

Art in Education 2004

A paper delivered by

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Art bids us [to] touch and taste and hear and see the world . . . and [it] shrinks from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories and sensations of the body.

— W. B. Yeats

The status of art programs in schools has been the subject of several recent inquiries. While artists in the schools and art initiatives, such as Art Connections and Young Audiences, were very popular in the 70s and 80s, there has been a steady erosion of their financial support throughout the nation. Recently, art programs have received some financial support in New Mexico, and now we are in a position to once again explore our extraordinarily rich cultural heritage.

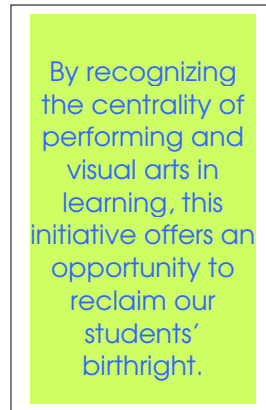
My comments tonight address the centrality of human creativity throughout our lives. The participation of students in the arts, music, and in literary activities, beginning with their preschool years and continuing throughout their educational career, is critical to their becoming fully realized human beings. The current single-minded and narrow emphasis on quantifiable verbal and mathematical skills prevents many teachers from sharing their own passions and gifts, as they reflect the full breadth of our common humanity.

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Csikszentmihalyi writes of the beginnings of creative life as the cultivation of curiosity and interest, “[C]hildren tend to have the advantage over adults; their curiosity is like a constant beam that highlights and invests with interest anything within range. The object need not be useful, attractive, or precious; as long as it is mysterious it is worthy of attention” (1997).

It is this curiosity that can be easily deadened by rote learning and unvarying routine. A classroom that fully reflects the diversity of human endeavors engages children through art activities; they are able to unify feeling and thought, imagination and discipline, fantasy and reality. Through the experience of shaping clay as toddlers and keeping paints and brushes at the ready, learning the first position in ballet, the do-re-mes of music, or the language of poetry, children learn using all of their senses and multiple intelligences.

There has been a sustained synchronicity between the ways in which intelligence has been measured through a single numerical IQ Test and the overwhelmingly verbal emphasis of traditional classrooms. This relationship was opened with Howard Gardner's introduction of the concept of multiple intelligences. In 1983 he



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proposed that human cognition is multifaceted and that, rather than thinking of human intelligence as a unified capacity, we should think of it as an ensemble of varied capacities. The impact of his work has helped to enrich educational experiences for children who learn through movement, through visualizations, who respond to music, those with verbal powers of imagination, or those who think in logical constructs. There are schools throughout the country that have integrated multiple teaching/learning strategies into their core programs, but with the recent emphasis on teaching based on controlled outcomes, that is, teaching to the test, these exciting possibilities had to be set aside. Teachers are now fighting for a chance to revisit and reincorporate these more diverse approaches in their curriculums.

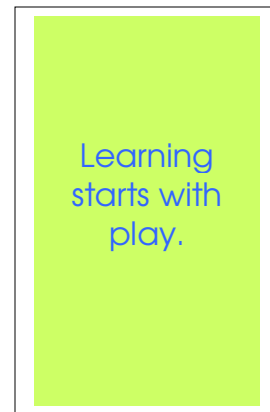
It is in this context that the initiative by the Institute for Education in the Arts is particularly welcome. By recognizing the centrality of performing and visual arts in learning, this initiative offers an opportunity to reclaim our students' birthright.

Learning starts with play. In creating imaginary situations, children explore their own needs as the complex interactions of the environments that surround them. Jerome Bruner emphasized that play is the child's way of working at understanding the world (1976). Researchers have identified different forms of play making distinctions between bodily, hands-on, pretend, and dramatic (Saracho 1992). They have emphasized the strong satisfaction that children experience when engaged in play, which contrasts with activities motivated and rewarded by adults (like putting away toys, or brushing one's teeth).

Young children both reproduce and creatively rework their experiences. Through creative imagination they shape their future while sorting and reorganizing their past. Children who are fully supported emotionally and physically play with intensity and inventiveness. But such behavior can be dampened through inadequate parenting by overworked or depressed caregivers, and through routine or rigid classroom activities.

