

The Teacher in Expressive Arts Education

IS THERE A PLACE FOR US?

The art and science of teaching can be viewed as a formalized link between our cultural past and the dreams for our future. Whether we teach science or mathematics, physical education or the expressive arts, each teacher serves as a living representative of one small slice of our current knowledge.

There were times when all knowledge was honourable and equal in the educational scale of things. Recession and conservatism on a broad scale have lately decreed some subject areas more equal than others. Expressive arts educators know well the experience of defending their discipline in the educational forum. Within this decade the spectre of accountability has emerged not only as justification in "what is this subject good for?", but also as a device to cope with leaner economic resources. As each subject area stands in line to be scrutinized and justified, expressive arts educators have been hard pressed to justify a creative, subjective learning exercise in an objective, empirical world.

We may have two critical challenges ahead of us. The first is to prove that the subject matter we teach is worthwhile, relevant, accountable, and in keeping with conservative philosophy. The second challenge is compounded with the first. Strive to teach exceptionally well to justify your existence.

THE PUZZLE AND THE PRIZE

The general purpose of education is to transmit knowledge and skills for the greater advancement of society. Traditional core subjects in one way or another provide knowledge about our environment, how to manipulate it to our advantage, and how to survive. Such knowledge has obvious value. The manner of communication while varied abides by convention, is transcribed by observable symbols, and is readily evaluated. However, the expressive arts have remained on the defensive because their contribution to the basic goal of education is not as obvious as that of other subject areas.

Uninformed critics typically focus on the apparently spontaneous **expressive** aspects of our subjects. They fail to see the vital discipline necessary to master a given art form. This limitation imposes serious restrictions in attempts to establish the value of expressive arts in a curriculum. Traditional setting of objectives does not lend itself to structuring expressive forms of meaning and knowledge as it does conventional symbol knowledge. Indeed these serious restrictions deny the legitimacy of the expressive arts. Therein lies the puzzle. Some critics fail to see or understand that a

considerable portion of knowledge in the expressive arts is **also** derived by convention, is communicable and evaluated. As in the core subject, the expressive arts are heavily based in cognitive symbols which in effect are language, theory and structure. "The (expressive) arts are cognitive activities guided by human intelligence that make unique forms of meaning possible. (Eisner, 1981)". Any endeavour which facilitates human understanding is of value unto itself as is any art form.

Education as mental development is incomplete as only symbolic representation of reality and meaning. More simply put, education is incomplete with the basic 3R's. There are at least two other ways of representing our reality beyond the cognitive mode. Eisner (1981) describes a) **mimetic** modes of representation, as imitation or mime conversion of an experience expressed by any of the senses and b) **expressive** modes of representation where "what is conveyed is what the object, event, or conception expressed, not what it looks like." Both modes are human conversions of experience into a form of metaphor, a rather complex intellectual exercise.

"Science for all of its enormous utility, can never in principle have a monopoly on meaning because the form of representation it employs is only one among the several that are available. Not everything can be either represented or known in one form (Eisner, 1981)."

Finally, in the mental development area, there is reason to believe that the right hemisphere is the site of mimetic and expressive modes of representing our experience, as opposed to the left hemisphere which processes conventional symbolic representation. Where the goals of education are expressed as favouring the development of the whole person, surely the critics cannot ignore recent research on the brain, the locus and repository of our knowledge and experience.

With the advent of the Third Wave one can speculate changing attitudes regarding maximizing human resources and the larger question of purpose and meaning in our day. Inevitably our quality of life is connected to the quality of our education. Therein lies the prize.

"Without the ability to manipulate conceptions of the world imaginatively, the work is likely to be uninspiring. Without an ear for melody, cadence, and tempo of language, the tale is likely to be unconvincing. Education in the arts cultivates sensitive perception, develops insight, fosters imagination, and places a premium on well crafted form. These skills and dispositions are of central importance in both reading and writing. When they are neglected or absent, the ability to

write well and to read is itself impoverished. Without them, children are unlikely to write, not because they cannot spell, but because they have nothing to say. The writer starts with vision and ends with words. The reader begins with the writer's words, but ends with vision. We use his words in order to see. The interaction of the senses proved an enriched formulation of meaning. Attention to the arts in education should not be regarded as a diversion from what is important, but among education's most important resources." (Eisner, 1981).

ACTION IDEAS:

1. What can the teacher do? The curriculum is hopefully a guideline to realizing society's values. Teachers occupy a unique position in promoting the value of expressive arts. They are on the front line of the education process. Their daily contact with students and parents is the first important step to reaching the community at large.

Be a living example. As a standard bearer for the expressive arts you will be judged not only by your declarations but more by your example. Leadership can be expressed very convincingly by quality of performance (in and out of the classroom) and quality of materials. Take advantage of professional development to extend the limits of creativity.

2. Educate your administrators. Provide them with information, demonstrations, and performances so they may see and hear quality work regularly. They can become advocates for the expressive arts with your example.

One of the most effective ways to communicate ideas is through committee work. Recommendations and decisions usually come from committees.

3. Let the community in. Involvement of the community (volunteers, audiences, committee members, assistants and advocates) in the day by day progress of education makes the public more aware of the important place of the expressive arts in the curriculum. Educate the public by example and increased awareness to become your support group. (Eg. Arts in Our Schools Week).
4. Reach out to the community. Your challenge as an educator is to provide leadership and awareness to the community. There are a host of welcoming facilities to showcase your efforts. Rather than wait to be asked, **you** offer to perform, display, exhibit with your students. Shopping plazas, senior citizen homes, fund raising events will usually welcome your contributions.

A special case of reaching out to the community is through the use of the media. Invite and offer particularly noteworthy efforts to radio or television exposure.

What will be **your** unique contribution to defend the expressive arts in the curriculum? Visible action is the key. Let others see, hear, and touch your efforts. Feeling productive and significant isn't enough. Take action today.

REFERENCES

- Eisner, E. W. *The Role of the Arts in Cognition and Curriculum*, Manitoba Music Educator (December, 1981).



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