

# Why the Arts Make Sense in Education



The Boston Arts Academy demonstrates the value of incorporating arts into academics, rather than segregating education into two separate spheres of learning.

**By Linda Nathan**

*Author and headmaster of Boston Arts Academy Linda Nathan meets with student government representatives.*

Art is not a very new idea.

Our ancestors knew the arts were synonymous with survival. We created art to communicate emotions: our passions, jealousies, and enduring conflicts. We designed pageants to dramatize the passing of seasons and other more temporal events. Daily life, communication, and rituals were circumscribed and delineated in a range of artistic expressions.

We went into battle with the sounds of trumpets, piccolos, and drums all over the globe. We buried our dead with song and even dance. We created theater that proposed solutions to our woes. We drew pictures of our kings and queens, and also cave drawings to tell the history of our day. Was this our primitive form of expression, or were we informing future generations in a way that language will never do alone? In short, the performing and visual arts have been the foundation of our recorded existence. I believe the arts are key to how we educate ourselves.

■ *LINDA NATHAN is headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy.*

I have spent 30 years in public urban education working in the arts (specifically theater) as well as teaching history, Spanish, and math. I have also been a high school principal for quite some time. I now have the privilege of leading one of the most exciting high schools in urban America — the Boston Arts Academy (BAA). BAA sits in an old brick warehouse in central Boston in the shadow of Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. The student body of BAA reflects the diversity of our city and school system. We have 420 students in grades 9-12. Our students are 52% African-American, 25% Hispanic or Latino, 21% white, and 2% Asian-American. Over 50% come from homes where English is spoken as a second language. About 60% qualify for free and reduced lunch, which is the poverty indicator for the federal government.

The students are chosen on the basis of their interest in and passion for the arts. There are no academic requirements for entrance. In fact, over 13% of the students have a learning disability. Yet, the school has established a remarkable record of acceptance to college of more than 95%.

From its inception, BAA has had a dual curriculum: arts and academics. The importance of teaching the arts for art's sake has been a given from the school's beginning. Of enormous importance was the belief that studying, making, and integrating art into academic subjects would vividly engage students of widely varying abilities and thus increase enormously their success in high school.



*A young visual artist presents her Spanish project (both a written and visual work), based on an artist of Hispanic descent. These projects are presented at a special World Language exhibition and exemplify the interdisciplinary approach integrating the arts into the curriculum.*

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We integrate the arts and academics into many classroom experiences. For example, imagine a math class in which students are working with a composer on syncopation in order to deepen their understanding of the quadratic equation they are studying.

In Spanish classes, students study Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Gabriela Mistral, or Celia Cruz. They research these famous Latin American artists and scholars and then present or enact them in costume, often with props, and with a deep sense of their history and context. And, what a meaningful way to learn a language. Our visual arts students are exposed to Spanish when, for example, they are taught by an artist in residence from Mexico who communicates solely in Spanish.

In engineering classes, BAA students are introduced to math and science principles by learning how to design and create a container of their choice. The array of belt, cell phone, and CD holders that young people can imagine and produce is impressive. Students then work with a visual arts teacher to produce brochures and advertisements for their containers. They add more levels of intellectual and creative learning to their projects while strengthening their reading and writing skills.

We are committed to empowering students to be active learners. The BAA is a very lively place, filled with the sounds of students creating, working, and rehearsing throughout the day, into the evening, and on weekends. One also can note how the high level of student engagement in arts courses carries over to the humanities and math, writing and science.

Our young people need to be immersed in artistic experiences. They must also develop strong intellectual skills. At the BAA, this is what we call being artist-scholars. We believe that young people come to appreciate and understand beauty. They use that same appreciation to be creative, mature thinkers in society.

## WHY THE ARTS?

Much has been written about adolescent development and the need for exploration and new forms of expression. The arts provide opportunities to explore and interpret and react to a world that can seem cruel and distant and complicated. The arts help young people develop a critical lens toward the world. The arts show that problems can have more than one solution. Through the arts, children learn to make good judgments about qualitative relationships. Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules dominate, judgment counts in the arts. The arts provide another language, a way of working together with disparate

people and creating an experience that will be appreciated by others. The arts provide that safe space, that structured time to be passionate, completely engaged, and taken seriously by both peers and adults.

