
The Misunderstood Role of the Arts in Human Development

Providing a decent place for the arts in our schools may be one of the most important first steps we can take to bring about genuine school reform, Mr. Eisner maintains.

BY ELLIOT W. EISNER

IN AMERICA 2000 the American people are presented with a reform agenda for their schools in which the arts are absent. Should they be? To provide an intelligent answer, one needs a concept of the arts and a view of the functions of education. What conception of the arts do people who shape education policy have? What image do they have of the aims of education? What kind of culture do they prize? What do they feel contributes to a life worth living? I believe that prevailing conceptions of the arts are based on a massive misunderstanding of the role of the arts in human development and education. This misunderstanding is rooted in ancient conceptions of mind, knowledge, and intelligence. Collectively, these conceptions impoverish the programs of schools and the education of the young.

Make no mistake, the curriculum we prescribe for schools and the time we allocate to subjects show children what adults believe is important for them to

ELLIOT W. EISNER (Stanford University Chapter) is a professor of education and art at Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., and president-elect of the American Educational Research Association.



learn. There is no more telling indicator of the importance of the subjects students study than the amount of time allocated to them.¹ In American schools, the arts receive about two hours of instructional time per week at the elementary level and are generally not a required subject of study at the secondary level. The allocation of time to what we teach has other consequences as well. The amount of time allocated to a field of study influences the kinds of mental skills children have the opportunity to acquire.

Thus time represents both value and opportunity: value, because it indicates what is considered significant; opportunity, because the school can be thought of as a culture of opportunity. A culture in the biological sense is a place for growing things. Schools, too, are cultures. They are cultures for growing minds, and the direction this growth takes is influenced by the opportunities the school provides. These opportunities are defined by the school's program — its curriculum — and by the artistry with which teachers mediate that program. A school in which the arts are absent or poorly taught is unlikely to provide the genuine opportunities children need to use the arts in the service of their own development.

To speak of mind as developed or, even more pointedly, as grown may seem strange. Yet, in a basic sense, mind is a form of cultural achievement. We are born with brains, but our minds are made, and the shape they take is influenced by the culture in which that development occurs. For children, the school constitutes a primary culture for the development of mind. Therefore, decisions that are made about the school's priorities are also fundamental decisions about the kinds of minds children will have the opportunity to develop. Since our educational priorities are significantly influenced by our conceptions of mind, knowledge, and intelligence and since I believe that prevailing conceptions of the arts misconceive their primary features, I will briefly identify five widely held but fundamentally flawed beliefs about mind, knowledge, and intelligence that give direction to our schools. I will then describe what the arts can contribute to the educational development of the young.

1. Human conceptual thinking requires the use of language. Perhaps no

belief shapes our understanding of cognition more than the conviction that language plays a necessary role in its operation. Indeed, thinking itself has sometimes been thought of as a kind of subvocalizing, a physical process that accompanies the chain of language activity that best represents the higher mental processes. Language and thought are inseparable.

There are many reasons why this belief will not stand scrutiny. First, to argue that language is a necessary condition for

Time represents value, because it indicates what is considered to be significant.

cognition is to conclude that children cannot think until they are able to speak. Yet anyone who has lived with a child knows firsthand how inquisitive a child can be before speech has developed and how intelligent such a child can be in solving problems: a child who cannot think cannot survive.

Second, language as we normally use it is a symbolic device, and symbolic devices that do not have referents do not symbolize. To symbolize, a symbol must be connected to a referent — that is, to an array of qualities one can experience, or that one has experienced, or that one has imagined. To speak meaningfully of baroque music — or of an oak tree or of a jet airplane — requires a conception of these objects and events, and these objects and events exist as qualities in our experience prior to the labels we assign to them. Contrary to popular opinion, in the beginning there was the image. It is the image that gives meaning to the label. The information of the image is a cogni-

tive event.

