

WHY AND HOW DO WE TEACH ART TO SCHOOLCHILDREN?
Overview for the Santa Monica, CA, School District
Advisory Committee on Teaching of the Arts

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Art's not just fun, it's good for you! The arts are not a frill in schools. Kids who paint and draw and sing and dance and make poems and act in plays and play instruments and hear and see good art of all kinds are positively stimulated, more alert, better coordinated physically, better integrated and balanced emotionally, more focused mentally, better citizens of their school, better learners, altogether more enlivened than those who don't.

But we live in a world where the audience for live fine art performances is shrinking and aging. Where few people sing together socially or in public. Where most music comes out of machines and devices, and television and the Web are the least common denominators of our culture.

As for the choice of "high" art as the focus of exposure, pop culture needs no extra attention in the schools. Expressive manifestations such as rap talk (even its creators do not call it music), break dance, hip hop, graffiti, street mime, juggling, circus acts, standup comedy, commercial television and film and video and their attendant musical wallpaper, rock and pop music, rock videos, and commercial music theater don't need in-school emphasis. Most get endless global exposure as commodities on the open market that drives our material culture.

True, any of them might serve superficially as a sneaky means to catch the initial interest of street-wise and media-saturated, but Western-art-naive, kids and, through flimsy analogy, teach them something about fine art. Multiculturalism, too, may be a necessary modern burden across all curricula, and nobody is saying these commercial or street forms are all uniformly bad or empty. They can all be vital and serve a legitimate expressive purpose (except perhaps those that involve vandalism using paint). They just don't belong inside schools as part of formal education for life. In school the kids need to get what they *don't* get outside school: a vast legacy of cultural treasure for the soul.

What to do? Simple. Give art to school children.

Not the commodity—the experience, the vision, the process, the opportunity, the tools, the materials, the skills, the vitality. Let them experience and enjoy art, see and hear it. And then guide their first steps in creating their own artistic expressions and performing those of others.

What elementary schoolchildren need most is primary immersion in art, in two parallel streams from the same source (the artist).

One stream is *taking in art*: exposure to finished, polished, mature art—seeing great paintings and sculpture, hearing and seeing live performances of drama, music, dance, opera, mime, story-telling, poetry said aloud.

In this stream, we must focus on **primary** exposure:

- Live performances, actual artworks in galleries, plus presentations by live musicians and painters and dancers and mimes and poets and actors who can also show and tell what they do and how and why

in preference to **secondary** exposure:

- Recordings, videotapes, printed plays (and poems), slides and prints of paintings and sculpture, purveyed by middlemen who themselves make no art.

The other stream to immerse the kids in is *making art*. It is on this stream that I now focus.

In the visual and plastic arts, this means making their own original creations right away, polishing their skills as they go. Preschool and elementary-school kids can draw and paint and scissor and glue and work clay with a considerable degree of satisfactory self-expression (if not with technical mastery) right away, often even without first seeing formal models of drawing and painting and pottery. They have been exposed to so much visual and graphical stimulation that they need no further stimulus at least to get started. (Exposure to fine visual art should come soon after.)

In the performing arts, we have two layers to provide. There is performing and there is inventing. Elementary kids are not ready to create their own original stuff in the performing arts in a satisfying way as early as they are to do so in the visual arts, but they are ready fairly early to learn to perform existing works in the performing arts (created by others, whether drawn from the canon or created for educational use). So here the focus is first on mimicry, imitation, and acquiring performance skills and experiences, then later on models and on learning to make your own original creations.

Performance itself can be a quick starter. Kids can sing with you very early, and dance around and say rhymes and bang out rhythms and *ostinati* on Orff instruments. But they need to absorb at least elementary models to make their own poems, skits, dances, songs, instrumental pieces. Additionally, notational skills are necessary to reify the creation of these arts, while with, say, painting, at the elementary level, notation and creation are largely one and the same.

Of course, in singing, for example, even a very young child can often improvise an impromptu song on the spot, just as they might a painting. But often they do so using a tune they have learned (thus they do not create a song, only create their own lyrics in a pastiche). And even if the tune is their own (or their echo or variant of one they have heard), of course, once they've sung it, it's gone (for kids with normal talents). An audiotape or videotape recording of this is not a finished art work, either, any more than a videotape of a child improvising a dance is choreography. (Its value is also mixed—does it reinforce or embarrass when played back?)

With the visual arts, you master skills, perhaps you absorb models, then you create the object, then you are done. (Properly structured and supervised, the process of creating the object can be a path to skills mastery.) With the performing arts, you master performing skills, then you can perform someone else's creation, then you get additional exposure to models, then you can shape a new "object" to perform yourself, and finally you learn to refine it and notate it (or, in the case of dance, convey it) so others can perform it as well. At that stage you get an external performance, and you also retain a printed or otherwise notated model for further performances. But what you have is not the finished object, just its blueprint. (An audio or video recording in this context is a purely archival record of an event, not the event itself.)

And here is the key point: **The art is the actual event in time. Performance is ephemeral, it is the moment.**

In the upper grades, one of the earliest areas of true creation of original work in a performing art might be short dramas, if only because the one form of notation they should have mastered well enough by then—the written or typed word—is the key one in "writing" (i.e. recording or capturing) a play. But it is not the tool for creating the play. The skills used in creating a drama—imagination, visualization, improvisation,

creation of conflict and suspense, character development, sequencing, verbalization—are not the same as the pure mechanics of notation. These could be exercised earlier, with the teacher doing notation.

By and large, though, placing the focus on skills mastery and guided performance before creation is necessary in the performing arts.

How do we implement this approach? First things first:

STAGE ONE: DOING ART THEMSELVES

MUSIC: We get the kids singing, in groups, in unison, with good guidance, without at first striving for artistic polish, only for focus. The goal is to get everyone singing together in the classroom every day as a normal thing, and the student body singing something together whenever they are assembled.

Details of song choice, instructors, space, class time, need planning and thought. So does the introduction of advanced or choral singing, with harmony and independent part singing. In Santa Monica, instrumental music skills teaching is essentially in place, but because of specialization of instruments and the need for balance of various forces in order to perform music, it does not serve the many in the way that singing does (which should be essentially universal). It also does not allow for the same level of achievement in the earliest years because of its additional mechanical-skill hurdles.

SINGING IS KEY. We learn to hear language by being talked to and sung to, and to understand it the same way, then to communicate by imitation and experimentation with vocalizations—and by interaction. We talk before we read or write. So, too, must we sing, learning first purely by ear, before we read notes or notate melodies. (Here the analogy runs out, since music itself is not a denotative language, only an expressive one, and music notation a purely mechanical skill.)

VISUAL ARTS: We get the kids drawing, painting, molding clay, doing block prints, papier-maché, various other media, always hands-on, again every day. Guided, not dictated, projects; self-expression encouraged. Murals and huge group posters. Reproduced salable posters for school fundraisers (oops—a commodity!)

DANCE: We get the kids doing simple group dance, folk dance, repetitive single-pattern circle dances, also mime, guided movement, every day. This could work to recorded music, or some students could make a rhythm band, or all could sing the old songs cultures have danced to for centuries. The goal is for everyone to participate, all to learn a few common/shared dances. No competitive ballroom dancing yet, no emphasis on solo or couples dance at first.

POETRY: We expose the kids to models (that are read aloud), then walk them through simple exercises in poetic expression (imagery, feeling, experiences, word play, metaphor and other symbolic word-selection, choice of words for feel and sound and meaning, some rhyme and meter). We encourage them to make up a poem in their heads and remember it, and SAY their poems to others, then write it down. (No, this is not a subset of creative writing.)

DRAMA: See the previous section. The skill set practiced can eventually extend to general stagecraft, costume design and creation, scenic design (cross-pollinating with visual/plastic arts), lighting, mise-en-scene, production, stage management, and sound design.

CODA: NO CRITICS-IN-TRAINING

Let me be clear what I do not mean by giving art to schoolchildren. We should not, for K-5, implement a curriculum module to encompass the formal study of elementary art history, art criticism, and/or art appreciation as academic disciplines. These have their potential value, but they must come much later, after primary needs, long unfilled in California's (and many other states') public education systems, have been met (and for most students, when children are older).

Why? Simple:

Art history is not art. It is a subset of cultural history, which is itself a subset or stepchild of political/economic history. Art history involves esthetics and analysis and intellect, true. But at root it treats art as a cultural commodity and record, no matter how hard the purist may try to trace just the evolution of individual artistic expression alone.

Art criticism is not art. It may involve more intensive exercise of esthetic criteria and analytic techniques than even art history, but its insights are rarely valuable in living a full life, and are still principally focused on art as a commodity (and, perhaps worse, as a trove of politically and ideologically manipulable symbols).

Art appreciation is not art. It can potentially open the door to self-awareness and growth through understanding of the impulses and energies of the creative act and the creative life. But only for those who have tasted art itself.

True, analysis can broaden both understanding and appreciation. These peripheral approaches may bring the maturely developed mind closer to art and what it offers. But such approaches do not serve best with young minds that are just forming. Before they intellectualize something so vital (or even decide if they need to), young children must first experience its vitality, first-hand and *in extenso*. Children need something more primary to open them up to art—or perhaps to do no more than prevent them from closing up to it as the material, social, economic world demands more and more of them. After all, *we are all born artists at some level*. The trick is staying an artist when you grow up, as Picasso noted.

So, to sum up: Experience real live art first. Then learn to make art. And include art in the basics.