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CREATIVE COGNITION: DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TRAINING OF THE VISUAL ARTS AND THEATRE IN UPPER DIVISION AND SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

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The purpose of this paper is to help define the commonalities between the visual arts and theatre through the lens of interdisciplinary education. Interdisciplinary education can be defined as the integration of concepts, philosophies, and practices from different fields of knowledge. It crosses the humanities, the social sciences, science, and technology. It engages its participants in collaborative dialogue, which includes both debate and conflict, and ultimately transforms our individual understanding and produces new knowledge relevant to the fields of study involved. Interdisciplinary education allows for collaboration within different disciplines or fields of study. Such collaboration is especially needed when complex, real world problems cannot be solved or understood with the perspective of only one discipline (Derry, 2005).

There is a tendency in American education to create or adhere to a curriculum that is centered around individual subject areas or disciplines with little regard or concern as to how these subjects are related. The result of this disregard is a curriculum that lacks any sense of the larger questions, agreements, and disputes that drive learning in the world. Learning, therefore, is often mechanical, routine, and viewed as preparatory for some later task that will somehow synthesize and make use of all the disconnected information that most students encounter throughout the course of their education (Parsons, 2009). Central to the task of teaching is to enable students to make cognitive connections that move between disciplines and subject areas.

Education should exist to set up a conversation within an environmental and social context so students are challenged by other ways of understanding and acquiring new information. Through this process it is imperative that students engage new materials, metaphors, models, ideas, images, narratives, and facts that will be used for shaping, reshaping, and testing their own experiences and expanding their base of knowledge (Abbs, 2003).

Within the fields of the visual and performing arts, there often exists a core language that is common to each specific discipline. For the individual artist, inspiration can often come from different sources and more often than not these sources exist in other art forms. The artist then takes this new information and transfers it into his or her own consciousness and experiential realm (Ayshe, 2008).

Gardner's theory on multiple intelligences is essential for understanding the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to arts education not only throughout the broader school curriculum but within the humanities themselves.

The 7 core Intelligences are:

Linguistic – involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals.

Logical – Mathematical – involves the capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically.

Musical – entails skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns.

Bodily – Kinesthetic – entails the potential of using one’s whole body or parts of the body to solve problems or fashion products.

Spatial – features the potential to recognize and manipulate patterns of wide space as well as the patterns of more confined areas.

Interpersonal – denotes a person’s capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people and consequently, to work effectively with others.

Intrapersonal – involves the capacity to understand oneself, to have an effective working model of oneself – including one’s desires, fears, and capacities, and to use such information effectively in regulating one’s own life.

(Gardner, 1999).

The theory of multiple intelligences speaks to this idea of a core human experience that all people share and can most deftly be applied through the arts. Gardner states, “Specific intelligences operate in rich environments, typically in conjunction with several other intelligences.” (pp.37) However it is important to note that Gardner makes the distinction that there is no singular creative intelligence. He believes that no specific intelligence is inherently artistic, although each intelligence lends itself to a specific art form. For example, a person with a high degree of linguistic intelligence might become a poet, novelist, or dramatist. In contrast, someone with a high degree of kinesthetic intelligence might become a dancer or gravitate to a form of expression that involves the physical self. Artists do not use just one form of intelligence; rather they often use several working in concert with each other. A dancer may use not only his or her kinesthetic intelligence to govern certain movements; they may also incorporate musical and spatial intelligence in regard to their position on the stage, their place in time, and relation to other participants in a performance. Educating this awareness, specifically through the lens of the arts, ultimately nurtures more cognitive and creative awareness (Fowler, 1996).

An integrated approach to the humanities would put the theory of multiple intelligences into practice. It would call for specific student learning outcomes that look at art in the broader sense while examining the commonalities and specifics that exist within each discipline. This approach calls for the teaching of artistic practices along with intellectual knowledge in the theory and history of the arts and their relationship to our shared culture.

