

In Defense of Failure

When was it decided that academic subjects were by definition non-arts courses?

By Jessica Hoffmann Davis

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As an arts educator, I am beyond weary with the discussions and debates about whether the arts help children with academics. When was it decided that academic subjects were by definition non-arts courses? When was it decided that "here are the arts and here are academics"?

The art education historian Arthur Efland marks the underlying distinction in play: "that there are certain subjects that are good for thinking (logic and mathematics), whereas the cultivation of feelings [lies] mainly in the arts." Over the course of art education's troubled and defensive history, we decided that the "cultivation of feelings" would not sell, and that in order for the arts to be recognized, they too, like "certain subjects," needed to be "good for thinking."

From this new direction arose our interest in what is known as a "cognitive" approach to the arts, our interest in what arts learning has to do with brain development, our curiosity over whether the arts can make our children read and write with more fluency, or whether music ability goes hand in hand with mathematical skills. And we put together studies that were about demonstrating and therefore advocating for the worth of the arts in terms of non-arts subjects.

And then we demonstrated these studies were frail, and we had to have better studies or admit that there were better justifications for the arts than their impact on children's performance in non-arts subjects.

We were so driven to measure the impact of the arts in education that we began to forget that their strength lay beyond the measurable—that the arts, like most really

significant human behaviors, defied measurement. Can we score character, compassion, empathy, vision, imagination, self-esteem, humanity?

But "humanity" was a word like "joy" and "expression" that seemed to place the arts in extracurricular time slots. So we jumped in for "critical thinking," "spatial intelligence," school smarts like "stick-to-it-iveness" or "self-reflection." And I was getting tired and wondering if and when art educators might embrace a different mantle.

When might we stop trying to justify the arts as helpmates to academics and start facing the fact that if academics were more like the arts, more kids might show up and stay in school? Attendance. That's a quantitative variable that we can measure in terms of the arts. Principals have forever known that if they schedule visiting artists on Monday and Friday, the two most-skipped days in school, attendance rises.

When do we reconstruct our position as arts advocates from one of self-justification to one of strong example?

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It was there, within the context of impatience with packaging the arts as entities that would make non-arts learning do better what they do well, that I thought: Maybe it's time to consider the ways in which the arts help students deal with what non-arts subjects do less well? The arts have always quietly served that purpose. Why not address it head-on? And so I began with the topic of failure.

A frequent rationale for including the arts in education is that they provide opportunities for success to children who do not succeed in other areas. I have been thinking that an equally good reason is that they provide opportunities for failure to children who succeed in other areas. Indeed, the arts provide opportunities for failure for all kinds of children. This may be one of the most important reasons they should be included on a regular basis in general education.

Making sense in, through, and of art is demanding work, requiring the use of sensibilities and skills not central to performance in other disciplines. Even as arts

education advocates struggle to demonstrate that arts learning provides opportunities for using problem-solving, critical- thinking, or metacognitive skills that may be useful in non-arts subjects, the arts pose unique challenges to learners, challenges for which non-arts subjects may not have prepared them well.

The student who has learned not only to think clearly in the medium of mathematics, but even to perform well on a math test, may be overwhelmed by the expectation that his eyes and hands are meant to shape something out of wet clay. The student who has mastered the structure of a five-paragraph essay may be intimidated by the challenge of creating her own dance, just as the student who has demonstrated the ability to write up an experiment in science may be terrified to invest her voice and emotion in the portrayal of a role on stage.

"All the more reason to exclude the arts," some may respond. "Why break the stride of students who are doing well in school?" All the more reason to include them, I argue, to provide children who have bought into our preoccupation with unqualified success with the chance to have daring, edgy, generating, and important encounters with failure.

For artists, mistakes open doors for their work. The painter Jack Levine described the process of coming daily to a work in progress and seeking out what was wrong. It was there, he explained, that he found a place to begin; one had to "work around" what was right. Robert Motherwell recounted that, in starting a body of new work, "every painting was a mistake," and the art he ended up with was "the process of correcting that mistake." Art teacher Charles Taylor, one of my dearest mentors, is remembered for stomping around the art room, bellowing to his students, "Every mistake is on purpose. Figure it out!"

Arts encounters with mistake-making, with facing and building on what's wrong, have tremendous implications for learning in other disciplines. But they are uniquely accessed in the safety of arts classrooms where, perhaps ironically, risk-taking and failure may fruitfully abound. Safe from the hard edges of "right" and "wrong" answers, safe from agendas that exclude multiple perspectives, safe from assessments that are sure of themselves, arts classrooms provide opportunities for students to explore the messy, uncertain realities that preoccupy their lived lives

within and beyond the world of school. Children who are successful in school skills need these safe havens for failure as surely as those who struggle in other areas.

We must ask, "Who are the children whom we describe as having success in art but not in other areas?" We expect that they are the artistically talented few who should seek training beyond the limited resources of school. "And who are those students who may excel in standardized modes but find discomfort in messy artistic expression?" They may be the academically talented few who should find comfort in their mastery of arenas that really matter. But these distinctions are frail, and I am not seriously interested in such compartmentalization of our children. Regardless of the criteria we use or the arenas we consider, all students of course need to be able to encounter and make sense of success. But, as importantly, I am suggesting, all students need to be able to encounter and make sense of failure.

While we rightly shy away from deficit models through which we "problematize" our children, we need to find a comfortable way, perhaps even a positive way, to make sense of the things that are hard for them or the areas in which they fail. It is not always success that drives our children's interest. There are as many successful artists and teachers and CEOs driven by persistence as by success. Are we no longer surprised by the many adults who succeed mightily in life even though they struggled mightily in school? Was their failure somehow a launching pad for what was to come next?

Why this emphasis on success as the optimal and necessary outcome? Do we learn and grow from our successes? Can we ever realistically assess our performance if we fear mistakes and failure? Don't all our children deserve the opportunity to experience failure in a medium that invites revision and growth? The arts, I suggest, offer children positive experiences with failure, invaluable experiences with setting the bar higher than we can reach, with knowing that the passion lies in the attempt not the realization, that failure can be clarifying and generative, that "failure" is part of a process in which I am involved, not a product that you can call me.

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At a time when standardized testing is supported even in the arenas of artistic expression, we need to equip our children with an understanding of performance as a developing process. A preoccupation with outcome-based testing threatens a student's crucial conception of his or her life as a work in progress. The arts can provide our children with the experience of imprinting themselves in media that challenge measurement.

A celebration of agreed-upon standards may negatively affect a student's incentive to explore *personal* educational values and goals. The arts provide opportunities for making individual decisions that have immediate consequence. "I can see what that red did to my painting. I can hear how the increase in the volume of my own voice changed the meaning of that song. I can feel the difference in the breadth of my movement in this dance. And these decisions may all seem to me wrong and therefore be the source of future revision—a place to begin."

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