

The Arts Built My Future

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I was *that kid* in middle school. The one who didn't quite fit in, who appeared checked out during most of her classes (because often, I was). The kid you suspected might struggle later in life unless she found her place.

Luckily, I found the perfect place for me. In the arts.

Since my school had no specific program for creative writing, I poured myself into the next closest thing: theater. There, I could build characters, speak dialogue, and create my own scenes. Theater became my foundation, my launchpad. I also played in the school orchestra and later joined the choir. Eventually I became heavily involved with speech and debate, a blend of art and academics. Art classes became the structure upon which the rest of my education stood.

For me, it was crucial to have access to these classes within the school setting. I was raised by a single mom who worked two, and sometimes three, jobs to bring in a very tight income. Money for lessons was hard to scrape together; even harder was finding the time to get me to and from those lessons. Without access to the arts in my school, I would be in a very different place today.

Unfortunately, over the last several years, arts classes seem to have become the first slash when schools tighten budgets. Taking their place are increased testing and other academic priorities. There are reasons: jobs in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields are growing three times as fast as jobs in non-STEM fields, and STEM workers earn 26 percent more than their non-STEM counterparts (Langdon, McKittrick, Beede, Khan & Doms, 2011).

I do not suggest that arts education take precedence over more academic areas. Rather, I believe that arts education is the

glue that binds together the goals we all want for our students: not only improved academic performance but also improved education of the whole child.

Looking back, I see the academic benefits that theater gave me. Most notably, my reading comprehension improved dramatically (no pun intended!) when I instinctively began reading passages as if I'd perform them next. I made gains in oral reading, vocabulary, and even mathematics. (Who knew mathematics would be necessary to design a set on stage? Everyone but me, I'm fairly sure.) In rehearsals, I absorbed the works of Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and Thornton Wilder—even Shakespeare finally made sense to me.

But the greatest advances came in ways tests do not measure. My confidence skyrocketed, as did my abilities with memorization, and so did my senses of responsibility and place. I learned to take criticism and to make mistakes. I learned to work with a team and to speak clearly and make myself heard.

Academically, music became the way I began to understand math, but it also reduced my stress, taught me poise in front of an audience, and helped me appreciate poetry.

But of all classes I took during my middle and high school years, speech and debate have served my life the best. Most academic classes give students information and ask for the correct answer to be regurgitated during a test. Debate, on the other hand, required me to analyze my opponent's argument and figure out a logical way to counter it in front of a judge, then support it with evidence. I learned to research, to write papers based on that research, and to see both sides of an argument. I learned how to win with

grace and, more important, how to lose with dignity. I had to think on my feet and control my emotions. I also experienced the real-world benefits of preparation and hard work. I still draw on skills I developed in speech and debate class almost every day.

In fact, the arts mean so much to me that I went on to teach theater and debate in a high school setting, and from my observations there, I can say that while every student may react differently to the arts, in some way, the arts have a beneficial place for every student.

This holds true for the art that is now closest to my heart: creative writing. As an author, I visit schools all over the country and speak with teachers who talk of research writing, personal narratives, and essays—all parts of a solid education. When I ask about creative writing, too often these same teachers shake their heads. They want to teach it, they sneak it in when they can, but it isn't considered an academic necessity.

Aristotle was once asked which he felt was the more important to teach: history or fiction (poetry). His response, in more modern terms, was that although history teaches what has happened, fiction teaches that anything can happen.

Anything can happen. What an empowering statement for young writers, to understand that the possibilities for their lives are limited only by their imaginations.

In fiction writing, students can build a universe, create a magic system, write characters who change the world or save it. They can invent the future or write warnings about it or, strikingly often, work through the tumultuous emotions of teenage life in the safe space of a written page of fiction.

That same written page becomes the experimental ground for students to better understand themselves. Most young writers begin by using a more powerful, heroic version of themselves as the main character (whether they realize it or not). This is particularly true of writers in the upper elementary and middle school years. Ask them about their stories, and their descriptions often shift from “then she went” to “then I went.”

Outside school, teen students are often confronting very difficult times, facing social and academic pressures, increased responsibilities, and the challenges of simply fitting in. Allowing students to create fictional worlds they control can become a vital balance in their lives.

