

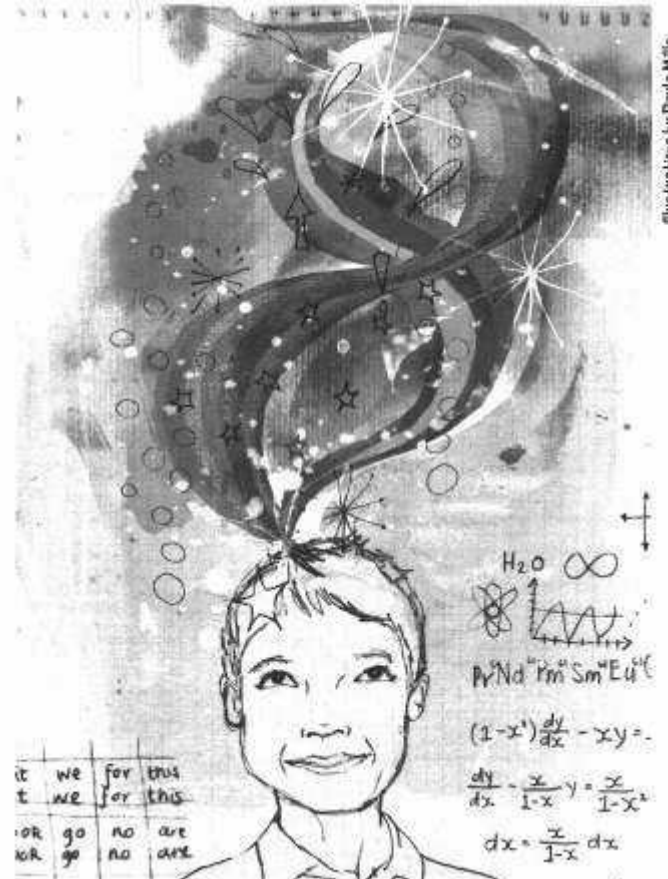


Creativity In The Classroom

It's time for the arts to get a starring role in the curriculum, writes Michael Nagel.

‘Okay class, you are not getting your work done and it is important to remember that if you don’t finish then you won’t get maths today...’ It is probably safe to assume that this is not something you will hear in any classroom. However, replace the word ‘maths’ with ‘art’ and you have a stock-standard disciplinary tactic used by many teachers. Why is that? Have you ever wondered why maths is never held to ransom like the creative arts might be? This may seem like a silly question, or perhaps you think, like many people, that the arts are not as important as other school subjects. The problem is that such a belief is profoundly mistaken given what we know about learning, academic achievement and employment in the 21st Century. This problem is exacerbated further by misguided policy and reform initiatives that impact on the day-to-day education of today’s children.

Recently in Australia, there has been a great deal of political swagger, publicity and media attention focused on education ‘standards’ and schools’ accountability, with much of that emphasis on the very important areas of literacy and numeracy. And while there is no denying that a child’s standards of literacy and numeracy are critical elements in successful school and life endeavours, a ‘standards’ agenda tends to focus on testing and on narrow prescriptions of learning and teaching.





Importantly, the current emphasis on literacy, numeracy and testing has not adequately taken into account the potential benefits of the creative arts in enhancing scholastic excellence and the overall education environment for all students. Moreover, contemporary schooling still tends to place the 'arts' on the periphery of other subject areas tacitly considered to be 'more important' without taking into account the growing body of research identifying the arts as integral in preparing students to be creative and innovative in a future often described as beyond comprehension. Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the 'standards movement' is often surpassed only by that espousing building creative and innovative minds.

It therefore seems paradoxical that much of what we currently know about enhancing learning, lifting standards and building creativity through the creative arts garners such little attention. This is even more problematic when looking at the growing body of research and a great deal of empirical evidence noting the importance of the creative arts and the positive influence they can have on many aspects of educational endeavour. Over the past two decades, scientists have provided us with a greater understanding of how the brain matures, develops and operates. In terms of child development and education, some of the

most intriguing findings available suggest that the creative arts have a positive impact on intellectual development and emotional wellbeing and the capacity to redefine and enhance many facets of educational practice.

The creative arts usually include the visual arts, music, dance and drama. Many parents, administrators, politicians and even teachers consider the creative arts to be 'soft' subjects, done when the hard work is over and allowing intuition, talent or feeling to replace what we normally call 'thinking'. Because of these biases and perceptions, the creative arts have a very weak presence in most aspects of 'schooling'. Budget and time constraints may exacerbate these attitudes, insofar as the creative arts are viewed as taking resources and time away from 'serious' subjects.

