



Student Perspectives on the Relevance and Importance of Arts-Based Learning

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Abstract:

Drawing on interview data from a practitioner research study involving secondary students in a Jewish school, the following paper presents students' explanations for why learning through the arts is a valuable and important classroom experience. The explanations offered by students reflected a strong self-awareness and understanding of their own learning styles and how the arts complimented their studies and challenged them in new ways. In addition to hearing how students appreciate learning through the arts, the data also suggests that teachers and other school stakeholders should find ways to provide opportunities for students to contribute to conversations about pedagogical practice.

Keywords: arts-based learning; practitioner research; Jewish education; student voices and perspectives

Les perspectives d'élèves du secondaire sur la valeur et l'importance de l'apprentissage par les arts

Résumé :

Cette présentation des perspectives d'élèves du secondaire sur la valeur et l'importance de l'apprentissage par les arts pour leur expérience scolaire tire ses données d'une étude participative avec des jeunes d'une école juive. Les explications offertes par ces élèves témoignent d'une grande conscience de soi et compréhension de leurs styles d'apprentissage et démontrent comment les arts ont été sources de nouveaux défis et de complexité dans leurs études. En plus de laisser place à l'appréciation qu'ont les jeunes pour l'apprentissage par les arts, les données suggèrent que le personnel enseignant et autres acteurs scolaires devraient trouver le moyen d'offrir aux élèves la possibilité de contribuer au dialogue pédagogique.

Mots clés : apprentissage par les arts; praticien-chercheur; éducation juive; voix des élèves; perspectives des élèves

The following paper presents my findings from an arts-integrated practitioner research study that I conducted, involving over forty grade ten students in Toronto, Canada at a Jewish high school. In the study, students in my grade ten Bible classes were assigned an in-class arts-based project that asked for their interpretation of Chapter 12 of the Book of Numbers. Working in groups of three or four, students had the liberty to create using any medium of their choice and also crafted a written exposition detailing the thought process that went into their work.

Following the creation of the projects, I individually interviewed twelve of the students in order to hear explanations of their work in their own words and to have an opportunity to dialogue with them about the process of creating interpretive works through the arts and whether the process had any lasting impressions. Almost as an afterthought, I asked the students whether they thought I should repeat the assignment in future years. The answers were a resounding and emphatic yes. After each yes, I asked the student if they could explain why. In addition to their explanations about how the projects led to new insights into the text and regarding their emerging Jewish identities (Reingold, 2014, 2015, 2016), the students began identifying pedagogic, psychosocial and cognitive explanations for the significance of the project. Beyond being caught off-guard by their answers, I was impressed and surprised by the detail and the self-awareness that students had towards understanding their own educational experiences and the relevance of learning through the arts. By analyzing this unexpected data, I wanted to understand what students felt they gained by learning through the arts, how it differed from their other classroom assessments, and whether learning like this should be continued.

The following paper is an attempt to capture these dialogues and identify and analyze the insights students provided into the benefits of learning through the arts, in contrast to classrooms that are more conventional and traditional in nature. While previous studies (e.g., Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sherian, 2013; Jacobs, Goldberg, & Bennett, 1999; Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2008; Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer 2009) make a compelling case, for the importance and value of learning through the arts, based on interviews with teachers and administrators, the data from this study introduces a new voice into the existing tapestry of educational stakeholders, namely, a student voice. The students in this study provide a fresh and insightful perspective that both adds to and extends the conversation about reasons for using the arts in education. Five distinct reasons for using the arts emerged based on the students' responses to questions about whether they enjoyed learning through the arts and what they felt the arts offered. The explanations that students provided are that

- learning through the arts provides the opportunity to express creativity;
- learning through the arts leads to better recall of text;
- learning through the arts provides an opportunity to feel successful;
- learning through the arts leads to collaboration which results in deeper thinking about the material; and that
- learning through the arts provides the opportunity to be challenged in a new way.

Literature Review

The literature on learning through the arts is varied and approaches the topic from a number of disciplines. In the following literature review, I will outline a few of the understandings for why learning through the arts is valuable to student learning. At the 1999 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Jacobs et al. argued that the arts provide students with the opportunity to “*experience* concepts rather than simply discussing or reading about them” (p. 2). Through this experience, a new type of understanding may be formed.

