

NAEA Advisory

The National Art Education Association, 1916 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091

Fall, 1989

Will the Arts Continue to Occupy Place at Margins of Educational Institutions?

by

Elliot W. Eisner

Stanford University, Department of Education

Reprinted from the Stanford University *Campus Report*, May 3, 1989

The arts enjoy no place of privilege on the campuses of American and European universities. Privilege might not be the right word. The arts are more accurately described as marginal rather than as a part of the core of a student's liberal education.

Their marginality is in large measure due to the prevailing conception of intellect--what it means to think, to know, to exercise intelligence--and the way in which universities define their mission. The arts provide an arena for the development or display of refined sensibility, something that the educated person should possess, but they are not at the intellectual heart of what universities are about.

The reasons for the marginal position of the arts is deeply rooted in the prevailing conception of mind and intellect. That conception gives its deepest bow to abstraction, by which is meant the ability to reason with words and numbers. The more abstract thought becomes, that is, the less dependent upon sensory information, the more intellectually sophisticated it is considered to be.

Thus, for most scholars, theory in the sciences and in mathematics represent the apotheosis of cognition. To know, to really know, the phenomenal world must be used only as a rung to grasp higher, more ethereal matters. In the quest for abstraction, the unique qualities of the particular are forgone.

The roots of this argument are surely familiar to those who have read Plato's Republic. Socrates leaves no doubt, even to one not all that bright as Glaucon, that the real world cannot be the world to which our senses have access.

Socrates makes it clear that the highest form of human rationality is exemplified by a flight upward--ideas about ideas--not downward. Even the sciences fall short of this standard. They test their theories by moving from generalization to the visible world, a move downward. It is in mathematics that the true calibre of human rationality is tested. The pure forms can be known only by rational, not empirical, processes. Hence, intellect is most clearly displayed in the abstract use of language and in mathematical reasoning. No one I know rationalizes educational aims or the curriculum of a liberal education on the basis of ideas I have just articulated. Nevertheless, they are there.

Consider the concept of intelligence and compare it with the concept of talent. Talent is what is needed to paint or dance. Intelligence is what is needed to think. Talent is used in making or doing. Intelligence is central to reflection. Universities aspire to be more Greek than Roman. And the more Greek, the better.

Consider further how universities regulate entrance through their gates. In those institutions that can choose who they admit, the criteria for admission, at least the basic criteria, are not particularly subtle. For high school students something called the core academics count the most. Indeed, some university admission committees suspect students who enroll in fine arts courses in high school of avoiding hard work.

Furthermore, when GPAs are calculated, not all courses count the same. The grades students receive in fine arts courses are not often included in the calculations admissions committees make of high school students' GPAs. Thus, arts courses, which are thought to depend upon talent, not intellect, are discounted.

This message to students is sometimes made explicit by universities. Stanford sends a memo to secondary schools, students and parents titled "Preparing for a Stanford Education." This memo presents a set of values that assigns the arts to the second-class status I have described. The memo informs its readers that "some study of fine or performing arts is desirable." It goes on to say that "although we do not include art courses (except, for example, those designated as advanced placement, history of music, or history of art) in our calculation of an applicant's grade point average, we do nurture the active artistic community at Stanford, and we value highly the advanced appreciation of the arts that comes from such courses."

Such reassurance damns with faint praise. What is ironic is that Stanford gives academic degrees in studio art and in music.

Stanford, being a bellweather institution, helps create a ripple in high schools that discourages students from working within one of our culture's most precious resources. The message is crystal clear: If you want to enter here, this is what you should study. Not wanting to appear to be utterly philistine, some study in the arts is OK--but not too much. The arts have a polite place.

If these cues were not enough, the SATs cap the message. The Scholastic Aptitude Test, a test developed in the 1940's and taken by a million and a half high school students each year, has two sections. One of these is verbal and the other mathematical. Aptitude for scholastic work is "determined" by the measurement of verbal and mathematical performance. It matters not that the SAT adds little to what transcripts already predict, what does matter is that it symbolizes what universities believe the young should value.

In my remarks so far I used the term "abstract." I said that university faculties were interested in the skills of abstraction and in abstract thought as contrasted with the ability to deal with the particular or the concrete. But now I wish to qualify my remarks. I am not ready to concede abstraction to language and number alone. The arts are exemplars of abstraction. They also exemplify intellect at work.

Intellectual abstraction and the arts

Consider the matter of perception, in particular what might be called artistic perception. Artistic perception has to do with the fine-grained perception of form so that both its constituent elements and the whole in which they appear are seen as one. This requires the development of a cognitive schema that is appropriate to the genre of the work perceived.

