

Heads, Hearts, Hands

What is it?

The Heads, Hearts, and Hands approach is a practice popularized by Dr. Jane Vella, an educator and author who focused on adult learning and the development of holistic education strategies.

It focuses on developing three key areas of intelligence to promote well-rounded growth: intellectual (Head), emotional (Heart), and practical (Hands). These three elements help individuals engage in learning, problem-solving, and action in a balanced way, addressing the cognitive, emotional, and practical dimensions of human experience.

Heads (cognitive aspect)

This part refers to the knowledge, thinking, and intellectual understanding that come from your mind. It involves critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to understand complex ideas. It is about acquiring knowledge, reasoning through problems, and making informed decisions.

Hearts (emotional aspect)

This part represents the emotional and relational aspects of learning. It involves fostering empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence. It highlights the importance of understanding feelings, forming meaningful connections with others, and developing a strong sense of purpose or motivation. The heart encourages emotional awareness and helps people relate to their work or learning on a deeper, more personal level.

Hands (practical aspect)

This part refers to the practical application of knowledge and emotions in real-world scenarios. It emphasizes action, skills development, and the ability to implement ideas. This is about putting what is learned into practice, whether through physical tasks, hands-on projects, or engaging in community and professional activities that require applied skills.

How to use it?

To use this practice in your learning or work, try following these steps to balance your thinking, emotions, and actions:

Engage your head (thinking)

- **What:** Focus on understanding and gaining knowledge. Ask yourself questions to encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and learning.
- **How:** Before making decisions or taking action, make sure you understand the facts, concepts, or information related to the situation. Use reasoning and reflect on different ideas.

Engage your heart (feeling)

- **What:** Connect emotionally to what you're learning or doing. Understand how it makes you feel and how others might feel. Build empathy and motivation.
- **How:** Take time to reflect on why the task or learning matters to you and others. Foster positive emotions like excitement or curiosity, and stay motivated by focusing on the bigger purpose.

Engage your hands (action)

- **What:** Put your knowledge and emotions into practice. Use your skills and take action to apply what you've learned.
- **How:** Try hands-on activities, real-world projects, or practice your skills in everyday situations. Take steps that move your ideas or learning into something tangible.

Examples in arts and culture

1. Pandemic

Let's consider a disabled artists collective using the Heads, Hearts, Hands approach to envision a more caring, inclusive, and accessible future in the arts and culture sector post-pandemic.

Heads: Intellectual understanding

- **What:** Focus on the intellectual and strategic aspects—understanding the barriers disabled artists faced during the pandemic either improved or worsened, and identifying solutions, remedies, or therapies for the future.
- **How:** The group starts by reflecting the intellectual and practical challenges that disabled artists experienced during the pandemic, such as new opportunities or limited access to physical spaces, the digital divide, and the lack of accessible virtual platforms for showcasing their work. They also examine how the pandemic underscored the vulnerability of disabled people in society, including isolation, healthcare access, and economic instability.
- **Impact:** The group collectively studies these issues and uses data and research to understand how systemic change can happen. They discuss how accessibility in real life and virtual platforms can be improved and advocate for digital inclusion, where art platforms and venues offer tools for various disabilities (e.g., captioning, sign language interpretation, audio descriptions) and ensure that the arts are accessible to all.

Hearts: Emotional connection

- **What:** Tap into the emotional and relational aspects—addressing the care, empathy, and solidarity needed to create a more inclusive and supportive arts community.
- **How:** The disabled artists collective shares personal stories about the new forms of care that evolved or the emotional toll of the pandemic, including the feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and the lack of support from the arts community. They focus on nurturing solidarity, empathy, and connection. In group discussions, they share how the arts provided an emotional outlet during the hardest times, whether through creating art, finding solace in others' work, or expressing personal experiences.
- **Impact:** By focusing on heart-centered care, the group commits to building more inclusive, compassionate spaces for disabled artists. They brainstorm ideas for creating mutual aid networks or support groups where disabled artists can share resources, collaborate, and build a sense of community. They focus on how art can be a tool for healing and collective solidarity, ensuring that emotional well-being is prioritized in any future planning for the arts.

