

## **Casting Fake Pearls Before Real Swine? The Role of the Arts in Mass Schooling**

I once asked a university colleague who was walking out of his survey of literature class, “Watcha been up to?” His wry response was, “Casting fake pearls before real swine.” I laughed; but over time I’ve concluded that my colleague’s comment has hidden meaning. It reflects what can go distinctively wrong for educators who teach the arts to the masses.

Unlike nonartistic fields, such as math or grammar, music, dance, painting, and other art forms have an almost purely intrinsic value. People who listen to classical music, for example, don’t do so in order to make money, maintain mental health, aid their digestion, or lower their blood pressure. They listen because they love it. The music has intrinsic value; it is worthwhile *in and of itself*.

### **Isn’t Math Beautiful, Too?**

Of course, nonartistic fields, such as mathematics, have intrinsic value too. For some, a well-solved equation is just as beautiful as a well-danced pas de deux. But—and this is absolutely crucial—beauty isn’t the *only* reason to give a damn about mathematics. Math and other technical subjects also readily serve as means to *other* ends. Should you have no intrinsic interest in algebra, for instance, it’s still potentially useful for solving a variety of problems.

Thus, students taking technical subjects have *two* reasons to be motivated:

- the subject is of intrinsic interest
- the skills it offers are potentially useful

### **Art for Art’s Sake**

That’s not the way it is for the arts. If students don’t find the learning worthwhile for its own

sake, it has no other point. That’s why teaching such subjects is such an all-or-nothing affair. This doesn’t matter when students love the art they’re being taught. When drama majors learn stagecraft, for instance, they usually have intrinsic motivation. And that makes teaching them a joy.

Reluctant arts “scholars” can sometimes be brought to see the intrinsic value of the enterprise. Skillful teachers of the arts can sometimes kindle intense love of an art in initially indifferent students. For example, my own appreciation of opera came about in exactly that way. A teacher managed to show me why he found it so wonderful. Now I love it too.

But not everyone can be converted. And when they are not, of what use is an arts course? The honest answer is, the course is of no use whatsoever. In fact, those who find it useless often suck the joy from the course for everyone; it’s probably best to kick them out.

What about using music to teach math, dance to keep kids fit, art to teach history, and so forth? That’s not *teaching* art; that’s *using* the arts to teach something else. Similarly, the arts can be integrated into the curriculum so that painting can be used to teach history, etc. But that is not teaching the arts per se, either.

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## Unmotivated Kids, Part I

Is there a point at which teaching the arts turns into casting fake pearls before real swine? Yes, there probably is. Imagine a young lady who is not good enough, or not lucky enough, to qualify for one of the few serious music jobs available. One way she can make a reasonable living and not abandon music is to become a teacher. Let's say she eventually lands a job at St. Mediocritus College teaching Music 101. Day after day, semester after semester, year after year, our music lover teaches what she loves to section after section of reluctant scholars who often enroll in the course in the hope that it is an easy "A."

"Listen to this," our heroine says as she plays an utterly enchanting Chopin waltz for a class of freshmen. But once again, in spite of the work's wondrous beauty and the skill of her interpretation, a majority of the class seems utterly unmoved. When the music dies away a lone student raises his hand. "Yes, Bill," says the teacher hopefully. Bill asks, "Is this stuff gonna be on the test?"

Finally, our heroine gives up, deciding she has been trying to make baboons cherish roses. Instead she puts the roses away forever and offers bananas, in the form of worksheets and multiple-choice tests. Trying to convey the majesty and wonder of music is over. Now she just pretends to teach; the students pretend to learn. When the semester ends and the kids fill in their course-evaluation questionnaires, the dean is pleased to learn that our musician's teaching has finally "improved."

## Unmotivated Kids, Part II

Does that sound discouraging? Well, here is an alternative, and darker, scenario. Instead of landing a college job, let's say our heroic teacher can find work only in neglected, overcrowded Al Sharpton Middle School in a particularly putrescent New York City slum. Pedagogical Pollyannas (Chester Finn, for example) would have us believe that a truly dedicated teacher, fervently believing that every student can learn, would improvise instruments from empty beer cans and discarded crack syringes and have these street-wise kids playing Beethoven with feeling by Christmas. But that sort of thing happens only in

the movies. In real life our music teacher quickly finds out that she would be better off dead than trying to teach inner-city middle school kids to love serious music.

She appreciates how desperately these kids need beauty in their lives. She even manages to throw a musical life preserver to a couple of them. Ultimately, however, her efforts are overwhelmed by the kids who are too worried, too unloved, too hungry, too sad, too angry, too high, too weary, too frightened, too mean, or too intimidated to hear that beauty. In fact, these children's needs are so far outside the scope of our teacher's resources that she can't even get them to pretend to learn if she pretends to teach. So, to save herself, she quits and sells cars for a living. Her piano now sits silent, covered with dust.

## No One Ever Said Teaching the Arts Would Be Easy

In places like Al Sharpton even those who teach subjects of unmistakable practical utility have serious problems with unmotivated kids. The instrumental value of knowing how to read is obvious, for example. Yet in spite of that, child after child remains unengaged. In schools like Sharpton teachers of every subject deal with serious motivational problems. But those who teach the arts face an even greater challenge because so very much depends on intrinsic interest.

Other instrumental motivations are perversions that threaten the vitality of the enterprise. Grades, for example, pervert the process by always threatening to become ends in themselves. I recall trying to persuade my son's gifted education teacher to count his multidimensional involvement in theater in computing his grade. When my son found out he was horrified. "If they start giving grades for theater it will ruin everything!" he told me. When I asked why, he explained that it would attract those who didn't love the theater.

Ultimately the arts entail things such as wonder, enchantment, beauty, truth, passion, commitment, delight, and fulfillment. That is what makes them so very hard to teach. And that is what makes teaching any art to a roomful of reluctant scholars so very, very painful.