

## The Value of Art for Students with Disabilities

By Erica Rooney

It is frequently remarked that the arts give students with disabilities an opportunity “to express themselves.” What does this mean for students with disabilities? What does it mean “to express yourself” if you have difficulty with many of the means of self-expression: fine and gross motor skills, language, vision, hearing.....? What does it mean?

It means “to be able to do,” “to be able to make,” to be able to learn skills for doing and making. If this is how the arts enable students with disabilities, then the arts are first and foremost very practical. This warrants repeating: *The arts are very practical for students with disabilities*. The very word “practical” is cognate with practice, practicum. The arts give students opportunities to practice skills.

What are some of the skills the arts give students the opportunity to practice? For starters:

Skills that make a student better at moving his/her body

Better at knowing where his/her body is in space

Better at reaching, twisting, holding

Better are interacting with peers

Better at sharing space, materials, surfaces

Better at figuring out and following the steps in a process

Better at observing materials and the agency that he/she has in causing changes in those materials

These are practical skills.

These are, of course, skills students practice in their classrooms with their teachers and with their Related Service Providers (Occupational, Physical and Speech Therapists; Counselors). So what is the special place that arts have in students practicing these skills?

The arts give students opportunities to practice skills in a context that is open-ended and in a context that puts the students at the center. In the open-ended context, there is no hard right or wrong answer. There is exploration, exploration that is paced by the student. Because there is no teacher-desired product, at the center of this exploration is the student. The student drives the exploration, the learning, the discovery. The feedback loop is between the student and the materials with which s/he is working.

This creates a different kind of connection between the student and the teacher. The arts have the potential to change the teacher. A teacher doing art with his/her students changes because the dynamic between the student and the teacher changes. Many teachers come to the arts as an activity for “self-expression” in their students. Even though it is argued here that what self-expression means with many of our students is nuanced, the teacher bearing that attitude becomes more inclined – when his/her students make art – to let the students work freely, more inclined to watch the students and see what the students can do without instruction from on high, more inclined to give the students choices, more inclined to be comfortable and relaxed with the daily struggle to differentiate classwork.

This new kind of energy from the teacher to the student is good. In turn, it generates a new kind of energy from the student to the teacher. It changes the pedagogical flow from top-down to back and forth.

But what is it about the arts that leads students to even want to engage in this exploration? Is it just the open-endedness? Some students work better when there is a boundary, a structure, a clarity that says “done,” “good,” “here,” “there,” “up,” “down.” Is it that the student is given opportunities to make choices, to make his/her own decisions, to do what we call “child-centered” work? Some students, especially students with disabilities, need permission, have become dependent on prompting, need models of what it means to make artistic decisions, to even care about the decisions they make.

So what is it, beyond open-endedness and child-centered pedagogy that the arts provide? Is there something more that harnesses a student's desire, his/her drive to make and do, his engagement? Yes.

Embedded in the practicality of the arts is an immediacy, the simultaneity of the action and the result, the work and the result, the effort and the satisfaction. The arts are practical; they are practical for us because they can lead students to activities that enable them to practice skills they need and that we want them to develop. But more importantly, the arts are practical for the students because project-based activities in which the students are doing and making something they can see, hear, feel, taste, touch are self-generating engines of engagement. The “I want to” feeling is emboldened and honored. What they are doing makes sense and has purpose. It is worth their time and energy. It is practical. These valuable skills have found an application to something real, present in the moment and mine.

This engagement also has direct connection to students' ability to regulate. Arts activate the sensory systems in ways that soothe: rhythm, touch, repetitive back and forth movement, heavy lifting, choral chanting. Because the arts support the needs of the body, they invite students to engage, entice students to focus, give students purpose to do and make. The students are busy. Brains focused and bodies busy are in sync. A classroom in which students are busy is a classroom that forms a community of happier people, safer people, and people with more bandwidth to learn together.

Once a teacher has a context in which engagement is authentic and flows naturally, the integration of curriculum has fertile ground. The arts have the capacity to slide under all academic subjects and provide a vehicle for engagement, fun, joy, ownership – the emotional basis of learning, the *Why* of learning, the first and probably most important column in the UDL (Universal Design for Learning) chart.

Human beings are inclined to do again what they enjoyed doing once. We are inclined to return to activities that are fun, safe and that make us happy. Our students with disabilities struggle with many situations that frighten them, that they cannot connect to, that might make them feel unsuccessful, that have no purpose to them. What we have seen when students are engaged in art activities are some very telling developments:

- Extended time-on-task
- Improved eye-hand coordination
- Willingness to try

Anticipation and prediction around steps in a process  
Increased agency in communicating wishes and needs (self-advocacy)  
Laughter  
Serious, whole-body focus  
Peer-to-peer connection

This is all hard work. These are not easy tasks and skills. When we see students do these things without prompting, and do them repeatedly, we can see something has been awakened, some fire lit in students' connection to the world and their agency in it, some new and exciting sense of self.

Is this “self-expression”? Perhaps it is, but it is a very nuanced meaning of the phrase, with a greater sensitivity to what “self” means and what “expression” means. We see our students and we see them reveling in being able.

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