholarly insight (Critical Thinking), crafting clear language (Audience Engagement), and doing so in partnership with source communities (Ethical Leadership). This integrative pressure is what cultivates the nuanced, holistic decision-making capability characteristic of expert practice.

## **4. Effective Pedagogical Pathways and Strategic Implementation**

To operationalize this competency framework, arts management education must embrace a suite of learner-centered, experiential pedagogies.

### **4.1 Deep Project-Based Learning and Simulated Environments**

Real-World Projects: Partnering with museums, galleries, or festivals to give student teams ownership of an actual exhibition component is paramount. This "high-stakes" learning builds accountability, resilience, and professional networks.

Immersive Simulations: Complex professional scenarios can be safely rehearsed in the classroom. Examples include simulated loan agreement negotiations, press conferences for a controversial exhibition, or budget crisis meetings. These exercises develop soft skills and strategic reasoning under pressure.

### **4.2 Interdisciplinary Collaboration as a Core Methodology**

Arts management is inherently interdisciplinary. Structuring courses as collaborative studios where arts management students work alongside peers from fine arts, design, business, technology, and communications mimics professional reality. This teaches the "language translation" necessary for cross-functional teamwork and fosters innovative, holistic solutions.

### **4.3 Structured Industry Immersion and Reflexive Practice**

Moving beyond observational internships, programs should design "learning placements" with clear academic objectives and mentorship. Coupled with guided critical reflection—through journals, portfolios, or viva voce examinations—this ensures that practical experience is analyzed, theorized, and integrated into the student's professional identity.

### **4.4 Embedded Ethics and Global Consciousness**

Ethical reasoning must be woven throughout the curriculum, not confined to a single course. Using case studies on repatriation, controversial sponsorship, or environmental impact of exhibitions prompts students to grapple with real-world dilemmas. Similarly, incorporating global case studies and fostering international collaborations prepare students for a transnational cultural sector.

Table 2: Mapping Pedagogical Strategies to Competency Development

Pedagogical Strategy	Implementation Example	Primary Competencies Engaged	Assessment Approach
Deep PBL	Curating a public exhibition from pitch to opening.	All clusters- Comprehensive integration and application.	Final exhibition, project portfolio, stakeholder feedback, reflective essay.
Crisis Simulation	Managing a simulated art damage incident or PR crisis.	Strategic Thinking, Collaborative Practice, Project Management.	Performance in simulation, after-action review report.
Interdisciplinary Design Sprint	A one-week sprint with mixed teams to prototype a digital exhibition extension.	Collaborative Practice, Audience Engagement/Digital Literacy, Entrepreneurialism.	Team prototype, pitch presentation, peer assessment of collaboration.
Ethical Dilemma Workshop	Role-playing a board debate on accepting a donation with problematic origins.	Ethical Leadership, Critical Thinking, Collaborative Practice.	Position paper, facilitation of discussion, ethical framework analysis.

### 5.Challenges and Future Directions for the Field

Implementing this holistic model faces significant institutional and systemic hurdles: Academic Rigidity: Departmental silos, inflexible credit systems, and research-focused faculty reward mechanisms often stifle interdisciplinary, time-intensive PBL initiatives. Resource Intensity: Authentic projects require substantial funding, access to collections/venues, and technological infrastructure, creating equity issues among institutions. Pace of Change: The rapid evolution of digital tools, audience behaviors, and cultural policies can outpace curriculum revision cycles. Assessment Complexity: Developing robust methods to evaluate soft skills, teamwork, and ethical reasoning remains pedagogically challenging.

Future development must focus on: Hybrid and Agile Program Design: Leveraging online modules for core theory, combined with intensive in-person workshops and practicums. Developing stackable micro-credentials for lifelong learning. Academic-Industry Co-Creation: Establishing joint professorships with practitioners, and creating advisory boards of industry leaders to ensure curriculum relevance. Emphasis on "Future Literacies": Systematically integrating training in data analytics, digital storytelling, platform economies, environmental sustainability, and inclusive design into the core curriculum. Building Resilient and Ethical Mindsets: Beyond skills training, fostering adaptability, resilience, and a deep commitment to the ethical and social responsibilities of cultural stewardship.

### 6.Conclusion

The dynamic realities of the global cultural industries demand arts management professionals who are integrators, strategists, and ethical agents. The core competency framework—spanning strategic, operational, engagement, financial, and ethical domains—provides a blueprint for this new professional profile. Exhibition curation, as a synthesizing practice, offers a powerful and pedagogically rich vehicle for developing these competencies in an integrated, applied manner.

The path forward requires a committed shift in educational philosophy and structure. By embracing experiential, interdisciplinary, and reflective pedagogies within flexible and industry-connected learning environments, academic programs can move beyond imparting discrete knowledge to cultivating the sophisticated, adaptive, and values-driven professional judgment necessary to lead the cultural sector with resilience, innovation, and social

purpose. The goal is not merely to train technicians for the industry as it is, but to empower visionary leaders capable of shaping what it can and should become.

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