The Arts and the Creation of Mind

The arts afford opportunities to transform brains into minds in distinctive ways.

Elliot W. Eisner

As popular opinion would have it, our schools are failing and adrift in a sea of discontent. For more than a few, this failure is due to the lack of a challenging curriculum and the absence of rigorous standards. Secondary schools in particular have been likened to "shopping malls," places where students wander and pick willy-nilly the courses in which they have an interest (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Such patterns of course selection are believed to be due to a lack of adequate guidance. In addition to such shortfalls, we are told that our children cannot read as well as they should, that our standards are either nonexistent or too low, and that we will not be able to compete well in a global economy unless our schools do a lot better than they are doing at present.

To some, the solution seems clear enough. It is, in brief, to create a structured federal system that will make it possible to manage, monitor, and measure educational progress. This will require not only the formulation of measurable standards, but also a high degree of standardization. Homogeneity in aims, content, and evaluation practices will provide a body of data that not only displays the performance of students and, hence, of schools, but makes it possible to compare schools across the nation. We seek desperately to tidy up an unkempt system. Standardization has its appeals.

The concepts of order and tidiness, of uniformity and standardization, have their historical roots in the Enlightenment (Toulmin, 2001) and were played out most vividly in the factory procedures used during the Industrial Revolution. The aim was an efficient system that, once installed, would be uneventful. No surprises, thank you. We seem to be embracing similar values. In the process, surprise, the offshoot of genuine learning, gets lost.

The arts and artistically treated practice do not fare well in such a climate. The reasons seem clear. The allocation of time and the establishment of priorities in our schools largely follow rather than precede the ways in which we demonstrate our accountability. We demonstrate accountability on the basis of our

students' test scores, and what students are tested on is what is emphasized in our schools. The arts and the ability to think imaginatively are not tested. I do not suggest they should be, given the quality of our tests and their side effects in the classroom. But their absence in our testing programs contributes to their marginalization. Of course at a general level, we do acknowledge the importance of both, but I fear our schools give more lip service to the arts and to imagination than time and attention.

Perhaps the newest term to define what we believe important to teach is the word "core," as in core subjects. Once having identified core subjects, what is not core is either marginalized or absent from our programs. Thus, we legitimize inattention to the arts and imagination by putting them on the rim of education rather than at its core. In many ways, the marginalization of the arts is consistent with what we used to call "the basics," as in "back to the basics." There is something quite appropriate about the phrase "back to the basics." It *is* a matter of going back rather than forward.

But how does one justify the arts when other aims seem so pressing? Does the imaginative potential that we possess have a role in determining what's important in our schools? What do the arts have to do with literacy, that is, with our standard conceptions of reading and writing? My aim in this brief article is to elucidate those functions.

Transforming Brains to Minds

I start with a premise that may seem counterintuitive and overstated, but I present it to you to make a point about the nature of human nature. That premise is that humans do not come into the world with minds; they come into the world with brains. Minds are forms of cultural achievement. Brains are biological resources. The task of education, socialization, and acculturation is to transform brains into minds. Minds come into existence as individuals secure varied forms of experience in the course of their lives and, through those forms of experience, learn to think. In schools, that experience is shaped by many factors; two of the most important are curriculum and teaching practices.

Curriculum and teaching are at the heart of the process of creating minds, and it is in this sense that the curriculum and the teaching that mediates it are mind-altering devices (Eisner, 1994). What we decide to include in our curricular agenda and how we choose to teach it have a profound effect on *how* students learn to think and *what* they are able to think about.

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The development of mind initiates with the activation of our senses, for they are, as Susanne Langer (1937) once said, outposts of the mind: there is nothing in the head that was not first in the hand. Thus, how sensibilities are employed, the qualities to which they are directed, and the refinement and differentiation of perception promoted by their use help shape the ways in which we think and ultimately influence the character of our experience. What we experience and the meaning that it has for us is at base a product of the interaction between the sentient organism and the qualitative world that organism inhabits.

Education uses experience as its primary medium (Dewey, 1938). It does so by defining the conditions students will encounter in school. Experience, in turn, is related to the ways in which our sensibilities are employed in the course of our life. We learn through interaction how to use our mind.