Winner and Hetland (2008) argue that the arts teach students specific thinking and processing skills that are not taught in other classes. These skills include “visual-spatial abilities, reflection, self-criticism, and the willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes” (p. 29). In their study, they noted that arts students were consistently told to work past preconceived notions. The authors note that these skills, while not testable, nor easy to quantify into grades, are valuable for many fields that rely on viewing a problem from a variety of angles.

Following a qualitative study revolving around the arts and learning disabilities, Mason et al. (2008) noted that the arts provide students with the opportunity to make choices as active agents, as opposed to having their academic choices determined for them. Through these choices, learning the subject matter “becomes more participatory, enhancing understanding” (p. 38). Directly connected to the idea of choice and engagement, the authors identified that the arts provided students with opportunities to build self-confidence, thanks to the positive attention they received for their work and the chance to convey their own understandings of the world. A further result of providing students with agency over their learning was that “the arts made learning fun and exciting” for both teacher and students (p. 45), which correlated to students wanting to take part in the learning process.

Project Zero’s publication “The Qualities of Quality” (2009) identified a series of traits or beliefs that were common among arts practitioners, teachers, researchers and policy makers. A central finding of this Project Zero study (part of a renowned, long-term research enterprise based at Harvard University) is that for the arts to be successful, they should lead one to a greater understanding of the world. By this, the authors mean that the arts are a tool to help students engage with the world around them. Additionally, the arts can play a role in “helping students see that they have something to offer—that they have voice and the ability and credibility to contribute to society” (p. 26). As well, the arts can help students grow as individuals. The researchers write: “From developing students’ imagination and self-esteem to encouraging their self-awareness, engaging with the arts can affect how youth see themselves” (p. 26).

Gardner’s (2008) theory of multiple intelligences presents a model for understanding the different ways that people can learn, interact with the world and create. The theory posits that humans have at least seven different ways of making meaning of the world, which include verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical-rhythmic and harmonic, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic ways of learning and knowing. Gardner (2008) argues that *all* humans possess the seven intelligences to varying degrees, and that they can be improved

upon through formal and informal schooling and training.

Eisner (2002) writes that it is difficult for students to maintain focus and concentration on abstract ideas for extended periods of time. However, the act of creation enables students to be better able to concretize and make real these abstract ideas. Eisner furthermore suggests that the arts “help us discover the contours of our emotional selves” (p. 11) and through this, provide an opportunity for students to “recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves” (p. 44). The arts also provide students opportunities to use language as well as other non-linguistic modes of representation to describe experiences and perceptions, both seen and felt, and, as a result, give students a sense of freedom in describing their experiences and a chance to “liberate their emotions and imagination” (p. 89).

Greene (2001) argues that the arts present students with an opportunity to explore, using their imaginations. The value of using one’s imagination, she notes, is that “to enter a created world, an invented world, is to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of everyday” (p. 82). Engaging the imagination will allow students to “expand visions . . . challenge the taken-for-granted . . . break with confinement, look from an increasing number of vantage points—realizing that the world is always incomplete” (p. 84).

Taken as a whole, these varied texts present a compelling argument for why learning through the arts is valuable to the student. However, what is absent in these texts is the voice of the most relevant stakeholder in the educational experience—the students. The conclusions of this paper do not present new ideas about why learning through the arts is valuable; what it presents is these ideas from a new source, namely the students themselves, and what the experience of learning through the arts offers them as they navigate the challenges of high school.

Description of Study

This research study is primarily informed by practitioner research methodology. In practitioner research studies, the researcher is studying their own classroom practice. Within practitioner research, I employed what Freebody (2003) calls *case study* methodology. Case studies focus on “particular instance of educational experience and attempt to gain theoretical and professional insights from a full documentation of that instance” (Freebody, 2003, p. 81). Freebody argues that the goal of a case study is to create an opportunity for researchers and educators to consider best practices in teaching. Case study methodology focuses on documenting the story of the experiment in action and the consequences of the actions taken.

