Art Becomes the Fourth R by Jason Ohler
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*"In an era when students design Web sites for projects and integrate video, graphics, and animation into their presentations, art is fast becoming the new literacy for our times."*

One of the many reasons I enjoy being an educator during this time of unprecedented change is that the potential for revelation is great. To do my best revelation-hunting, I locate the eye of a hurricane, park, and look around with an open mind. When I do that, revelations come frequently.

One such revelation that came years ago has helped me understand an important foundational shift underlying the Internet revolution in education. I am not referring to the creation of distributed-learning communities; to the use of hypermedia to learn associatively rather than linearly; to the creation of anywhere, anytime, on-demand access to knowledge to meet the lifelong learning demands of a mobile work force; or to other shifts in the ways we learn and work. Although these are significant changes from even a decade ago, they are just symptoms of a greater change that is so pervasive and infused into our experience that we miss it entirely.

I am referring to the fact that the multimedia environment of the Web, as well as much of what we experience through our computers, requires students to think and communicate as designers and artists. The age of art has arrived, leaving behind the text-centric world that has guided us for so long. The language of art has become the next literacy-or the fourth R. We need not linger any longer over whether art should have a permanent and central place in our school curriculum. It should, and we need to move

quickly to prepare students to be literate in the world that they are inheriting and rapidly shaping. In the digital age, art skills are not just good for the soul, but they provide, in the words of Elliot Eisner (1988), "access to cultural capital," and ultimately, access to employment.

I had an amazing experience a few years ago that helped me fully appreciate art's new importance in education. I was watching a 10th grader struggle at his computer to create a multimedia presentation for his language-arts project. He wasn't struggling with the technology-like any infoage kid, he could click around the screen with considerable ease. It was the aesthetics that seemed insurmountable. As I watched him clumsily cramming together scads of video clips, graphics, sounds, buttons, and a few words, it suddenly hit me like a ton of bits: He was trying to create art, and no one had shown him how. In the process of fumbling with the medium, he was losing his sense of what he wanted to communicate in the first place.

And this wasn't an isolated incident. I watched it happen again and again- across grades and throughout the curriculum, from science to social studies, where term papers and reports yielded to Web pages and PowerPoint presentations.

In my day (we won't dwell on when that was), we were trained to be writers, crafting term papers out of mountains of text. A picture was neither expected nor necessary. Including sounds and movies was not even feasible. By the time I wrote my first serious social-studies report, I had years of training in wordsmithing. Yet this 10th grader had to figure out on his own how to use video, graphics, music animation, and sound bytes-none of which he had been trained to use, let alone create himself with any sense of artistic vision. Out of sheer necessity, the language of art is finally taking center stage in our culture, but we, as a society, haven't figured that out yet.

Art and the Digital Age

Multimedia communication has become ubiquitous in a short period of time because of two fairly recent developments. First, today's relatively affordable, easy-to-use, multimedia technology acts as assistive technology for the artistically challenged. In the same way

that word processing opened up the world of the writer, multimedia technology has opened up the world of the artist. Today, anyone who can move a mouse can jump in and give it a go.

Second, the Web uses multimedia presentation as its Esperanto, spreading the language of multimedia throughout the global world of the Internet. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that citizens of the internationally networked world would move away from text-centric communication and toward pictures, diagrams, sound, movement, and other more universal forms of communication.

The convergence of these two developments has earned art a permanent place in the common experience of life for us all. For that reason, art should be included in the common experience of school for all students, not just those who plan to major in art and design. Those who do not create art for a living will use it, manage it, interpret it, or interact with it in ways that simply did not exist 10 years ago.

The Long and Winding Road

For years we tried to sell the importance of art education to taxpayers for a number of good reasons, none of which ever fully captured the public imagination. These reasons fall into three categories. The following brief synopses of those categories do not come close to capturing the work done in this area by such experts as Darby (1994), Eisner (1988), and Egan (1997).