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Our curriculum — in both arts and academic classrooms and studios — has given our students an ability to understand and empathize with differences. The arts keep students engaged. They are disciplines that embrace creativity, inquiry, perspective taking, and problem solving. The arts help us imagine scenarios beyond our own realities and provide pathways to unexplored possibilities in our lives. For many who experience daily alienation in their schools and communities, these are skills in short supply. Most impor-



*Africa Lives! is an integral part of the 9th-grade humanities curriculum at BAA. Students study different countries and tribes of Africa and create a written and performance/exhibition piece which is part of a daylong event at the school. Here, two young theater students wear costumes based on African mythological animal characters.*

tant, our graduates feel a responsibility to create art that will help the rest of us experience what it means to be a citizen of the world, and of taking responsibility to change the world.

Arts-based pedagogical strategies and features encourage learning. Students connect to material with a resonance that feels completely their own and unique. This emotional connection pulls students in by extending their power of attention and knowledge.

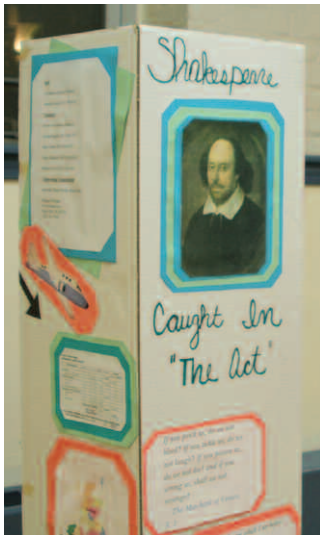


*A junior visual artist works on a painting based on readings from Robert Pinsky's translation of Dante's *Inferno*.*

They gain confidence as both intellectuals and creators. Such strategies transfer to their academic learning. An emphasis on an arts education also helps students invest in their own learning by investing in others. One of my seniors describes how arts build a bridge for her back to her community. Melanie's senior project, "Love of My Life," shows how "Teens need a place where they can be themselves, and also figure out who they are — their identities."

Melanie's project is part of a BAA graduation requirement. All seniors must develop a proposal that demonstrates their academic and artistic training over their four years and also addresses a community need. The project directs their knowledge and passion toward a practical cause and delivers experience as independent artists. Their final presentations must demonstrate artistic rigor, feasibility, and mutual benefit, as well as writing technique and presentation skills. In a Senior Project Fair, representatives from the community, universities, organizations, and artists review the proposals. They allocate funding for those who score in the top 20%. Some projects have included original choreography on a theme of eating disorders for young girls, a publicly designed mural project, a monologue performed to raise awareness of homeless teens, a steel drum workshop at a local hospital, and a film on the effects of rape.

In addition to the senior project, BAA students also prepare portfolios in math, science, and world languages, as well as the humanities. Throughout the year, students demonstrate their accomplishments in several areas through performances, fairs, and exhibi-



*A senior theater student project, an afterschool theater program for middle school students, focuses on the works of William Shakespeare.*

**Consider these questions for discussion, development, and decision making in your schools and districts.**

- >> What has been our experience in teaching abstract concepts and making them accessible to a broad range of students?
- >> Is abstract thinking more easily developed in one discipline than in another? How do we think it is developed?
- >> What might an integrated arts-academic curriculum look like in my school?
- >> How might we develop an interdisciplinary curriculum with learning in two domains simultaneously to create greater understanding of a concept?
- >> Where have we seen critical thinking used effectively? What was essential to that experience?
- >> Where do we see links between language development and development in an arts discipline?

tions. Students prepare deeply and know their area of study quite well. In addition, we have created an authentic assessment system that truly matters to students and their families and prepares students with skills they will need to compete beyond high school. Melanie has traveled through our carefully developed system. Her experience is one story of how our method plays out.

## MELANIE'S PROJECT

Melanie is hoping her project will be funded this year. She stands barely five feet tall. She is wearing elegant high heels, two-toned red shoes that match her suit and the ribbon in her hair. Her dark skin glows against her outfit. Over the years, I have tried to support her as she has struggled in school. Math, during first period, was particularly hard because getting to school on time was a challenge. She had responsibility for getting her younger sister to school. Then her family lost its apartment and she was living with relatives. Today, she stands before me proud and passionate as she describes her project. She plans to work in an after-school program in a very under-resourced section of the city to give teens the opportunity to take vocal technique and theater improvisation classes that culminate in a small musical play. Melanie explains:

I have learned over my four years here a lot about technique and how to use the body and the face to communicate that technique. I did a few musical scenes from Gilbert and Sullivan; I also learned some Broadway numbers, and I'm working on an Italian aria now. We've also done some popular music over the years. I will be able to teach young people the connection between the voice and the body. The students will keep a journal that will contain different prompts that elaborate on their experiences.