The study is also grounded in arts-based research methodology. Leavy (2009) defines arts-based research practices as “a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers. . . . These tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (p. 3). Drawing on both case study and arts-based approaches allowed me to think carefully about both the narrative and artistic aspects of the data. The approaches are very compatible with each other, given their common emphasis on the importance of narrative in understanding data and the high value placed on the researcher’s observations and role in the study.

Forty grade-10 students at a Jewish high school in Canada participated in the study. They were first taught Chapter 12 of the Book of Numbers. Upon completing their study of the chapter, students were tasked with creating, in small groups, an arts-based project that demonstrated their own understanding of the text. Their reading was to draw from the Bible text and classical and modern commentators, and they were given the liberty to arrive at their own contemporary and new understandings of the narrative through the use of any art medium or media. Following the completion of their projects, students were expected to submit a written statement that explained the genesis of their project. Subsequently, I interviewed members of each group to gain additional insight into their projects and their group's creative process.

Elsewhere (Reingold, 2014, 2015, 2016), I have documented findings from the study regarding how learning through the arts impacted the students' approaches to biblical texts and Judaism. This paper explores an additional feature of the research study, one which involved analyzing the students' statements about the merits or demerits of learning through the arts and about being required to engage in a creative process. At the end of each interview, I asked the student an open-ended question about whether he or she would recommend using a similar assignment with future years' classes and to explain their reasoning. This was done in order to gauge the students' interest in the projects, their arts-based experience as a whole, and whether they found it a worthwhile use of time.

Results

Following completion of the prompting, collecting and coding of the data, I was surprised to discover that patterns emerged in relation to how the students responded to the questions about the benefits of learning through the arts. Students identified five specific benefits to learning through the arts. Students believed that learning through the arts provides the opportunity to express creativity; leads to better recall of text; provides an opportunity to feel successful; leads to collaboration, which results in deeper thinking about the material; and provides the opportunity to be academically challenged in a new way. In what follows, a brief discussion of the significance of each finding is offered. A more substantive discussion on the overall significance of hearing student voices with respect to their learning through the arts is offered at the end of the results section.

Opportunity to Express Creativity

Not surprisingly, the most commonly identified benefit of learning through the arts was the opportunity to express creativity. In this school, many students work very hard to manage the heavy course-load of eleven non-semestered classes, in addition to extra-curricular activities. Additionally, the high academic standards and expectations of university attendance following graduation place a tremendous amount of pressure on students. Most courses in the school allocate grades based on tests, assignments, essays, presentations and classwork. Given the traditional nature of assessment in the school, many students were not only excited to have the opportunity to express their creativity, but felt that it should be a more prominent feature of their schooling.

Students identified two advantages to having the opportunity to express their creativity. The first advantage was that students felt that they were able to express a side of themselves that is otherwise absent in the classroom. Miranda¹ noted that

when you learn through the arts, you get to show a different side of yourself . . . instead of doing a project where you just write something, like writing an essay—I feel like I got to get in touch with my creative side, which I liked.

Summer explained: “This project and using the arts, it just gives you a different opportunity to use your strengths to show your understanding. Using art is a unique way to display things, like different types of drawings.” Miranda and Summer’s explanations echo Gardner’s (2008) theory of multiple intelligences. Miranda and Summer valued what the arts offered them that was absent in their other classes—an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that was representative of their abilities and/or personalities.

In addition to the opportunity afforded by the arts to demonstrate one’s creative ability, some students specifically noted that the creativity of the arts mirrored their understanding of how youth approach and understand society. Specifically, the emphasis on pop-culture and digital and social media that pervades society was reflected in the students’ use of creativity in the classroom. Summer believes that “[her] generation is more into being yourself and expressing yourself and who you are” and that the creative projects allowed for that sense of freedom of expression. Hank stated that

[it] feels like learning in the arts is more effective because the arts is something that teenagers like to do and it’s easier to focus and pick up on what’s happening. It’s more meaningful to us because that’s what we’re into.