2. Sensory experience is low on the hierarchy of intellectual functioning.

The genesis of this belief can be found in Plato's ideas about the nature of human understanding. You will recall that, in the sixth book of *The Republic*, Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a single, vertical line divided unequally into an upper and a lower segment. The longer upper half of the line represents the intelligible world; the bottom portion, the visible world. The intelligible world is grasped through rational procedures; the visible world, through perception. Rationality is high; perception is low. Plato's hierarchy was not diluted by the expansion of the Roman Empire. It is alive and well in the schools and universities of modern America.

But is it true that the perception of qualities is a low-level cognitive activity? When those qualities are complex and subtle, as they are in the arts, the perception of their relationships and nuances can be daunting. To put this matter in context, listen to Rudolf Arnheim:

By "cognitive" I mean all mental operations involved in the receiving, storing, and processing of information: sensory perception, memory, thinking, learning. This use of the term conflicts with one to which many psychologists are accustomed and which excludes the activity of the senses from cognition. It reflects the distinction I am trying to eliminate; therefore I must extend the meaning of the terms "cognitive" and "cognition" to include perception. Similarly, I see no way of withholding the name of "thinking" from what goes on in perception. No thought processes seem to exist that cannot be found to operate, at least in principle, in perception. Visual perception is visual thinking.²

Ironically, indifference to the refinement of perception and inattention to the development of imagination have limited children's cognitive growth. Since no teacher has direct access to a child's mind, it is the child's ability to see the connections between the example the teacher uses, what the child already knows, and what the teacher hopes he or she will understand that makes the example instrumental to new meaning. In short, understanding depends on the child's ability to think by analogy and to grasp, of-

ten through metaphor, what needs to be understood. Poetry may indeed be closer to the most sophisticated forms of cognition than many people suspect.

3. Intelligence requires the use of logic. The importance of logic in the exercise of intelligence is clear *if* the form that is to be used to speak to the world is one in which the literal use of propositions is necessary. Mathematics and the sciences place a premium on a certain form of precision: literal statement. Logical consistency in such forms of representation is a condition for meaning. But to regard logic as a necessary condition for the exercise of intelligence is to restrict intelligence to those forms of representation that require its use.³ The result of such a conception is to banish from the domain of intelligence those forms of representation whose meanings are not conveyed by and do not depend upon the use of logic. Poetry, for example, achieves meaning by employing language in ways that do not depend solely on logic; poetic meaning is often "extra-logical." The meanings conveyed by this extra-logical feature of poetry are what might better be thought of as the product of human rationality, and the same point pertains to the other arts.

Although rationality and logicity have been closely associated, rationality is a broader and more fundamental concept: Logic is one of the ways in which rationality is expressed, but it is not the only way. Individuals who manage human relationships well, those who draw or paint well, those who dance well, those who sing well — all do their thinking *within* the medium in which they work. Writing in 1934, John Dewey recognized that intelligence is usually regarded as the sole property of those whom we regard as intellectuals — especially, but not exclusively, in the academy. For those holding such a view, Dewey said:

Any idea that ignores the necessary role of intelligence in the production of works of art is based upon identification of thinking with use of one special kind of material, verbal signs and words. To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical. Indeed, since words are easily manipulated in mechanical ways, the production of a work of genuine art probably

demands more intelligence than does most of the so-called thinking that goes on among those who pride themselves on being "intellectuals."⁴

4. Detachment and distance are necessary for true understanding. Emotion has long been regarded as the enemy of reflective thought: the more we feel, the less we know. Now there certainly is a case to be made that such emotions as rage can radically influence one's perception and judgment. When running ram-

Detachment and distance have their virtues, but they are limited resources for understanding.

phant, emotions can cloud vision, impair thought, and lead to trouble of all kinds.

