The Self-Marginalization of Arts Education

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Arts educators, particularly those associated with visual arts and music, continually express dismay at the marginalization of their particular subject areas in the public school system. It seems that arts programs experience frequent cutbacks in funding, reduction of time allocations in the schedule, and system dismissal from administrators concerning the importance of the arts in education.

As there is limited time and resources for subject areas in the school curriculum, the arts are involved in an eternal competition with other subjects for time and resources. The main competitors seem to be programs which focus on language and math skills. Yet in every such competition, the arts lose dramatically! How is it that defeat comes so easily? It certainly cannot be that a lack of rationales for the arts exist and that these have not found their way into every debate ever offered. School administrators themselves are not unaware of the benefits that come from a study of the arts. Most will vigorously defend the arts within public schooling (offer lip service), but when budgets and time allocations are an issue, will not hesitate to quickly eliminate established structures associated with arts programs.

It would seem that after losing this competition so easily and frequently, arts educators would begin to understand that the traditional rationales and program structures they have constructed simply do not work! How many battles must be lost before one starts to understand that the tools of engagement are not adequate? Is it not time to start constructing new tools, approaches, and rationales for the arts within public schooling?

When engaged in a competition such as this, it seems that administrators, as well as the general public, look most favorably on those subject areas which provide skills that easily transfer to real-world situations, especially those that focus on skills that will successfully situate the student in the world of career, income, commerce, and professional status. As a consequence, the arts are usually seen as auxillary and recreational rather than essential. One can become a very successful professional in the world without any regard for art and music whatsoever. But it is not thought that this level of success can occur without an understanding of the so-called basics, i.e., "reading, writing, arithmetic" and the subjects associated with these. It seems that subject importance in schools focus on areas that emphasize the acquisition of skills that seem essential for survival as a productive citizen in the contemporary world.

Perhaps it could be argued that arts educators marginalize themselves through their own limited approaches to the subject areas they teach as well as the structure of established arts programs they use. Art teachers teach art which seems somehow reflective, self-indulgent, historically-based, and recreational. Music teachers focus on choral and band programs which train people in traditional performance, but which have little relevance to the immediate issues of survival in the world. In both these endeavours, what is being addressed is only a small part of what the subject area really comprises. Why are math, science, and language skills thought to be more important

than visual and musical skills? It may be that school administrators see value in subjects which have some immediate and useful continuation after graduation ceremonies have finished and which relate to survival value in a competitive society.

Perhaps it time to change our focus in the arts and recognize that when looked at from another perspective, it is a massively robust industry which offers as many career opportunites as medicine, science, or business. In reality, the production of music and visual art in the real world is a vigorous and dynamic enterprise. This is not usually stressed in the teaching of the arts. If it was, it would mean that programs would have to focus on the Industry Arts (graphics, animation, multimedia, etc.) as opposed to the Fine Arts. In a recent statistical survey I completed, I discovered that of all those currently making a living in the visual arts, only 5% are involved in the area of Fine Arts. 95% of working visual artists are employed in Industry Arts. In this survey, it was also discovered that the number of those who work in the Industry Arts professions far outnumber those who work as doctors or dentists. I am sure that the same statistical overview might be applied to the area of music. By far the vast number of those who make a professional living in the music industry are involved in industry-focused music rather than in the area of fine art-oriented production.

Also, the digital age has generated an environment where every student needs design and graphic skills in almost the same way that graduating students now need to know language and math skills. Employers in business are expecting potential employees to understand basic desktop publishing, layout, design, and graphic concepts along with the traditional package of writing, numeracy, and organizational abilities. Students indicate that when actually utilizing the components of traditional literacy in digital environments, the concept of visual design is needed for successful development. The concept of "literacy" is expanding to include visual components in a rapidy increasing way. To capitalize on this, however, arts educators need to re-structure their approach as well as their programs to focus on how the arts are essential components for professional success in the 21st century.

So! Can arts educators continue to ignore the ongoing competition for time and resources that their programs face daily? Are there other ways that arts educators can start to construct programs that would seem more legitimate to parents, administrators, and students? Is there ammunition in some of the ideas suggested above that might allow a new perspective on the arts to emerge? The field definitely needs new program approaches which can begin to eliminate the increasing marginalization that is consuming arts programs in school systems throughout North America.