

THE ARTS, CREATIVITY, BUSINESS, TEACHERS, AND THINKING: BUILDING A BETTER BOX. © 2001, Niel DePonte, President and Founder, MetroArts Inc

In recent years, corporations have placed an ever-increasing emphasis on hiring workers whom, upon graduation from our public schools, are skilled in more than the “three R’s”. In fact one of the great buzzwords of the 1990’s, used to describe what they were looking for in graduates then, and now, was the ability to “think outside the box” – to think creatively. When we look at “the box” and examine what thinking outside of it might mean, we extrapolate that what corporate America is looking for are workers with: problem solving abilities; problem finding abilities; analytical skills; strategic planning skills; communication skills; public speaking ability; teamwork skills; and critical/creative thinking skills, among others.

In his book, *The Fifth Discipline Field Book*, Peter Senge talks about corporations that are attempting to evolve into *learning organizations*. In learning organizations people feel they’re doing something that matters—to them personally and to the larger world. Every individual in the organization is somehow stretching, growing, or enhancing both their creative capacity and their capacity to treat others as colleagues. There’s a mutual respect and trust in the way they talk to each other, and work together, no matter what their positions may be. [Senge makes the point that](#) people are more intelligent together than they are apart. If you want something really creative done, you ask a team to do it—instead of sending one person off to do it on his or her own. In a learning organization employees feel free to *try* experiments, take risks, and openly assess the results. No one is killed for making a mistake. But the question remains: how do we produce graduates from our academic institutions, and in particular the public schools, who could function successfully in the kind of learning organization to which Senge refers? MetroArts Inc, a non-profit educational consulting firm located in Portland Oregon, believes that a thorough education in the performing and visual arts, in particular at the elementary grade levels, may be the most effective way to teach the skills base that corporations say they want in their employees.

The arts make an excellent platform to teach strategies of *generating knowledge*: investigation, discovery, evidence; *communicating knowledge*: learning to “read” and “write” in the symbol systems of the arts; *integrating knowledge*: decision making, problem solving, planning; and *acting on knowledge*: following through, capturing the moment, bridging the “idea-action gap” (as paraphrased from the writings of Harvard University’s education research organization, Project Zero). The arts are also an effective vehicle for experiencing the meaning of the phrase “deeper learning”. In my view, deeper learning is best achieved when academic units go beyond the teaching of what I will call “technique” (learning fundamentals and how to work within a discipline), and challenge students to think as a practitioner of the discipline thinks, including reflecting on their work and the processes used to create it. This affords the learner the opportunity to not only assess and refine his work, but also to examine his thinking; learning more about *himself* and thereby influencing future works and creative processes.

The arts focus on production (thinking in the domain), craft, the pursuit of excellence, inventiveness, expression and reflection. Artistic pursuits require the ability to evaluate work, to have an awareness and discrimination of physical and aesthetic properties of the domain. In addition, both an individual’s working style when working alone, as well as in teams, is enhanced through the arts because art, and especially the performing arts, require personal engagement, independent thought, and collaboration. And let us neither forget nor diminish the inherent value of experiencing the arts for their own sake, grounding us in our culture and in the cultures of our many ancestors.

But from the standpoint of seeing the potential for a paradigm shift and a new thrust in arts education, it seems clear that the challenge before us is formidable: How can we teach the arts in such a way that the problem solving and thinking skills developed via the creative processes found therein might find their way to other disciplines and into the corporate workplace? Or putting it another way: Can an arts program, looking for “high road transfer”, actually get you socially desirable (read, business desirable) outcomes by teaching for the transfer of said skills, as learned through the art-forms of music, dance, theater, and visual arts? The answer can only be found by reassessing our entire approach to arts education. To examine the status quo that rewards only students with “talent” or an abiding “interest” in the arts with positive reinforcement of their work, yet overlooks the responsibility and the opportunity we have to use the arts to prepare *all* students for the challenges in thinking and problem solving that will face them as adults. This is a subject for another article, but involvement in arts education by non-arts-specialist (i.e. generalist) classroom teachers, with a focus on teaching thinking skills through art-making activities, will be central to real change.

The efficiencies found in training students essentially *once* (with ongoing reinforcement via a fully integrated arts curriculum) in thinking strategies like giving thinking time, making thinking broad and adventurous, making thinking clear and deep, and making thinking organized should be obvious. However, the advantage in transferring this training from an arts context to other disciplines goes well beyond striving for efficiencies in education or creating a superior workforce. Its real value is found in creating a way of looking at the world: each opportunity; each problem; each encounter with another discipline or another human being, in such a way that the promise of exciting revelations, deep learning, rich and textured interactions and opportunities for growth – along with the belief that one can generate creative responses to those opportunities – engenders both a love of knowledge and an unbridled enthusiasm for the thrill of discovery! In short, what better, more rewarding way is there to think outside the box than to build it yourself, take it apart, work with a team to redesign it, reshape it, put it back together again,

decorate it, and then assess the outcome and reflect on the value of what you have done. When we realize the potential benefit of empowering the generalist classroom teacher to deliver basic arts skills for purposes of teaching thinking strategies and dispositions, creative process and ideation, problem solving and risk-taking, *as well as* for the express purpose of exposing children to the inherent value of art itself, then we may be poised to reestablish the tradition of teaching the arts to all children throughout the school year, a position lost in the shuffle of making high-stakes standardized testing the coin of the realm.