



## Seeing is Achieving: Emphasizing Art Education as Core Curriculum from Preschool Through Secondary School

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### Abstract

*Art education has often had trouble finding a place in our educational systems. While it is often treated as a luxury or distraction, it is imperative to instill a more significant art education that utilizes theory and history as its basis (as opposed to studio work) and is taught more frequently.*

*Teaching art history and theory as early as preschool and elementary school is a huge asset to developing visual language skills-especially at an age where reading and writing have not been mastered yet. Discussing artworks gives children a chance to observe and analyze and develop an understanding of how colors, lines, brush strokes can imply feelings and ideas. They learn the infinite number of ways people can express themselves. They see the way ideas and styles are built upon the past. They can begin to understand why we create the way we do. At any age, it provides an invaluable opportunity to practice self-critique and evaluating others. Students learn to back up their opinions with reasoning and evidence. They develop an understanding of critical analysis-an essential skill that is often absent in curriculum.*

*A significant art education will not take away from the other "core" subjects and will enhance the ability of students to achieve the expectations being set for them.*

Art education has been tossed around in elementary and secondary curriculum as either a nice inclusion, an unwanted obligation or snubbed as an impractical distraction. Even when included the arts are rarely regarded as a significant component of a child's education. The time devoted to teaching art is more or less a break to do crafts and when integrated with the other disciplines, it serves as a pedestal to improve learning in other areas. One rarely hears disagreement that the arts are important to a child's development but what is also rarely seen is a genuine effort to maintain a consistent and significant art education.

Political developments stimulate the desire for 'back to basics' curriculum and test scores and budget constraints dictate what is being taught in schools. In every reincarnation of these philosophies of accountability, math and science take a dominant place and the arts are put aside to attend to more 'serious' subjects.

But who determined that art was not a serious subject? To be sure, when art class consists of pumpkins in October, turkeys in November and finger painting to relax, art loses all of the meaning, direction and cognitive benefits that it could have. We study science to understand the way the world works; why not study art for the same reasons? By studying the way art represents culture, place and time we promote the "child's ability to perceive subtleties and to recognize complexities among the qualitative relationships encountered in the phenomenal world." [1]



When we focus solely on the concrete methods of learning, we instill this idea that everything that has or will occur in the world has a definitive answer and that there is only one approach to trust. In a world that changes as fast as ours does now, it is imperative that children develop the talent and technique that can help them navigate it. Elliot W. Eisner maintains that “work in the arts...invites the development of a disposition to tolerate ambiguity, to explore what is uncertain, to exercise judgment free from prescriptive rules and procedures.” [2]

It is also important to recognize that a significant art education cannot just begin at the elementary or secondary level. It is at the early childhood age that visual language and artistic intent is at its highest peak. In contrast to the widely accepted theory that children's skills begin at the bottom of linear ascent and develop with age, there is a U-shaped pattern that more accurately describes one's artistic development (Figure 1). Young children have less inhibition to what they create and are more receptive to the infinite number of ways to create it. Adults who have developed their own artistic interests and talent share a similar process. They are able to be less inhibited in their technique-with the benefit of having an understanding of where it will take them.

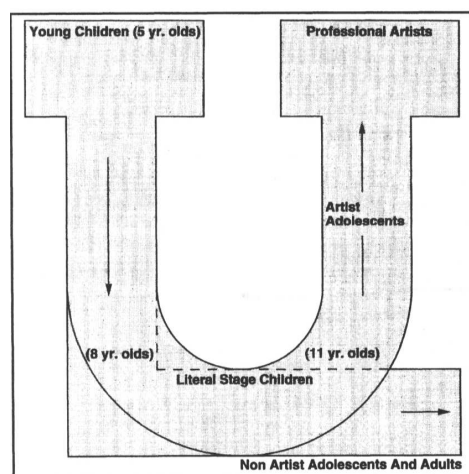


Figure 1, U-curve of graphic development [3]

Between the ages of 8 & 11, the U hits its trough at a point where students are more concerned with realism and literal meaning in their work. This prevents total susceptibility to artistic form and, for many, creates the initial decline in artistic interest they maintain for the rest of their lives. [4] It is vital, then, to establish strong connections with art and visual language during these elementary years. It seems that the desire to fill a young mind with new knowledge disregards the talents they already have. The 5 and 6 year olds that are so attuned to their artistic side must have the opportunity to nourish it with substance that can make it stronger.

At this point, however, the arts become subjects that are meant to be appreciated rather than understood, like the sciences. [5] They are tucked in, when possible, and meant to be a nice distraction or helpful learning tool. It is only for those students who initiate a desire to do artistic work that are given an opportunity to learn more. Should this be a model of the other subjects-where math is only taught to those who want to be mathematicians and writing to those who want to be writers? [6]

Visual language forms the basis for everything we do. It exists in maps, signage, logos, geometry; and understanding that language is most critical to understanding the world. What is learned can then become a part of the individual's repertoire, and once it is a part of that repertoire, new and more complex problems can be generated and successfully addressed. [7] We must consider the ways art can and should be incorporated into each stage of educational development on a consistent basis.



