



The Need for 'High Touch' in a 'High-Tech World'

Why the arts are necessary for young minds?

By Wendy Hollenbach Hellyer

This "high tech" age needs the "high-touch" of the arts and humanities. If you doubt this, think about the last time you tried to reach a live customer service representative of a large corporation and spent 20 minutes "looping" through voice mail prompts! We can't wait to interact with a human being!

Our high-tech world has also affected education. As it has become easier to program computers to calculate formulas and correct our spelling and grammar, it has also become more challenging to find ways to motivate children to develop their own mathematical, grammatical and analytical skills. The higher logistical thinking skills required to understand written material or reading comprehension for some children has disappeared altogether. The very inventions that have provided us with instant coffee, instant communications, instant calculations and instant entertainment have also made it easier for us to neglect the development of our own mental skills and talents.

In this era of instant gratification what can motivate children (or anyone) to work at their own developing skills? The arts - music, drama, painting and sculpture - are still disciplines that require more than a quick perusal of the subject to become proficient. The very time spent in practicing these disciplines can bring as much satisfaction as completing the final piece or performance!

In addition to the obvious reading comprehension skills necessary to read and perform a play, the actor needs to analyze the characters' behavior, their set of values, their choices in life and the consequences of those choices. Besides the reading and physical coordination required to play an instrument, a

musician needs to understand the nuances of the composition and what divine or human qualities they need to express through their playing. Also, the artist may ponder for several days before choosing just the right color for a dab of light in the sky or the line of a person's cheek - the harshness or softness, the curved or angular qualities - conveying his or her ideas about the universe or the human condition.

Pushing a computer button can never replace the satisfaction of mastering a new skill on the piano or learning to sing a high note with ease and beauty. The persistence and mental discipline needed to master new skills in art, music or drama not only hones one's analytical skills - it also builds strength of character. Artistic endeavors require ensemble work. A play or orchestra involves teamwork and cooperation - skills that are needed in all facets of life's personal and business relationships.

A two-year test of preschoolers* (1995-1997) led by psychologist Dr. Frances Rauscher and physicist Dr. Gordon Shaw showed that children who received piano/keyboard training performed 34 percent higher on tests measuring spatial-temporal ability than children who didn't. Another survey revealed that teens involved in the arts tested, on average, 100 points higher on their SAT exams.

The evidence is clear that the arts improve the mental capabilities of children. But don't involve them in the arts for that reason alone. Discover the arts with them! Take early childhood music classes with your toddlers, learn to play an instrument or to draw and paint with your children. Participate together in a choir and go to concerts and museums together. You'll be amazed at the imaginative insights your children will share with you and rediscover the world through their eyes! Best yet, you'll have "high-touch" experiences that will keep you in touch with and rejoice in the wonder of our humanity.

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