

*Lessons from the Arts: A Review of
The Arts and the Creation of Mind
by Elliot Eisner*

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Elliot Eisner's most recent book, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, presents evidence for the importance of arts education and the need for it to move from the periphery to the centre of curriculum. He maintains that the arts have specific and unique contributions to make to cognitive development. Eisner's case is compelling.

Although the ideas presented here are not new, but more of a summary of his work to date, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* is a book worth reading. Eisner does a commendable job of presenting his ideas in a concise, engaging text that serves as an excellent introduction to his work. As such, teachers, parents, administrators and anyone interested in the future of education could pick up this book and be riveted by its contents. The importance of arts education is brought alive in these pages. For a book that is academic in nature, this is a page-turner.

Eisner first began to advocate the value of including the arts in the curriculum in the 1960's. A constant theme throughout his work since then has been that the arts promote subtle and complex forms of cognitive development that are not easily achieved in other disciplines

(Eisner, 1974, 1994, 2002). Eisner continues to strengthen this argument in this book. He conceives of cognition as a spectrum of abilities and processes, including the ability to feel and work with the abstract. Eisner argues that creating and critiquing art foster specific and unique aspects of cognition. He maintains that this happens in two ways: through the engagement and development of the imagination and through the stimulation and refinement of sensory development.

The idea that arts education provides opportunities and permission to engage the imagination is an idea espoused by many (e.g., Gardner, 1983; Greene, 1995; Howard, 1992). Maxine Greene, widely described as the most significant American educational philosopher since John Dewey, believes that the imagination is a powerful ability important to the lives of both individuals and society. Imagination, according to Greene, is a tool to open minds to the possible beyond the habitual in both our culture and daily lives. The imagination is key in helping “students to realize their deep connection to and responsibility for not only their own individual experience but also for other human beings who share this world” (Greene, 1995, p. 57; www.lcinstitute.org/philosophy_maxinegreene.asp).

Eisner claims that nurturing the imagination is, in fact, cultivating a form of thinking. This type of thinking is the ability to transform shared representations into images of the possible, leading to the creation of the new. Our cultures grow through the engagement of the imagination.

In this book, Eisner shows how the arts also have a role in the development of our sensory capacities. The ability to perceive and experience is distinct from the ability to recognize. Seeing as merely looking and recognizing is passive, whereas seeing as engaging one’s feeling and making sense of the environment is an active experience. As Eisner says, “Seeing is an achievement, not merely a task” (p. 12). Sensory perceptions provide unique ways of seeing and knowing, which are subtle and complex forms of cognition.

Eisner makes a direct link between curriculum and thinking skills. Each subject area has an effect on the type of thinking skills students develop, which shapes the ways that students experience, organize and understand the world. He maintains that curriculum choices delineate the types of thinking endorsed by schools, and further, that the types of activities that take place in school will consequently determine cognitive abilities students develop. At present, mainstream educational systems do not focus on promoting cognitive development and thinking skills associated with the arts.

It is for these reasons—namely the development of the imagination, sensory capacities and thinking skills—that Eisner contends that the arts

should be included as an essential component of the curriculum. He urges that the arts receive recognition that so that they are included as a discipline in their own right, receiving as much attention as other subjects. If not, the full benefits of arts education will not be achieved. As Eisner points out:

[L]earning is seldom significant when it is limited to a one-time affair. The teacher who gives students clay one week, water-colors the next, wire sculpture the third week, and linoleum printmaking the next, all in the name of providing a rich art curriculum, does those students no favor. What are needed are sequential opportunities to work on problems with one material, time to get a feel for that material, and time to learn how to cope with problems engendered by the material so that mastery is secured (p. 96).

Perhaps the arguments made by Eisner and others are beginning to take effect. The arts are gaining recognition, and curriculum and policy are being created to reflect the acknowledged importance of the arts to education. For example, the Albuquerque Public School Board in New Mexico (<http://www.toknowart.com/apsarts/index.html>) has created a fine arts program modeled on Eisner's principles. Its mission is to provide training and resources for teachers so that they may fully include the arts in the curriculum so that students may benefit from the lessons that art has to offer.

Using the visual arts as an example, Eisner describes various approaches to arts education including discipline-based art education, creative problem solving and creative expression. Each approach carries with it its own implications for further curriculum development and implementation. Eisner does not advocate one approach over another. As he states, "There is no single sacrosanct vision of the aims of arts education" (p.25). The best approach will vary according to the values and characteristics of a community and the needs of its students.

While the integration of the arts into other subjects can enhance the learning in these areas, Eisner maintains that the arts should not be limited to acting as facilitator of learning in other disciplines; art must also be included for what it has to contribute. This is in keeping with Winner and Hetland (2000) who insist that the arts must not be mere "handmaidens" to the other disciplines. At the same time, however, he is quick to note the conflict that arises between integration of subjects and the time needed to immerse in one subject to learn the skills and processes necessary to the particular subject.

Eisner illustrates this conflict using the example of pottery. One can learn to appreciate pottery as an art form as part of an art class or through integration with another subject such as history. To learn the skill of pottery, however, to develop an understanding of what it means to throw a pot, takes time. One needs both an understanding of the skills and processes of a discipline and the connections of the skills and processes to other disciplines. Eisner informs the reader that he has no answer to resolve this dilemma. Rather, these decisions need to be made at the district, school and classroom level as part of policy and ongoing curriculum planning and implementation.

One of the traditional reasons for the absence of arts in schools may be that the arts have often been viewed as art activity instead of art education (McMurrin, 1989). This misunderstanding of the arts leads to the argument that there is no time or space for arts in an already full curriculum, especially since the educational climate is focused on “standards.” There is a lack of knowledge on how to align the arts to meet curriculum standards (Hinckley, 1997). Many educators feel that there are no standards for evaluating the arts (Pitman, 1998).

Eisner takes issue with our current educational focus and its emphasis on standards. He argues that:

[S]tudents learn at different rates. The idea that students will take the same paths and learn the same things at the same rates flies in the face of what is known about human development. Under optimal pedagogical circumstances...variance among students will increase as they are exposed to learning opportunities appropriate for their aptitudes. The image of applying uniform standards to assess their learning at the same point in time conjures up an assembly-line model of schooling (p. 166).

According to Eisner, learning is not only the result of standards, planned curriculum experiences and the ability of a teacher to teach. Learning is also shaped by the climate of a school including its norms, values, attitudes of teachers and students, hidden expectations about what is valued and expected—the explicit and implicit curriculum respectively of both the classroom and the entire school. Learning is also shaped by the null curriculum, that is what is not taught or included in the life of the school. When the arts are not included in a school’s curriculum, or when they are taught haphazardly, students are still learning. The absence of the arts in schools sends a powerful message to students about the arts. Students learn that the arts are not of value. Together the explicit, implicit and null curricula shape the culture of the school. Eisner intends the

reader to interpret his description of the *culture* of the school in a biological sense—a medium for growing.

I wish that this book had been available to my colleagues and me when I was teaching elementary school and living and growing within school cultures. One of the issues that we all grappled with—regardless of our commitment to the arts was that of assessment and evaluation. Eisner tackles the issue of assessment and evaluation in this book. He addresses specific features to consider when assessing the arts. This would have been a valuable tool to have had both as part of my teacher education and during my ongoing professional development as a practicing teacher.

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