

Why Arts Education is a Matter of Social Justice and Why it will Save the World

Lucia Brawley, Huffington Post, 4/24/09

"Don't hold us in suspense!" After I published my first Huffington Post piece, "[President Obama's Arts](#)," on October 21, 2008, readers wanted to know what had happened to Mordecai Santiago - the ten-year-old boy from the Hell's Kitchen projects who had a great talent for the piano, but no resources with which to pursue it. I'd deliberately left my audience uncertain of his destiny, implying that he might turn out to be "a great artist or a great criminal." Now, I would like to set the record straight. Thanks to a marvelous public arts education and not-for-profit arts program, Mordecai is evolving into the former.

According to an email from the Education Director at the 52nd Street Project, the New York City after-school program where Mordecai and I met in 2003:

He loves his high school LOMA [Lower Manhattan Arts Academy], which is a performing arts HS [sic]. He's in the ninth grade and has brought up his grades immensely. He just got hired to be in a small theater production -- off-off Broadway! AND he was the first kid to be hired by the [52nd Street] Project in its new Teen Employment program.

Yet further evidence that arts education saves lives - that is, school-based instructional studies in the arts delivered via certified arts educators, visiting artists, and arts after-school programs. All three of those elements must be in play for the child to receive a complete arts education which, coupled with the humanities and sciences, constitutes a well-rounded, balanced overall education. Just ask any private school student. Do they run the risk of not learning and engaging in the arts from highly qualified, in-school arts teachers, working artists visiting their schools, and out-of-school, specialized arts teachers? Do they have to choose between arts, sciences and humanities? Do they run the risk of never seeing an art exhibit or attending a musical or theatrical performance? In Washington, D.C., museums are free. Shouldn't it be that way all over the country? If we required the children of our nation's political titans to go to public school, might public school programs, including the arts, suddenly improve?

Not just individual arts, but arts-integrated learning, which uses the arts as an entry point to other core subjects, can prove highly effective in engaging students in seemingly less glamorous academic areas. For example, when we rapped Mordecai's reading homework, he finished it. When another student at the 52nd Street Project rapped her times tables, she was able to retain them. Visual arts, creative writing and theatrical role play projects can help kids get excited about history reports, book reports, science projects, and so on. And, as Wynton Marsalis illustrated in the profound, jazz-infused, spoken-word odyssey *The Ballad of the American Arts* - which he delivered at the Kennedy Center as part of

the March 31st Arts Advocacy Day celebrations - we must teach our children about their cultural legacy.

I'm realizing that a great part of my life's quest is to help ensure every American child the kind of opportunity that kids like Mordecai have received. Often, I feel like Sherlock Holmes, following one clue to the next, as I piece together a master picture of what options exist nationally for us to deliver a top-quality arts education to all of our children, even in lean times. In order to do that, we must convince the powers-that-be that arts education is not a luxury reserved for fat times, but a necessity that will ultimately help us thrive as a culture, as a community, as a competitor in the global marketplace and as a leading collaborator in the stewardship of our world. Or, as I said earlier, simply that art saves lives.

It has saved mine more than once. When I was an overly analytical teenager deconstructing life to its molecules and feeling as though everything were meaningless, it was Hamlet's "quintessence of dust speech" that made me know I wasn't alone. What's more, if Shakespeare could assemble blots of ink, insignificant in and of themselves, to create an exalted whole holding universal truths, couldn't there be a great Shakespeare of the cosmos assembling molecules in much the same way?

Or take a friend of mine who attended a Minneapolis magnet school with a very strong arts track, which allowed him to enjoy school, even though he struggled with other academic subjects. He went on to an Ivy League university, winning an Emmy award before he'd even graduated. Meanwhile, his brother, who entered high school when the arts program had been cut, has found himself in and out of trouble with the law and entertaining much slimmer prospects than his elder sibling. Another friend lived in a Cleveland home for boys during his high school years, but due to early cultivation of his acting talent, entered Boston University's conservatory acting program and went on to create roles in award-winning New York plays and major films. A girlfriend of mine, who grew up as one of twelve kids from a poor, immigrant family in the Bronx, found her voice through musical theater. My musician friend, Derrick Ashong - who was born in Ghana, raised between the U.S. and Middle East, went to Harvard, and now speaks internationally on the nexus of art, justice and peace - says:

People often forget that at it's heart, artistry is human communication taken to the highest possible levels. The power in art lies not only in its ability to inspire, but also in its capacity to expand the boundaries and quality of other forms of communication. The truly educated person does not consume art as a mean of diversion from the world but rather as a tool for learning how to better engage it.