Hands: Practical action

- **What:** Focus on tangible, concrete actions—what can be done physically and logistically to create a more caring and accessible post-pandemic arts world.
- **How:** The collective decides to take immediate action by designing accessible art programs and digital platforms. They begin advocating for venues, institutions, and online platforms to adopt universal accessibility standards, including making exhibitions, performances, and workshops more accessible to disabled people. This could mean offering wheelchair access, designing interactive spaces for people with cognitive disabilities, or ensuring that all online events are captioned or signed for D/deaf participants.
- **Impact:** The group also works on creating a new series of workshops and events specifically tailored to D/deaf and disabled artists, focused on skill-building, networking, and showing their work in accessible spaces. They may collaborate with local government and arts organizations to implement accessibility training, ensuring that the arts world is physically and digitally inclusive moving forward.

2. Racism and economic inequality

Let's consider a young Black poet-musician who is navigating the challenges of racism and economic inequality while trying to create and share their art in a world that limits access to affordable housing, performance spaces, and publishing opportunities. Using the Heads, Hearts, and Hands approach, they can begin to strategize a path forward in their journey toward greater equity and expression.

Heads: Intellectual understanding

- **What:** Analyze and understand the systemic factors that contribute to their struggles, especially regarding racism and economic inequality.

- **How:** The young artist examines the structural barriers in place, such as limited access to affordable housing and performance spaces, which disproportionately affect Black artists. They study the ways in which the art world, particularly in publishing and live performances, often privileges more mainstream, white voices, leaving their unique perspective underrepresented. Additionally, they explore the role of economic inequality in limiting opportunities for exposure, training, and resources. They engage with literature, historical context, and movements led by other marginalized artists to understand how these issues have persisted and how others have fought back.
- **Impact:** Through this intellectual analysis, the poet-musician gains clarity on the external forces that influence their work and creativity. This understanding helps them strategize how to overcome these barriers, whether through advocacy, policy change, or creating new ways to access space and platforms.

Hearts: Emotional connection

- **What:** Engage with the emotional aspects of the artist's journey—processing feelings of frustration, resilience, and hope through creative expression.
- **How:** The artist channels their personal experiences of racism and economic struggle into their poetry and music. They reflect on how their identity, culture, and heritage influence their art, but also how systemic inequalities have shaped their life. Through writing and music-making, they express both the pain and strength of their journey. In doing so, they connect emotionally with others who share similar struggles, as well as those who need to hear their story. Their work becomes an act of healing, resistance, and empowerment.
- **Impact:** By connecting with their emotions, the artist is able to tap into a deeper well of creativity. This emotional resonance helps them build a community of like-minded individuals who are similarly affected by racism and inequality. Their work fosters solidarity, empathy, and a collective sense of resilience that can drive social change.

Hands: Practical action

- **What:** Take concrete, actionable steps to address the barriers they face in accessing housing, performance spaces, and publishing opportunities.
- **How:** The poet-musician begins by seeking out grassroots or independent spaces where they can perform, collaborate, and showcase their work. They might reach out to local community centers, art collectives, or organizations that advocate for Black artists and musicians to find affordable venues or residencies. They may also consider forming alliances with other marginalized artists to create cooperative performance and publishing spaces. On a practical level, the artist might use digital platforms to share their work, ensuring that they can reach an audience without relying on traditional publishing channels that often favour established, mainstream voices.
- **Impact:** Through these actions, the artist begins to create the conditions for their success. By focusing on finding accessible spaces and utilizing alternative publishing methods (such as self-publishing, social media, or independent zines), they circumvent traditional barriers to entry. The artist also begins to build a network of allies who support their work, pushing for greater representation and access for young Black poets and musicians in the arts world.

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