Although I have emphasized the relationship between our sensibilities and the world we inhabit, our sensibilities are also employed in the construction of our consciousness, that is, they are employed in what we can recall and imagine. We secure qualitative forms of experience not only from the public world, but from the private or personal one as well. We secure it when we recall, for example, a melody we hear in our "mind's ear," in a vision through which we recall the look of a street once experienced, in the feel of someone's skin who is now long gone. Recall affords us opportunities to *re*-member, rather than dismember our experiences.

But remembered experiences as such have little social utility except to those having the experiences. Recollection is, after all, private. For social value to occur, two processes are needed. First, the recalled material needs to be treated imaginatively. That is, it needs to be more than a recollection; it needs to be something of an invention. Put another way, the material needs to take on a valued countenance it did not possess in its original state. To infuse our ideas and visions with imagination requires more than recall.

But even when treated imaginatively, the social value of an image or idea does not secure importance unless something else happens—the second

process, the transformation of what has been imagined into some public form. In short, the contents of consciousness need to be made public; they need to be *re*presented.

Language is a primary means through which images recollected are given a public countenance. How language is used to do this is crucial. Ideas can be made public in ways that are literal. They can also be made public through means that are literary, poetic, metaphorical. The way language is shaped, the melody that language possesses, and the illusions that language insinuates influence the kind of meaning language has. When the form language takes possesses features that engender expressive or connotative meaning, language takes on the character of an art form. Poems come to mean because of the ways in which language was shaped in creating them.

The refinement of the senses is particularly important for those concerned with writing and reading. Unless an individual is in touch with the environment in ways that are complex, subtle, and incisive, there will be little of importance to say. The writer starts with vision and ends with words. The reader starts with the words of the writer and ends with vision. The senses feed imagination, and imagination provides the content for representation. We experience the representation and through it acquire the vision. The arts, when well taught, are fundamental in refining sensibility and cultivating the capacity to think imaginatively (Eisner, 2002).

In much language teaching, pedagogy is directed in ways that are highly rule-abiding. Spelling and other treatments of language are often taught in ways that imply singular versions of correctness. For many things, this is appropriate, but not for everything. Consider how a child might learn to read the word "tree." The *word* "tree" is a surrogate for objects that grow in fields and back yards. Language can be used to promote or impede the exploration of the qualitative differences among trees as it can the differences among anything. It depends on how trees are described. Often children come to learn that trees have green leaves and brown trunks. Their books tell them so. Words can reinforce such stereotypes or they can invite exploration of the tree's qualities. Words can place in their consciousness a canonical image that thwarts their perception of the distinctive qualities of particular trees. The word "tree" can be treated merely as an instance of a larger abstracted class. In such cases, perception is aborted and put in the service of recognition. The image is given a label and the student moves on. The arts, on the contrary, invite perceptual exploration. They invite the exploration of the qualitative character of an individual tree. "Greenish" is closer to an artistic realization than "green." We need to encourage "greenish."

But we also need to promote the student's recognition that language has a melody, that cadences count, that tropes matter, that metaphors mean. We need to invite children and adolescents to hear the melody in the language they encounter. In the end, we hope that they will be able to become composers themselves, that they will develop an ear for the melodies of the language they use and that what they hear will guide their reading and writing.

The importance of developing an ear in writing cannot be overestimated. It is too rarely attended to in schools. We are often so concerned with teaching *rule-abiding practices* that we neglect using *structure-seeking activities*. Helping youngsters learn how to organize language so that its form becomes a source of meaning is a primary type of structure-seeking activity. When this structure affords its reader aesthetic forms of experience, language use becomes an art.

Literacy itself can be thought of not as limited to what the tongue can articulate but what the mind can grasp.

The Arts as Language

Thus far, I have been talking about language in terms of our conventional sense of the term—the use of words in sentences having nouns and predicates. Indeed, learning how to use language in that sense is extraordinarily important. But I have also indicated that the literal use of such language is only one way in which meaning is carried by words. The meaning of language can exceed by far the boundaries of the literal and even the metaphorical uses of language. The term "language" can be conceptualized to refer to the use of any form of representation in which meaning is conveyed or construed (Eisner, 1994). Literacy itself can be thought of not as limited to what the tongue can articulate but what the mind can grasp. Thus, in this sense, dance, music, and the visual arts are languages through which both meaning and mind are promoted.