When I was growing up in New York City, Joseph Papp's Public Theater used to bus productions around to neighborhoods, set up rafters, marked off by blue Police-Do-Not-Cross barricades, unfold the stage from the back of their truck, and perform Shakespeare for city kids of all stripes. The first play I ever saw, an all black and Latino production of *Romeo and Juliet*, I experienced in this fashion. The Public also bussed kids to Broadway to see free shows of *As You Like It* and other Shakespearean classics. It allowed kids of

every race and socio-economic background to recognize that Shakespeare was for them, too. This should be standard practice all over the U.S.

Inspired by countless examples of the vital importance of the arts in shaping young lives, I have embarked, with figurative magnifying glass in hand and tweedy cap upon my head, sleuthing my way into rooms with some of the country's foremost arts educators and arts education advocates. In fact, an alternative title to this piece was *The Music of Change*, due to the inspiring work of Louise Music, who is revolutionizing the educational and political terms with which I pray we as a nation will eventually effect arts education policy.

Like my friend and mentor, Harvard Kennedy School Professor Marshall Ganz, Louise emerges from Cesar Chavez' UFW movement. After her years as an organizer, she became an arts educator and, since 2001, has established herself as Arts Learning Manager for the Alameda County Office of Education in California's Bay Area, where she has managed to create an arts education program, called the Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership ([AALL](#)), that could, and I believe should, serve as a potential model for the nation.

In 2006, California had a statewide arts education budget of \$6 million. *Only \$6 million for the entire state of California* - perhaps enough for a box of crayons in every classroom. And then that was slashed to \$0. Rather than declare AALL defunct, Music re-examined her options and managed to leverage resources from a wide array of stake holders - proving that we can deliver a quality arts education to children even in times of fiscal crisis. Such major players as the Ford Foundation's Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom Division, the Hewlett Foundation, and the United States Department of Education, offered funds.

Meanwhile, employing her organizing background, Ms. Music engaged corporations and philanthropists, politicians and administrators, local community members and businesses, as well as artists, parents, teachers and students in the process of advocating and raising funds for AALL. Today, 18 out of 18 Alameda school districts have effectively implemented AALL's arts education strategies, including struggling districts in inner-city Oakland. From the county level down to the individual school level, Ms. Music has propagated a vocabulary, based on the work of Lois Hetland, from Project Zero, a branch of the Harvard School of Education that focuses solely on studying ways to improve and distribute arts education. AALL employs the terminology of Dr. Hetland's *Studio Thinking* framework, in order to unify the respective agendas of local education, arts, and arts education communities.

The framework boils down to "8 Studio Habits of Mind." In other words, Dr. Hetland - who, in addition to her work at [Project Zero](#), serves as a professor of Art Education at Massachusetts College of Art - has taken the terminology of the overall American educational community, which aims to cultivate in students productive "habits of mind," and reveals how only the arts can foster intellectual agility in certain ways which can then

be applied to any arena of learners' lives - artistic or otherwise. The 8 Studio Habits of Mind are:

1. Develop Craft
2. Engage and Persist
3. Envision
4. Express
5. Observe
6. Reflect
7. Stretch and Explore
8. Understand the Art World [or understand community]

(Courtesy of Lois Hetland/Winner Research Team, copyright 2003 President and Fellows of Harvard College on behalf of Project Zero)

Arts educators cultivate these Studio Habits of Mind via "3 Studio Structures":

1. Demonstration-Lecture
2. Students at Work
3. Critique

(Lois Hetland/Winner Research Team, copyright 2003 President and Fellows of Harvard College on behalf of Project Zero)

In the past, the arts and arts education communities have undertaken the Sisyphean task of convincing mainstream society why it should support the arts for art's sake. There has been very little in the way of objective assessment standards for arts learning. And without clear standards and tangible means of assessing student achievement, educational projects receive no funding. As a working artist, I want to believe that art speaks for itself. However, for those who don't think like me, the 8 Studio Habits of Mind clearly demonstrate that the arts contribute directly to making students smarter, a la [Lauren Resnick](#) - the eminent education pioneer who postulates that smartness can be taught. The arts help teach kids how to be smart and, what's more, how to love learning - a love unmistakably exhibited in the student works hanging from walls, leaping and singing out of performance halls, during the month of March, Alameda County's "Art IS Education Month."

