

# 10 LESSONS the **ARTS** teach

## 1 How to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.

Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, the arts show how judgment prevails. How qualities interact — whether in sight or sound, prose or poetry, dance or theatre — matters. These qualities cannot be neglected because they are the means through which the work becomes expressive.

## 2 Problems can have more than one solution & questions can have more than one answer.

The arts embrace diversity of outcome. Standardization of solution and uniformity of response are no virtues in the arts. While the teacher of spelling is not particularly interested in promoting the student's ingenuity, the arts teacher seeks it.

## 3 Problems can be solved with changing circumstances & opportunities.

Arts learning requires a willingness to surrender to unanticipated possibilities of work as it unfolds. Art is a dialogue delivered by the artist to the work. It is a conversation with materials punctuated by surprises and uncertainty made possible through conversation. With art, one hopes for flexibility of purpose and surprise. The aim is more than impressing what you know into a material; it is discovering what you don't know.

## 4 How to see and celebrate multiple perspectives.

There are many ways to interpret the world — a lesson seldom taught in our schools. The multiple-choice test celebrates the single correct answer. That's what makes the test "objective." It is not objective because of the way the questions were selected, but because of the way they are scored. There is no allowance for the scorer to exercise judgment, which is why machines can score these tests.

## 5 The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.

To reduce knowledge to the quantifiable and the literal is too high a price to pay in defining the conditions of knowledge. What we come to know through literature, poetry, and the arts cannot be reduced to the literal, nor can the world in which we live.



## 6 Small differences can have large effects.

The arts abound in subtleties. Paying attention to subtleties is not a dominant mode of perception in our ordinary lives. We typically see things and recognize them rather than exploring the nuances of our visual field. How many have really seen the façade of our own house? One test is to try to draw it. We tend to look for our house to know if we have arrived home, to see if it needs to be painted, or to determine if anyone's there. Seeing its visual qualities and their relationships is much less common.

## 7 How to experience the world in different ways.

We discover what we perceive and feel through artistic experiences. Some works of art put us into another world because the experience is so powerful. We should not simply help children learn how to read a book; we should help them use their reading skills to visualize images while they read. Literacy includes the ability to perceive our world through various senses: visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory.

Diverse literacy enables children to understand the world's artwork and experience the joy, delight, and insight those works of art make possible. When children perceive and understand a work of art — be it a symphony, a play, a dance, or a painting — they gain skills to then perceive and understand the world in which they live.

## 8 How to express what can't be said.

When children are invited to describe how art makes them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find the words that will convey their message accurately.

Talking about art makes special demands on those discussing it. What is required to describe the qualities of a jazz trumpet solo by Louis Armstrong, the surface of a painting by Vincent van Gogh, the seemingly effortless movements of Mikhail Baryshnikov, or the language of William Shakespeare? The task is to express through language the qualities that transcend words. It is here that suggestion and association are among our strongest allies, and metaphor, the most powerful of language capacities, comes to the rescue.

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## 9 How to think through and within a material.

All art forms employ means through which ideas become real. In music, it is patterned sound; in dance, it is movement; in the visual arts, it is form — perhaps on a canvas, a block of granite, a sheet of steel or aluminum; in theater, it is a combination of speech, movement, and sometimes song. Each art form uses materials that impose certain demands on those who use them.

## 10 If the school values art, the student values art.

Without question, school curriculum shapes children's thinking. It symbolizes what adults believe is important in order for the young to be competent in the world, and it tells children which human aptitudes are valuable to possess.

The degree to which a school values a subject determines its presence in the curriculum and the amount of time a school devotes to it. The importance of a field of study is not found in school district testimonies, but in when and how often a subject is taught. Additionally, the relationship between what is tested and what those test scores mean to the overall evaluation of a student defines what schools value.

