

## **Teacher Newsmagazine**

**Volume 22, Number 3, November/December 2009**

**The arts help us all to engage in life By Peter McKnight**

Society's fixation with measuring success has pushed music and art to the sidelines in education. Learning may be a much more rich experience than we currently understand. If art and music are cut from a curriculum, you may be losing more than the piece you're leaving out. – Martin Gardiner

*The only time my education was interrupted was when I was in school.* – George Bernard Shaw

Ken Robinson is no fan of education. Perhaps I should rephrase that: Robinson, who is renowned for his writings and speeches on the importance of imagination and creativity, and who will be speaking at the Vancouver Peace Summit this weekend, is no fan of our current approach to education.

That approach, says Robinson, educates children “out of creativity.” And it does so by privileging math and languages—the three Rs—over the humanities, and even more so, over the arts, the very subjects that have creativity at their core.

The truth of Robinson's contention is everywhere in evidence. Elementary and high schools tend to emphasize math and languages at the expense of the arts, thanks in part to our fixation on measuring student performance.

The arts, after all, don't lend themselves well to traditional metrics. And if we can't measure artistic performance, then there is little point in spending precious time and money on teaching the subjects.

That's not the only reason for under appreciation of the arts, and this under appreciation extends far beyond elementary and secondary education. Universities, for example, are typically judged by their scientific and technological prowess, not by their achievements in the literary, musical, visual, or theatrical arts.

And governments, always under pressure to use public money wisely, inevitably see the arts as a veritable treasure trove of funds, ripe for redistribution to more worthy endeavours.

Underlying these attitudes is a certain conception of the arts, one that sees art as purely ornamental—pretty, to be sure, but no match for the serious business of serious pursuits that help to keep the world turning, that power economies both large and small.

For those who wish to defend the arts, there is an rejoinder to this attitude: there is an abundance of research that suggests studying the arts improves student performance in those more “worthy” subjects.

Education in music, for instance, has long been known to aid performance in mathematics, and theatre arts help students develop oral and literary skills. Anyone interested in the three Rs ought therefore to advocate for the inclusion of arts in education.

This is true, but it is not a wholly satisfactory answer, since it reduces the arts, not to an ornamental role, but to an instrumental one: the arts are seen as worthy of our allegiance in so far as they aid students in grasping the subjects that make the world go ‘round.

This impoverished view of the arts recognizes some of the benefits of an artistic education, but only by obscuring its deeper benefits, by concealing the fact that **art helps us to engage, not only with math and language, but with life.**

**In *Education and the Arts*, Christine Sinclair, Neryl Jeanneret, and John O’Toole emphasize this life-affirming nature of the arts. They note, for example, that “the arts are all about how we perceive the world through the senses, and sort into order and harmony the welter of stimuli from outside us and within us, to create a meaningful reality.”**

**Art therefore helps us to make sense of our world, and of ourselves. Indeed, art may be better situated to make sense of a complex world than virtually any other pursuit.**

**On this point, Elliott Eisner, a professor of education at Stanford University, and the author of *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, notes that the arts teach us that many problems have more than one solution.**

**Art consequently encourages us to embrace flexibility and creativity, toward solutions and toward ways of arriving at those solutions. Similarly, understanding that there is often no single correct solution to our problems encourages risk-taking. The arts—and the sciences, incidentally—are all about taking risks, about taking a chance, getting things wrong, and trying again.**

Now consider these virtues of the arts—flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking—in the context of modern education. As Robinson and others have noted, the school system discourages all of these virtues by encouraging fealty to rules, and to the authority figure (the teacher), and by insisting that there is one correct solution to a problem and punishing those who get the wrong answer.

The modern education, therefore, educates children out of creativity. Or to put it another way: our current system trains students to become functionaries, to follow rules without question.

Robinson notes that there is good reason for this, since the system was developed at a time of increasing industrialization, when society needed people to work on assembly lines, where rule-following and a lack of questioning are essential.

But that is not the world we live in today. Creativity and risk-taking are as indispensable in a knowledge economy as they are intolerable on an assembly line. And in our multicultural global village, the ability to understand other people and other cultures is arguably as important as technological prowess.

If we are to ensure our future success, then, we need to bring our education system out of the 19th Century and into the 21st. And we can begin to do so by returning the arts to their rightful place in schools, to emphasize that there are not three Rs, but four—reading, writing, arithmetic and art.

*Peter McKnight is a columnist with The Vancouver Sun.*

[pmcknight@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:pmcknight@vancouver.sun.com)

Material reprinted with the express permission of 'Pacific Newspaper Group Inc,' a CanWest partnership. *The Vancouver Sun*, Sept. 23, 2009.