Nearly every day in the news, we hear two very creative and integrative thinkers, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, discuss not just standards but the vital importance of "21st-Century Skills." In other words, in order for them one day to participate as world leaders and global citizens, children must develop a capacity for independent thinking and creative problem solving. Nothing fosters such skills better than the arts.

We live in an abundant society that allows us room to search for meaning and the search for meaning becomes a multi-billion-dollar industry. Richard Florida's bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, reveals how the "organization man" of the 1950s has given way to a new type of worker, less structured and more innovative in thought, generating an economy in which ideas hold greater currency than widgets. Another business-world bestseller, Daniel H. Pink's *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future*, explains how the current realities of "Abundance, Asia and Automation" are creating an American economy predicated upon "inventiveness, empathy and meaning" (DanPink.com). Outsourcing and the automation of previously lucrative, more left-brain-based jobs, like IT, accounting and law, augment the demand for meaning-making, creativity-based lines of work.

Historically, America, a nation of "rugged individualists," has reared great inventors, thinkers and innovators. Countries like China and India, where rote learning, based on colonial education systems, produced technically adept workers who were unable to compete with American workers in inventiveness and critical thinking. However, now, with the advent of programs such as Harvard's WIDE - Worldwide Interactive Development Education -- students and workers in India, China and other Asian countries, are taking online courses to learn how to think more independently. If other nations surpass the U.S. both technically and innovatively, there will be no chance for us to stay on-course as the world's leading economy. And while as an artist I believe in equality, world citizenship, and one human race, I would nevertheless like to see the United States, with its democratic system of government and renewed commitment to rule of law, retain its global primacy.

Therefore, yes, we must improve our education overall, including in the fields of science, technology and engineering. But we must also remain ever cognizant of our national genius -- characterized by independent thinking and improvisation. There is no better training ground for creativity, spontaneity, effective communication, and an understanding of difference -- in other words, all the skills necessary for us to perform in a global future -- than in the humanities and all of the arts.

Culture has always been among America's greatest exports. Without the U.S., the world would have no Ragtime, no Jazz, no Rock'n'roll, no Hip-Hop, no Joffrey Ballet or Alvin Ailey Dance Company, no Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman or Langston Hughes, no Romare Bearden or Georgia O'Keefe, no Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin or Toni Morrison, no Frank Lloyd Wright or I.M. Pei, no Tennessee Williams or August Wilson, no Humphrey Bogart or Rita Moreno, no Angela Bassett or Meryl Streep, nor international box office busters, Sam Jackson or Angelina Jolie.

One major roadblock that historically has stood in the path of nation-wide arts education is the lack of studies proving that it raises achievement levels in all subjects, that it translates into a higher rate of college matriculation and better paying jobs. However, new arts-related studies have begun to proliferate.

Washington's Institute for Sustainable Communities has a Leadership for a Changing World component, with web interviews, including one with Arnie Aprill, the founder of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education ([CAPE](#)), in which Aprill states:

The research has shown that youth 'at risk' benefit the most from arts-integrated programming. Young people living in challenging circumstances tend to be creatives because they need so much flexibility, creativity and improvisation to survive challenging circumstances. Their assets are typically enormous and under-recognized. The arts can be life-saving and life-affirming for young people who have been discarded by the culture. ([LeadershipforChange.org](#))

Aprill goes on to cite the research of Shirley Brice Heath, Stanford Professor of Linguistics and English, which shows, that:

Young people who participate in the arts for at least three hours on three days each week through at least one full year are:

- 4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement
- 3 times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools
- 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair
- 3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- 4 times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem

Young artists, as compared with their peers, are likely to:

- Attend music, art, and dance classes nearly three times as frequently
- Participate in youth groups nearly four times as frequently
- Read for pleasure nearly twice as often
- Perform community service more than four times as often

(Living the Arts through Language + Learning: A Report on Community-based Youth Organizations, Shirley Brice Heath, Stanford University and Carnegie Foundation For the Advancement of Teaching, Americans for the Arts Monograph, November 1998)

The Maine Alliance for Arts Education's Advocacy Handbook, which also cites Shirley Brice Heath's work, goes on to mention two studies -- one from UCLA and one a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Justice, National Endowment for the Arts and the advocacy group, Americans for the Arts. Both studies support the social value of arts education:

The facts are that arts education...