Play nourishes creative imagination. At a very early age children experiment with substitute objects, like a stick for a horse. As they get older their pretend play includes more ambitious activities, and may require more elaborate artifacts. Their creativity is strongly sensual in nature and connects to their needs and fantasies. Creativity is rooted in pretend play, and it is supported as well by books, toys, music, movies, television, and video games. But play is under siege now, since it is thought to take time away from more structured learning.

Early play may reveal domain-specific interests and strengths, or what we increasingly call those multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983). Interests in visual activities, such as those displayed by Picasso who as a young child drew incessantly, are not confined



to just those children characterized as prodigious. According to family legend his first word was “piz” for lapis, the Spanish word for drawing pencil (John-Steiner 1997). Howard Gardner emphasizes the importance of painstaking observation as part of the development of visual facilities, and he suggests that mental imagery plays a significant role in spatial and metaphoric thinking (1983).

The vividness with which childhood visual images are remembered is evoked by the Viennese painter Oscar Kokoschka who writes in his autobiography, “Though I was unable to reach the wall from the cot, I remember the pattern of wallpaper on it—a scattering of gaily colored flowers. . . . For as long back as I can recall, I have lived in space, not in time” (John-Steiner 1997).

The immersion in early, domain-specific experience is also recalled by many musicians. The great Spanish cellist Pablo Casals remembered:

From early infancy I was surrounded by music. . . . To hear my father play the piano was an ecstasy for me. When I was two or three, I would sit on the floor beside him as he played, and I would press my head against the piano in order to absorb the sound more completely. (John-Steiner 1997)

The core abilities for music include pitch and rhythm. The sensory and physical nature of music making, even with the simplest of instruments, provides immediate feedback. In schools, music education is the most prevalent form of arts education, so I will focus on some of the claims made by music educators to illustrate the benefits of the arts for young learners.

Music making starts in the mutually reinforcing vocalizations between mothers and infants. The anthropologist Dissanayake (2000) considers this form of interaction the beginning of intimacy and aesthetic understanding. The cognitive and cortical benefits of music have been widely discussed. The music educator Lori Custodero suggests that music as an aural art . . . involves hearing, seeing, and feeling cues regarding musical goals” (2002).

The multi-modal experience of music making also contributes, Custodero suggests to the bridging of “the schism between product and process” (2002). It is an outstanding example of a domain in which affective and cognitive factors are deeply intertwined.

Musical talent can manifest itself quite early as illustrated by the biographical accounts of many famous performers and composers. Aaron Copland first expressed his interest in music by listening to his sister play the piano and by making up his own songs. As a young teenager, he even arranged for his own piano teacher. (John-Steiner 1997) In cultures where musical education is available for large numbers of children, for instance the students of the Suzuki method developed in Japan, musical abilities seem universal among children when contrasted with what is usually assumed to be the case in our society. Gardner suggests that the cortical representation of music starts in the right hemisphere, but with increased knowledge and training it is mediated by the left hemisphere of the brain (1983).

Children’s spontaneous expressiveness is part of their playful capacities, and, within their range of favored activities, they frequently reveal a profile of particular strengths and weaknesses that may help adults to make choices with them toward further development of their potential. One such form of development occurs through musical education in schools and also in after-school programs. This kind of education provides many benefits for school-age children. When playing and performing on a musical instrument, their sense of self-confidence is strengthened, connections to other children are encouraged, and they are engaged in a discipline that is both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. These children also strongly tend to have a deeper sense of personal resilience, and they do “better” later in life.



