



## ARTS EDUCATION FOR A CHANGING WORLD

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*The arts are fundamental resources through which the world is viewed, meaning is created, and the mind is developed.*

– Elliot W. Eisner

In classrooms across the nation, experience has repeatedly demonstrated that when the arts are taught in a comprehensive program, they are also a medium for developing cognitive skills that carry over into other areas. These include the abilities to see clearly, analyze, reflect, make judgments, and link information from diverse sources to generate new ideas – in other words, to think holistically. They are the same qualities embodied in the broader goals of educational reform, and they are exactly the attributes that children need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The world is in the midst of a very real shift from a predominantly industrial to an information society. Technology is providing increasingly sophisticated tools for communications, and tomorrow's workers will need to know how to manage them in a world of multimedia events.

We can already see the outlines of the world that awaits children coming of age in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They will rub elbows with ever more diverse mixtures of peoples in the classroom, at the work place, and on worldwide communications networks. More and more, they will be working with others on collaborative projects. Conceptualizing and problem solving will be done by teams, and to be an effective member of a team requires understanding of and respect for different cultures and points of view.

To be literate in such a world requires vocabularies of symbols, images, and cues that have become immeasurably larger and more complex. To work and communicate creatively demands the capacity to see outside the boundaries of separate disciplines and grasp the connections that lead to creative solutions.

In a quality arts education program, learning happens along two broad and parallel avenues: in and through the arts. Education in the arts offers those rewards that are inherent in creating and studying works of art themselves. Education through the arts produces those outcomes that are related to learning in other fields. In the new arts education, children learn to convey ideas, feelings, and emotions by creating their own images and performing dance, music, and drama. They learn to decode and understand the historical and cultural messages wrapped up in works of art. They also learn to analyze, critique, and draw reasoned conclusions from what they see and hear, reflecting on the meaning of their perceptions and experiences.

The arts speak their own language, conveying meanings beyond the power of words to express. They are, many educators believe, separate forms of intelligence and ways of knowing – a unique and important literacy. To be able to interpret the meanings of art is to expand one's capacity to intuit, to reason, to make connections, to imagine – that is, to think creatively.

Even before children have been taught to read, they learn to use non-verbal symbols to link experience and understanding. As they advance through formal schooling, they continue to add to and draw on these stored-up images. The depth and quality of this image base – and the extent to which it is enriched by a knowledge of the arts – bears a strong relationship to linguistic competence.

Literacy in the arts can open doorways to understanding other subjects, not only because of the thinking skills they engender, but because of the metaphors they can provide as links to other areas of learning. Educators have been quick to recognize this advantage. Consequently, the arts are becoming a valuable curricular focal point or core, particularly in classrooms where a range of subject matters and disciplines commonly compete for attention and resources. One way to harness this competition to more productive ends is through inter- or cross-disciplinary learning. This approach uses the knowledge and methods of several disciplines in combination to explore a central theme, object, or issue as a framework for building student competence.

In this kind of educational setting, the special language of the arts can act as a kind of unifying force. In an integrated history-driven curriculum, for example, art images bring a particular era to life. The paintings of Romare Bearden or a Faith Ringgold quilt, together with jazz and blues of the period, make vivid a period of African American social history to young students. In mathematics, a Calder mobile may provide a revealing visual analogy for algebraic equations, opening the door to comprehension and learning for millions who are aided by visual interpretations of information.

At the same time, this kind of education fosters the visual literacy required for success in this new information age. Popular culture and the flood of media images it has generated occupy a whole new universe of nonverbal forms of communication. Students must learn to interpret images, symbols, and icons in order to understand subtexts and implicit messages, know the excellent from the inferior, and create effective images and messages of their own. The study of the arts, through a quality arts education program, provides an indispensable base for solid communications skills.

Yet if we are to develop higher-order thinking skills in students, how shall we measure them? Educators are looking for new ways to measure accountability in the classroom. Art teachers have long used a portfolio-based curriculum to measure student progress, finding that it enables students to become perceptive critics of their own and colleagues' performances and helps them to perform at higher levels. These assessment techniques, which are now being introduced into other traditional subject areas, hold promise in preparing students for the workplace, where team building and project or performance-based evaluations can be critical to achieving goals.

As we reform our schools to meet the challenge of the information age, we cannot afford to ignore the arts. Nor can we afford to privilege the traditional approach to learning over the visual – particularly when it is the visual that may make learning more accessible. In vital areas – workplace preparation, interdisciplinary studies, cross-cultural learning, technology skills and understanding, and assessment – comprehensive arts programs are proving that they can provide a strong footing for the kind of education that will prepare our children to reach their full potential in the rapidly changing times ahead.

Of course, no one can predict what the future will hold. Obviously the 21<sup>st</sup> century will present great challenges as well as dazzling opportunities for education. It is reassuring to reflect that arts education is finally taking its rightful place in classrooms and in the lives of students and teachers. The study of the arts, with their potential to communicate ideas, emotions, and values, will continue to be the key to understanding the world's cultures and civilization's legacies. And the arts will always be the lens that enables us to see a rapidly evolving world with a clear and critical eye.

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