- makes a tremendous impact on the developmental growth of every child and has proven to help level the "learning field" across socioeconomic boundaries.

(Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary School, James S. Catterall,

The UCLA Imagination Project, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA, Americans for the Arts Monograph, January 1998)

- has a measurable impact on youth at risk in deterring delinquent behavior and truancy problems while also increasing overall academic performance among those youth engaged in after school and summer arts programs targeted toward delinquency prevention. (YouthARTS Development Project, 1996, U.S. Department of Justice, National Endowment for the Arts, and Americans for the Arts)

So, arts education not only helps kids develop their potential, but helps make society safer as a whole.

Former Republican presidential candidate and bass guitar player, Mike Huckabee, has established arts education as a bi-partisan issue, ordering studies on the value of the arts, as part of a balanced public education at a level similar to what private school and IB students receive:

While there are many competing priorities in public education that are deserving of support, this choice of focus for my [Education Commission of the States] Chairman's Initiative was a simple one. It was simple because I know both from deep personal experience and from the evidence I have seen in school that arts education must be a vital part of every child's education. From improving academic and student achievement to enhancing our nation's overall economic competitiveness, the arts offer many practical benefits. In fact, I would suggest that the future of our economy is based on establishing a creative class and creating a generation of people who can think artistically. That's why an arts education has value in and of itself . . . [T]he arts are not extracurricular, extraneous or expendable, but instead an essential part of a well-rounded education for all of our students. ([Governor's Commission on the Arts in Education, Findings and Recommendations, July 2006](#))

Still, we need more research, in order to secure mainstream support for arts education's place in the education of the whole child. The government must invest in studies that show unequivocally the result of a thorough arts education, as part of a balanced overall education. This short-term commitment of investing in studies has the added benefit of requiring, at least for the moment, very little federal funding for arts education. Just start with the studies and then see if the programs are worth investing in. If they are, then you will see an enormous social, cultural and economic return on your tax dollar.

But beware: please don't study our children in their educational environment as if you were testing the effectiveness of a new drug. We can't have, as Patrick Riccards, CEO of Exemplar Communications Strategies, an educational consulting company, says, "One group of children receiving an arts education and one group staring at the wall for five years." The education research community must continue devising new methodologies for studying education delivery systems, remaining ever vigilant that the subjects of these studies are breathing, growing children.

Deborah Reeve, the brilliant and passionate Executive Director of the National Art Education Association ([NAEA](#)) in Washington, D.C., alerted me to an article by Elliot Eisner, the Lee Jacks Professor Emeritus of Education and Professor Emeritus of Art at Stanford University. In *What Education Can Learn from the Arts*, Professor Eisner postulates that the education world has used scientific bases for improving its methods, but also stands to learn a great deal from the arts (Volume 62, No.2, Art Education, the Journal of the NAEA). "This paradigm, a scientific paradigm, was much more interested in certainty in methods than the surprises that some methods would yield. It was more concerned with measurement than with meaning, and at times its metaphors likened education to a business," Eisner writes. He goes on to enumerate eight ways in which artistic paradigms can improve schools:

1. Education can learn from the arts that form and content cannot be separated. How something is said or done shapes the content of experience.
2. Education can learn from the arts that everything interacts; there is no content without form, and no form without content.
3. Education can learn from the arts that nuance matters. To the extent to which teaching is an art, attention to nuance is critical.
4. Education can learn from the arts that surprise is not to be seen as an intruder in the process of inquiry but as a part of the rewards one reaps when working artistically.
5. Education can learn from the arts that slowing down perception is the most promising way to see what is actually there.
6. Education can learn from the arts that the limits of language are not the limits of cognition. We know more than we can tell.
7. Education can learn from the arts that somatic experience is one of the most important indicators that someone has gotten it right.
8. Education can learn from the arts that open-ended tasks permit the exercise of imagination, and the exercise of imagination is one of the most important of human aptitudes. It is imagination, not necessity that is the mother of invention.
(pp. 7-9, Vol. 62., No. 2, Art Education)

In other words, not only students, but teachers, must be educated via artistic paradigms.