These perceptions about the creative arts fail to acknowledge the research identifying the important role they play in enhancing cognitive, emotional and social development, and therefore, overall academic outcomes. Specific studies have demonstrated that musical training and the visual arts can improve reading fluency, language capacities and numeracy skills, along with mathematical and scientific aptitude. Research has also shown that the creative arts have a positive influence on memory, motivation, creativity, critical-thinking skills and overall cognitive and physical development. Indeed, the extent to which the creative arts can have such a positive impact upon so many aspects of academic achievement and educational endeavour appears to be limitless.

Research in the fields of cultural studies, creativity and innovation also acknowledges the important role of the arts in enhancing self-esteem, confidence and emotional wellbeing as well as in building creative capacities. Most people would probably agree that such qualities are important aspects of individual growth and development. Unfortunately, current political agendas relating to contemporary education appear steadfast in their notions that 'standards' and testing are the panacea for building individual and collective futures.

We have no way of knowing what the future holds for our children. We do know, however, that the educational practices of the past and our taken-for-granted notions of academic achievement are increasingly becoming antiquated and are ill suited to current and future generations of schoolchildren. The research evidence tells us that this is so, but you need only look in a newspaper to find stories of disengaged and disenchanting school students or listen to your own children tell you that school is boring or that they didn't 'do' anything at school today. In many respects,



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this is indicative of learners who experience the world very differently from previous generations but who are forced to participate in educational systems designed to meet the needs of a bygone industrial era.

Much of what is valued in schools or denoted as success, especially as children move through the system from primary to secondary school, still focuses on intellectual development encompassing deductive reasoning and some notion of linear progression. These types of capacities and attributes are particularly evident in competitive curriculum initiatives, testing and in subjects such as mathematics and the sciences, which have greater institutional 'currency' than the creative arts. However, the creative arts may help to instil in students the idea that learning is something to be enjoyed, not just endured in order to do well in an exam, and are gaining greater recognition for developing all aspects of the intellectual, emotional, creative and innovative mind needed for a rapidly changing world. Moreover, as corporations and governments recognise and espouse the long-term value of creativity and innovation, it seems imperative that those who are in charge of, and work within, our education system rethink both the curriculum and the value of the creative arts. It is time for education to become innovative, and the creative arts could be the means by which to turn government and bureaucratic rhetoric into reality.

There is an ever-increasing demand for creativity and innovation in the workplace within the context of changing global economies. This suggests that any discussions of an educational 'revolution' to equip students for the future need to focus on having schools that cultivate human creativity and that challenge many taken-for-granted notions of educational practice.

Children often learn a great deal via observation and modelling. If the business of education is about creating innovative young minds, what might the possibilities be

if students were given as many opportunities to express themselves artistically, musically and dramatically as they are to practise literacy and numeracy skills? There is enough evidence to suggest that they would thrive in many ways, and that those who currently are disengaged from education might find a new passion for learning and school.

Learning is a very personal endeavour and while society, and the education system in particular, often tries to quantify learning in the form of some measurable score, the reality is that human beings are designed to learn – and we do it well when the conditions are right. Moreover, learning is not just about academic ability, and academic ability is not the same thing as intelligence. Academic ability focuses primarily on verbal and mathematical reasoning and as such is too narrow to fully encapsulate the range of talents and abilities a child brings to school each day. The creative arts provide opportunities for enriching the talents children possess, enhancing their learning and expanding the range of intelligences and abilities necessary for an unpredictable future.

There is now widespread acknowledgement that Western society has shifted from an industrial to a creative economy that is redefining workplace expectations, and that today's students will work very differently from previous generations. It would therefore seem pertinent to question what constitutes appropriate educational experiences for students and what will be of most benefit in developing creative and innovative minds. The current education system, which has been handed down from the industrial age, does not reflect the values, priorities and requirements of the creative age. An emphasis on standardisation may facilitate discussion about performance or achievement, but is unlikely to foster curiosity, exploration, discovery, innovation or creativity in our children.



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Finally, preparing children to engage in life as adults is about more than uniformity and conformity. Children flourish in environments that allow them to express who they are and all of their talents. Literacy and numeracy standards are cornerstones of school success. Science, maths and other subjects are also part of that foundation. However, the creative arts offer a great deal to the overall educational milieu we call 'school' and to the overall development of children's minds, bodies and souls. To that end, parents would do well to advocate for the same measure of time and attention to be given to the creative arts to ensure that they are not just considered as something to do when all the 'hard' work is done. ■

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