

The Arts and Re-Envisioning COVID-Era Schools

Using the arts re-imagine *education* as distinct from *schooling*

By **Judith M. Burton**



HANDS ON Education anchored by the arts could address what Burton calls "the dilemmas of socialization and of making" that have been exacerbated by the COVID crisis. (Photo by Judith Burton)

Writing previously in this space ("[Re-imagining: The Arts in a Time of Reckoning](#)"), [Judith Burton](#), TC's Macy Professor of Education, presented the arts as agents of thought-in-action, or "natural proclivities of the human mind." The arts, she suggested, are the glue that shapes the making and receiving of culture(s), rooting us in relationships and grounding us in the richness of our diversity, and American education has committed "a social and pedagogical injustice" by paying scant attention paid to the rich potential of the arts for learning.

COVID & Schools

A series on education during the pandemic.

Read [The Ultimate Adaptive Challenge](#), which describes the uncertainty facing schools as the new year approached, and [Leadership in Crisis](#), a "roundtable in print" of TC's experts on school leadership.

Read *Amid COVID and Racial Injustice, Teachers Matter More than Ever*, a commentary by Amra Sabic-El-Rayess on re-envisioning schools under COVID-19.

In the following piece, Burton calls for re-envisioning schools within clusters of cultural institutions in which the arts serve as extended “texts” for re-vitalizing learning. She argues that the shutdown of schools during the current crisis presents an opportunity to recast the arts as a central, universal language for education that restores an emphasis on making, socialization, and the imagination itself.

Even before the dovetailing of our three current pandemics — viral, economic and racial — the sweep of the standards movement, with its attendant drive for memorization and the distanced formality of learning, had already replaced the “making” that makes learning complex and personal.

Over-exposure to digital activity was already a concern for parents and educators, and many educators were already re-imagining teaching and learning in a world dominated by technology, economic expansionism, expectations for the future, and questions about access, equity and the nature of knowledge itself.

Now, their work has taken on a new urgency as we find ourselves forced into the broad-sale implementation of online learning far sooner than anyone anticipated. Our current crisis highlights all the deepest flaws in our education system — but it also offers us an unprecedented opportunity for change.

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For some time now, I have been arguing that schools as we know them will likely no longer exist in their present forms, and that this will happen quite soon. Here, I build on that notion by proposing that, as we move forward, we think about the arts as deeply enmeshed with how we might re- imagine *education* as distinct from *schooling*.

More specifically, I want to reflect upon how we might re-think schools by envisioning them within clusters of cultural institutions in which the arts serve as extended “texts” for re-vitalizing learning.

To a certain degree, this is already happening. Libraries, museums of art, science and history, theaters, opera guilds, and dance companies, all now have their educational offshoots and a cornucopia of extra-curricular offerings that guarantee young people some sort of educational provision year-round. Most striking, these cultural institutions, which long kept strictly to themselves, now collaborate extensively with schools, in recent years stepping into the breach to provide programming as school arts budgets were slashed — and they have redoubled those efforts since schools closed their doors.

But this is only a hint of what could be. With imagination, planning and still greater collaboration, I believe these institutions could anchor a new and revitalized vision in which the arts become central to how we provide all aspects of education. Further, I believe that realizing that vision could address two significant problems prevalent in our current system and highlighted by our present predicaments: the dilemmas of socialization and of making.

Outside the formalism of schools, the current maker movement along with the interactive practices offered by many museums already show us multiple possibilities for new thinking. Youngsters, too, lead the way as many, singly and in informal groups, make and share art, re-group and extend ideas in rich, inventive and almost never-ending iterations. These collaborations often occur across continents and oceans, while young people from around the world also design and play video games and attend classes or lectures on art, design and science that originate in other nations. Put directly, while our schools talk abstractly about transculturalism, 21st-century youngsters are using their artistic skills to walk the walk of informal border crossing on their own!

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By truly centering our schools within networks of cultural institutions, we might similarly open-up options for rich disciplinary border crossings through collaborative making activities in the service of learning and the critical socialization experiences that follow. To do this work, schools as such will have to be rethought, perhaps as disciplinary hubs, and the so-called school day re-conceptualized to allow dialogue, making and learning to flow, cross boundaries and supported by the in-depth use of cultural institutions' resources. Cultural institutions, in turn, will also have to think beyond their western-inflected value systems and envision their resources more broadly as "texts for learning." Teachers, curators, museum educators, librarians and community leaders will need to work as teams to co-construct curriculum, giving priority to investigative dialogue as they design instructional activities.

The diverse "texts" that result must be understood as exemplifications of experiences interwoven into knowledge. When our minds are encouraged to range backwards and forward across geographies and times, we come to see that idea-making responds to changing social/racial contexts and contradictions that reflect the personal, social and economic influences of different places and ages. When our young people are enabled to think, explore, reflect and ruminate as past infiltrates present and cultures interplay and inform each other over time, they become inheritors of this long and diverse history of idea-making.

