

Running Head: THE VALUE OF ART IN EDUCATION

## **The Value of Art in Education**

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## Abstract

Through an examination of advocacy for meaningful art education in American public education, this work seeks to provide insight into art's intrinsic value within our schools. The arts offer students opportunities for learning that other subjects do not provide. A thorough list of the benefits art offers is presented and the four disciplines of visual art are explored: art production with instruction; art criticism (perception and response); art history and cultural heritage, and aesthetics (appreciation through examination and connection.)

Teachers without any formal training in art or art education can integrate meaningful art instruction into their classrooms and, by incorporating a substantive art program that includes the four disciplines, can excite, engage, connect with, and help students make personal meaning of content. An accompanying Web site with pertinent literature and examples provides resources and ideas to help teachers enjoy the benefits of teaching the different art disciplines in the first and second grade classroom.

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## Introduction

Throughout my life, I have seen elementary art education take many forms. The arts, for example, are often used “in service” to other subjects. This kind of integration requires educators to justify the arts and to promise results to increase the potency of core subjects when paired with art. It also, however, dilutes the value and power of teaching art and renders it dispensable. In other situations, teachers are confined to a school art style that relies on “holiday art,” which produces paper pumpkins or valentines, and is devoid of art instruction, initiative, or creativity. Many teachers completely avoid the use of art in the classroom, believing it to be a frivolous distraction from the core curriculum. Even schools that have made art production a priority often neglect its cultural, critical, and historical contexts, and thus present a limited, one-dimensional educational offering. Some specially endowed “arts” schools teach art appreciation and instruction starting in Kindergarten, but these schools are rare in the public realm.

The lack of value educators place on art makes it the first on the chopping block when budgets are tight. Common objections to teaching art are likely familiar in education communities. Jessica Hoffmann Davis identifies seven common objections:

- Value: nice but not necessary
- Talent: only useful for students talented/gifted in art
- Time: barely enough time to teach the “important” subjects
- Measurement: achievement in art can’t be objectively measured
- Expertise: teaching art requires specialists
- Money: art education is too expensive

- Autonomy: arts will survive without art education in schools  
(Hoffmann Davis, 2008)

What is evident in current practices in education regarding art, and in Davis' list, is that school administration and teachers don't see value in art education. They do not know that there is great value in teaching art for art's sake. This capstone project was designed to study advocacy for art education in American public education, illuminating its intrinsic value within our schools. I believe that American students are missing out on the capacities and skills that art would add to their education, and that these capabilities are the very assets we want young people to possess in order for them to be successful and fulfilled throughout their lives.

## Current Educational Values

Let's start by looking at what our educational system currently values. I don't think anyone would deny that the arts are integrated into every aspect of life, but Americans do not appear to see any relationship between the arts and the American bedrock ideals of influence and affluence. As education is seen as a means to prepare students to meet our nation's commercial and corporate needs, American schools have identified a core curriculum that leaves out the arts. The arts have been pegged as frivolous and superfluous (Fowler, 1996, pg. 8), and not recognized as one of many valuable, viable approaches to making sense of and advancing our knowledge of the world around us.

In the West, a bias has long existed toward logical-rational thinking as the best indicator of an intelligent, "well developed" adult. Although in the last few decades, an approach to

cognition that included a broader range of competencies has been considered (Gardner, 2008, pg. 7), in 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act introduced mandatory high-stakes standardized testing that pushed assessment and result-consequences to previously unforeseen heights. Curriculum and assessment were narrowed, pushing teachers back into a focus on the single realm of cognitive intelligence. In an attempt to ensure positive test results, many teachers were forced to return to teaching isolated facts instead of developing higher order abilities in their students (Popham, 2011, pg. 336). Elliot Eisner eloquently drives home the problem:

When students believe the text possesses a single correct meaning, it is not difficult to understand why they would regard their task as discovering the correct one, storing it in their memory bank, and being ready to retrieve it when called upon to do so. Being smart means being right, and being right means knowing the single correct literal answer to questions that might be posed. Such an attitude toward understanding does little to promote intellectual values that celebrate multiple perspectives, judgment, risk taking, speculation, and interpretation. Visual images, music, dance, and other non-literal forms can invite modes of thinking that reflect the foregoing values. When everything is specified, the need to interpret is diminished. (Eisner, 1994 : 71 as sited by Rosewarne Foster, 2003: 6)

I was surprised to find that the U.S. Department of Education strongly advocates for the arts. In fact, the arts are one of the core academic subjects in the NCLB Act. On the ED.gov Web site, it is stated that art benefits intellectual, personal, and social development and boosts fundamental cognitive skills. ED.gov claims that some schools are cutting arts programs because of tight local budgets and blaming the cuts on NCLB. What they fail to mention is that NCLB standardized tests do not include assessment for the arts. With the increased pressure to prepare students for high-stakes tests in the other core subjects, it makes sense that schools have not embraced the Department's endorsement of the arts.