There are five specific outcomes that are vital to implementing an integrated model into the curriculum:

- *The student will be able to communicate at a basic level in the four art disciplines: dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts. This includes knowledge and skills in the use of basic vocabularies, materials, tools, techniques, and intellectual methods of each arts discipline.*
- *The student should be able to communicate proficiently in at least one art form, including the ability to define and solve artistic problems with insight, reason, and technical proficiency.*
- *The student should be able to develop and present basic analyses of works of art from structural, historical and cultural perspectives, and from combinations of those perspectives. This includes the ability to understand and evaluate work in the various art disciplines.*
- *The student should have an informed acquaintance with exemplary works of art from a variety of cultures and historical periods, and a basic understanding of historical development in the arts disciplines, across the arts as a whole, and within specific cultures.*
- *The student should be able to relate various types of arts knowledge and skills within and across the arts disciplines. This includes mixing and matching competencies and understandings in art making, history, culture, and analysis in any arts related project (Detels. 1999).*

An emergent theme that is expressed through these specific learning outcomes and throughout the arts is that a fundamental aspect of the arts is their ability to communicate. American Surrealist Peter Blume states that, “ Since I am concerned with the communication of ideas, I am not at all ashamed of “telling stories” in my paintings because I consider this to be one of the primary functions of the plastic arts” (Protter, 1997 pp.248). It is useful to think of art, in all its manifestations, as being the medium through which art’s meaning is communicated. What is conveyed, however, functions in a different way than other modes of communication, such as language (Anderson, 1990). Art can communicate in multiple ways through multiple forms of expression. Key among these forms of communication is art’s uncanny ability to express emotional meaning and to define an aesthetic. Emotion is the

conscious sign of an intellectual break, actual or impending, that induces reflection and a desire for resolution. Restoration of this break converts these emotions into interest in the objects or performances themselves (Dewey, 1934). The artist uses this process of emotional tension and resolution to create artifacts that embody this process and bring about an emotional response to them. In other words, the audience doesn't simply hear or see the information being communicated, they feel it and are changed as a result.

Theatre, like any art form, seeks to communicate with its audience on human terms. Aristotle wrote in *Poetics* that the dramatic "poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects—things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be" (Trans. Butcher, 1951). In Hamlet's advice to the players, Shakespeare wrote that "the purpose of playing...was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," (Arden, 2003). Oscar Wilde Cite here was quoted as saying that he felt theatre was, "...the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being. "

As a cumulative medium of humanities, theatre is unique in that it often straddles the worlds of visual, performing, and literary arts. Most design elements (lights, scenery, costume, and sound) work in tandem with the performers (actors, dancers, and musicians) to bring the story of the script to life. The influence of visual art instruction on the instruction of scenic design and music for a musical play are obvious, but a less explored connection is the commonalities found in the training of both actors and visual artists.

Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of humans and environmental conditions happens in the very process of living (Dewey, 1934). Under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas, so that conscious intent emerges. The nature of experience can be understood as including both active and passive elements combined in distinct ways. On the active side, experience is a meaning that is made explicit. On the passive side, experience is undergoing continual development. When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it, and then we suffer or enjoy the consequences. In short, we do something to the experience, and the experience does something to us in return (Dewey, 1934). This defines the relationship between the art, the artist, and the viewer where the outcome is a form of forward cognition that acts on both the intellectual and emotional self.

Kinesensic" is comprised of the following roots:

kine—motion or movement

Movement is energy. Scientifically, energy begins on the cellular level in some sort of atomic conversion. The whole universe is comprised of these building blocks, which are always in motion. Even the cells in stagnate objects break down over time. The body itself is a biological machine full of moving parts that continue to move even in moments of outward stillness. Stop for a moment and notice your heartbeat—the “gentle turbulence”, as Lessac refers to it.

* esens—basic meaning, nature

What does this sensation tell you? When your heart skips a beat, or you have a big belly laugh, how does your body feel during and after? What are the physical movements? Literally, how are you moved by the experience? Also, what movements are natural to your own optimal functioning—as opposed to pushed, habitually engrained, or forced? This learning by listening to the body is referred to by Lessac as “Organic Instruction”.

