The Turning of the Leaves: Expanding Our Vision for the Arts in Education

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When I consider the idea of “Expanding Our Vision for the Arts in Education,” the turning colors of fall leaves comes to mind—and I think that there are two parts to the idea of “turning.” We connect with the world, but we also make sense of our experiences in the world and make them our own. One way to engage with the world and the changing colors of all the leaves that surround us is to find our own ways of expressing the impact of beauty. How can we engage authentically with the world around us, how can we attempt to translate what we perceive—both physically and emotionally—into our own unique aesthetic responses?

I am convinced that one of the crucial ways in which people might connect with the world is to find their own means of expression. When I look at the golden leaves and the trunks of the trees outside my window, I feel as though—if I were only skilled enough to paint them—they could be mine. When I see the leaves flutter, I believe that the arts can help us all recognize that, beyond that interweaving of trunks and leaves, we may have a deep connection between ourselves and the world around us. Yet, I have to overcome the sense of total inadequacy I feel as I attempt to render this feeling into words—or movement, or color, or rhythm, or song. It is exactly the stimulation of this kind of feeling, and the translations of these feelings into color and rhythm and movement and words, that I believe should be the major role of the arts in education.

At this historical moment, such stimulation is being repressed and buried by the incessant insistence on the standardization and measurement of teaching and learning. However, there are multiple ways of conceptualizing criteria, which we now recognize as shifting and changing within differing contexts and over time. There is no way to standardize the arts. If we think back, we
understand that there appear to have been moments in history when criteria for judging the arts were possible. However, when we talk of criteria today, we realize that there is no way to crystallize the wonder and beauty of the contributions of the various arts. Wonder and beauty remind us that unanswerable questions remain. The unanswerable may move students to reach beyond where they are to respond. Importantly, these responses can be questioning as well as admiring.

The arts in education should thus recognize possibilities that open new horizons, in both form and substance. This is true not only in the arts but also in education in its various manifestations. The possibilities of the work of art must be central, must be honored. If we can honor the visual, poetic, and gestural possibilities in the arts, we then can begin to understand the openings made accessible by living in the questions. Such living enables us to release our social imaginations in order to take action against the very standards of measurement and evaluation that are separating us from one another and from our ability to learn and teach in differing and, yes, creative ways. Such teaching cannot always be predicted or controlled. It is emergent—like our engagement with the golden leaf, with the world. It is always becoming and can never be fully captured.

Given the changes in our cultural and social worlds, many of the possible roles of arts learning have to do with the specific contexts of contemporary education—for example, new technologies that potentially strip art of its special “golden-ness,” tortuous political events, and the incessant emphasis on standardization of teaching and learning. If we are going to affirm, extend, and expand the role of the arts in education, we must give up the kind of standardization that wipes clean the diversity, richness, and humanness that infuses the arts as well as human beings’ individual—and sometimes collective—responses to the arts. Further, we must learn more about how to attend. We must be able to demonstrate to our students how the arts enable our full engagement in and of the world, allowing us to attend or be open to others and their possibilities.

In the glow of autumn light, the leaves outside my window can never be stopped from turning. However, in the winter they will lose their special hue, and in the spring they will burst with blossoms. But if I had not been able to attend to those leaves and respond to them in their momentary golden splendor, in their wonderful transience, I could not likewise imagine the endless possibilities for the arts in education.

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