The most dominant of view of art at the preschool is one that promotes completely independent self-expression. Many believe the process of discovery is most instrumental at this stage and is paramount to the development of the young child. There is also a strong presence of what some call "holiday art." Crafts comprise a large percentage of classroom projects and while based on at least some teacher guidance, these activities fulfill this creative activity the curriculum demands. But it should not be assumed that creativity alone will be sufficient in developing the ability to see the qualities that constitute visual art or any aesthetic frame of reference. [8] At an age when artistic reception is highest, we are cheating children out of the most advantageous moment to incorporate artistic study. At an age where everything is visually oriented, these students are not given a sufficient understanding of that visual language. How do they describe a feeling when the only word they know for it is 'sad'?

Even at the early childhood level, picture study and formal art education can take place. My preschool art program uses a survey of art history format to introduce children to many different artists and styles of art. Remembering names is encouraged, but not necessary. At this age, the importance is put toward introducing ways of using color, lines and expression and how to show feelings and ideas. The students are not necessarily able to see deeply into the work (although some can), but they are exposed to the idea that there are an infinite number of ways to create art and express feelings and ideas.

As students naturally hit benchmarks discussed in Viktor Lowenfeld's Creative and Mental Growth, they are able to broaden their abilities with the support of art historical context. They begin to discover that colors are not just colors. Black is dark and scary. Blue is cool and seems like water. Colors can be bold or faded or sickly looking. Lines can be jagged (angry), crooked (old and sick). Older students notice the bright and dark spots. They question why a figure looks messy. They see the differences in Donatello and Michelangelo's David and understand the different ways the story is being told. They understand that abstract work makes us see the world a different way. These ideas, when combined with a child's natural artistic tendencies, elicit work with tremendous detail and finesse.

At the early childhood age, emphasis is put on the visual aspect of teaching and learning. Color charts, feelings posters, schedules are all placed in preschool rooms so that the students may identify concepts with having the necessary skills to read. Babies as young as eight months are taught sign language as a method of communication. We recognize the absolute necessity of visual language for students who haven't yet mastered vocal, writing or reading skills but we are not teaching them ways to understand that visual language. Incorporating art study at the early childhood age would not only develop the visual literacy skills necessary to promote communication, but it also capitalizes on the fact that children at the ages of 4 and 5 are at an artistic peak that will likely not be seen again (if at all) until adulthood.

For elementary students, art is an essential resource for studying the world and its history. The arts are the greatest indicator of time and place and are invaluable for the study of history and social studies. While the preschool and early elementary ages are ideal for practicing techniques, the later elementary ages give opportunity to mastering techniques and firmly understanding how to interpret and convey ideas. Being required to carefully consider a work of art helps motivate a mastery orientation in students. This provides an ideal venue to practice critique and problem solving. Compared with a novice whose performance orientation wishes to just get it over with, a student who practices the skills used by experts may transfer that character to their other studies and into other facets of their lives. [9] One of the goals of Discipline-Based Art Education is to help students learn how to see and talk about the qualities of the art they see. [10]

They also inherently learn to see the qualities in many non-art situations. The symbols and conventions they have become familiar with can now be seen and interpreted. They can learn to speak in metaphor and how to explain the invisible. One of our society's greatest concerns is the way children and adolescents deal with technology, media pressure and visual culture. What better way to help kids understand the messages that are being told to them?

As children enter their secondary years, the desire to do more studio art may show in certain students; and if they have had a strong, consistent art education, it will show in more of them. At this point, students can have the opportunity to exercise their critical skills and use a language that develops their tastes and interests and opens opportunities to discuss ideas with others. Government classes in high school delve



into the meat of political ideas and procedure. English classes offer electives in specific areas of literature. A class in art theory can allow students to dissect a work and discuss its every detail: provenance, technique, era, etc. It allows them to understand and evaluate their and other's philosophies about art and how to recognize its value.

With both an appreciation and an understanding of art, students can grow into adults that maintain interest in cultural elements and can share their passion for art with their own children. Adults who have never had the opportunity to learn about art tend to scorn art or feel left out by it. The arts are an immense part of our lives, whether it is painting, film, television, advertising; it all deserves our attention.

The ultimate lesson that any student could learn from arts education is that "seeing is an achievement, not merely a task." [11] If our goal is to turn out students that are prepared for the world and can make it a better place, the best gift to them is an ability to discern, innovate and communicate in a world that is as limitless as art.

## References

- [1] Elliot W. Eisner, *Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002.
- [2] Eisner, 10.
- [3] Jessica Davis, "The 'U' and the Wheel of 'C': Development and Devaluation of Graphic Symbolization and the cognitive Approach at Harvard Project Zero." *Child Development in Art*. ed. Anna M. Kindler. Reston, VA: NAEA, 1997, 45-58.
- [4] Davis, 51.
- [5] Davis, 47.
- [6] Davis, 54-5.
- [7] Eisner, 8.
- [8] Eisner, 26.
- [9] Judith Smith Korscick, "What Potential do Young People have for Understanding Works of Art?" *Child Development in Art*. ed. Anna M. Kindler. Reston, VA: NAEA, 1997, 143-63.
- [10] Eisner, 26.
- [11] Eisner, 12.