Moreover, the inclusion of community members, practicing artists and crafts people as role models and mentors helps give this inheritance an ever-present reality. Artists are recast as social beings who through an intermingling of imagination and reflection give knowledge important presences in the world. And bringing together youngsters from different schools within a collaborative model open to deep inquiry and energetic exchange gives reign to social imaginations able to embrace how knowledge of self is deeply entwined with sensitive knowledge of others.

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Ultimately, learning in and through the presence of cultural "texts" entails thinking about the making process itself, which offers new depth to the intermingling of socialization and learning. Anything that can be taken as a material (including digital materials) *invites* physical actions of transformation that open a spectrum of possibilities for inner reflective dialogue. Materials and their challenges call into play nuances of thoughts that originate in wonderings, curiosity, experiments, and intentions and are expressed through images, sounds, and movement in diverse and open-ended outcomes.

While transformational dialogues with materials begin in physical acts of the body, they evolve as complex repertoires of thought — particularly when groups of young people work together, learning to be as open to one another's ideas, perceptions and thoughts as they are to ideas derived from their own surrounding cultures. In this context, the interplay of group and cultural influences feeds the rich complexity of personal repertoires of thought in which culture and minds are constantly shaping each other. What is critical here, is that materials as flexible agents-of-the-mind also make possible the kinds of sensitivities and aesthetic nuances that endow images, structures and forms with the kind of dynamic personal "presence" that makes new knowledge compelling. Such "presence" not only confronts the world as personally distinctive but also invites a kind of continuous reflection compelling further action that moves ideas into the as yet unknown. While the outcome of all this maybe a crystallization of an ongoing and integrative dialogue between materials and minds, it also endows autonomy on makers and a "spark" that contributes to the continuum of culture.

To realize that idea, conditions within 21st-century schools will have to change in still other ways. Collaborative networks thrive in circumstances where teachers, principals, cultural institutions and parents share a collective vision of why an interweaving of disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning is important in young peoples' lives. A truly collective vision embraces the full network of interactive influences from the curricular relationships among disciplines, art classroom

arrangements, administrative management, and parent involvement and participation in decision making. Beyond the school, the location and economic circumstances of the neighborhood contribute to supporting and sustaining an enlarged arena in which youngsters' generative efforts can find expression and acknowledgement.

A final thought

What I am advocating may sound like a radical departure from current practice, but it captures a way of educating young people that I have encountered in different countries and iterations. Furthermore, it is actually rooted in a longstanding tradition that holds the arts be fundamental activities of the human mind. We can trace that tradition back to ancient civilizations, but in more recent times, my countryperson Herbert Read argued in his important book *Education Through Art* that all learning is inflected by an aesthetic sensibility that is inherent to human development, a sensibility that is both dynamic and endows thinking with personal meaning. Here at Teachers College, our late colleague, the philosopher Maxine Greene, argued persuasively that it is this aesthetic sensibility that energizes thought, directing it to penetrate the unknown and envision the world and ourselves in it as both might be otherwise. In other words, she saw the work of the arts as concerning the making of knowledge and culture.

When youngsters in schools are denied access to the arts, in whatever form, we do them a great social, emotional, artistic and intellectual injustice, for it is in and through their materials and processes that thought is endowed with personal significance and placed in the world. We fail to acknowledge their implicit right as citizens to function as makers of culture.

My own contribution is to suggest that the materials of the arts, both in their disciplinary and interdisciplinary forms, can be thought of as vehicles through which dynamic and penetrating sensibilities can construct personal knowledge and enact it within an inter-relational world. Personal knowledge is thus endowed with cultural significance and also contributes to the making of culture. The arts become universal languages that give us permission to wonder, be curious and speak of those things that concern us most and which cannot always be contained in descriptive words or numbers. Apprising and making "ART" prized from the sole context of western value systems frees it to become a vernacular offering new dimensions to contemporary experience.

Conversely, when youngsters in schools are denied access to the arts, in whatever form, we do them a great social, emotional, artistic and intellectual injustice, for it is in and through their materials and processes that thought is endowed with personal significance and placed in the world. We fail to acknowledge their implicit right as citizens to function as makers of culture.

Young people find learning energizing and exciting when it endows them with a rich sense of their own possibilities, singly and together, and embraces knowledge of a world beyond their own horizons. Transforming education to meet this standard will take time, particularly because it must be designed to respect different age/developmental levels and different communities and settings. Technology will most assuredly play a significant role in many instances. There are multiple possibilities for pedagogical imaginations to ponder. But the good news is that our present crisis has accelerated the winds of change. Let us make sure we capture them with imagination and sustain them thoughtfully.

Judith M. Burton is Teachers College's Macy Professor of Education

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