Professional Development stands as one vital component in developing arts education standards. Last spring, Louise Music's office at the ACOE (highlighted in [Part I of this article](#)) partnered with the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association Arts Initiative and California Alliance for Arts Education to "showcase discipline-specific and integrated arts instruction, new resources for strengthening and expanding K-12 arts education in school districts, advocacy strategies, and new ideas for professional development and curriculum development . . . [through a] plenary presentation by Oakland Unified arts teachers with Arnie April." ([OaklandAfterSchool.org](#)). Meanwhile, Barbara Cox, Arts Education Partnership Coordinator at Minnesota's Perpich Center for Arts Education, has helped develop an arts education partnership between Minnesota and North Dakota, in order to create inter-state standards for arts education and professional development.

Arts educators around the U.S. derive inspiration, not only from each other, but also from programs abroad. Italy's Reggio Emilia approach to education reclaims so-called waste materials, i.e., interesting garbage, in order to cultivate "critical thinking, creativity, and exploration of the possibilities of changing cultural-historical perceptions over time . . . [I]t encourages children to think deeply about material culture, and can help support broader social, cognitive, and aesthetic educational goals." (p.14, NAEA's Art Education) And that is all before the children starts reconfiguring the found objects into works of art, which they will, in turn, employ their analytical and communication skills to discuss, thus developing "a diverse repertoire of languages . . . on their journey toward understanding themselves and their world." (p.15, Art Education).

As Professor Eisner says:

When the going gets tough we should remember that there are few higher compliments that one can assign to an individual for his or her work than to say of that work it is a 'work of art.' Indeed, a work of art may represent one of the highest forms of human achievement, again, whether in the fine arts themselves or in the sciences. (p.9, "What Education Can Learn from the Arts," *NAEA journal of Art Education*)

Perhaps we ascribe praise to achievement by calling it "a work of art" because we innately comprehend that art distills the meaning of our human experience in a way that resonates with every level of our being - intellectual and physical, conscious and subconscious, primal and spiritual.

George C. Wolfe's Broadway production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Central Park production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, ignited an indescribable fire in the foundations of my being when I was 16 and 17, filling my life with meaning and cementing my goal to be an actress and writer. For the inner-city graffiti artists and hip-hoppers represented in the seminal 1982 documentary *Style Wars*, street art gave purpose to young lives that would otherwise have been overtaken by drugs and violence.

Jessica Mele, Program Director at San Francisco's Performing Arts Workshop - which has helped inner-city kids "develop critical thinking, creative expression, and basic learning skills through the arts" since 1965 (PerformingArtsWorkshop.org) -- wrote to me today:

We're hearing from a lot of small family foundations who have supported us for over 25 years, that they're "changing their funding priorities" to support direct services like food banks. It seems to me that pitting domestic hunger relief and the arts against each other is exactly the wrong way to look at the current situation. Both are essential - the first, to our survival on a family level; the second, to our survival on a societal level. Now we should be strengthening arts education programs, rather than cutting them (the state of ca [sic] has made elementary arts education funding flexible at the local level - though still present in school budgets; the city of sf's [sic] arts commission just tried to eliminate the only full-time arts education position they have). If we develop a citizenry of engaged, inquisitive, creative and empathetic thinkers, we could avoid fiscal crises like the one

today. Artists don't see the world in terms of profit to be made. They see the connections and the big picture, not the bottom line.

As our economy crashes, wars rage, our environment hangs in the balance, and world orders shift, human beings everywhere search for meaning. "In a spiritual vacuum," as Professor Marshall Ganz (mentioned in Part I of this article and in today's *New York Times*) said to me in a recent conversation: "People will find meaning in destructive social forces," such as Fascism, Communism, fundamentalism, alcoholism and addiction. As a culture, we are charged with filling that vacuum with positive, imaginative, creative, regenerative forces, in order that we as a species may not only survive, but evolve and thrive.

When we base our meaning purely on markets, we get AIG scandals and global depressions. When we remember that markets are simply means by which to create meaning, we invest not only in money-making ventures, but -- as Ganz calls them -- "meaning-making institutions." Few would question the notion of giving money to a church, synagogue, mosque or temple. Why, then, should we question giving money to arts and arts education programs?

Recently, as I sat in the office of Peter Jablow, President and CEO of Washington D.C.'s prestigious Levine School of Music, I looked up at the wall and saw a 1979 cartoon, signed by Pat Oliphant, of Michelangelo unable to finish the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel because the Pope had "decided to cut arts funding." I second the motto of the National Endowment for the Arts, that "A Great Nation Deserves Great Art." And a great nation's children deserve a great and balanced education. We cannot lead the world without a culture that inspires us to reach for the sublime. And we cannot reach for the sublime without first introducing our children to its existence and their role therein.