Memory Recall

Throughout every interview conducted, it was evident that students demonstrated a strong recall of their projects and the contents of the biblical text, which had been learned over a month earlier. While there was not consensus on the cause for this solid retention, five students specifically mentioned that they believe that they remembered the content of their arts projects better than they remember content from tests after a period of time has elapsed. Louise attributed her retention to the fact that she “worked with it so closely”, as opposed to test material, which might only be covered in a single lesson. Tess suggested that she has “more memory on this because it was something that actually meant something to [her]”; because she made personal connections through the project, she was better able to remember it. Jocelyn was surprised with the relationship that exists between fun and memory. She noted: “With tests, I just want to get the marks just so my grade average is up. But this is just a fun way of learning things, and I actually understand it a lot more.”

¹ All names are pseudonyms so as to protect the identity of the student. This study itself was reviewed and approved by York University’s Human Participants Research Committee (HPRC) and all students and their guardians signed informed consent forms.

Student Perspectives on Arts-Based Learning

Miranda identified a flaw in her studying—namely, that she studies and memorizes for a brief period of time and then the material fades from memory. She believes that the arts offer an alternative that results in greater retention. She said,

When you're taking a science test or something, you're doing a lot of it off of memory. Personally, I don't like that. I don't mind science, but I don't like doing things off of memory because I find I'll learn it and then it just goes away. You don't remember it anymore. But when you do something with the arts, it allows you to not only see a new creative side to yourself, but you also don't forget it as much.

Tests and many high school essays are teacher-centric exercises, in which the teacher determines the questions and has an ideal answer in mind when the assignment is composed, and in order for the students to succeed, they must answer the teacher's questions in alignment with expected answers. In the projects completed for the study, the open-ended questions let students make their own choices, assume a position of authority, and feel a sense of autonomy in shaping the way they demonstrated comprehension and understanding. As a result of being given the opportunity to dictate the terms of the projects, students needed to take an active role in the learning and assessment process. This involvement, they suggest, led to greater understanding and greater retention of the content.

The students' recollection of both biblical storyline and opinions about its topic directly challenges the assumptions made by some teachers (Backenroth, 2011) that learning through the arts is frivolous and takes away from "meaningful" class learning. The ability of students to remember their projects well after completion suggests that teachers should find ways to include the arts in their classroom and in doing give students the agency to make choices about their projects. If harnessed well, the arts can become a powerful tool for helping high school students develop lasting memories of classroom texts.

Feeling Successful in School

The third common answer that emerged was that the arts facilitated the opportunity for students to feel success in a way that they do not feel in other classes. Louise noted that "there are so many people who don't test well, and if you're not given the opportunity to do any other type of testing, you won't [succeed]". Echoing Gardner's (2008) research about different types of learners, Louise's assertion comes from her own struggles in the classroom. Louise stated that the arts "make you feel better about yourself if you're given opportunities to succeed. If you're really challenged by tests and that's all you have, [the creative work] builds your confidence." Similarly, when asked whether she preferred the creative project to traditional testing, Tess said,

God it's so much better because I think that there's a lot of people, including myself, that on tests, get nervous, freeze up, can't display all their knowledge, and it's a lot easier when you're doing something that's more in your element to express yourself.

Both Louise and Tess highlight one of the challenges that come with high academic demands. Specifically, there can be tremendous pressure for success, especially for students who struggle in

the traditional classroom. Lack of success can lead to a loss of confidence and a feeling that the student does not belong in the school. Stiggins (1999) explains:

If students are to come to believe in themselves, they must first experience some believable form of academic success as reflected in a real classroom assessment. . . . Even a small success can rekindle a small spark of confidence that, in turn, encourages more trying. (pp. 195-196)

For these students, the opportunity to be assessed based on an alternative learning modality is important. Not only does it allow them to feel successful, it can build their confidence and foster a greater sense of perceived self-worth in the classroom. Research in classroom confidence (as cited by Stiggins, 1999) suggests that there is a direct correlation between student success, confidence and classroom attitude.

