

Arguing for the Arts

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Leann Logsdon and Deron Boyles' fine essay makes a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing conversation about schooling and the arts. I assume they are aware that they have entered a particular current of this conversation at mid-stream. The research of Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland has been the focus of much debate and controversy at least since the 2000 article, "The Arts in Education," which concerns the arts and academic achievement.¹ This piece offers a meta-analysis of hundreds of research articles on the relationship between arts education and the broader domains of academic achievement. Some relationships were found between the arts and achievement in music, spatio-temporal reasoning, and some verbal skills. However, there were no causal relationships between arts education and other areas of academic achievement. More generally, Winner and Hetland found very few studies that were rigorous enough to count in considerations of causality or even robust correlation. In truth, this is not a surprising indictment since there is very little causal research in any genre of the social sciences. The relevant element of this research for our purposes is in their use of terms. Winner and Hetland call arguments that endorse the use of the arts to enhance academic achievement in other areas *instrumental* arguments. Thus, they are concerned that instrumental arguments for the arts will fail if research does not confirm their validity as mechanisms of learning transfer and generalizability. This work has prompted a debate among arts advocates about how to argue for the arts. Winner, Hetland, and others responded to this criticism and warning by developing the Studio Arts model as an *alternative* to the instrumental approach. Logsdon and Boyles in the current essay cite the Studio Arts model as an *example* of the instrumental approach. Oh, what a tangled web we weave!

This background is of more than historical interest. Obviously, there are important conceptual shifts that have occurred here and these are the focus of my response. The conceptual core of Logsdon and Boyles' essay is the distinction between the instrumental and utilitarian arguments for the arts. What is this distinction, why does it matter for arts advocates, and how will it help us re-imagine arts-centered inquiry in schools?

In Logsdon and Boyles' view, utilitarian arguments subordinate the process of lived inquiry to the production of specific future goals. Such arguments focus on benefits in the future. In contrast, pragmatic instrumental arguments focus "on the aesthetic inquiry *in* the present and *for* the present." Utilitarian arguments "represent a dual conception inadequate to the task of understanding how students make meaning when engaged in arts-centered inquiry," while pragmatic instrumental arguments avoid such dualisms by conceptualizing inquiry as the mediating link between experience and learning in the present. However, in my view, a pragmatist has a very hard time making a case against the future. Pragmatism is always about

consequences and consequences are always in the future. Indeed, it is the future consequence that gives an experience its meaning. William James tells us that it is the barn at the end that makes a trail a cow path. At the very least, pragmatists insist upon a living, phenomenological interpenetration of past, present, and future in order to transcend dualisms. This is my first concern about the central conceptual distinction in the essay. Is the distinction between instrumental and utilitarian approaches in a contrast between the present and the future? Have Logsdon and Boyles set up a dualism between the present and the future in the distinction between the instrumental and utilitarian?

Perhaps the distinction between instrumental and utilitarian approaches is not about present and future orientations, but rather about “how broadly ‘instrumental’ is conceptualized.” Some arts advocates have suggested that a broad idea of instrumentality will capture both the role the arts play in the development of like skills that are important to future citizens and workers, and the generative possibilities of lived aesthetic engagement. Logsdon and Boyles seem uncomfortable with this broad meaning of instrumentalism as well. For them, the argument for the arts must focus on the “unforeseen possibilities” that learning generates, “the sensory immediacy and open-ended experimentation of aesthetic inquiry” and on “innate, natural curiosity and the transactions that organically follow.” Again, the focus seems to be on the immediate and unforeseen possibilities of aesthetic encounters apart from their extension into future conduct.

