

On Synthesis, Art Aberrations and Possibilities

By Stephen Yaffe

I'm defining Synthesis as *finding points of commonality between seemingly disparate entities*. In this sense Synthesis is key to comparison, analogy, simile, metaphor. It would also play a pretty critical role in any and all 'Aha moments'. That is, Synthesis is absolutely essential in meaning making.

As such, it's considered a pretty sophisticated – aka, ADVANCED – element of thought. In Bloom's taxonomy it's assigned one of the most complex areas within the Cognitive Domain.

Not surprisingly, it's not readily found among the core skills, processes and/or learning objectives targeted in work with students with disabilities (SWDs), or more specifically, those with lower cognitive function.

However, Synthesis is core to the creative process. Arts Education often involves it as a matter of course, not something on the rarefied spectrum, but as a building block on the way to greater elements of self-expression. In the Arts it's a tool in finding out; in making, understanding and expressing meaning.

It's no less a tool in Arts Education provided SWDs. I am reminded of a high school student with severe cognitive impairment, reading on a pre-primer level who, after writing poetry with the help of prompts, said he now knew "what thinking of myself as a color means."

He may not have known the terms *Simile* or *Metaphor*. But that's not the point. He was synthesizing.

His teachers – and possibly the teaching artist – may not have known he was synthesizing. And that is the point.

For two, very important reasons.

Reason #1:

The Arts reveal previously unknown – and often unsuspected – capacity. This is particularly critical in working with students with disabilities. But oftentimes those faculties are missed. This can be because the work is not sufficiently unpacked.

In the just-cited example metaphor is the Literary element – a What. Synthesis is its underlying process – the How. Synthesis is the capability.

If we fail to recognize that, we can't build on it. If we fail to recognize that, our understanding of what a student may be capable of is diminished. Possibility and growth are lidded.

Reason #2:

Even if we recognize capacity revealed through the Arts, the fact of it may be the extent of it. It may produce no more than a smile, an encouraging word to the student, a "Wow!" in conversation with a colleague, maybe a mention to a parent.

The reason is because often what is revealed becomes, consciously or not, relegated to the world of *Art aberration*. That is, the 'thinking' goes,

There are things that just 'happen' in the Art context. The Arts just 'bring things out' of kids.

Arts revelations are not aberrations. The Arts – by offering so many options for expression and engagement – disclose capacity that exists and can be developed. Arts 'revelations' are entry points. They're the beginning of the process, not cause for happy conclusion.

In the Entries that follow we'll be considering Arts values. We do so in the hopes of bringing to more conscious awareness *What is embedded in the doing of the Arts, How the Arts are learning, and The important ramifications of this* – for students with disabilities, those who work with them and those who love and champion them at home.

We don't offer these merely as talking points, but as ways to further discussion, strengthen partnerships, and, above all, deepen learning and extend our notion of what is achievable – within and beyond Art contexts.

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Stephen Yaffe is an Arts and Education consultant who has mentored classroom teachers, teaching artists and arts administrators in inclusive practices nationally and provided professional development to those working in the field of disability on five continents. He is Chair of the Arts for All Abilities Consortium.