## Elliot Eisner and DBAE

Elliot Eisner is the United States' foremost advocate for art education and has been credited with promoting what has become known as 'discipline-based art education' (DBAE). From early in his career as an art educator, Eisner found that most schools offered a seriously unbalanced approach to education because they overlooked the significance of art. Even before Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, Eisner recognized that conceptions of cognition lacked proper attention to artistic modes of thinking and were therefore inadequate. He argued for multiple "literacies" to be fostered in students, including non-verbal modes of learning and expression (Smith, 2005).

DBAE is a comprehensive, cognitive approach to teaching art. It is comprised of the following:

- Art production with instruction
- Art criticism
- Art history
- Aesthetics

"It is through these four disciplines or areas of study and exploration that students acquire the content that makes art education substantive and consequential" (Dobbs, 1992, pg. 22). DBAE uses a variety of visual images and objects for study, drawing from "fine," applied, crafts and folk arts, fashion design, and photography (Dobbs, 1992, pg. 22). Because the subject matter in art is so broad, this study can be tied to all subjects, harnessing art's ability to excite, engage, connect, and help students make personal meaning of content. Without a disciplinary base, however, art contributes little more than meaningless filler. Art educator Laura H. Chapman calls

this kind of offering instant art and states that it “makes few demands on all who participate in it. It requires minimal skill, little or no knowledge, the least possible effort, and practically no investment of time. Instant art is a sham, but it has become the standard fare American schools offer to most of our young people” (1982, pg. xiii).

Let's take a brief look at the four disciplines in DBAE.

### **Art production (creative expression)**

“Most students don’t learn to make art by just exploring; they need explicit instructions using media, tools, and techniques, and vocabulary with which to communicate” (Cornett, 2007, pg. 177). We don’t just “turn students loose” and expect them to succeed in other subjects. With instruction, we give students a rich new language with which to express themselves. Washington State Art EALR requirements include the understanding and application of arts knowledge and skills, applying the creative process, and communicating through the arts.

### **Art criticism (perception and response)**

Criticism involves closely examining art to construct meaning, and articulating a public response (Cornett, 2007). This begins when we help students to describe what they see and the feelings evoked rather than to make simple declarations of like or dislike. Washington State Art EALR requirements include applying a responding process.

### **Art history (cultural heritage)**

An exploration into the contributions artists and art make to society today and throughout history can help students answer and generate questions to make sense of the world and gain a deeper understanding of art (Dobbs, 1992, pg. 9). Washington State Art EALR requirements

include understanding and applying arts genres and styles from various artists, cultures, and times.

### **Aesthetics (talk about art)**

Eisner defined aesthetics as art appreciation achieved through careful examination with close attention to detail, recognition of the different dimensions and relationships, making personal connections, and exploring in a wider context (Smith, 2005). According to Julie Rosewarne Foster (2003), typically students' first responses are expressed as subjective likes and dislikes, but teachers can help them build on their personal feelings, reactions, and ideas about the artwork to develop into an objective, expansive meaning. Washington State Art EALR requirements include making connections within and across the arts to other disciplines, life, cultures, and work.

Throughout this work, references to art education and art are meant to include the four disciplines of DBAE, but not formal DBAE curriculum.

## **Rationale**

### **Benefits Art Offers**

So what are the unique features of art that can benefit students? The arts offer students opportunities for learning that other subjects do not provide. The intellectual skills and self-discipline used in the arts are required for problem solving and are valued in the world. The many benefits offered in the arts are not easily categorized, as there is much overlap between categories, but I will attempt to present them in a coherent way, based on a model presented in Why Our Schools Need the Arts by Jessica Hoffmann Davis (2008).

### **Agency –**

“Arts invite students to be active participants in their world, rather than mere observers of it” (Fowler, 1996, pg 49). Art offers students an opportunity to create something of their own invention, a tangible product that shows that what they do matters. They can realize the possibilities that they imagine. Art encourages exploration, experimentation, and evaluation of one’s own inventions, and provides a record for imagination, understanding, and personal impact (Hoffmann Davis, 2008, pp. 51, 52).

### **Ambiguity –**

Historically, the core subjects taught in public schools used precise symbols with non-negotiable meanings and called on students to find the right answers to formal questions posed by texts and teachers. Current education practices are leaning towards curriculum that tries to help students make personal meaning of what they are presented. Science Inquiry and Everyday Mathematics are examples of this. Unfortunately, high-stakes standardized testing may interfere with this goal, preventing teachers from letting students ask the questions for fear that they won’t learn the answers to test questions. Because artistic expression and observation are full of ambiguities and inspire questions, higher-order thinking and abstract reasoning are required. Art opens a world of personal experience, possibilities, and imagination. Students learn that there are many ways of seeing (interpretation) and that even when we see things differently, what others think matters (respect) (Hoffmann Davis, 2008, pg. 67).

### **Connection –**

“Children respond to the humanness of art” (Hoffmann Davis, 2008, pg.76). Art allows teachers to make human connections with students, harnessing the arts to excite and engage students, and to add passion and joy to learning. Art allows students to make human

connections to others in school and beyond. Through observing and creating art, students can see commonalities with their peers, contemporary artists, and creators of art throughout history. These connections and a growing sense of caring in students are the seeds for empathy and a base for social responsibility (Hoffmann Davis, 2008).

### Creativity –

“All too rarely are students asked to solve problems, be innovative, and figure out new solutions. The arts are one of the best means for teaching these skills” (Fowler, 1996, pg. 119). Schools rarely call on students to be creative. Rather than teaching and fostering creative thinking, teachers too often tell students what to think; even in the arts, teachers can be distracted by end results and neglect to encourage students to focus on the creative process, engage their imaginations, and make personal interpretations and choices. Art educator Judith M. Burton (1991) emphatically describes the powerful role of imagination:

It is the imagination that allows us to take journeys in thought, to probe the hidden and undiscovered dimension of things, to enlarge our horizons and transcend limits. It is the imagination, moreover, that allows us to play with ideas, draw new conclusions, test them in thought and action, and transform what is empirically given to us in our world into our own personal symbolic realities. The imagination is one of mankind’s most precious capacities, one to which we need to give a privileged place in our schools. (pp. 24-25)

People who think creatively invent, they do not just copy. They find new connections, new possibilities, and new solutions. We are all born with the capacity for creativity but if not called upon or encouraged, it will atrophy (Fowler, 1996, pg. 123).

### Emotion –

“It isn’t intellect that connects us to other people, it is feeling. There is a near miracle here, because as soon as we have a glimpse of another people’s humanity, we have crossed the cultural chasm that separates us” (Fowler, 1996, pg. 53). Of all the disciplines, the arts offer an

explicit venue for expressing and sharing human emotion. In school, art is an acceptable way for students to express how they feel and to be aware of and attentive to the feelings of others. When students think beyond themselves and consider the feelings of others, the foundations for empathy have been laid (Hoffmann Davis, 2008). Whether students are examining art or creating it, together they can recognize their similarities, understand their differences, and ultimately learn respect for one another.

### **Meaning –**

The subject matter of the arts is as broad as life itself, and therefore the arts easily relate to aspects of almost everything else that is taught. But the arts are generally not conveyors of information. Their purpose is not to convey data but to supply insight and wisdom, in a word, meaning. Their power is that they can move us. (Fowler, 1996, pg. 49)

Art helps us make meaning by providing personal connections, intensifying attention, and engaging curiosity; it offers us expressive modes of communication with which to make new meanings. John Dewey, acknowledged as the pre-eminent educational theorist of the twentieth century, believed personal experience and making personal meaning to be essential for learning, and asserted that teachers are responsible for creating conditions in which meaningful experiences can occur (1938, pp. 38, 49). Art is a natural tool for helping students to make meaning in all areas, and according to Dewey, deepening their understanding and cementing their learning. Eisner also believed that students' personal creation of meaning is absolutely vital to the education process.

### **Process Orientation –**

Creating art “allows children to experience first-hand the kind of questions that do not have right or wrong answers (inquiry) and that inform the direction of their thinking on a work in progress (reflection)” (Hoffmann Davis, 2008, pg. 71). As students direct the process – asking

questions like “how will I solve this problem?” “how am I doing?” “what will I do next?” – they see the impact of their thinking and their decisions. This orientation also introduces or strengthens the students’ experience with inquiry as they respond to open-ended questions and explores answers that will affect the artwork (Hoffmann Davis, 2008).