Perhaps the distinction is not about present, future, or breadth, but rather about the interests behind the argument. Logsdon and Boyles pepper the text with allusions to partisan interests. Utilitarian arguments are “associated with business- and government-sponsored efforts in the service of developing skills ‘that enable businesses to compete successfully in the 21st century workplace.’”² Utilitarians work from “overstated, unsubstantiated, and politically motivated assumptions.”³ A pragmatic instrumental approach would provide a “philosophically grounded opposition to arts advocacy claims at the intersection of practice, research, policy, and corporate sponsorship.” They worry “when the voices of corporate interests promoting utilitarian outcomes provide the central themes for the arts advocacy discourse,” especially around such issues as the national standards for arts education. I agree with Logsdon and Boyles that the “context in which advocacy efforts ... are enacted” is important and that this context is being influenced in new ways by corporate interests. This is not a new story in the history of American education. Early in the essay, Logsdon and Boyles specifically locate the difference between the two approaches in relation to “the center of power.” Unfortunately, there is no serious analysis of power here, just allusions to sinister forces. If these forces are indeed sinister, as I think they are, why not name them directly and analyze them? If centers of power are the issue, the essay needs sustained analysis of centers of power. Why talk about utilitarian arguments when you mean corporate power? After grounding the distinction between arts advocacy arguments in the language of power, the authors then call for “education and business leaders to acknowledge the complex kinds of thinking that students who are engaged in arts-centered inquiry demonstrate

and to figure out ways the value of such inquiry in schools might be supported and sustained.”

In short, while I believe Logsdon and Boyles make a worthwhile contribution to an important ongoing conversation about the role of arts in schooling, their core distinction between instrumental and utilitarian approaches is unclear in conception and implications. This raises a broader question.

Certainly the corporate model is partisan. However, so is their alternative. Both are grounded in assumptions about a preferred way of life. The utilitarian argument holds that the arts might encourage the kinds of skills and dispositions allegedly required for a particular conception of twenty-first century life and that success in such a life is a good. The pragmatic instrumental argument holds that the arts might encourage “multiple and idiosyncratic” experiences that generate “unforeseen possibilities” and that having such a life is a good. I do not think a philosophical distinction between what is instrumental and what is useful, even if clarified, will help us get very far in addressing this broader question about preferred ways of life. Too often, such a distinction ends up as one more instantiation of a dead-end dualism that stands in the way of the inquiry that we want and need to do.

Finally, John Dewey drifts through the argument like a ghost, alluded to, cherry-picked for pithy quotes, but never seriously analyzed. For example, the authors write, “Dewey is calling for a renewed commitment to the constructively instrumental work of producing imaginative and generative ideas to meet social needs.” I think this quote must be read as a call for future-oriented production. While Dewey’s aims are not narrowly utilitarian or tied specifically to corporate interests, they point beyond the immediate to the reconstruction of present tendencies for prospective, extra-individual purposes. And this is to say that Dewey struggled over a lifetime to find a way to conceive not only of the arts, but all subject matters, as part of a continuum of experience that could serve to move us beyond distinctions between use and value, intrinsic and practical, present and future, and the lived immediate and consequential. Commentators on Dewey’s views on arts and education typically refer to *Art as Experience*. While there are good reasons to do so, I believe a more hard-headed perspective can be found in *Schools of Tomorrow*, *School and Society*, and *The Child and the Curriculum*. In these texts, Dewey is working hard to connect all forms of inquiry and school subject matters to occupations — not jobs or trades, but literally the matters of life that occupy our interests as whole persons. To do so he refuses all separations of mind and body, use and enjoyment, and present and future. He reminds us that the argument for the arts in the curriculum requires a refusal of both the narrow, merely artisan, and the sentimental and empty art-for-art’s sake conceptions.

While I think Logsdon and Boyles conceptual distinction needs refinement and further development, I appreciate their contribution to the important conversation about education and the arts.

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1. Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, "The Arts in Education: Evaluating the Evidence for a Causal Link," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34, nos. 3/4 (2000): 3–10.
 2. Leann Logsdon and Deron Boyles, citing Thomas L. Birch, "Tough Times: Advocacy Strategies in an Economic Downturn," *NASAA Advocate* 12, no. 1 (2009): 2.
 3. Karen A. Hamblen, "Theories and Research that Support Art Instruction for Instrumental Outcomes," *Arts Education Policy Review* 98, no. 3 (1997): 27. Cited in Logsdon and Boyles.