
Interdisciplinary Art Education: Creativity in a Culture of Choice

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*Being trained to thrive in an uncertain environment
as a confident and self-directed learner*

The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships. Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, it is judgment rather than rules that prevail." Elliot Eisner (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind*

It is not a new concept that art education is essential to a child's development. Even to the young scientist or business manager, art education has proven to vastly effect the development of the brain. Elliot Eisner highlights only one of the many important skills developed through contemporary art education. Numerous studies have proven that training in the arts improves self-confidence, skills in critical thinking, problem solving, complex higher order thinking, public speaking, high school graduation rate and attendance, higher standardized test scores and reading scores. However, the arts most importantly provide a method of learning that spans all disciplines while cultivating a self-directed investment in one's own educational development. This training is essential to the growth of all students as they enter into college and beyond.

Our youth's generation is defined by a rate of change that is unprecedented. The rise of digital culture has accelerated and enhanced the capacity to utilize multiple disciplines to express ourselves. While art education has always provided valuable and essential components to a student's education, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to arts education in this economic and digital climate is more demanding than ever. Learning multiple disciplines and how they inform one another directly mirrors the context in which our youth learn. While our students are texting and updating their statuses on Facebook, we as educators are charged to keep up with the pace and mobility with which they are accustomed to functioning. As they are literally "surfing" the Internet in a constant search for more information – moving from site to site and communicating in acronyms of Internet slang such as LOL

and OMG – mobility and adaptability are becoming increasingly rewarded.

With change comes uncertainty. Faced constantly with new tools and new materials, the ability to be self-directed in transferring skills from one arena to the next becomes invaluable. So how do we reach our youth in this "daily barrage of uncertainty"? Not only how do we reach them, but how do we nourish them? What are the skills that are becoming increasingly important as the world around us becomes more and more digital? How do we cultivate clarity and independence so that our students feel empowered to make sound decisions? What is intrinsic to human development, and how can we marry those traits to transferable skills that encourage life-long learning, 'real-world' stamina and a general cultural competency that our youth can rely on after their formal education is finished? Finally, what can we teach our youth that will still be relevant in 5 years, or 10, or 25? If the rate of change continues to increase as it has only since 2002 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Web) when the Internet was launched, how can we be sure that we are teaching our students skills that will not be obsolete in their near future?

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change with circumstance and opportunity. Learning in the arts requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.” Elliot Eisner (2002)

Eisner speaks here to a key aspect of interdisciplinary art education; the ability to work within an uncertain and unanticipated environment. Yet this is not a simple task. This one lesson alone is multi-layered. Skills in recognizing when to change one’s approach requires confidence. It requires adaptability. It requires seeing the big picture, and choosing one or two new skills from a huge pool of resources in order to move forward.

It requires creativity, and open-mindedness, and the knowledge that there are many paths to solving a problem. It requires qualitative judgment, analytic and strategic thinking, problem-solving skills, foresight, hindsight, risk-taking, and an enormous amount of self-direction and confidence in one’s own ability to thrive.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz, who teaches at Swarthmore College, notes that college seniors are plagued by decision making. They are fearful of graduating, of choosing a field, a job, and a city in which to live. However, extending further than the privileged class of Americans who are able to afford a college education, the problem of choice, coined the “Disease of Modernism,” is everywhere. Facebook, launched in November of 2007, and with more than 350 million active users, has become the social operating system of the Internet (www.facebook.com/press/info.php). Surpassing even TV in engagement with our young, it draws 250,000 new members every day. Profiles and decisions about how to portray one’s online identity are made multiple times a minute - each time a new social networking site is joined. Communication is not only through online social networking, but cell phones, IM chatting, and blogging. “With some candidates in the 2008 Presidential election embracing every facet of Web 2.0 to get their message out...your next president may be no further than a friend add-on on Facebook” (Time Magazine). Knowledge and communication have become exponentially more accessible, and the rate at which one can harness skills to navigate a new situation, is rewarded in a way it’s never been before.

Instead of specializing in one system, the very essence of this new skill-set resides in the ability to learn and then apply a multitude of skills to a culture that is defined by constant change. It is for this very reason that interdisciplinary arts education rises to the top in a method of reaching our youth and instilling

the values that are so important to their learning in the future.

In order to educate the next generation of decision makers, we need to train them in methods of thinking and ways of approaching new situations. Teaching them about how they learn instead of what to learn, instills a confidence that they can thrive in diverse situations. Teaching them that their unique outlook on the world is their greatest asset, we encourage a self-sufficiency that is critical to any young person’s path in their education. Interdisciplinary arts education provides a context for such lessons that are inextricably linked to the digital world in which our youth are accustomed to functioning.

Addressing a cultural trait of multiplicity that is on the rise in such disciplines as Installation, Multi-Media, and Mixed-Media, Interdisciplinary Arts training also calls out to the young leader. Young artists are taught not only how to nourish and give rise to their own voice, but to learn how to use that voice in many different arenas. They are taught that mediums talk to each other. Figure drawing informs abstract sculpture, which informs installation, and so forth. Critical thinking is a key part of the creative process.

Now, even the business world is catching on to the rise of art entrepreneurs and noting the creativity in which they are able to market their work in a multitude of arenas in order to make their practice sustainable.

“If we know that one child has a very spatial or visual-spatial way of learning, another child has a very hands-on way of learning, a third child likes to ask deep philosophical questions, the fourth child likes stories, we don't have to talk very fast as a teacher. We can actually provide software, we can provide materials, we can provide resources that present material to a child in a way in which the child will find interesting and will be able to use his or her intelligences productively and, to the extent that the technology is interactive, the child will actually be able to show his or her understanding in a way that's comfortable to the child.” Howard Gardner. *Big Thinkers: Howard Gardner on Multiple Intelligences*

Whether or not a student is aiming to be an artist, a CEO or a scientist, art education is essential to placing oneself on the map in today’s society. The value of being trained to thrive in an uncertain environment as a confident and self-directed learner is best addressed through interdisciplinary art education. It is essential to our youth’s ability to effectively navigate through and thrive in today’s culture.