But perception without feeling can do the same. Not to be able to feel, say, a human relationship is to miss what may very well be its most critical features. Not to be able to get a sense of history, not to be able to stand with Columbus on the deck of the *Santa Maria* and experience the pounding of the vessel by the relentless sea and the excitement of the first sighting of land is to miss — and perhaps even misunderstand — that aspect of history. And in failing to experience the emotion of such moments, we miss out on an aspect of life that has the potential to inform. Detachment and distance have their virtues, but they are limited resources for understanding, and any conception that assigns them dominion in cognition misconceives the ways in which understanding is fostered.

5. Scientific method is the only legitimate way to generalize about the world. The traditional, flawed concep-

tion of the arts claims that, when they are about anything, the arts are only about particulars: they yield no generalizations. Their virtues reside in delight rather than insight. They provide nothing that can reasonably be regarded as knowledge or understanding. Since the instrumental value of the products of science is considered greater than the delight derived from the arts (which in any case is usually thought to be merely a matter of personal taste), the value of the arts in comparison to the sciences is set low.

This conception of generalization defines much too narrowly the sources through which generalizations are actually made. The need to generalize is fundamental. Human beings generalized long before either science or statistics were invented. Generalizations are not only scientific and naturalistic; they also emerge from those intense forms of experience that we call the arts: concrete universals they are sometimes called.

Consider the paintings of Francis Bacon, Velázquez, or Picasso, or consider the novels of John Steinbeck or Cervantes. Even fiction — perhaps especially fiction — can help us grasp the meaning not only of Don Quixote, the particular man, but of what we all share with him as we tilt at our own windmills, struggling to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.⁵ Cervantes helps us understand such travails, and, because he succeeds so well, we come away from his work with a new view, a view that enables us to recognize and reflect on one of the important features of our own lives. Through his work, we are also able to recognize these features elsewhere.

MY ARGUMENT thus far has focused on beliefs that have given direction to the educational enterprise. I have contended that the five beliefs I have described — that thought requires language, that sensory experience is a low-level function, that logic is necessary for intelligence, that detachment and distance foster understanding, and that science is the only legitimate way to generalize — create an intellectual climate that marginalizes the arts because what these beliefs celebrate seems to have little to do with what the arts provide. I will now focus on four contributions that I believe are

central to all the arts. In doing so, I will not describe the specific contributions that each individual art makes to children of different ages. Instead, my aim is to identify the common, core contributions of the arts and their potential role in furthering the aims of education.

1. Not all problems have single, correct answers. One of the important lessons the arts teach is that solutions to problems can take many forms. This lesson from the arts would not be so important were it not for the fact that so much of what is taught in school teaches just the opposite lesson. Almost all of the basic skills taught in the primary grades teach children that there is only one correct answer to any question and only one correct solution to any problem. Spelling, arithmetic, writing, and even reading are pervaded by conventions and rules that, in effect, teach children to be good rule followers.

The arts teach a different lesson. They celebrate imagination, multiple perspectives, and the importance of personal interpretation. The last thing a modern teacher of the arts in America wants is a class full of standardized performances on a given task. The last thing an English teacher wants are idiosyncratic interpretations of how words are spelled. This is as it should be. Creativity in spelling is no virtue. But when the curriculum as a whole is so heavily saturated with tasks and expectations that demand fealty to rule, opportunities to think in unique ways are diminished. When carried to an extreme, the school's program becomes intellectually debilitating.

2. The form of a thing is part of its content. We have a tendency in our schools to separate form from content. Form is regarded as the shape something takes, and content is the meaning something conveys. In notational systems, we can live with such a dichotomy. In such systems, attention to form *as such* is largely irrelevant. For example, the number six can be symbolized in many ways, but its meaning is the same as long as one recognizes it as a six. The task is one of categorization. Early reading also emphasizes categorization. And when children learn to assign a form — say, a particular tree — to its category rather than to explore its distinctive features, perception is aborted. As Dewey pointed out, perception ceases when recognition be-

gins. Assigning a label to an entity is an act of categorization, and when entities are assigned to categories, the exploration of their uniqueness stops.

