Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why The Arts Are More Important Than Ever!

Jennifer Appel · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

If you're an artist, this is your time to shine! If you are an educator who is also an artist, this is really your time to shine! And if you are a teacher who just knows an artist — grab them! You're going to need them come September.

As an artist myself, I certainly have a bias toward the importance of the arts in our culture and, more specifically, in education. However, as an actual educator for over twenty five years, I also believe I have a somewhat data driven point of view at this point, and in a time where science and facts are in danger of mattering, I thought I'd throw my hat in the ring with some real life experience and consistent, sustainable, and repeatable results.

We all know life can be quite cruel in any number of ways. But it can also be kind. And one of the many kindnesses it has bestowed on me is the ability to be a teacher. Not only was I given a gift in this area, but I was also blessed with the opportunity to work in some of the "best" schools and some of the "toughest" as well (whatever that means!). What I found is that children were the same no matter where you taught, and yes, so were teenagers. While some school cultures were more toxic than others, the deal was usually the same: engage, educate and graduate.

But how to engage? I know, I know. It's only gotten worse since this whole long distance learning thing arrived on the scene. But has it really? You see, as an educator, I am not surprised by the complaints I hear from both parents and teachers. Nor am I alarmed by administrators' new found anxiety. The problems they are panicking about have always been issues. Only now, they are forced to address them.

How you engage a child or teen is virtually the same whether you do it in person or through Zoom. And schools better get on board or they are going to close. Yes, close. Other options are already popping everywhere world wide. People are smarter than you think. It is occurring to a couple of million people right about now that they may not need a school building as much as they first thought.

So, what to do? Well, I can only speak from experience, but my approach has resulted in unusually high standardized test scores, Ivy League acceptances and successful teen entrepreneurship, all while the kids had fun and hardly noticed they were working. I am going to go with the fact that this is a good track record. Now, mind you, I never wanted to be a teacher. That is how I can list my accomplishments so easily — I am not attached to them. I found this path to success completely by mistake, or divine intervention, however you may see the case. Either way — it was by accident. I had every intention of continuing down the path of actress, artist, writer and director. But wouldn't you know it — God had other plans! I know, crazy.

And so, during my freshman year at NYU, an old high school teacher of mine asked me to come teach an acting class over in the East Village, and I thought I'd do her a favor and try it out. Well, I haven't left teaching since. Who did who a favor?

And ya see, what made me a "great" teacher was not the Masters in Education I would one day get, or even my studies at Harvard about curriculum or literature or diversity. Nope. It wasn't the ton of certifications I got either. It was acting, art, writing, directing and producing. It was exactly what I thought I would pursue and had imagined I had given up. It took decades for me to realize I was doing it all! And with great success! Art and creativity engage the learner! You have a captive audience. And these days, that seems to be the holy grail everyone is after.

And so, I am going to attempt to leave you a roadmap that leads to engaged learning and creative experiences and approaches that will leave both student and teacher more fulfilled. It will also help parents and hopefully will change everyone's mindset about "virtual learning". The virtual landscape is just a new canvas with more exciting tools for us to reimagine the world. And it coulndt have come at a better time. We definitely need to do a little reimagining!

Okay, so first of all, you have to accept and embrace how "school" came to be in the first place. Acknowledge that it was primarily a one on one tutoring situation and it was based on the student's interest to study with a mentor! Next, see how industrialization, the "church" and western "civilization" used it as a means to control and gain power. And lastly, much like we need to address the promises in our very own Constitution, juxtaposed against the reality of its fundamental hypocrisy, we must also look at the higher ideals of education and believe in those principles, rather than the sexism, classism, and eventually racism, it was originally meant to perpetuate!

So, we have to start with a renovation sort of mindset – in short, we need to do it better than before. The roots of education are not steeped in much of anything we want to repeat. Next, forget about "differentiating" and just accept the fact that you're tutoring like 30 plus people at once — because you are. And then, get on with it! There are ways to do it. I'll try to sum some up.

It's not as hard as you think. First of all, stop assuming you, the adult, know better. You may know more in a particular subject, but the innocence of youth has a brilliance all its own and must be respected because when you are looking at a child you are looking at what evolution calls progress. They are our future. You are not.

Next, after you have honestly respected this young person and shown interest in who they are, explore their interests. And here is where the magic comes in — connect whatever skill or content you are teaching to their interest! Obvious, right? But so often missed!

Then, learn. Yes, learn. You — the teacher or adult must be willing to learn. Why? Because they are our future and they will know how the new App works and can easily sync their Google everything to their iPhone everything else, and yes, convert it into foreign languages like Microsoft PC. They can run circles around you…and you want them to.

It's a relationship — a mutual one. Now, are you an adult who is constantly monitoring and filtering everything you say in order to stay in the pristine adult role model role? Yes. But it doesn't mean it's not an equal exchange.

And that's where art comes in. I know; long way around the mulberry bush. As much as teaching is

a science or a skill, it is also an art, and now, more than ever, your creativity is essential. How you integrate new technology, platforms and ways of reaching and assessing students is paramount to everyone's success.

So stop thinking of it as a computer and start thinking of it as paint, and glitter and a new kind of white board. Get in there! Play! And recreate the learning experience for both of you. And use actual art! Fine art! Letting kids doodle on an app like Padlet can be just as helpful as "brainstorming" in the classroom. Having students explore their ideas on Kidblog and comment on one another's work can be just as useful as small table discussions or "turn and talk". And posting poems and word art can communicate feelings during hard times. In addition, a virtual talent show can bring families and relatives together from around the world. Whether it is art or acting or writing, or yes, a new app, the canvas has become a matrix of digital possibility where "analog" and warm hearts can find new expression!

And perhaps the most important point — is where I leave you with a warm heart. Nothing connects people better than art when a physical hug is no longer an option. Art is the discipline that moves the world forward by showing us what is possible and hiniting to us how to get there- whether it inspires new technology or a much needed phone call of forgiveness. It reminds us of what it means to be human and celebrates us in all our faulty fragile glory. And, if done well, it ultimately sounds the trumpets that Love Wins in the end. And we could all use a little more encouragement on that subject these days, don't ya think?

It's not an educational crisis. It's an opportunity to get it right. Finally and for the first time. Calling all artists! We've got a future to teach – if we'd only let them show us the way.

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