That's how it was for me. My first serious writing project in sixth grade was about a girl who loses control of her imagination (and coincidentally, whose personality bore an uncanny resemblance to my own). The story became a world in which I made a difference, where I had power. As I felt stronger in that fictional world, I became stronger and more courageous. I had been creating the

story I personally needed at that time in my life.

As I've visited with young writers across the country, I see them doing the same thing. They are proud to show me finished stories with their names right at the top. The quality of the story doesn't matter, only that it's something unique they have created, something that cannot be duplicated by anyone else, ever.

But creative writing extends into academic benefits as well. To give their stories authenticity, these young writers are learning research skills, asking science- and history-based questions, and actually wanting tips on editing techniques.

Better still, many of these young writers are sharing their stories with friends and teachers or posting chapters to websites. Through these interactions, they learn to accept criticism and improve their work. Once finished, many try to find out how to become published, demonstrating forward thinking that guidance counselors wish for in all their students.

As wonderful as all of this is, I've also seen the other side: schools where students are largely deprived of the arts. This is most concerning to me in the high-poverty schools I've visited, the places where the arts can make the greatest difference.

For example, The Harmony Project offers a music education program serving low-income children in Los Angeles. Since 2008, 93 percent of students who participated in their program continued on to college, despite coming from neighborhoods with a 50 percent high school dropout rate. Researchers from Northwestern University further discovered that children who regularly participated for two or more years showed greater improvement in reading scores and in their brain's ability to process speech, when compared to their less involved peers (Locker, 2016).

One of the most profound school visits I ever did was at a California school where 100 percent of the students lived below the poverty level and nearly all students had at least one family member in a gang or in prison. The school was doing everything within its power to set its students on a different path.

Part of my presentation to the students involved putting up a humorous picture of a boy hanging from a fence with what might be the all-time worst wedgie. No matter where I show it, the picture always gets a huge reaction from students, but then I asked the same question I do everywhere else, “How did this boy get there?” For the first time, the question failed. The students at this school could tell me everything about what they were seeing, but they could not create any story to explain what might have happened just before or just after this picture. They could not imagine.

And I asked myself, if these students cannot imagine how this boy got onto the fence, how can we ask them to imagine a life without poverty or life on a college campus? If the only reality these students have ever known is associated with poverty and crime, how do they escape it if they cannot visualize anything different?

I know what art did for me, what study after study confirms it does for students now, and yet those who need it most are too often being deprived of the opportunity to create, to express, and to imagine. Developing these skills will enhance the academic education that may allow them to break the cycle of poverty.

If we can agree that education in the arts is valuable to students, then the issue that remains is perhaps the most difficult of all: Teachers are increasingly asked to do more in less time, and to produce measurable academic outcomes. How can educators incorporate more of the arts into their classrooms?

A few ideas:

- Students can convert difficult texts into skits or readers' theater performances.
- In history class, students could write a fictional short story in the time period being studied using historically accurate details.
- Students can use mathematical formulas to design a dream home.
- Geometry students can create colorful mosaics using a required variety of angles.
- Science students can design a futuristic invention on paper, then answer science-related questions for how the invention might be made.

- Biology students can do an art composition using patterns and colors of animals.
- Rather than traditional book reports, students can form groups to film ads for an assigned book.
- Geography students can create their own map of the ultimate battle fortress with natural formations, using only examples of real places around the world.
- Math students could be given a series of problems to solve. The answers lead to a beat pattern they must put into a percussive rhythm to be performed in class.
- Have students link English texts to their favorite songs (e.g., What current song could have inspired Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?).

All educators hope to make a difference in their classrooms. I am convinced that by incorporating arts into the curriculum, we will see increased performance from all of our students.

REFERENCES

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2018 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2018 elections, Middle Level Section member **Alfredo Celedón Luján**, Monte del Sol Charter School, Santa Fe, NM, was chosen vice president. Luján will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

The Middle Level Section also elected new members. **Brooke Eisenbach**, Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, and **Carla España**, Hunter College (CUNY), New York, NY, were elected to four-year terms on the steering committee. Elected to the 2018–19 Nominating Committee were **Alexander Corbitt**, The Bronx School of Young Leaders, NY, chair; **Lakisha Odlum**, School of the Future, New York, NY; and **Shelly Shaffer**, Eastern Washington University, Cheney.

You can find additional 2018 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2019 elections on the NCTE website (<http://www2.ncte.org/get-involved/volunteer/elections/>).