Related to the topic of developing confidence and feeling success, Georgia specifically appreciated the opportunity to be assessed based on the way that she wanted to express herself, as opposed to through a proscribed medium. An important distinction she made between the creative project she completed for the study and creative projects she has done in previous classes is that in other classes the teacher chose a specific medium. The danger for Georgia in this is that “it can be something that you're even weaker at”. Conversely, she noted that

in this project we could do whatever we want; whether it was arts, something on the computer—audio, music—whatever, it's just whatever we want. And the fact that you get to take something that we're learning and apply it to something you like, you like doing it way more.

When overly prescriptive, even a creative assignment may become a further stumbling block for the student and an obstacle to feeling successful and demonstrating comprehension. Mason, Steedly and Thormann (2008) argue that the arts allow for students to have greater agency over their choices, which in turn leads to greater success and contentment in the classroom. Georgia's statement suggests that teachers should consider what their goals are and where in the project there can be room for student individuality and freedom of expression. Since what is a desired medium for one student might not be a desired medium for another, by prescribing the medium that the teacher thinks best for the students, the teacher misses an opportunity for allowing students to exercise choice in the classroom. This decision may potentially sacrifice greater engagement with the material, so teachers should be mindful of what aspects of the assignment they need to control.

The Importance of Collaboration

The fourth theme that emerged in relation to the value of the arts from students' perspectives was the importance of collaboration. Two different students put forth the idea that their group's understanding of the topic was deepened as a result of the collaborative process. Hank noted that “you can discuss it; your ideas may be different than someone else's; then you come up with one idea”. Hank's observation into the nature of group work suggests that for some students, group work is an opportunity to build something wholly new together. By piecing different ideas together and working collaboratively, two or more students are able to arrive at something new together. Hank's

group succeeded in experiencing an example of “creating”, the highest order of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)². In this step on the taxonomy, students do more than just make something, they arrive at new ideas and ways of thinking and act as designers and inventors. While Hank was the only student to directly link his group’s success in creating something new to its collaborative nature, many other groups worked very well together and achieved success as a result of collaboration.

Juliet identified that group work involves a change: to develop the skills of how to work collaboratively when there is a difference of opinion amongst the group members. She noticed how in terms of working in a group, we liked each other’s ideas, and it was good that we were all really different because we could balance off of each other’s ideas and opinions. But also being really different caused conflicts in terms of how things were going to be designed.

Challenged to Think in New Ways

The fifth theme that was identified was that students appreciated how the arts challenged them to think in new ways. Aleeza, a very strong student, commented how she is “someone who tests well”. She said,

I just do [well] because memorizing is just easy for me. But I’m not creative, so to switch to the creative aspect and play around with it and try and be creative is just better for me than just doing what I always do. And there are people who don’t test well but who are actually really smart.

As part of his research into multiple intelligences and the way that students learn, Gardner (2008) argues that while individuals may be stronger in one particular domain over another, every individual possesses all of the intelligences that have been identified. More important, however, is that it is possible to improve or strengthen an intelligence. Being repeatedly exposed to one type of assessment can be difficult for those who are not strong in a given area, but it is equally undesirable for those who are strong in that discipline, as they will not have the opportunity to strengthen and hone other, more latent, aspects of themselves.

Summer was also appreciative of the fact that the arts pushed her to think differently. She commented that

it was good to have a different way to learn things instead of just sitting in a class and reading off something; and to be able to put our own opinions into things. I don’t really like it when things are just set square. I like to be able to talk about things and express my opinion and explain why I think a certain way. This gave me a big opportunity to do that.

For students like Summer, tests can at times be boring and do not challenge them to think in new ways. Open-ended assignments like the one completed in class gave her the chance to consider the text differently and to think through material in a new way. Both Summer and Aleeza’s comments extend the research of Hetland et al. (2013) on the value of arts-based learning. There, the authors

² This was formerly called synthesis, which was the second highest order in the taxonomy.

identify specific skills and tools that students gain by being exposed to the arts, as those skills are not practiced in traditional classrooms. This concurs with what Summer and Aleeza explained, that they not only succeeded in the challenge and were able to develop new skills, but they actually wanted this challenge so as to reduce the monotony of their other classroom experiences, given that it pushed them to think in new ways.

