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On Art Education: Can Art Give us Knowledge?

JAMES MAGRINI

There is a reason, they tell us, that the first subjects relegated to the educational scrap heap are art and music when funds are scarce: "The arts do not provide the substantial 'knowledge' associated with math and science," which is instrumental knowledge, knowledge that is useful and can be put to the test and either affirmed or denied with certainty. Respectively, we say that science gives us empirical knowledge and math, axiomatic truth. But, what of the fine arts and music? What of literature and poetry? Do the arts deal in the stock-and-trade of knowledge, or are they merely about play, or worse, deft technical manipulation? The question I consider runs thusly: "What type of knowledge, if any, is associated with the fine arts?" Responding to this query, I hope to reveal the value of the arts in education.

The ancient Greeks, who certainly knew a great deal about education, believed that art provided a special type of knowledge, *aisthesis* (from it, we derive "aesthetics"), which was unlike any other form of knowledge. In contemporary circles, cognitive theorists associate this form of *intuitive-perceptual* knowledge with the emotions. However, it must be noted that emotions are never blind or devoid of a legitimate cognitive content, they are neither the equivalent of blind passions nor base drives. Rather, they inspire us to feel, imagine, and ultimately, understand our world and lives in new ways. Through the clarifying lens of art, by means of the aesthetic experience, we understand things differently.

The cognitive content of art is not akin to the cognitive content of the sciences; the knowledge of art does not function along the same theoretical lines. Working empirically and conceptually, science *tells us* what life is by demonstrating its truth-claims, providing truth that is *actual* in nature. Contrarily, art illuminates, reveals, and intimates truth perceptually, and within moments of insight, *shows us* what life is, and concomitantly, invites us to imagine what life might become. Art does not hand us ready-made certitudes. Rather it provides experiences wherein knowledge is illuminated, and as opposed to the explicit truth of science, art's knowledge is implicit, instances of truth that hold *potential* for future development. For example, art provides authentic insight into the complex existential aspects of life, e.g., the meaning of love, suffering, aging, religious insight, the essential world of nature, our moral interpersonal responsibilities.

Simultaneously, art lives on two planes: (1) The level of the concrete, or particular, where art portrays this man, this woman, this child in a specific situation; and (2) The level of the abstract, or universal, where art shows us the objective aspects of the human condition that we all share. Understanding our own unique propensity for suffering within the general and overarching human propensity toward suffering, engenders a sense of moral urgency concerned with the compassionate care for others. By allowing us to imaginatively envision ourselves within possible, or potential, worlds that are at a remove from our current locals, worlds wherein we commune with individuals who are radically different than ourselves, art facilitates the emergence of alternative paradigms, which inspire the potential contemplation of values and the concerns of ethics.

I have witnessed students experiencing and then contemplating the deep, emotional horrors of war when participating in Picasso's *Guernica,* more so than if they had read a twenty-page historical treatise on the events surrounding the Spanish civil war in 1937. The painting speaks, and the voice of protest resounding from the canvas is far more visceral and immediate than the spoken word, as the extremities of human suffering and war's atrocities manifest in a world created by Picasso's vibrant, bizarre, and symbolic forms. The students, as participants, enter that world and are transformed, and for the first time, begin ruminating on the meaning and implications of this war as portrayed, and further, warfare in general. Focusing on the extreme inhumanity of war, they begin to form and adopt values by asking questions concerning the necessity and purposes of war.

Indeed, the subjects of math and science are absolute necessities for all students, and removing these viable forms of knowledge from the curriculum is unthinkable - but so too should the removal of art and its unique form of knowledge be unthinkable! If educators seek to facilitate a flourishing, participatory member of the democracy, they must take seriously the notion that the arts are not merely for enjoyment and beautification, and their inclusion in the curriculum is as necessary as any of the sciences. Educators must

work to ensure that future generations will demonstrate an acute understanding of and appreciation for art's transformative powers. The knowledge that art provides, along with the potential to become more *humane*, is as much a part of solid democratic citizenry as is the ability to think clearly, objectively, and critically.

The Author:

James Magrini teaches Western philosophy at College of DuPage, Illinois (USA). Recently he has published on Heidegger's philosophy of art in *Education, Philosophy, and Theory*, *Philosophy Today,* and *Curriculum Matters*. During his educational career he has taught all grade levels, including kindergarten, sixth grade in a self-contained classroom, and fine art and art history at the K-8 level.