



What High-Quality Arts Education Provides

The late Elliot Eisner, one of the authors of the 1977 statement, reiterated the case for the value of the arts at the 2008 Aspen summit.

“With the arts, children learn to see,” said Eisner, Professor Emeritus of Child Education at Stanford University. “We want our children to have basic skills. But they also will need sophisticated cognition, and they can learn that through the visual arts.”

What are the forms of cognition students can develop through the visual arts? Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner discovered an answer while studying five visual arts classrooms in two Boston-area schools for a year. “What we found in our analysis should worry parents and teachers facing cutbacks in school arts programs,” they conclude in their 2007 book, *Studio Thinking*. “While students in art classes learn techniques specific to art, such as how to draw, how to mix paint, or how to center a pot, they’re also taught a remarkable array of mental habits not emphasized elsewhere in schools.”

These habits include observing, envisioning, innovating, and reflecting, Hetland and Winner state. “Though far more difficult to quantify on a test than reading comprehension or math computation, each has a high value as a learning tool, both in school and elsewhere in life.”

These abilities develop children’s intelligence, argues David Perkins, Senior Co-Director of Harvard University’s Project

Zero. The practice of looking at art, he noted at the 2008 Aspen summit, requires thoughtful attention to what the artworks have to show and say. And works of art connect to viewers’ personal and social lives. Thus, looking at art “provides an excellent setting for better thinking, for the cultivation of what might be called the art of intelligence.”

In addition to developing students’ intellectual capabilities, visual arts instruction also helps develop young people’s sense of civic engagement. The arts stimulate or release imagination by bringing into existence an alternative “reality,” noted the late Maxine Greene (2007), former professor emeritus, founder, and director of the Center for Social Imagination, the Arts, and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In that way, young people can envision a world that is different from the world they know; thus art education opens the possibility for creating new worlds, rather than simply accepting the world as it is: “We know that imagination reaches toward a future, toward what might be, what should be, what is not yet.”

The artistic features inherent in new technologies also make possible new forms of social interaction. By creating a video and posting it on YouTube, for example, a young person instantly creates a new global virtual critical community, because viewers around the world can comment on the work and provide needed feedback. At the same time, the work creates an audience for future works.