

Arts Education is Workforce Development

By Bruce Richardson

“The opposite of war is not peace; it’s creation” “La Vie Boheme” from *Rent*

Some may be surprised how many people in Wyoming make their living from the arts. In Sheridan there are 1,123 people (5.8% of the workforce) work in the creative, arts-based economy according to a recent, very careful study, “Tradition, Expression and Recognition: Creative Opportunities in the New West.” Stuart Rosenfeld, the author, gets his data from on-the-ground counts that find the self-employed and others not listed on the standard sources; this includes a cluster of leather and saddle artisans. The study (available from the Center for Vital Communities in Sheridan) is of significance to the whole state and our efforts to increase economic diversity and attract top creative talent. It’s clear that Jackson and Cody have major arts economies, but clusters of activity can be found in many Wyoming communities.

What can be done to help and encourage all these people? The study recommends coordination and common efforts in marketing and business practices. For creative workers it seems clear that arts education is workforce development, but this goes beyond learning to make art. I would also argue that arts education, since it stimulates the imagination and enhances creativity, is workforce development for everyone. Many agree that creativity is what we need from every worker and manager, every small and large business owner and civic leader, from every person—the ability to visualize, see new patterns, work through tangles, identify problems, feel what others feel, make

meaning from mush, create the story. Arts are the basics. They are the starting place for everything else.

Business Turns to the Arts to Train Workers

Businesses are getting this. Placing value on creativity, teamwork, problem solving, emotional intelligence, insight and motivation takes you right into the arts. They turn to Daniel Pink, whose best-seller *A Whole New Mind*, argues that the arts are the way to master and excel at the conceptual economy of now and the future. They hire Sir Ken Robinson (author of *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*) to guide them, they employ theater companies to teach acting; writers to get employees making poetry; painters to help visualize. The demand for creativity has become a basic of not just marketing, but conceptual thinking and emotional meaning.

The Conference Board, a well-known research unit that measures consumer confidence and other economic indicators, has addressed what they call the creativity gap. Once renowned as the center of world creativity and innovation, the U.S. is falling back. The board has taken on an agenda to focus on creativity and stimulate more and better teaching and access to the arts to push it forward. They argue that “to foster and develop creativity and innovation skills that can be applied in life and work” arts must be part of all levels of education, community life and the workplace. Read more at www.artsusa.org/news/press/2008/2008_03_29.asp.

Voters Value Creativity and Arts Education

A recent survey shows that 89 percent of American voters say that using imagination is crucial for innovation and economic success in the 21st Century; 69 percent believe that the U.S. devotes less attention than other nations to developing

imagination and innovation; 88 percent think that arts education is central to cultivating imagination. Find out more at www.theimagination.net/resources.htm.

Political leaders are listening. The issue has surfaced in the Presidential race. Barack Obama has stressed the need for a revolution in art education to stimulate a creative workforce. Republican candidate Mike Huckabee and Democrat Bill Richardson argued emphatically for the arts as key to a good life, a creative people and a good society. The National Governor's Association has done a good report on "The Impact of Arts Education on Workforce Preparation." Through specific examples, the report shows how arts prepare workers for the new economy and are especially effective with at-risk youth. Read more at www.nga.org/cda/files/050102ARTSED.pdf.

Music and Creative Thought

How do the arts stimulate creativity in all areas? Permit me an example close to home. My fiancé heads the technical services/cataloguing department at the Natrona County Public Library and is also a violinist in the Wyoming Symphony orchestra. We know that music study involves discipline, collaboration, a lot of thought and knowledge of symmetry and structure. Not surprisingly, musicians do well with math and vice versa.

Susan's library work requires thinking about structure. Where do books fit in the categories of knowledge? What are the best ways of processing all this information? Where should items be put so people can find them? How do things fit together, both logically and emotionally? Susan, a philosophy major, relishes such challenging questions. Music freshens and deepens her creative ability, and gives her insight into

emotional structures as well. What people feel about the world matters to the cataloguer and reference librarian.

Music unleashes feeling and provokes thought. I have started taking a little notebook with me to concerts since thoughts seem to flow so easily during the music. Struggling over how to focus and arrange an art essay, I found the solutions flowing over me while listening to the Wyoming Symphony play Brahms. How did this happen?

It turns out that brain scientist Mark Jung-Beeman has mapped the burst of brain activity that accompanies those sudden “ah ha moments,” and finds that they require not dogged persistence, but a kind of relaxed wandering through the whole mind. It helps, too, to be happy and emotionally alive during this journey. It’s no wonder that lots of people find that playing or listening to music puts them in that receptive mode.

Doing Art Is High-Level Thinking

A recent report from the Dana Foundation summarizes the research on arts and brain function and finds that the mix of discipline and relaxation in music primes the brain and gets it working. Read the report online at www.dana.org/artseducation.aspx. It has been long known that students who do arts perform better in other academic areas than those who do not, but there has always been a chicken-egg problem with this research. What causes what?

Years of close study of arts education and artists in action has taken us beyond this particular question to show that an immense array of important skills and creative abilities are required to play music, act in a play, write a poem, draw a picture, and dance. The Project Zero study of teaching visual arts identified the multiple abilities they call the studio habits of mind, which include persistence, evaluation, questioning, and explanation

(Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education). It seems that it's not an issue whether art causes thinking; it is thinking itself.

Advocating for a Creative Society

Arts advocates can advance their case by knowing some of this information. It's all collected in a wonderful toolkit on arts education. The first section on "The Arts and the Creative Workforce" covers the topics addressed in this column and has strong, punchy advocacy materials you can use to convince school boards, school administrators, colleges, recreation centers and everywhere else to run lots of excellent arts programs—www.nasaa-arts.org/nasaanews/arts-and-learning/al_toolkit.htm.

We know that arts are fun, that they give pleasure and meaning, that strong art lifts the soul and unclutters the mind. Of course we will have arts. The information above suggests that we also have strong, practical needs for arts. They are the basics, the starting place for everything else. I think I'll keep using my mantra: "Arts education is workforce development and all manner of human development."

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