The arts, however, teach the child that the grass is not simply green; it is lavender, grey, gold. And when it is green, its varieties are endless. Furthermore, in the arts and in much of life, the form something takes is very much a part of its content. In fact, what the content *is* often depends on the form it takes. The arts are prime examples of how this marriage of form and content is created and of the effect that it has on our experience.

I have made a special point here of emphasizing the function of the arts in human development. The arts are neglected resources and deserve attention in our schools. But I do not want to give the impression that at least some of the features that the arts possess are not also to be found in the sciences. The products of science have their own aesthetic features: the parsimony of theory, the beauty of conceptual models, the elegance of experiments, and the imagination and insight of interpretation. Indeed, the qualities for which a work of science is cherished are often related as much to its aesthetic appeal as to its explanatory power. A theory, after all, is a perspective about the way the world is. It is a way to secure a coherent view, and coherence is so important that we are often unwilling to give up the views we find attractive, despite contradictory evidence.

My point here is that, although my primary focus is on what may be called the fine arts, some of the features for which the arts are valued are also exhibited by the sciences. At the risk of oversimplifying the differences between the arts and the sciences, let me say that, in the context of creation, a work of science is a work of art.

3. Having fixed objectives and pursuing clear-cut methods for achieving them are not always the most rational ways of dealing with the world. There is a tendency in technologically oriented cultures to conceive of rationality as a method for tightly linking means and ends. To be rational, we tell children (and teachers), they must first formulate clear-cut objectives for their work, then use these objectives to define means for their achievement, and finally implement and evaluate the effectiveness and effi-

ciency of the means for achieving the desired objectives.

Of course, there is a sense of sweet reason about such a procedure. Yet we often conceptualize and implement this process in mechanical ways: we give students goals for each lesson, we expect teachers to know exactly where they are headed, and we appraise classrooms and the quality of teaching on the basis of their achievement. We try to create a technology of management so that efficiency in learning and teaching is achieved and public accountability is provided. Our narrow conception of rationality is expressed in our incessant search for "what works": it supports the belief that there is, in fact, a single best way, that the main task of researchers is to find it, and that the primary obligation of teachers is to use it. The entire effort to standardize educational outcomes is premised on a conviction that efficient and effective systems can be designed that will take luck out of the educational process.

These beliefs not only affect the conditions of teaching, they also create a climate that affects what and how students learn. Moreover, these views are antithetical to what the arts teach. The arts teach that goals need to be flexible and that surprise counts; that chance, as Aristotle wisely remarked, is something that art loves; that being open to the unanticipated opportunities that inevitably emerge in the context of action increases insight; and that purposeful flexibility rather than rigid adherence to prior plans is more likely to yield something of value. No painter, writer, composer, or choreographer can foresee all the twists and turns that his or her work will take. The *work* of art — by which I now mean the *act* of creation — does not follow an unalterable schedule but is a journey that unfolds. The relationship of the maker to the work is not that of lecturer to listener, but a conversation between the worker and the work.

In the context of much of today's schooling, the lessons taught by the arts are much closer to what successful and intelligent corporations do and to what cognitive psychologists are discovering constitute the most sophisticated forms of thinking.⁶ These recent psychological discoveries are lessons artists have long understood. What are these lessons? They

are that solving complex problems requires attention to wholes, not simply to discrete parts; that most complex problems have no algorithmic solutions; that nuance counts; and that purposes and goals must remain flexible in order to exploit opportunities that one cannot foresee. These newly discovered cognitive virtues are taught in every genuine *work* of art. Yet, ironically, the arts are typically thought of as noncognitive.

What is even more ironic is that, while we say that the function of schooling is to prepare students for life, the problems of life tend not to have the fixed, single correct answers that characterize the problems students encounter in the academic areas of schooling. The problems of life are much more like the problems encountered in the arts. They are problems that seldom have a single correct solution; they are problems that are often subtle, occasionally ambiguous, and sometimes dilemma-like. One would think that schools that wanted to prepare students for life would employ tasks and problems similar to those found outside of schools. This is hardly the case. Life outside of school is seldom like school assignments — and hardly ever like a multiple-choice test.