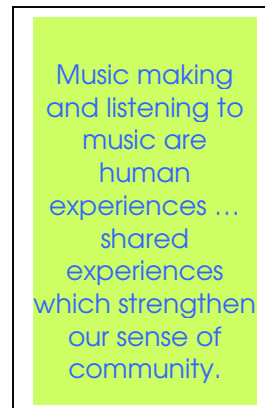
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In contrast to activities that are constantly tested, such as spelling where the correct reproduction of an expected standard is reinforced, in art activities children experience the pleasure of the medium. The appeal of newly mixed paints, the joy of costumes in theatre productions, the beauty of bodies in motion during dance all contribute to pleasure through activity and to the staying power of engagement and intense effort. These experiences are frequently characterized as “flow” or the effective balance of skills and challenges (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Custodero identified certain qualities of the musical experience as contributing to flow. These include the learner’s contribution to the activity:

Prolonged duration—that is giving children time to “achieve a depth of understanding, and to utilize sensory feedback provided by the activity”; the structuring of activities that are meaningful to learners, such as playing familiar songs on the piano; playing instruments and moving to music also deepened the experience of flow. (2002)

Music making and listening to music are human experiences which make us resilient when faced with rejection, illness, and loss; these are also shared experiences which strengthen our sense of community.

Performing in a group fosters shared pride and collaborative engagement. The art educator Marjorie Wilson documented, in a high school art room, the students’ sense of “communitas” (John-Steiner 1997). They joined each other after school hours and experimented with drawing and painting. At times they had



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models available, and occasionally they were exposed to artists in residence. It was their involvement in these activities that strengthened the bonds between them. They made their art room their sanctuary (John-Steiner 1997). When creative young people form a

community, they become more aware of themselves, they profit from the criticism of their peers, and they learn new ways to claim their experience:

In the Southwest, young Indian children hear traditional tales at bedtime, especially during the long winter months, from the grandfather, who is the cherished storyteller. These quiet times together create a very special bond across generations, and are frequently recalled in interviews and in poems by American Indians. One teacher told me that she used to run to fetch very cold water from the pump for her tired grandfather when he came into the house after working in the fields. She would do this even if a friend had asked her to come and play together: “But, then he is my Grandpa, and he is the source of my Indian stories. Whenever I come to him, no matter how tired he is, if I need an Indian story, he never tells me to go out and play with your friend.” (John-Steiner 1997)

The role of friendship groups, collaborative circles, and creative dyads have been and still are studied intensively by sociologists and psychologists. In these studies we have documented the continuing need of risk-taking, creative individuals to combine solitary labor with sustained, nourishing connections to others.

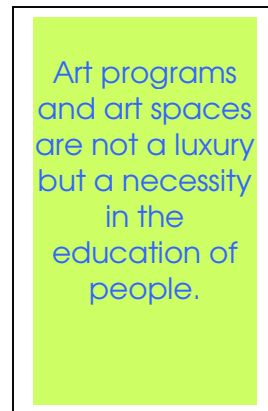
Another important theme in creativity research relevant to arts programs in the schools relates to theories of motivation. Teresa Amabile has argued that intrinsic motivation—engaging in an activity because of the pleasure that it provides—enhances creative efforts, while extrinsic motivation activities, which are governed by the expectation of public recognition or money, decreases creativity. In one study of young writers, she found that even a simple manipulation could reduce the creativity of writers in an extrinsically motivated group.

While the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has been an important one in creativity literature, more recent work indicates that these two forms of

motivation can be additive rather than antagonistic. In looking more deeply at the relationship between the two, Amabile found, when asking children what was really important to them, that:

Well, I like to get good grades, and when I bring home a good report card, my parents always give me money. But that's not what's really important. I like to learn a lot. There are a lot of things that interest me, and I want to learn about them, so I work hard because I enjoy it. (1990)

It is through the sustained participation in the arts that these two forms of motivation combine, and the learner's potential becomes more fully realized. In elective group activities such as band, drama, debate, dance, chess, and journalism, the collaborative relationships formed through peer interactions have long-term developmental consequences. It is in the context of these kinds of activities that the learner's own agency emerges and a level of competence and confidence is achieved that otherwise could not happen. Not only does this impact the students' future ability to "work" productively, but also these activities also directly and positively affect their ability to care about and make connections with others.



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In this all too brief opportunity to speak with you, I hope to have made the argument that art programs and art spaces are not a luxury but a necessity in the education of people that we, as teachers, hope will become fully actualized human beings.

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