

The Arts:

The Crucial Puzzle Piece in Education

Although some may regard art education as a luxury, simple creative activities are some of the building blocks of child development



FOR ME, GROWING up in the Philippines meant that I was extremely fortunate to have been taught music and dance as early as pre-school. By the time I graduated from high school, I had performed in countless choir concerts and dance performances, acted in and directed full-length play productions, played the bass guitar and the drums in my high school rock band and participated in many other performance-related activities.

Clearly then, compared to other curriculums around the world, the arts is given greater importance and students are encouraged to pursue their artistic dreams-whether it is to become an opera singer, a trumpet player or a fashion designer.

Eight years ago, I moved to Vietnam and my friends here were able to quickly and easily recognize my passion for music, dance and theatre. Fast forward to now: It has become increasingly difficult in this day and age to justify funding art-based subjects in schools. Around the world, schools are implementing cost-cutting measures and if subjects must be prioritized, isn't it much more important to focus on those subjects that translate into workplace skills?

Of course, for me, and many like me, the skills I learned in the arts did translate-I studied English and Theatre Arts at Bachelor and Master's level and have taught these subjects over the last two decades.

And as a high school teacher here in Vietnam, it has, at times, saddened me to see promising-and occasionally even gifted students-give up on subjects that they have had the amazing luck to be both talented in and in love with because of family pressure to pursue higher education in business or banking.

But the world needs engineers, computer technicians, financial analysts and manufacturers; so how important can exposure to arts be to our future generations? The answer, of course, is very, and for fairly obvious reasons. Firstly, studying the arts is vital in the development of a young person's critical thinking skills. Now, more than ever, in this post-truth world, the ability to





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critically analyze the constant flow of information that is dumped in our social media, on our TVs and through our devices, is necessary if we are to have any hope of making informed opinions about the world around us. This skill is formed when we immerse ourselves in literature, attempt to divest meaning from music or strain to discover underlying themes to a play. And make no mistake, the ability to read nuance, understand implications and understand a person's motivation—all things that are taught in a literature or drama arts class—are life skills that any employer would welcome. This leads into the second major benefit of receiving an education with an artistic element: the ability to communicate. So much of our art, be it spoken, written, danced or played, is an attempt by the artist to communicate with the audience. Being able to understand this deep, emotion-based message strengthens a person's ability to communicate in so many different ways. And it is depth of communication, not sheer amount that counts. We live in a complex and, sometimes dangerous world, and being able to communicate important messages is vital if we are to navigate through this life causing only a minimum of grief and anger.

And, if we are to focus on a practical aspect of this argument, we live in an era of mass communication, much of it noise. How useful would a skilled communicator be? How much of an asset to any workplace? Anyone who has had to plod through a turgid report, suffer through an almost unintelligible presentation, or read an overly wordy essay would agree that this skill would place highly in many walks of life.

These skills all help to develop an essential characteristic needed for the world's future leaders—emotional intelligence. There are many admirable traits in a person, but none so important to being a successful manager of people than being able to relate to those people. Of course, I am not suggesting that empathy, sympathy or understanding of others is taught only by the arts, or even that it is taught at all, but subjects such as music, drama and literature certainly refine it, and can often provide useful shorthand to young people who may struggle to express their emotions as they grow and develop.

And if we were to look again at the practicalities of developing these traits, then numerous studies have shown that the most successful bosses are those that really take the time to

understand their employees, rather than simply seeing them as tools to be used in the service of the company.

And finally, simply, art is innovation. Without learning creativity and developing confidence through trying and failing—something that any grade school poet or university drama club actor goes through—we do not learn how to innovate through that process of trial and error. As Steve Jobs, in launching the iPad 2 put it: "It is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing."

But perhaps I am being overly indulgent. Even I, as a dyed-in-the-wool, liberal, artsy-fartsy type, would have to admit that the ability to accurately measure, to observe, report and draw conclusions from outcomes, to build and direct others to build and to successfully manage a budget would have to rank higher than an ability to create, appreciate and critique art. Of course, the world cannot run without those core STEM skills, and, come the zombie apocalypse, the need for artists will not be high. But do you know what? There won't be a zombie apocalypse; it's just an entertaining story, made up by an artist. ■