1. Improved expression. Who can argue with a child's need for expression? Along with providing valuable information for teachers and parents about the student's worldview, art helps uncover the student's other intelligences that Howard Gardner (1993) has warned us are being ignored in the traditional curriculum. In addition, schooling in the arts develops different symbol systems, expanding a student's ability to connect with a rich array of resources within and outside school. If our goal is to provide kids with the means to realize their potential and to communicate with others, then art is an obvious avenue to help achieve that goal.

2. Cognitive and attitudinal improvement. A correlative and perhaps even causal relationship exists between being active in the arts and improving cognitive functions as measured in standard curricular

areas. Such statements as Murfee's (1995) are commonplace: "Vocabulary and reading comprehension were significantly improved for elementary students in the 'Arts Alternatives' program in New Jersey" (p. 5). Common sense told us long ago that these kinds of connections should be no surprise. After all, art requires expertise in synthesis and evaluation, the top of Bloom's learning taxonomy. Honing these skills in one area can only help in others. In addition to cognitive improvement, the arts are motivational, inducing students to attend school and be receptive to learning. If attitude is everything, then art is learning's best friend.

3. Multicultural awareness and personal growth. There is no better way to understand and experience the diversity and commonality of humanity than through art. At the heart of art's contribution is improved attitudes toward self, citizenship, and community. Art increases our understanding of the breadth and the depth of humanity, inducing not only cultural awareness but also personal growth. This growth takes many forms, from motor-skill development to self-knowledge to development of teamwork skills.

Despite these reasons, the general public often sees art as tangential, soft, or not entirely relevant for the world of work and citizenship preparation. This is why art is the first program to get cut when money gets tight. To keep this from happening, art must be considered the fourth R: a literacy as solid as reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. When was the last time a school board discussed cutting any of these subjects from the curriculum? When art is considered a literacy and is as embedded in the curriculum and in our cultural psyche as the other three Rs, it will become self-perpetuating, inevitable, and unquestioned. Fortunately, the world of multimedia and the Internet gives us the opportunity, rationale, and a broad base of support to make that happen.

Should We Worry?

Every conceptual revolution that overtakes education adds something to the pedagogical toolbox even as it contains the seeds of its own misuse. We have not developed the ability to look proactively for the weaknesses in what Don Shalvey (2000) calls "the paradigm du jour" and are doomed to suffer because of it.

The potential for misuse of a good idea is even greater when technology is involved. As with all technology, multimedia tools connect us to new opportunities and disconnect us from others. We would be wise to look for the disconnections now so that we might avoid them or at least understand them when they occur. What follow are a few of these disconnects to watch for.

1. The digital divide. As technologically based fourth-R skills become a path to personal growth as well as to the workplace, limited access to these tools will further separate the privileged from the disenfranchised. Even relatively inexpensive equipment will always be too expensive for some portion of the population.

2. The trivialization of art. Multimedia may trivialize art as it becomes the fourth R. After all, art technology is doing for art what the word processor did for writing-it gives anyone a chance to get involved. This, in turn, floods our information channels with artwork in the way that word processors have flooded them with words.

Some people will question whether what I am discussing is art at all and will worry that multimedia tools blur the lines between commercial and fine art. To a certain extent, this blurring may happen, but regardless of the medium, a broad spectrum of expression will always exist. The way poetry and computer manuals sit side by side in the textual world, so shall Picasso and PowerPoint both have a place in the art world.

3. Art as advertising.Perhaps the greatest potential drawback of shifting to art-based communication is that although students are routinely required to develop arguments with words to persuade others of a particular point of view, when they do so with multimedia, it looks uncomfortably like advertising. As discriminating consumers, we should be concerned with multimedia's ability to overwhelm our senses and manipulate us emotionally. We are right to wonder whether encouraging multimedia makes us part of the communication problem rather than the solution.

