

The Arts Contribution to Adolescent Learning

by Read M. Diket

When the arts are a part of the core curriculum, adolescents approach learning, as a whole, much more seriously.

My desire to make the arts central to a broad education has permeated my professional life. When I was a doctoral candidate, graduate students joined me—at my daughter's urging—to provide Saturday morning arts classes for the international mix of children in the often-cramped campus family housing. Using the housing community center as a base, the children performed plays, made sculptures, wrote and illustrated comic books, and choreographed dance. Though we had little funding, simple materials allowed us to do wonderful things. Middle school students were especially drawn to our classes and were among the most faithful, productive young artists.

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The Arts in Education

The importance of arts education has long been recognized. Years ago, John Dewey (1934, vii) argued that, in arts education, “learning is controlled by two great principles: one that participation is something inherently worth while, or undertaken on its own account; the other is perception of the relation of means to consequences. . . . A third consideration [focuses on]

Left Behind initiative, which provides assistance for arts education as an integral part of elementary *and* secondary school curricula. The legislation includes provisions for increasing student competency in the arts. Appropriately, the arts under the initiative are expected to contribute to student learning in general—through artistic experience and specific content taught by field specialists in distinct disci-

phor, in composition, a number of elements—color, line, shape, value, and space—reinforce the form or physical presentation of an idea. Design-communication components—emotive signs, cultural symbols, pictorial content, and story narratives—interact with a viewer’s memory to provide a sense of the art. Within the design of education, the arts communicate ideas, captivate the imagination, contextualize information, provide open frames for viewing the world, and widen perspectives.



skill and technique.” Today, the arts are taught in schools as disciplines providing unique cores of understandings, and fostered as curricular enhancements for learning through other school subjects. The skills and techniques that Dewey considered integral to the arts offer to engaged learners alternative languages and innovative strategies.

The arts are among core academic subjects under the No Child

plines, and also as contributory artistic strategies posed by teachers in other core subject areas.

Though the “No Child” legislation’s emphasis on high-stakes testing in reading and math could work counter to arts education in schools, it can work positively if teachers in other subject areas recognize the value of artistic understandings and seek to incorporate the arts into classroom learning plans. To use an art meta-

Participation in the Arts

Teachers easily can associate basic forms of artistic expression and communication with multiple learning outcomes. The unique media and processes of the arts intrigue learners to dig deeper for meaning. Art forms have structural components that readily can be discussed in the classroom, and these components parallel other symbol systems. The arts convey cultural understandings without demanding uninformed judgment about those who make the objects. Finally, artistic activity also carries narrative possibilities and historical connections beyond the object.

Because the arts allow for direct human expression, they engage a broad spectrum of students. The Visual Arts Consortium secondary study (Diket, Sabol, and Burton 2001; Diket, Sabol, Burton, Thorpe, and Siegesmund 2002) of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that eighth graders’ active engagement with the arts in and outside of school significantly impacted their achievement scores. For high school students, studies indicated a strong correlation between arts study and SAT scores (Winner and

Hetland 2001; Deasy 2002). The arts provide rich curricular components at school; and partnerships with agencies outside of school link the specific aims of education, including the arts, to the general development of the nation's youth.

The importance of the arts cannot be understated among expectations held for secondary-level study. The knowledge base—ideas that adolescent learners come to understand through school study, the flexibility of their knowledge-gaining strategies, and their ability to reason in a complex society—apparently gestates during this fertile period of educational development. The arts offer the most compelling and accessible representations of what people desire, pursue, hold dear, revere, and reject. If young people cannot interpret meaning directly from cultural forms and communicate using the symbolic systems provided by the arts, they often cannot think beyond what others have already codified for them.

The youth culture emphasizes and relies on visual, auditory, and kinesthetic involvement. Through various presentational modes (visual and performance art, critical viewing, and participatory experience with cultural forms), teachers and students read culture—which requires spatial reasoning, constructing, and talking about meanings. When youthful readings of the surrounding culture are accurate and astute, the information often contributes positively to adolescent actions. Adolescents can create artistic products, using diverse art forms, that reveal otherwise illusive nuances of youth culture and wider understandings about adult societies and the flux in cultural sys-

tems. Facilitating teachers can observe much of this pursuit, particularly during student portfolio development or preparations for performances.