The use of varied forms of representation is not new. Humans have, throughout the course of their lives on this planet, employed the arts as means through which meaning can be made and shared. The drawings on the walls of the Lascaux

Caves portray and communicate what was important to those who lived 17,000 years ago. The rhythms that were employed in music and dance as early humans gathered in communities were ways of conveying emotions and images that would not take the impress of literal language. Later they became a part of our history; they were "handed down."

Thus, it has been and will always be the function of the arts to make three contributions to our lives. The first is that the arts provide a means through which meanings that are ineffable can be expressed. The altars that were built to honor the heroes of 9–11 represent the need to find a way to say what cannot be said in literal terms. Humans, as Polanyi (1966) reminds us, know more than they can tell.

Second, the arts afford opportunities for individuals to use and develop their minds in distinctive ways through learning to think within a medium whose unique and special messages are conveyed in sound, sight, or movement (Arnheim, 1954). To create or perceive with these materials requires one to think within a specific medium. The arts provide these media (Eisner, 2002).

Third, the arts make possible a certain quality of experience we call *aesthetic*. Aesthetic forms of experience are memorable. We travel long distances to have them and pay much for the opportunity to undergo their magic. The arts help us secure experience that is valued intrinsically. We see this with young children in the context of their play. Sand castles are the child's art.

Thinking Artistically

For the most part, I have been talking about the arts as if they were an independent set of subject matters or processes. In some sense, they are. Music, after all, is not mathematics. Social studies is not the visual arts. At the same time, we can think about what we teach in terms of artistry; that is, we can think about what we teach in any area of the curriculum as providing opportunities for students and teachers to think artistically about what they do. What does it mean for science to be taught and learned as a process in which artistry is at work? What kind of aesthetic satisfactions are possible in science (Eisner, 2002)? What kinds of judgments and processes might scientifically minded people make in order to get on with their scientific work? And how can such processes and experience be promoted in schools? The same array of questions apply to social studies and mathematics.

We haven't thought much about these fields as being concerned with artistry, but we should. After all, one of the highest compliments one can pay is to call someone an artist within their own field, whether it's language arts, mathematics, science, history, or the social studies. Given the value we accord artistry in our work, we might even say that the major goal of education is the preparation of artists, people who can think artistically about what they do, who can use their imagination, who can experience their work as it unfolds, who can exploit the unexpected, and who can make judgments about its direction on the basis of feeling as well as rule. That would not be an outrageous goal for education. It would be ambitious,

Keeping Arts in the Schools

The following Web sites provide information on the arts, grant information to help keep the arts in schools, and current legislation that affects the arts.

- http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org This excellent site is one of the Marco Polo partners that provide high-quality subject area information and lesson plans, as well as news reports, news links, and funding information. Advocacy resources and other Web sites are also linked.
- http://www.aaae.org/ This Web site for the Association for the Advancement of Arts Education provides information on programs for teachers and research on arts and communication.
- http://www.artsusa.org/issues/advocacy/index.asp This group is dedicated to providing information so that the arts can be available for everyone. One important service is an index of advocacy ideas and organizations.
- http://www.artsednet.getty.edu/ The Getty Museum offers support to teachers and others incorporating the arts into classrooms.
- http://www.americanartsalliance.org This Web site provides information on news and alerts, federal arts issues, and voting records. There is also a grassroots advocacy kit.

—Roxanne Henkin

perhaps, but aspirations should exceed our ability to reach them. At a time when standardization is bleeding our schools and classrooms of their distinctive vitalities, the need for the arts and for artistry in what we do has never been more important. Maybe it's time to emphasize the *art* in language arts.

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NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Voices from the Middle.* In May 2005, the term of the present editor, Kylene Beers, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than September 30, 2003.** Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal, and be accompanied by the applicant's vita and one sample of published writing. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in February 2004 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2005. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, *Voices from the Middle* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Margaret Chambers, Division Director for Publications: mchambers@ncte.org; (800) 369-6283, extension 3623.

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