Students appreciated learning through the arts because they valued finding a vehicle that allowed for thinking creatively. This parallels Greene's (2001) belief that creativity allows us "to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of everyday" (p. 82). Creative assignments can afford students more than just opportunities for fun; they can also open up potential to begin thinking in new ways. As Eisner (2002) notes, the arts lead students to "[recognize] what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves" (p. 44). As is evidenced from the students' statements, they, too, believe that the arts have the ability to lead to new thinking about themselves, their peers, the learning process and the world.

Discussion

There is no shortage of literature about learning through the arts and how the arts offer students an opportunity to learn differently and effectively. What sets this study apart from the existing literature is the emphasis on the student voice, on how the students were able to articulate an understanding of their educational experience. That their answers paralleled what much of the scholarly literature has stated is not the new finding; rather, the new understanding that has emerged is how students themselves, without prompting, are able to arrive independently at this understanding. This suggests that the student voice should be an integral component in assessing pedagogical strategies because, as is evident from the student responses, students want to learn well and they want to be challenged in new and meaningful ways.

The study also demonstrates that students have a clear understanding of their own educational experiences. The students who were interviewed as part of this study should not be seen as silent and voiceless, rather as relevant stakeholders in the school system. Not a single student questioned the necessity for evaluation, nor indicated that they would prefer not to have school requirements. But the range and insight of their responses suggests that educators could have much to learn by interviewing students in order to understand not just what is happening in the classroom, but also what should be happening in the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge that a limitation of the study is that it is not known yet whether students' ability to explicate the importance of learning through the arts is an ability that transfers to other types of learning methods. While students were able to articulate what they felt was ineffective with different pedagogical strategies, the study was not designed to assess whether they are as able to understand the rationale behind these different teaching styles. Given this, further research needs to be conducted in order to ascertain students' pedagogical awareness in non-arts-based learning methods, the relative merit of considering student input on non-arts-based learning experiences, and how much weight should be given to students' voices.

Student Perspectives on Arts-Based Learning

An additional limitation of the study—as with any practitioner study—is the role that the practitioner plays in shaping student responses. While I tried to minimize this by not assigning grades for the study assignment and by not providing incentives to speak with me, there is always the possibility that students delivered answers that they thought would make me happy. Further research is therefore also needed into to what extent students are reliable research participants and whether their answers would have been the same had an independent evaluator asked them the same questions.

I wanted to better understand the perspectives of the students in my classes on learning through the arts, and whether it created the meaningful experiences that philosophers and researchers of the arts said that it would. In essence, I wanted to hear from students themselves and not what others said about students. The students who were interviewed in this study paint a thoughtful and robust portrait of how learning through the arts offered something new, substantive and different, and through this, were challenged to think and work in new ways. Additionally, their clear understanding of their experiences with learning through the arts, and how it differs from learning through other pedagogical approaches, demonstrates a rational and insightful self-awareness of their own education and what occurs in the classroom. The study shows that students are not passive recipients of content but, at least with regards to the arts, are able to articulate an understanding of what the teacher is trying to pedagogically accomplish.

The study shows that dialogue with students about their classroom experiences can be beneficial for educators. This will allow teachers to better appreciate how students construe what is happening pedagogically in the classroom and will allow educators to become more purposeful practitioners of teaching by hearing how their teaching strategies are being received. These opportunities can take the form of student feedback surveys on pedagogy (as opposed to attitudes and feelings towards a specific teacher), focus groups between students and administrators and/or lead teachers, or even student reflections on how they have learned over the course of the year. Given that students might never have thought about pedagogy in a formal way, questions should be framed in a way that encourages open dialogue, an opportunity for conversation, and a space for students to ask clarifying questions. The conversation should be framed around a desire to learn from the students' experience and to hear, from their perspective, what works and what does not work in the classroom and, most importantly, why they think this way. Their perspectives would add an important voice to the education conversation and serve as a reminder that in education, all stakeholders, including the students themselves, should have agency, and a seat at the table where their voices can be heard.

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