

Why teach art?

by Mark Alan Anderson

There is a discipline that embraces history, business, music, science and math – and through study of which has been suggested to increase a student’s overall achievement in seemingly unrelated topics. This discipline has the ability to heal troubled souls through personal expression. It provides a solid community foundation for economic development. And it has provided the basis for untold countless hours of simple, personal enjoyment.

The discipline to which I refer is art education.

That a core awareness or education in art could have such a dramatic influence on individuals or communities shouldn’t be such an astonishing statement. It’s been said that we’re all of us creative individuals to some extent. Art – and artists – are not a separate part of society and, in fact, are all around us. Thinking creatively – thinking “outside the box” – has had a profound effect on our approach to business, to

industry, to education and to personal communication. While few of us are geniuses, we each have the ability to alter our surroundings in some way, whether it’s through thought, decoration or action.

Literacy. I think there is a prevailing misconception that visual art and literacy are mutually exclusive and therefore, unrelated. While the art classroom might not be as “reading intensive” as would be the English, social studies or science classrooms, it should be understood that literacy plays a vital role in Art Education. Comprehension and understanding of art history and art technique would be difficult – if not impossible – without a common foundation of language and terminology on which to base meaningful dialogue and discussion. Furthermore, many forms of visual art deal specifically with the written word. For example, there exists the study of graphic design, which demands a high degree of proficiency and comprehension of language in order to successfully

execute the most basic of assignments. That a “visual” medium should require an excellent grasp of language is not surprising. Thus, one can draw the natural conclusion that art education supports a foundation of dexterity in both visual and verbal language abilities – skill sets that are invaluable for the student – and the adult he or she will ultimately become.

Creative Problem Solving. Art Education teaches students to “think outside the box” by encouraging a process of approach that examines various and different entry points to a given issue. Employers frequently complain of staff who can only see one side of an issue; students can just as easily get lost in the quagmire of “tilting at windmills” instead of seeking out alternative processes, solutions, and approaches. The concept that reading and comprehension and *the ability to write cohesively and visualize a problem* is an important aspect of learning in *all* content areas.

My goal is to “open people’s eyes” – teaching children how to really see and observe – and through “seeing”, discover a means of understanding on a completely different level. Such an approach is all about thinking creatively and with an open mind, seeing in greater detail through the development of observational skills, and in general fostering tolerance – tolerance of ideas, people, cultures and thinking.

Cross Curriculum. Reputable and

peer reviewed studies have argued that an education with a strong emphasis on the various arts can have a positive impact on other, more analytical areas of study, including math, science and reading.

Self Expression and Self Discovery.

Expression of ideas, concepts, strategies and information should – to some degree – be at the core of every educator’s responsibility. There is abundant evidence to support the idea that a teacher of a specific content area has a unique opportunity to provoke and stimulate literacy, dialogue and fluency within that content area. In fact, there is probably no better agent to provide a means of self expression and self discovery than the content area teacher of art.

Relevance of Personal Experience.

Closely tied to self expression in education, is the idea that the process of education should include a means of rendering the materials relevant to the personal experience of the student. Teachers of core subjects struggle with this monumental task every day, trying to find a common ground between math or science and the various individuals in a classroom. Art, by virtue of its very personal nature, can provide a much needed bridge by bringing relevance into the school and classroom.

Common Experience Of Art Making.

Beyond the record of human history, mankind has created art. Why make art?

There seems to be no universal reason and yet we have continued to do it, through wars and famine, times of plenty and times of oppression. From the dawn of our very existence, we have found a common experience in our desire – our very *need* to make art.

Cultural Singularities. In the United States, we've built a nationwide community comprised of a rich fabric woven from various cultures. We may not ever know the personal reasons *why* every culture has created art, but we can learn to appreciate the broad tapestry of diversity and foster a greater degree of understanding and tolerance by learning something about the cultural singularities found in the art of our cultural siblings.

A Profession with a Thousand Entry Points. At one time or another, most professionals stumble across the old saw that, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." Well, that's a fine load of twaddle that tends to overlook the important point that few – if any – of us "professionals" would ever have achieved such a designation without the boost from teachers and mentors along the way.

There seems to be some misconception about a career in art. The prevailing wisdom – of parents and school administrators anyway – is that an art career means either painting (and starving in a Paris basement apartment) or teaching. While

both are possible outcomes (and equally possible for an MBA, an accountant, and a physician), it should be noted that there are hundreds of thousands of art related career opportunities in other, less obvious areas. These include advertising, a variety of forms of design, television, marketing, printing, architecture, administration, therapy ... the list goes on and on and includes many positions with substantial earning potential.

And, after all, one of the main conditions of the "No Child Left Behind" Act is to ensure that the nation's high school graduates are prepared for the work force.

Aesthetics. As one becomes introduced to art education, two components become apparent. For many years, I'd only given consideration to one of these two components: Learning how to make art. I'd always thought that art education was about the "hands-on" experience of making art...instruction in learning how to paint, draw, sculpt, etc. I felt that art education was about learning the craftsmanship, skill and artisanship –that anything else was just peripheral and that you had either absorbed it somehow or been born with it in the first place. Somewhere along the way I was struck by something so blatantly obvious that it was almost an epiphany: I was surprised to realize that there is a second component of art education – that of learning how to respond to art. And it strikes me that such response is not neces-

sarily always an innate characteristic. Also: Learning how to make art and learning how to respond to art are not one and the same. A personal response to art can encompass “likes” and “dislikes”, art history and appreciation, the “why’s” and “wherefore’s” of the purpose and end result of a particular artwork or “why” an artist created that work in the first place. The components of an education in art are thus articulated as not only the “how”, but also the “why”. least of such tools is literacy.

History. While it is important to understand what has happened in our past, it is also equally important to stay current and involved in the contemporary visions of the art and art education community. The art educator finds a way to reflect upon where we have come from while exploring and debating where we are going.

Recently, I read that, “somewhere there is someone who needs to hear your story, your song, your poem. You may never know how it will inspire them, change their life, and maybe connect them with their own purpose.” I’d like to believe that I might be able to provide some such influence.