### Multiple Literacies –

A list of the unique benefits of art would not be complete without including multiple literacies. The work of Howard Gardner has helped us understand that human development is not linear across all contents as earlier believed. Gardner tells us that young people may be developmentally advanced in one area but not as accomplished in others. Their strengths and preferences, or what Eisner called “ways of knowing,” may influence how they approach learning and problem solving. The bias in the West for teaching and assessing is heavily weighted toward the logical-rational learner (Gardner, 1990). In writing about Gardner, Fowler tells us that

Because everybody’s mind is different, education should be tailored to the individual. ‘Kids who have language and logic abilities are going to do fine in school,’ Gardner points out. ‘But everyone cannot be smart when you have a single ruler, a single caliber.’ He suggests that schools ‘help kids discover where they do have strengths – what I call a crystallizing experience – and to really encourage that.’ (1996, pg. 40)

Gardner was a major proponent of teaching art in school. He believed that although the arts involve emotions, we should view human artistry as an activity of the mind first and foremost. He asked us to consider teaching the tools and languages of the arts with the same seriousness we use to teach the tools and languages of mathematics, science, or language arts. Emotion can be experienced and expressed once those tools and languages have been learned, rather than as an outlet for uninformed, unstructured releases of emotion. (Gardner, 1990, pp. 9, 10).

## Turning the Model Around

After reading this brief introduction, I hope you will agree that the benefits of teaching art have all too frequently been both misunderstood and overlooked in education. Art education advocates have long argued for a major shift in the emphasis and direction of education. In fact, they argue for reform that changes the methods for teaching core subjects to more closely resemble the way art is taught. As Jessica Hoffmann Davis (2008) contends, “If experiencing and coming to know one’s humanity through art is not as important an exercise as filling in the right blanks on a multiple-choice test, it’s time for us to review and revise our values and not compromise the teaching of art by asking it to be taught to the tests of other domains” (pp. 47,48). Art education advocates seem to agree that engagement and making personal meaning are paramount to significant learning, and that art gives us the tools to attain this goal. “Thoughtful educators are not simply interested in achieving known effects; they are interested as much in surprise, in discovery, in the imaginative side of life and its development as in hitting predefined targets achieved through routine procedures” (Eisner, 2004 as sited by Smith, 2005).

## Taking the Plunge

I fully understand that decision makers in education will have to see the value of art before significant changes in art education are made in our schools. I created a Web site for this project to help teachers begin to incorporate art to make meaningful changes for students in individual classrooms, without having to wait for a state- or nation-wide, top-down incorporation of arts into education. You may be concerned that most teachers are not trained to teach art; most of us didn’t receive comprehensive training in and exposure to art in our schooling and therefore have little or no confidence in our abilities. Because art is not valued, it has been OK to say “I

can't do art." We have been victims of the "born with talent" myth that told us art is for a gifted few and have overlooked the fact that learning new skills comes from exposure, effort, practice, and hard work. Moving forward, teachers can explore alongside their students, as they do in other subjects. "An expert teacher is an artist, just as she is a mathematician, a scientist, and a writer" (Hoffman Davis, 2008, pg. 38).

Without an overhaul of education to include art as a core subject, teachers will not receive the kind of training the advocates for art education call for. They can, however, still integrate art into their classrooms. There are many accessible instruction books that teach art fundamentals, and some require no previous knowledge in art. Any of them can help one teach the basic principles of art while developing a vocabulary for discussing it.

If there is an art specialist in your school, utilize him or her! Reach out for support when you have questions about art concepts or need ideas for projects to teach with different subject content. Find out what units the specialist will be teaching your class so you can supplement with supporting observations, art history, and critique activities, especially if the specialist only teaches art production. Make connections from these activities to the lessons you are teaching in other subjects to deepen understanding and reach more students. Partnering with the art specialist will enrich your students' experience. Use the talents of artist friends and any of your students' family members who are artists to teach lessons. I also encourage you to share your ideas and lessons with your colleagues and soon you'll be helping each other build your art curricula. The project Web site will provide you with specific ideas and resources to get started. Here's the URL: <http://elementaryartinstruction.weebly.com/>

## Why a Web Site?

I chose a Web site as the vehicle for sharing resources and ideas for helping teachers add meaningful art in their classroom for two reasons. I determined that a Web site is the most effective way to make content known as broadly as possible. I intend to send the link to everyone in my cohort, my Antioch teachers, all the teachers I know, and everyone else I know. If those recipients send the link to people they think might appreciate and benefit from the site, the content will spread ‘virally.’ I have also used the Search Engine Optimization feature in the program with which I created the site to increase the likelihood that people browsing the Internet looking for links for teaching art in first and second grade will find it.

Secondly, a Web site is the most efficient way to provide the countless resource and art links I offer. Readers can benefit from the ease of accessing different information on the Internet, clicking on links that all open in new windows while the original site remains open on their computer. Readers will also have access to a PDF of this written portion of my master’s thesis if they are interested in learning more about the background and rationale of the site.

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