This schema, in turn, makes it possible for individuals to do two apparently contradictory things. First, it allows them to recognize the class or genre to which a form belongs--this is an impressionist painting, or a baroque piece of music, or a post-modern building and second, to experience the distinctive features of the particular form as such.

Classification and individuation are two fundamental processes in the perception of art. The former makes it possible to know what expectations, standards, or criteria to hold for the form. The latter makes it possible to discern the unique qualities of the form as such. Both classification and individuation are the products of sophisticated forms of inquiry.

Works of art, even those easily classified, are typically complex and highly nuanced and because of the "logic" of art is not governed by a codified array of rules that make it possible to demonstrate the proof of a conclusion, judgments that depend upon the perception of fit, coherence, productive idiosyncrasy become essential. To make these judgements, well refined sensibility is critical; the eye is part of the mind.

With respect to abstraction, that attribute typically assigned to theoretical activities exclusively, it too is central in both the perception and creation of the arts. Consider what is involved in the "simple" act of drawing. To draw something, it is necessary to perceive the structural features of some aspect of the world and to transform what has been perceived into its structural equivalent within the limits of the material in which one works. A tree, for example, has to be perceived as a form. This means that some aspects of the tree will be neglected--its botanical status, for example, or its economic value. The tree has to be seen in a special way in order to be successfully transformed within the limits of drawing. For example, a tree is not only a shape having color, texture and proportion, it also displays a certain expressive character. Some trees are stately, others are visually fragile; some are graceful, others gnarled. To experience these features one must attend to the tree so that its character "speaks" directly. A certain attitude must be embraced, one that allow the tree's form to inform. Those fixed on linguistic classification are likely to have both their heads and their hearts elsewhere. In the process of rendering a structurally equivalent form, a variety of qualities must be mediated. These qualities pertain to color, proportion, value, texture, and the infinite variety of

qualitative relationships that emerge in the course of action. It also requires knowing when to abandon intentions in order to exploit new possibilities in the drawing that were not foreseen. Perhaps most of all, it requires knowing when the drawing is finished. This process of qualitative mediation is one that is central to the functions of human intelligence.

If the essential features of a liberal education include the broad development of human rationalities and the multiple realities that these rationalities make possible, the arts would seem to have an inside track.

We recognize that "truth" in literature and in art is not the same kind of truth offered to us through physics. We understand that insight into human character may be secured through a play by Arthur Miller or a painting by Francisco Goya as well as by the results of a projective test that is a part of psychological test battery. We recognize that in our own daily life rational judgments are made often by the feel of a situation as well as by a logical analysis of the situation per se.

We also know that the arts are paradigm means through which the ineffable is made public. Yet, despite our awareness, we treat the arts as products of a less than fully rational activity and marginalize them within the liberal educational mission of the university. This paradox, I am arguing, needs to be recognized and the intellectual fetters that have so long constricted our conception of mind and understanding lifted.

Happily, cognitive scientists are formulating the empirical, scientific evidence to support the ideas that philosophers such as Nelson Goodman, Suzanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer have developed. Howard Gardner, for example, develops a theory of multiple intelligences in his important book, *Frames of Mind*.

Gardner argues that human intelligence is not a single ability, but emerges in seven identifiable forms, each with its own developmental history and each with its own location in the brain. Education that aims to expand human intelligences needs to provide the conditions through which latencies can be actualized.

By restricting the opportunities to work in the arts, either through disincentives or absent programs, the opportunity to foster the forms of intelligence used in the arts will be unavailable to students. As a result, the social contributions and personal satisfactions of those whose intellectual proclivities reside in the arts will be lost or diminished. Thus, the provision of opportunities to work in the arts in the programs made available to students is, ultimately, an act of educational equity, one with important social consequences.

The realization of intelligences through education is not a benefit that is enjoyed only by the student, it enables the student to share something important with the rest of us. How much poorer would our lives be without the arts? How much more equitable would our schools be with them? Are we willing to take the arts seriously in the education of our students or will the arts continue to occupy the polite but marginal place they have held for so long?

NAEA Goals for Quality Art Education state that "for graduation from high school, every student shall be required to complete at least one year of credit in one of the fine arts." It is further stated that "an acceptable course in the visual art shall include in-depth study in the techniques of at least one art medium; practice in several media; and studies in art history, aesthetics and criticism."

NAEA ADVISORY is issued as a service to members. Single copies may be purchased from the National Art Education Association, 1916 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 at \$1.50 per Advisory. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. PLEASE SPECIFY THE DATE AND TITLE OF THE PARTICULAR ADVISORY YOU ARE ORDERING. PAYMENT MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER.