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## Why We Desperately Need Arts Education in Schools

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, June 13th, 2018

When I went to college for my degree in creative writing, a lot of people — family members, random people at parties, punk rock friends who viewed college with disdain — asked me the same question: “What are you going to do with your degree?” This is the age-old question for liberal arts students. It haunts us like that calculus exam we failed in high school. When I fielded that question, which I understood to be either an expression of bafflement or an attempt to undermine my confidence, my typical answer was, “I’m going to write.”

That was my initial joke, but then I typically had to acknowledge it was a joke, after which I would admit that you don’t need a degree in writing to be a writer. This was followed by a short conversation of consolation. Whoever I was talking to would seek to help me feel better about my degree path because it was obvious I had no idea what I was going to do with it “in the real world.”

America doesn’t put a lot of stock in the liberal arts, which is a shame. If we’re talking about skills as fundamental as reading and writing, the state of [literacy in the U.S.](#) is fairly dismal:

- Over 30 million adults read and write below the third grade level.
- 75 percent of state prisoners meet the “low literate” classification.
- Low literacy carries over. Kids with low-literate parents have a 72 percent chance of going the same direction.
- While the demand for literacy skills has gone up since the ‘70s, the literacy skills of teenagers have remained stagnant.

Lately, American schools have put an emphasis on STEM because we want to compete with other countries. The thinking goes: if we don’t have enough scientists, engineers, and mathematicians, America will fall behind. Scientists, techies, engineers, and mathematicians are responsible for all the important, practical breakthroughs that truly impact people’s lives, right? Let’s train more kids to make a difference through STEM.

You can prioritize STEM all you want, but it won’t make a difference if you don’t concentrate on language and creativity.

It starts with language. In the U.S., there’s a “[word gap](#)” between children who grow up in “professional homes” — homes with higher incomes — and kids who grow up in low-income homes. By age 3, kids from high-income homes have heard 30 million more words than kids from low income homes. The kids with well-off parents who read to them and talk to them more are more ready for school. [The Atlantic](#) reports that “children with higher levels of school readiness at

age five are generally more successful in grade school, less likely to drop out of high school, and earn more as adults, even after adjusting for differences in family background.”

Low literacy perpetuates poverty — but why? I would argue it’s because kids who read more exercise their brains more. [They learn empathy](#), they use their imagination, and they’re more prepared to take on STEM careers.

Just because our education system wants to promote STEM, does that mean kids are going to become scientists, engineers, and mathematicians? I would say no. For young people to get excited about STEM careers, they need more than the nuts and bolts — you need to pique their imagination, you need to inspire them by reading them true stories of great scientists. If kids get into reading, they’re better able to picture themselves making a difference through a STEM career. That’s what a combination of empathy and imagination does for you. It institutes the conditions under which you can move outside of your animal brain into a more abstract world of theories, mechanics, and numbers. You get into that world because you can imagine the possibilities, and you can imagine the places you’ll go in that world.

I don’t think a liberal arts education necessarily turns kids into artists, writers, and actors. The desire to be an artist is more innate than anything else. It’s as if creative people are members of their own species. No amount of education will ultimately induce a child to sit down and create a work of art on their own accord. There’s something strange that goes on with the chemistry of genetics, experience, and creative energy. Every once in a while, something close to randomness creates a true artist.

Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” A liberal arts education encourages kids to use their imagination. Although that doesn’t necessarily mean a kid will end up caring about the arts, it at least provides a stage upon which they can explore the arts.

What’s sad about STEM is there’s a sense in which it goes against Einstein’s words. STEM says that knowledge is more important than the imagination. The stage of the arts may still be in the classroom, but it’s near the back, and it’s dusty and covered in cobwebs. If America wants to produce the next generation of great scientists, we should concentrate on the arts. Otherwise, we’re going to continue falling behind.

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