The arts offer adolescents insight into the deeper meaning of culture, illuminating basic values and beliefs underlying public presentations and built into cultural artifacts. Arts help them understand themselves and their surroundings. In addition, adolescent art and conversations about art can be a window into the meanings and multiple associations experienced by young people—revealing otherwise unknowable details and complex webs of environmental influence. Through frequent classroom reflection, both teachers and adolescents gain a sense of the collective psychology of youth and see its relationship to that of the adult world.

Though basic artistic understanding develops through core school classes and everyday experiences, proficiency requires repeated artistic experiences and multiple observational opportunities. Through arts education, young people gain knowledge, skill, and understanding of the world—constituting “cultural capital” and fostering a sense of belonging to and understanding of multiple and nested cultures. From an artistic perspective, adolescents can grapple with personal and cultural conflict, interpret emotive and expressive intent, identify common elements in disparate cultural presentations, and locate the self in a complex of worldviews.

In one model, art that teens created at school facilitated discussion about violent images (Diket and Mucha 2002). The model's pre-

dominant feature was talking with students about their art rather than about themselves. Making art the referent enabled talk on many levels and facilitated closer and more consistent communication between adults and students. Using this model, adults can guide young students through concrete to abstract levels of thought about elements in work, ideas, or expression and foster wider connections to historical and contemporary art exemplars. When art appears disturbing, the object informs discussion of an image and its contents, and consideration of what students know about and expect in a volatile world.

From highly engaging, stimulating, and thoughtful encounters with art, students initiate and sustain interest in art as a mode of personal expression and an enduring venue for creativity. With at-risk teens, the impact is especially profound; these students make strong gains in the areas of personal identity, increased focus at school, and goal setting that permeate other parts of their lives (Fiske 1999; Deasy 2002). Ideally, artistic experiences should extend beyond school into community venues, either as school-sponsored extracurricular events or through community and arts agencies. Sustained artistic engagement is key to positive changes in the ways at-risk teens see themselves in the world.

Arts in General Education

The arts permeate other core school subjects. Mathematics requires spatial reasoning, visualization techniques, and figural representation. Connections have been made between the arts and musical form. The process of reading textbooks often relies on

dual coding of word and visual text. Literature in elementary schools uses images to convey important ideas beyond the vocabulary of young readers; newspapers and magazines use similar techniques. History has its issues of voice and inclusion. By educational design, rather than simple development, children learn to encode and decode messages contained in arts media. Because texts for adolescents include fewer images, students must be able to visualize and substantiate the images in their own minds.

Adolescents also learn outside of school—in their homes and communities, among peers, and as participants in the larger culture. Theatre, as art and communication, reaches young people through television, movies, and game environments. Dance and music infuse the MTV world, as well as the more immediate social world of adolescents. Art persists in the lived world of adolescent learners, and they deserve to have the learning tools needed to understand aesthetic content and decode complex meanings. Without guidance, students can misinterpret the milieu around them and subsequently misdirect creative impulses.

Skills and Knowledge Development

The NAEP framework for the arts assessment in 1997 (National Assessment Governing Board 1994) postulates areas for artistic achievement: creating, performing, and responding. In dance and music, all three areas receive emphasis, though many music educators stress performance components. In theatre, creative acts work in combination with per-

formance aspects, and responsive/reflective processes are studied from both the perspectives of audience and crew. In the visual arts, creativity and responsiveness to artwork dominate over attempts to duplicate existing art. Creating, performing, and responding are building blocks for artistic achievement. As students encounter and learn about art in schools, they progress from generative activity to conscious presentation, from recognizable

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presentations to thoughtful articulation of essential ideas and emotive content, and from mere adeptness to genuine expertise.

Standards cannot dictate content, nor do standards specify the nature of learners, the learning setting, or credentials for

teachers. Because of the openness built into standards, conscientious teachers (in the arts and other subject areas) can make choices about specific projects and artistic objects used in their classrooms. Teachers' emphases on historical knowledge, aesthetic ideas, and interpretive strands differ in practice more often than they converge. The new canon is suitable for a pluralistic society. In many ways, this is the value of artistic understanding: there is no single avenue or prepackaged curricula that can be deemed appropriate for all students in all instances. However, art teaches students about thinking, and generating substantial ideas requires workable knowledge and suitable frames for presentation.

The Arts and Outcomes

The United States is edging closer to including the arts in the education of every upper-level student. A briefing report compiled by the National Art Education Association (Hatfield and Peeno 2002) noted that arts credits are required by 64.6 percent of states, though 47 percent of the nation's high school students graduate without visual arts credits. Heath (2001) reported that the top 100 U.S. colleges and universities recognize the import of extra-school learning. Participation in the arts reflects learning patterns and predicts subsequent achievement in higher education, vocations, and civic life (Heath 2001). Increasingly, institutions of higher learning require some form of arts as part of the core undergraduate study.

NAEP's 1997 report (Persky, Sandene, and Askew 1998) created a baseline of data for music, theatre, and the visual arts. The pilot also included dance, but not

enough dance programs could be identified to support national assessment. The NAEP arts assessment revealed tentative, rather than mature, accomplishments for standards in the arts. The Visual Arts Consortium secondary analysis (Diket et al. 2001) provided an in-depth reading for the visual arts data. The consortium investigation identified strong assessment blocks and found significant correlations with artistic achievement for factors associated with adolescent abilities and attitudes, home resources, school culture and climate, instructional resources and practices, and community and arts agencies. Furthermore, study of the visual arts data revealed unique variations among resource and environmental factors supporting and hindering arts achievement for regions of the country. The consortium continues secondary analysis study of high school transcript data from the National Center for Educational Statistics. A transcript report (Roey, Caldwell, Rust, Blumstein, Krenzke, Legum, Kuhn, and Waksberg 2001) indicated that, for graduating seniors, reading achievement increases with the accumulation of arts credits.

Instrumental claims for the arts are “double-edged swords,” though such claims appear to strengthen the position of the arts in schools (Winner and Hetland 2001). While it appears unlikely that arts teaching can be as effective in teaching another subject as the direct teaching of the target subject area, the arts are at the core to accomplish what other subjects cannot teach. Evidence strongly suggests that at-risk students gain entry points with the arts, experience success, make connections, develop strategic

knowledge, and bring heightened interests to other subject areas. Also probable is that all students benefit from an arts-integrated approach, which generates high situational interest (Winner and Hetland 2001; National Arts Education Consortium 2002).

Many teachers are employing the arts effectively in their classrooms. Other subject specialists bring artistic perspectives into their curricula. A number of highly credible Web sites provide entry points for teachers who wish to include the arts in their plans:

- www.getty.edu/artsednet.

The Getty site offers lesson plans, curriculum ideas, image galleries, and discussion formats.

- artsedge.kennedy-center.org. The Kennedy Center provides teaching materials, professional resources, news, standards-based curriculum, and ties for art to other subject areas.

- pzweb.harvard.edu/research/PROPEL.htm. For teachers who want to establish support for external funding, Arts PROPEL offers research papers at modest costs.

A Compelling Contribution

Today’s educators try to understand more about how students learn, determine what is meaningful to students in life beyond school, study why young people appear to learn better when provided interdisciplinary experiences, and predict certain practices that can produce the best results. Teachers can select curricula foci, garner school resources, and provide a rich base of support for students. As educators, they can reach beyond the school for additional resources and actively seek new partner-

ships with parents and community agencies. They can promote parent volunteerism in schools and interest community agencies in educating parents about student learning.

The arts, like other subject areas, must be taught as subjects and as general components of learning. No one would advocate limiting reading to English class, or to compartmentalizing mathematics as a stand-apart curriculum. In the zeal to upgrade education for all students, to neglect the arts would be disadvantageous. Far from taking time away from more serious learning, the arts make a compelling contribution to students’ education.

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