



Learning in a Visual Age: The Critical Importance of Visual Arts Education

Every day, American young people spend more than 4 hours watching television, DVDs, or videos; 1 hour using a computer; and 49 minutes playing video games. In many cases, youths are engaged in two or more of these activities at the same time. Little wonder this era has become known as the “digital age,” and Americans born after 1980 have become known as “digital natives.”

Yet it might be equally accurate to refer to the current era as a visual age. Although many digital tools rely on sound and text, most disseminate images—as a result, youths who spend a third of their waking hours in front of a screen are saturated with images. The ubiquity of images in young people’s lives has transformed the way they learn and perceive the world. And their use of images has created a demand for new skills to enable all young people to make sense of the visual world.

The predominance of visual images and demand for new abilities has also transformed the workplace. In the “flat” world that the journalist Thomas L. Friedman describes in his influential book, *The World Is Flat*, aesthetics and creativity are just as important as technical knowledge in the new economy. “The secret sauce comes from our ability to integrate art, music, and literature with the hard sciences,” Friedman says. “That’s what produces an iPod Revolution or a Google. Integration is the new specialty. That is what we need to prepare our children to be doing.”

These transformations place a premium on the types of abilities visual arts educators develop: visual-spatial abilities, reflection, and experimentation. They suggest that schools and their community partners need to strengthen visual arts education as a content area and to integrate the arts into other areas of learning to ensure that all young people become knowledgeable and skillful in the visual age.

Yet in a short-sighted effort to help make children competitive in a global economy, many schools have reduced visual arts instruction in favor of a greater emphasis on mathematics and science. These actions in some cases have resulted from accountability policies that measure school performance on a narrow set of abilities.

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—President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities



Fortunately, leaders are beginning to recognize that these actions are misguided. As The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities stated in its 2011 report, *Reinvesting in Arts Education*, "Decades of research show strong and consistent links between high-quality arts education and a wide range of impressive educational outcomes."

What is visual arts education, and what does it provide? Why is it important, and what can art educators teach their colleagues in other disciplines? In 1977, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) issued a powerful statement of its values, entitled *What We Believe and Why*. The document outlines compelling reasons to champion art education for America's children as:

- sources of aesthetic experience,
- sources of human understanding,
- means of developing creative and flexible forms of thinking, and
- means of helping students understand and appreciate art.



“We know that imagination reaches toward a future, toward what might be, what should be, what is not yet.”

— Maxine Greene

The document states:

Art is a rendering of the world and one's experience within it. In this process of making art forms, that world and one's experience with it must be tapped, probed, and penetrated. The search is both inward and outward.

The document also includes a sharp critique of the narrowness of schools and society that could have been written today:

In the culture of the United States, and in particular the culture that pervades American schools, the overriding conception of knowledge and the dominant forms of conception and expression are linguistic. To know in America, particularly in American schools, is to be able to put something into words. This belief has skewed the curriculum in such a way that important forms of understanding are omitted, or neglected entirely, biasing the criteria through which human competency are appraised.

When those words were written, invention of the World Wide Web was still over a decade away. The conception of knowledge and society's reliance on visual imagery has changed since websites, high-speed broadband, Skype, YouTube, Flickr, and other examples of technological innovation have become commonly available.

Learning in a Visual Age further emphasizes the centrality of visual art education in a visual age. First published in 2009, it is the result of a year-long—and ongoing—conversation within NAEA that included discussions in board meetings, conversations with Association members, and a 3-day summit of leading educators from across the nation held in August 2008 in Aspen, Colorado.

In this document, we examine evidence about the capacities that art education develops in students and what it can prepare them to do. We explore what high-quality instruction looks like and take a look at some environments in schools and in other settings in which excellent visual arts instruction takes place. We conclude with recommendations for federal policy makers that will strengthen visual arts education to help ensure that all young people can thrive in the visual age.