

Justifying the Arts in Schools

Donald Arnstine

The University of California at Davis

Sheryle Bergmann claims that the potential of the arts to foster a rich understanding of the human experience constitutes the strongest justification for including them in the curriculum. I think she has made a number of good points, and I want to emphasize them now, before I distract you with some reservations I have about her argument.

Some art *can* enrich our understanding. Who would deny that *Hamlet* shows how hard it can be to make up our minds? But not everyone gets this message, so Bergmann is correct to speak only of the *potential* of art to foster understanding. She is also wise to insist on the importance of form to all of the arts. Careful to avoid the excesses of Fry and Bell, who claimed that form is *all* art has to offer, Bergmann wisely notes the intimate connection between the form of art and the arousal of feeling.

Finally, Bergmann is practical in seeking to justify a place for the arts in the curriculum on the grounds of their instrumental value. After all, responsible school board members aren't going to pay teachers just to help kids *enjoy* the arts! You need to show that practical, measurable results will be achieved. Dr. Bergmann hasn't showed us how we can measure what she says the arts will produce, but she gives us a start. Teach the arts, she says, and kids can acquire a rich understanding of the human experience.

I am going to try to show that Bergmann's supporting arguments do not quite do the job she asks of them. More work is needed before they can justify a place for the arts, let alone constitute what she calls a "strongest" justification. After we have seen where these arguments need help, we will focus on the implications of Bergmann's having left teachers and children out of her discussion. For we need to ask of any curriculum proposal, what impact is it likely to have on the people who teach and study in schools?

How strong is Bergmann's justification for the arts in the curriculum? Can the arts really foster understanding of the human experience? Perhaps some can, but some arts surely cannot. My understanding of human experience has not been enhanced by the paintings of Jackson Pollack or the broken dinner plates that Julian Schnabel hangs from the walls of prestigious art galleries. And while Beethoven's quartets and Rob Wasserman's "Trios" certainly qualify as art, they do not foster understanding of the human experience either. Will Bergmann exclude them from the curriculum? Or do I not understand what she means by "understanding?"

Bergmann argues that *all* art "expresses content," although I chose my examples because they *have* no content: they offer nothing that refers to anything recognizable outside the art itself. Would Bergmann agree? She sidesteps the issue, concluding that it is not actually the content, but the form of art "which results in the potential for attaining this rich understanding ." But how can Pollack's ingenious drippings of household enamel foster the understanding of human experience?

There is no way out of this puzzle without confronting Bergmann's key concept, "understanding." She writes that the apprehension of art through sense and feeling makes possible a sensuous understanding of human experience. She says this understanding through apprehension is "similar to" Russell's "knowledge by acquaintance," which we have "with anything of which we are directly aware." Does Bergmann mean that direct awareness *is* understanding, or produces it? I may be directly aware of raindrops falling on my head, or of your irritation at my criticisms, but that doesn't

mean I understand the raindrops or your irritation. Direct awareness neither constitutes nor produces understanding, for the latter connotes formulation, prediction, testability, shared agreements, and other features from which direct awareness is innocently free.

What sorts of understandings do the arts foster? Bergmann offers only two examples. In the first, she says that the image of dancers moving in different and diverse ways can enable an audience to understand the 'universal' of *diversity*. She doesn't elaborate, and I am simply at a loss. Her next example stretches my credulity. She writes that her "understanding about war is enriched" through [her] experience with the painting, *Guernica*. This is a large, black and white mural depicting the agonized victims of fascist bombing; it is executed in the cartoon-like style for which Picasso became famous. The painting can certainly make us think about the carnage of war, but does it enhance our *understanding* of it? It didn't enhance mine. But if it works for Dr. Bergmann, I think she should tell us what it is she came to understand about war, and just *how* the painting fostered this understanding.

Dr. Bergmann could modify her position without abandoning it altogether. She could back off from claims about understanding and argue more modestly that some forms of art can make us directly aware of ideas and events, and arouse our serious concern about them. If she wishes to pursue a cognitivist approach, she could argue (like Anita Silvers¹) that art can exemplify the ambiguities that make the understanding of ideas so elusive. But if Bergmann leaves the concept of understanding inchoate, she cannot argue that it is the strongest justification, or indeed is *any* justification, for including the arts in the curriculum.

What Dr. Bergmann did not discuss is also a serious matter. Would children be able to pursue creative art activities in school? Not if art in schools is justified only if it fosters the understanding of human experience. After all, children go to school because they *don't* understand human experience, so Bergmann's argument cannot justify their creating art in school.

But more significantly, Bergmann did not discuss why people bother to spend time with the arts in the first place. If I'm not mistaken, they do it because they enjoy it. They find it fascinating, absorbing, compelling, entertaining, or amusing. People surely don't attend concerts, go to the movies, or read novels because they seek understanding. If insight comes, it's not because it was sought. It comes only when art is found enjoyable -- that is, fascinating, absorbing, compelling, etc.

If this is so, and if adults turn away from art that isn't enjoyable, then why does the enjoyment of the arts play no role in Bergmann's argument? What if art in the curriculum is *not* enjoyed by children? Might they not think that art is no more than a boring way of trying to get across some very murky understandings?

Some people consider the attractiveness of art to be its most characteristic feature, but Bergmann condemns this as an "art for art's sake" point of view. She supposes that if one conceives art as intrinsically pleasurable, and if children find pleasure in comic books and pornography, then their pleasure in such abominations could be used to justify their place in the curriculum. Averting her eyes, she concludes it would be "more prudent" to examine art's potential for expanding students' understanding. But this argument, which you might expect from Catherine MacKinnon or Pope John Paul II, works as well against the intrinsic pleasure Aristotle found in the contemplative life as it does against pornography. It condemns sex, oriental rugs, dry Bordeaux, and scientific research, just because they give pleasure. So I would like to close by suggesting why enjoyment should not be ignored when we seek a place for art in the curriculum.

In school, lots of youngsters just don't pay attention. But when something functions as art, it is enjoyed in its immediacy. That is why it holds our attention. To be serious about the arts in the curriculum is to be serious about holding the attention of students. If we introduce arts into schools that are appropriate for the children we teach, their enjoyment and their engrossment (which are goods in themselves) will enrich their sensuous awareness of the form of things in the world. And

some art -- like the movie, *Do the Right Thing* -- will also direct their attention to things in the world we care about, things they might not otherwise consider.

1. Anita Silvers, "Show and Tell: The Arts, Cognition, and Basic Modes of Referring," in *The Arts, Cognition, and Basic Skills*, ed. S. S. Madeja (St. Louis: CEMREL, Inc., 1978), 31-50.
