

## **The Argument For Arts Education**

### **Niel DePonte**

Some fundamental personal beliefs are in order up-front here:

A Creative Act is to make something new in THE world.

A creative act is to make something new in YOUR world.

In the final analysis I believe this...

Creativity is the dynamic energy of choosing, fueling the euphoria of discovery blessed by the grace of sharing.

I want to be able to articulate, succinctly and powerfully the rightful place of the arts in the classroom. That argument is basically as follows (and much of this is an adaptation of Howard's writings):

Students need educational vehicles to explore and encounter their own feelings in themselves as well as those of other individuals and develop a language to discuss those feelings. The teaching of creative thinking, critical thinking, and reflective thinking, when applied to one's own art or the art of others, often provides a bridge between valued transferable strategies of cognition and perhaps less valued, but equally important emotional experiences. The potential for developing intrapersonal intelligence may be a happy by-product of teaching for the transfer of cognitive strategies between the arts and other subjects. Students must see that these higher orders of thinking, and in particular reflection on not only the cognitive strategies involved, but also students' intrapersonal experiences, are respected and important activities.

To those who would say that feelings and cognition have no direct relationship, I suggest Csikzentmihalyi's evolutionary argument for creative disposition, and the implied relationship to cognitive strategies (my underscoring):

**Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing. The inventor Jacob Rabinow once said: "You invent for the hell of it. I don't start with the idea. 'What will make money?' This is a rough world, money's important. But if I have to trade between what's fun and what's money**

making, I'll take what's fun.”

When people are asked to choose from a list the [highest] description of how they feel when doing whatever they enjoy doing most – reading, climbing mountains, playing music, whatever- the answer most frequently chosen is [when] “designing or discovering something new.”

It is likely that the evolving human organism, through random mutations in some individuals, must have developed a nervous system in which the discovery of novelty [something “new to the discoverer”] stimulates the pleasure centers in the brain. Just as some individuals derive a keener pleasure from love and others from food, so some must have been born who derived a keener pleasure from learning something new. It is possible that children who were more curious ran more risks and so were likely to die early than their more conservative companions. But it is also probable that those human groups that learned to appreciate the curious children around them, and helped to protect and reward them so that they could grow to maturity and have children of their own, were more successful than groups that ignored the potentially creative in their midst.

If this is true, we are the descendants of ancestors who recognized the importance of novelty, protected those individuals who enjoyed being creative, and learned from them. Because they had among them individuals who enjoyed exploring and inventing, they were better prepared to face the unpredictable conditions that threatened their survival. So we too share this propensity for enjoying whatever we do, provided we can do it in a new way, provided we can discover or design something new in doing it. That is why creativity, no matter in what domain it takes place, is so enjoyable. In fact, every new little discovery, even a tiny one, is exciting at the moment of discovery.

Studying methodologies of art-creation brings the learner through the “discovery processes” (my term?) that fuel ideation, idea development, and ultimately product-outcomes, appropriate to design challenges, either invented by or given to the artist. It also places students in touch with the excitement of discovery itself - the “a ha!” moment that triggers pleasure centers in the brain. All of this assumes a basic literacy with the materials and techniques of artistic creation which should be part of classroom learning.

I believe all students must develop an overarching appreciation of the arts themselves: how they communicate feelings from one human being to another; what they tell us about the times in which they were created; how

the creation of art rewards each of us who pursue artistic creation and strive for artistic excellence, and how the study of the best art inspires us to look for our best work from ourselves. Recognizing and experiencing the *discipline* of the disciplines of art, and experiencing the range of emotions associated with “birthing” a work of art (ranging from frustration to exhilaration) are key to linking the cognitive skills in art production with developing an intrapersonal awareness.

It follows for me then, though it may not follow for all, that if one believes in Israel Scheffler’s notion of “cognitive emotions” that students, as part of their cognitive development, should be taught by people who love art - and be given the entry points necessary to fall in love with art themselves.

I believe that a “process-folio” approach to art production in schools, for purposes of assessing cognitive and affective development and higher order thinking, illuminates a student’s:

awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses;

capacity to reflect accurately;

ability to build upon self-critique and to make use of the critiques of others;

sensitivity to one’s own developmental milestones;

ability to use lessons from domain-[based] projects productively;

capacity to find and solve new problems;

ability to relate current projects to those undertaken at earlier times and those that one hopes to undertake in the future;

capacity to move comfortably and appropriately from one aesthetic stance or role to another and back again. (*HG, p.149*)

a student’s current and developing “thinking disposition”

I believe that cognitive strategies found in the making of art are transferable strategies to other domains (though more research is needed here). Indeed, teaching the making of art and the capacity to truly *see* one’s art, and the art of other’s, in a reflective manner may be the best way to *teach for understanding* a flexible use of knowledge and demonstrate intelligences geared towards problem solving and/or fashioning products that are valued in a culture or community.