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Theatre in the Age of Globalization
11/26/07
Arts Education

Arts Education: Empowering the Youth through Performance and Dialogue

The importance of arts education across the country has waned significantly in the past decade. Budget cuts and the administrations heavy reliability of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has left educators and administrators questioning how to properly educate their students without the resources needed on hand. Regarding the plans set forth in NCLB, President George W. Bush stated that “Taken together, these reforms express my deep belief in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America.” Arts education plays an important and often overshadowed role in achieving this mission. This article shall highlight the necessity for arts education throughout the school systems as well as those arts and educational institutions that successfully promote development through the arts and arts education.

The principle function and significance of arts education is often misinterpreted. Many believe that arts education is a luxury and therefore expendable. However it is our belief and that of many within artistic and educational institutions, that the arts play a primary role in a child’s development. Charles Fowler in his book Strong Arts, Strong Schools states that,

Artistic expressions introduce students to a wider world. They help students comprehend the human condition, by showing perspectives that can stretch and challenge their viewpoint. They help students learn to exist in a broadened horizon, recognizing and respecting an expanded universe consisting of options outside their own traditions and their individual points of view.

The arts help students see beyond the limits of their own cultural story. By introducing them to the multiple facets of their own and other civilizations, past and present, their horizons are extended. They learn to respect values other than their own. By learning to respect the distinctive arts of others, students learn to respect the people who created them as equals (59).

With a mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America, we don't see how the NCLB act could leave behind arts education. Education is the fundamental stepping stone with which we train our children to face the future and to become an active member of society. Arts education hands students the tools with which to experience, understand, and communicate within society and therefore to connect with others on an equal, global level.

Often, students will first enter into a relationship with theater in high school, usually by performing in a school play or community theater. It is our contention that this is too late; by one's teenage years, an ongoing relationship with the arts must already be forged. In their marketing strategy book Positioning, Al Ries and Jack Trout stress the importance of being the first product available in a given marketplace: "History shows that the first brand into the brain, on the average, gets twice the long-term market share of the No. 2 brand and twice again as much as the No. 3 brand. And the relationships are not easily changed" (43). Arts education, as a brand, faces challenges not only from all other types of education, but from an

increasing number of entertainment choices. Disney, McDonald's, Nickelodeon—all these companies understand the value of staking a claim in the mind of a child at the earliest possible age, creating a brand loyalty that will give the companies a head start in the future marketing attempts. Theater, as a whole, can utilize arts education in a similar way; by reaching children early and exposing them to the unique power of theater, an organization can stake a claim to a piece of that child's heart and mind. The long-term value of that claim would be immeasurable.

The key to creating programs that connect with young audiences lies in the concept of “stickiness,” as described in *The Tipping Point* by author Malcolm Gladwell: “There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it” (132). Theater, it would seem, has a head start in the stickiness race. Children play make-believe from their earliest stages of development. They crave stories and storytelling. They possess fertile imaginations that love to be engaged by live human interaction. Gladwell speaks of the television show *Blue's Clues*, discussing how the show's creators maximized the show's stickiness by creating the illusion of interaction between its characters and audience: “[The host]...spends almost all his time on screen talking directly at the camera. When he enlists the audience's help, he actually enlists the audience's help” (123). If one of the stickiest television shows of all time succeeds by imitating live performance and interaction, then how much more sticky can actual live interaction be?

One institution that understands that arts education is a vital part of a child's development is One World Theatre. In an overview of their programming, One World

states on its website that “One World believes that multi-cultural arts programming for children of all ages is critical to their education – a greater understanding for people and cultures unlike their own.” Hartt Stearns and Iluminada began One World Theatre in 1993 and built it on the foundation of arts education and the philosophy that “the more we learn about cultures dissimilar from our own, the greater the likelihood of understanding our minds and hearts to them.”

Encompassing all aspects set forth by Stearns and Iluminada, is One World Theatre’s KidsReach program and the annual summer Kids Series. KidsReach is a collaboration of professionals who travel to schools throughout Austin, TX where the theatre is based in order to “enrich students’ experiences of the arts and to expand their knowledge of various world cultures.” The annual summer Kids Series which began in 2001, features artists from KidsReach. Students involved in this project collaborate with the artists by creating their own instruments for the performances. The immense impact that One Worlds programming has had on the cultural development of its students will further encourage communication and openness to diversity, therefore leading to a society in which all voices are heard equally.

The success of One World and the KidsReach program isn’t due to just the fact that the arts are easily accessible to the students but to the courage and knowledge the students obtain working within the arts. The performance space allows for an openness and vulnerability that is often lacking as kids attempt to toughen up in an ever hardening and violent society. This openness and vulnerability allows for clear communication and for the seeds of acceptance and development to take root.

Without the chance to experience and integrate the arts into the classroom, students

are without a vital component of education; the permission to cultivate their artistic vision into accessible goals.

Ideally, we would like to see art integrated into all schools and all core course curriculums. However, as we understand that funding is often very limited, we also envision a traveling arts institution that, similarly to KidsReach, brings the art experience to the students. Through government funding as well as grants and sponsorships, educational touring companies can be established. The mission of these companies would be to integrate the arts into public and private educational institutions across the US and in doing so to cultivate dialogue and growth through open channels of communication and artistic means. Programs would range but the most common would be one that discusses the art in an open forum, then performs a piece for the students, followed by another discussion in which the action and the message of the piece is clearly laid out. Students would then be asked to create their own works within smaller groups using the same message, or one of similar means. These programs would allow students a through line in which communication would broaden as their knowledge and understanding of the performance piece came to light.

The number of potential models for successful arts education is impossible to count. Theaters nationwide and beyond are having great successes with a number of techniques and approaches. The vital importance of each of these techniques, we believe, is seen in the cumulative effect they have: an increasing stickiness, an open and honest series of exchange, and a cultivation of a love for the arts at the earliest stage of a child's development.

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