Students will also choose songs that relate to those experiences. Everyone listens to performers like Alicia Keys, and rappers speak to many life experiences. I've learned that people like Gustav Mahler, who most kids have never heard of, also wrote about pain and suffering the same way that Kanye West or Billie Holiday did. We will spend part of each class also learning about different music.

Students will write monologues based on writing prompts. Then they develop characters through improvisation and through song. Then we will rehearse how students will express themselves through their monologues and the songs they have chosen. We will perform these scenes at the local community center or the church.

Finally, Melanie explains the rationale for her project. "Young adolescents need the opportunity to be a positive asset to their community. I know firsthand how easy it is to be brought down by the bad things going on around you or in your family or your community. The goal of this program is to give the youth a place of refuge from the negativity of society and also to teach them how to safely express themselves."

Melanie recognizes what so many school or policy officials seem to forget — the arts are a powerful force to help change our world, and most young people can make an immediate connection between the arts and popular culture. Melanie's project is also helping her to develop academic skills in reading, writing, oral presentation, and even basic mathematics. She had to develop a budget and figure out what resources can be considered "in-kind," since she is learning early on the lesson that there is never enough money. And she had to revise her proposal at least four times until she got it up to the required standard. She had to read her proposal aloud and commit much of it to memory or note cards in order to stand before outsiders who will determine if she is deserving of funding.

Most important, Melanie is being taken seriously by an adult world where she must soon participate. We know the positive power of expression. We know that

students respond positively when given opportunities to make a difference in the world.

## AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

The centrality of the arts allows the school's faculty to think deeply about curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. We ask how our teaching connects back to the



*A visual arts faculty member works with a student (above) and (right) a work by a junior visual artist from the Inferno curriculum.*

culture of our students. We work together to ensure that we understand the prior experiences of students because of their culture, race, socioeconomic class, and language background. Arts education can be a key entry point in responding to cultures and experiences that are not one's own. In addition, since process is often as important as product, teachers are more comfortable with assessment that is not a single-mode-right-answer-test. The teachers call this *authentic assessment*.

This form of evaluation promotes understanding and learning for both teachers and students. Since the definition of authentic is "genuine or real," there is a greater chance that both students and teachers will care about the results. The inclusion of others to judge the assessment also highlights the importance of the student's work.

Unlike pencil-and-paper standardized tests that usually have only one right answer, *authentic assessments* focus on a student's process of learning and ability to describe, define, and reflect on where one is in the learning process, as well as his or her ability to master a given set of concepts. Furthermore, teachers have the opportunity to gain insights into their own pedagogy and, sometimes, their own vulnerability.

## SPREADING THE LESSONS LEARNED

Teachers of the arts and administrators in schools

like BAA are not the only individuals who can invest in the value of an arts education. Individuals at all levels of the educational process can contribute to the discussion and the discovery of ways to incorporate arts into academic curricula.

Build into your schools the importance of a dual curriculum. Emotional connection to the arts is likely to be categorically different from engagement in the



process of solving mathematical equations or mastering the complexity of a primary source document or analyzing a literary passage. One is not "better" than the other — just different. Schools must embrace that difference and put the difference to work toward improved student achievement.

Schools need not specialize in the arts to use lessons from arts education, such as the passion and commitment that can transfer to academic classes. When schools can put relationships, so often found in the study of technical or expressive arts, at the center of study, school becomes a meaningful and rich experience. Many schools prioritize logical connections in the classroom and give short shrift to the importance of intuitive, kinesthetic, associative, spiritual, or emotional connections to material. Melanie has gone far beyond education that teaches a list of prepositions or algebraic equations to be memorized. She has shown us how education must connect to a young person's life and experiences in order to be engaging. Most important, Melanie has become part of a group of artist-scholars who are making a difference in the world. A trite and overused phrase, perhaps, but the key to how we must change our schools.

If every school had a rich arts education, our systems would attain exceedingly different outcomes and be able to hold higher expectations for student achievement. It is no accident that more than 95% of BAA students go on to college. They have learned to become engaged and passionate about their studies. A curriculum steeped in the arts teaches our students to persevere, to strive for excellence, to create and care about that creation, and to work as a member of an ensemble. By embracing arts education, as Melanie and others have taught us, as an educational birthright, we will assuredly give the world far more capable young adults. ■

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