To Create Is to Be: The Role of the Arts in Human Development

A review of

Art and Human Development

by Constance Milbrath and Cynthia Lightfoot (Eds.)


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Reviewed by

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Art and Human Development is the result of a project that explored art, its development, and its role in the construction of knowledge. Two questions guided the project: (a) What is the origin of art, in an individual child, in a specific culture, and in the species as a whole? and (b) what is the epistemological status of creative, aesthetic activity in generating new knowledge?

With these questions in mind, editors Milbrath and Lightfoot organized the 2006 Jean Piaget Society Conference, inviting scholars from archaeology, communications, education, psychology, and the performing arts. The resulting book is divided into three sections: Art in the Context of Culture, Educating the Artists and Using the Arts to Educate, and Artistic Development. Each target chapter is followed by a commentary chapter written by a
developmental scholar who grounds the central arguments of the target chapter in a constructivist developmental framework.

The text is aimed at researchers and advanced students in the arts and human development. It can also serve as a text for courses in the psychology of art and special topics courses in human development and cognition.

Critique

In *The Republic* Plato argued for education in music, explaining that rhythm and harmony would find their way to our innermost soul and take hold of it. One could easily add to music art in general (literature, film, painting, etc.) and convincingly argue that each finds its way to our innermost soul and takes hold of it.

This may seem commonplace, but unfortunately it is not, at least not in current American society. When school administrators are faced with making budget cuts, typically arts programs are the first to go. This reflects our culture’s emphasis on mathematics and science achievement and its belief that the arts are in some way a luxury. When we read about American students’ performance on standardized tests, it is most often about their mathematics and science scores; rarely is it on their ability to write a cogent essay or their appreciation of a work of art. There are administrators, researchers, and educators who do recognize the importance of the arts in education and development, but they are fighting against the zeitgeist.

As Eisner (1976) pointed out, both political and economic factors influence what areas of the school curriculum are to be most valued. Recently, Eisner (2008) has argued that educators today are most concerned with seeking methods that will allow them to achieve its objectives; that is, they are focused on the products of learning—the “correct response”—and the methods best suited to generate those products, with short shrift given to the processes of learning. In what Eisner calls a *scientistic* paradigm, method over meaning is emphasized.

This is in stark contrast with what Bruner (1996) called *culturalism*. According to Bruner, “Mind could not exist save for culture” (p. 3). One of the primary goals of education, if not the primary goal, is to serve as an entry to culture and not merely preparation for it. Bruner forcefully argued that the subjects that schools marginalize or treat as “decoration,” the arts, represent the primary ways we learn about culture, reality, and ourselves.

The editors of this volume, Milbrath and Lightfoot, state, “We sought to expose the knowledge construction process as fundamentally creative and imaginative—a process of making the familiar strange” (p. 8). Eisner (2008) made a similar argument in his proposal to
reintegrate the arts into educational practice. He suggested that imagination, a virtue in the arts, should also be one in mathematics, science, and, indeed, throughout the curriculum.

*Art and Human Development* is an important addition to this discussion. Each contributor, often in a very personal way, argues for the centrality of the arts in our development as thinking, creative, and meaning-making individuals.

**Art, Development, and Meaning**

In many of his works, but most importantly in *Languages of Art*, Goodman (1976) proposed that the arts help us to create and make sense of our realities; the arts represent our ways of “worldmaking” (Goodman, 1978). Indeed, it is through the arts that we make our reality and ourselves, and it is the arts that help us to make meaning of that reality and ourselves.

Each day we construct a world of our own; each day we try to make meaning of that world, and we share that meaning with others. World making is the primary function of mind (Bruner, 2004). Notably, it is not solely the world of the mathematician or the scientist.

Purely mathematical and scientific thinking impoverish reality, reducing it to a set of principles and formulae (Cassirer, 1944). According to Cassirer, we live in a symbolic universe, and an integral component of symbolic activity is imaginative and creative meaning making. Cassirer argued that the arts can offer a richer and more profound insight into the nature of reality than can science. The arts, for Cassirer, serve as a mediator between us and the world. The products of our creativity and imaginations are the lenses through which we view and attempt to understand our realities. Our realities are embedded in the many cultures we inhabit.

One cannot separate culture from art or art from culture; they form a constant, dynamic relationship. Gude (2009) proposed that an individual

- immersed in life drawing, shooting video, or in the ages-old activity of looking for images
- in clouds or in ink blots or stains is similarly drawn into a state of mind that is intensely
- conscious of both inner experience and of the promptings of the outer world. This
- heightened dual awareness is a defining characteristic of the artistic process.

Gude made the important suggestion that an individual who is artistically engaged and who has an intense consciousness has a strong sense of agency, a belief that she or he can bring about change. In their discussion of creativity in a Vygotskian framework, Moran and John-Steiner (2003) described the dual processes of internalization and externalization and their dialectical relationship with the individual and culture. Internalization represents an individual’s engagement with one’s culture; such engagement “leads to newly realized
aspects of the self” (Moran & John-Steiner, p. 63). Externalization refers to “domain-changing creative transformations that expand the culture” (Moran & John-Steiner, p. 63).

We can see how this bidirectional relationship between the individual and culture leads to the cocreation of one another. It connects the past to the present and the future. Development depends on creativity; creativity depends on development. In the act of engaging with culture and its art, an individual’s identity develops and undergoes transformation.

The theme of identity explicitly and implicitly permeates this text. As the editors propose, knowledge construction is a creative and imaginative process; integral to this is the construction of identity. Moran and John-Steiner (2003) asserted that creativity transforms the creator “through the personal experience of the process, and others, through the impact of new knowledge” (p. 72).

The development and expression of knowledge in general and identity in particular are creative and imaginative, or should be. We are “cultured” beings and cannot escape our culture or its influence. Art is perhaps the defining characteristic of any culture, but not just canonical art. In their modest way, a lovelorn adolescent’s verse or a pen-and-ink drawing by a middle-aged housewife illustrates Gude’s (2009) proposition that intense dual awareness between our inner selves and the external world characterizes the artistic process.

As Vygotsky (1930/1998) expressed it, “Creativity exists not only where it creates great historical works, but also everywhere human imagination combines, changes, and creates anything new” (p. 85). Our individual creative activity transforms our identities, sometimes in very significant ways and sometimes in very subtle, nuanced ways. The adolescent who attempts to come to grips with a broken heart by writing a poem is transformed in the process; her or his identity has been changed. By recognizing and connecting our inner self with the world, we become whole.

The contributors to Art and Human Development each make explicit, whether discussing cave art, hip-hop, the art of composing music, literary reasoning, or acting as social cognition, that the act of making meaning of our realities and of ourselves is a creative experience. The arts are transformative; they transform the creator through her or his engagement with the creative process, and the products of that creativity transform the culture (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003).

The brain—is wider than the sky,  
For, put them side by side,  
The one the other will contain  
With ease, and you beside

—Emily Dickinson
References


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