Given these drawbacks, we need to remember two important points. First, although multimedia can act as an assistive technology, it cannot take the place of vision, talent, or skill, whether developed or inherited. We will always need to tell a story with our art and to

tell it with honesty, depth, and detail if it is to survive as more than a transient, disconnected thought. For this reason, teachers will become more important as technology increases in power. More than ever, students will need teachers for their wisdom and knowledge to help navigate a purposeful path through the glitz and distraction.

Second, we should not worry about the fate of words in a world of pictures and sounds. As art and design challenge the primacy of text that has dominated our culture since Gutenberg, we should not be afraid that text will disappear. Instead, we will see text clearly for the first time by understanding how and when it offers us the best vehicle to achieve communication in relation to other communication options.

Suggestions

How do we facilitate the coming age of art in our schools?

1. Rename art and get subversive. First-and I am only half-kidding-we need to rename art. The word comes with too much baggage. Being an artist implies a life of penury, emotional pain, and public misunderstanding. We need to demystify the nature of art and see it all around us, from the designs that undelie our tables and automobiles, to the aesthetics that imbue our Web sites, to the public sculptures that turn a building from a structure into a monument of public expression.

I suggest that educators invent a Trojan horse for their fourth-R programs. Call it, say, business communication. Roll it into the literacy portion of the school's curriculum, and then let it evolve. Everyone-from business leaders who are beginning to understand the importance of communicating in many media, to parents and policymakers who want business leaders' support-will eventually thank you for being "visionary and proactive." Remember-being ahead of your time requires patience and strategy.

2. Hire more art teachers. Second, we need to anticipate that the shift from text-only to multimedia environments will cause a combination of excitement and anxiety in our schools in the short term. Teachers will find that they cannot guide and evaluate students multimedia projects as effectively as they can the text-

based projects that they are used to. To help, we need more art teachers working across the curriculum with content-area teachers. The most pressing need right now is to develop design skills, graphic literacy skills, and skills that knit together pictures and words into unified presentations. Once we better understand how video, sound, music, and animation communicate ideas and information effectively, and once the technology that supports these activities becomes more affordable and less specialist-oriented, art will become the fundamental literacy for understanding hoth old and new media.

3. Increase fourth-R literacy requirements in teacher education programs. Of course, this means that ultimately, just as art becomes every student's fourth R, it should also be addressed in every program that prepares teachers for the the classroom.

4. Declare an "Art, the fourth R" day. We can schedule one day in the school year when art is infused throughout content areas, when mathematics, language, and science teachers work with art teachers to enhance communication across the curriculum. We can pick a day that has been neglected for want of a famous birthday or an event in history. With luck, in the near future we won't need an Art Day, any more than we need a Reading, 'Riting, or 'Rithmetic Day.

Advocating for Art Literacy

Years ago, finding fourth-R references was difficult. Now, a cursory search on the Web reveals that many educators and product developers see art not as the fourth but as the first R. My purpose in calling art the fourth R is simply this: The other three Rs are literacies that facilitate learning and expression in content areas. In a multimedia world this definition of literacy also exactly captures the role of art. We hear repeatedly from employers that workers need skills in communicating, team building, creative problem solving, and in the literacies that will help them be lifelong learners. Art is now one such literacy.

Beyond a literacy that facilitates learning and communication across a wide spectrum of activities, art skills also translate into real-world jobs.Each of the thousands of channels of video, the thousands of CDs and DVDs, the millions of incipient Web sites-and the other new media not yet on imagination's horizon-will require musicians,

choreographers, videographers, graphic designers, creative consultants, and many other "artistic" professionals. Artists are finally having their day.

As with all changes in education, the Internet turns out to be not just a revolution in media and methods, but in literacy as well. We need, in David Thornburg's (1990) words, to prepare our kids for their future rather than our past. Kids must become fully literate, and that literacy must include art, the fourth R.

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Author's note: For information on signing an e-petition to make art the official fourth R, visit www.jasonohler.com/fourthr.

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