* sens—spirit, inner energy, involvement

By opening yourself to sensation you enliven the openness of your spirit and are more willing to say “yes” to other impulses. A smell may trigger an emotion or memory, or a sound may create a physical reaction. Like harmonic overtones in music, or depth of color in a Rothko painting, we are multi-layered and complex beings. This openness and awareness of connectivity within the senses, we call “Inner Harmonic Sensing”.

* sic—familiar occurrences

We learn any physical action through repetition and eventual tactile understanding. We eventually get a “feel” for it in our body. Whether learning to ride a bicycle, to play an instrument, to dance specific choreography, to apply precise pencil pressure in shading, or to do any expressive act on stage, we truly own the act only when we understand it for ourselves as a familiar event. Once viscerally understood, we can repeat that event with ease. This is what Lessac calls the “Familiar Event Principle”.

The core idea of Kinesensic Training calls for the actor’s awareness of self while in the doing. Lessac summarizes that, “good acting is nothing more than interesting, imaginative, involved behavior: it is the experiencing of communication and, at the same time, the effective and involved expression of that experience” (Lessac, 1997).

The act of expression in the arts is achieved using the tools and terminology specific to each creative discipline. In the case of the visual arts, we train students to use core components that aid the student in the act of expression. These components are the fundamentals and principles of design that form the foundation for any classroom instruction in the visual arts and are often on display in any k-12 art classroom.

The *fundamentals of design* are the most basic elements of visual communication:

Line

Shape

Color/Value

Form

Space

Texture

The *principals of design* refer to how these elements relate to each other in the composition of a work of art:

Balance

Emphasis

Rhythm/ Movement

Variety and Contrast

Unity

Disciplines within the visual arts such as, drawing, painting sculpture, etc... requires a physical act. In this regard the visual arts merge with other art forms in that it requires a considerable amount of concentration and physical exertion. All art forms embody direct expressions of energy and movement. It is therefore vital for practitioners of the arts understand how these two elements, energy and movement, can be controlled and transformed into the vocabulary of the art form (Curtis, 2008). Terminology common to many art forms like line, rhythm, movement and gesture are obvious parallels between art forms.

In reference to the performing arts Lessac (1981) suggests that to achieve "body wisdom," "we need to learn how the body wants to function, instinctively and naturally, and what its optimal capacities are." Optimal body functioning begins with a natural sense of the

duality of posture and breath. Like the two sides of a coin, posture and breath are complementary. One cannot have good posture without good breath or good breath without optimal posture. Naturally, we understand this—an elite athlete has wonderful posture and fantastically functioning breath, sure, but so does a child at play. In moments of engaged physical activity and expression, the body has an innate, functional awareness of itself and a natural economy of movement.

Straight lines don't exist in nature—they are creations of civilized mankind. Likewise, there are no straight bones in the human skeleton. Man, as a part of nature is a series of curves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the spine. In the slides above, you see an ancient image and modern illustrations of the C-curve of natural human posture. Notice the lightness, ease and flexibility in each. Each figure is functioning optimally—with the exact amount of energy needed to perform the task at hand. It is only in the pursuit of perfection or correctness that straight lines and rigidity occur. When these anesthetics affect the doing, stress is induced and the doing itself is stressed. Our theory is that the physical action of creating visual art is a documentation of that physical exchange.

Conclusion

The creation of a work of art is a documentation of a physical exchange, a conversation between the body and the object being created. A key point behind creative cognition is the connectivity between cognitive theory- what we think- and the physical act of expression. When an interdisciplinary teaching model is incorporated in the teaching of the arts, the student is asked to employ skills and techniques that capitalize on a multimodal approach to their specific discipline. In this philosophy, all forms of art exist to inform each other to the greater benefit of the artist, and their ability to communicate within their medium. It is, therefore, incumbent upon teachers of the arts to foster a greater awareness of the specifics of each discipline and how the disciplines can be incorporated and utilized for the benefit of all.

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