4. In addition to their expressive function, the arts perform another function of critical importance. In all that I have said so far, I have emphasized the contributions that the arts make toward helping students recognize that problems are not restricted to those having single correct answers, that form and content interact, and that purposeful flexibility is a mark of fluid intelligence coping with the vicissitudes of the unpredictable. But I have neglected a contribution that is surely as important. That contribution hinges on a distinction between *expression* and *discovery*. In the arts, students learn that some kinds of meaning may require the expressive forms that the arts make possible. In this sense, the arts expressively represent; they provide the forms through which insight and feeling can emerge in the public world. Indeed, humans invented the arts to serve expressive functions. For most people who have thought about the arts, this particular function is the one most commonly recognized.

But the arts also make discovery possible. Discovery occurs as students learn

through adventures in the arts something of the possibilities of human experience. The journeys they take through the patterned sound we call music, through the visual forms we call painting, and through the metaphorical discourse we call poetry and literature are means through which students can discover their potential to re-

Expression and discovery are two major contributions the arts make to hu- man development.

spond. In other words, the arts can help students find their individual capacity to feel and imagine.

While such journeys are experienced through the arts, they can also be secured through the ordinary aspects of daily life when it is approached aesthetically. The world outside of art can become something to explore and relish: through the arts students can learn how to discover not only the possibilities the world offers but also their own possibilities. Expression and discovery are two major contributions the arts make to human development.

Just how are such discoveries made? As children learn to manipulate, manage, and monitor the nuances of voice, movement, and visual form, they discover the effects that their own fine-tuning achieves. As form is modulated, so too is feeling. As imagination is given permission to rise, children have the opportunity to enter worlds not tied to the literal, to the concrete, to the practical. Discovery emerges in the appreciation of qualities examined and images pursued. The arts, more than most fields, put a premium on such activities, and those activities can help students discover the special qualities of experience we call aesthetic.

Let me close by returning briefly to my initial claim that prevailing conceptions of the arts are based on a massive misunderstanding of their role in human development. This misconception is reflected in the narrow educational priorities of America 2000. In turn, these priorities are rooted in beliefs that regard mind as fixed rather than developed, that conceive of knowledge as the exclusive property of science, and that consider intelligence as limited to forms of abstract thought dependent on the use of logic. These narrow and misguided conceptions are not ivory tower theories without practical consequences. They influence our educational priorities, shape what we teach, and affect our children's lives. They result in schools that have an antiseptic environment that seldom provides even a nod to our sensuous, poetic, or imaginative sides.

I hope readers realize that my argument here is an optimistic one. What is pessimistic is a fixed view of mind, a conception of knowledge limited to what literal language can convey, and a view of intelligence constrained by the rules of logic. Human intellectual capacity is far wider. The realization of this capacity is surely more likely as we create a richer, more nurturant culture for our students. That culture, as I see it, ought to include significant opportunities for students to experience the arts and to learn to use them to create a life worth living. Indeed, providing a decent place for the arts in our schools may be one of the most important first steps we can take to bring about genuine school reform. Let's hope that, despite the priorities of America 2000, we have the courage and the wit to take it.

1. Basil Bernstein, "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge," in Michael Young, ed., *Knowledge and Control* (London: Collier, Macmillan, 1971), pp. 47-69.

2. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 13-14.

3. Elliot W. Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum: A Basis for Deciding What to Teach* (New York: Longman, 1982).

4. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), p. 46.

5. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

6. Lauren Resnick, *Toward the Thinking Curriculum: Current Cognitive Research* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989); and James Greeno, "Perspectives on Thinking," *American Psychologist*, vol. 44, 1989, pp. 134-41. 