

Artistic Development: Nature or Nurture?

The Three E's of Artistic Growth

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Abstract

In this literature review, I examine and compare ideas of artistic development. Specifically, creativity as a natural or nurtured process will be observed. The variations of artistic development is also conferred that a one-size-fits-all philosophy is senseless. Cultural influences are noted as well as collaborative efforts impact artistic growth. It is noted some children seem to have more natural ability when it comes to creative expression. However, I address my belief that anyone can learn to create, if given the tools and opportunity. If not nurtured, artistic development can be stifled at an early age.

Introduction

Since their child was four years old, Akiane's parents knew that their child had an extraordinary gift. She sketched faces that were as detailed as photographs. By the age of seventeen, Akiane had published more than eight-hundred works of art and had been featured on Oprah and Good Morning America (Kramarik, 2011). Her portraits have made her a celebrity and have been sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars (Kramarik, 2011). In the world of art, Akiane is a prodigy, but her extreme talent leads to a profound question. What motivates artistic development? When studying development, *nature* refers to the inherited characteristics and tendencies that influence growth (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007).

Some natural characteristics appear in virtually everyone. To *nurture* is to support and encourage, as during a period of training or development (Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nurture>). A series of *universal* stages occurs in all humans regardless of the circumstances (Feldman, 1987). The universal development of learning to speak, for example, differs from the *nonuniversal* development of learning to draw. Nonuniversal transformations “require the systematic application of cultural resources and effort by those who seek to facilitate developmental change” (Feldman, 1987, p. 247). Barrett (2003) recognized the effects of *denotations* and *connotations* that make up our world. All visual and verbal communication sends messages. What is literally seen in a picture is called denotation, while connotations are the implications of the things in the image.

But what stimulates artistic growth? Understanding the artistic behavior and development in children is not a “one-size-fits-all” classification. Many factors play in the artistic development of a child, including visual culture. Regardless of the mental, emotional, or physical

ability a child possesses, growing creativity is as simple as exposure, experience, and encouragement.

Exposure

One way in which children's artistic abilities are enhanced is through exposure and the stage of development in which they receive this exposure. The Wilson's (1981) acknowledged the theories of developmental stages, as explained by Lowenfeld, Kerschensteiner, Rouma, Burt, Mathias, Lark-Horovitz and Gardner. However, they also asserted, "With such a variety of slices, it might be asked whether or not these various inquirers were actually cutting up the same pie" (Wilson & Wilson, p. 4, 1981). Examining these differing stages of artistic growth, Wilson and Wilson (1981), determined that "it is time to throw the old tool away and to search for a new one" (p. 5). According to Feldman (1987), prerequisite skills and unique domain-specific skills must be addressed in order to better understand the progress of artistic abilities. Silverman (1997) reported the trials and triumphs of gifted children through asynchronous development, indicating a one-size-fits-all philosophy is futile.

Artistic growth is as unique as each individual child. Feldman (Wilson & Wilson, 1981; Silverman, 1997) built on and complimented the other researchers in this area on the basis of new ideas of artistic development. The changes of universal and non-universal development are not typically recognized by educators. Although a child may be considered gifted or developmentally delayed, each progresses at different intervals. This progression is influenced by their environment, interests, and distinct personality. The authors recognized a child's intention and understanding is as varied as their individual development. Louis suggests "artistic progress is better understood as a journey" (p. 347, 2005).

Artistic development in children is obviously as varied as any other sort of progression and growth. No two children are the same. As educators, we should recognize, accept, and teach to those differences. Even Binet believed intelligence to be highly influenced by the environment and improved with appropriate instruction (Silverman, 1997). Children classified as gifted are asynchronous as a significant number tend to also have learning disabilities. Although the highly gifted are far advanced intellectually, their emotional and physical maturity does not always match this level. In order to help children advance to their fullest potential, teachers must recognize and support their distinctive developmental differences. Teaching to these unique differences of each child is another issue.

Experience

Another factor in artistic development is the experience of the child. Many of the articles I read linked to the affects culture has on development and learning. Visual media, family, peers, and school all play a significant part in the influences and choices of children. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, accomplished in-depth research about the relationship between learning and development. His passion for education led him to observe, research, and learn all he could in order to develop an educational program for the young Soviet Union. He also had an aspiration for educating deaf children (Blunden, 2001). Vygotsky's social learning theory, the *zone of proximal development*, captured my attention the most.

What an individual can do when prompted spawned this area of development for Vygotsky. Blunden (2001) noted that Vygotsky School was not easily accepted in the West due to a collaborative style of work. Papers were written together and even experiments and conclusions were drawn by a variety of people who often moved. This philosophy of

collaboration is profound, as Blunden (2001) explained. He wrote that the fact that nearly everything we do in life, we do with others. People can collaborate to make things better without sharing the same philosophy. This common goal alliance pushed Vygotsky in his own work and filtered over into his theory of progress in children. This zone of proximal development includes all people connected to the child.

One example of how educators use this learning theory is when they participate in learning communities. Learning communities are a means of collaboration in which each person makes unique contributions to the subject or project. These learning communities indefinitely assist in development. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) explained, "We use a circle and dotted lines to show that collaborative efforts are dynamic, changing processes" (p. 199).

Although collaborative efforts are important, young people come to understand nature, history, and value of art, through a variety of means. Deciphering the messages of our visual culture is critical in artistic development as well as in defending our value system. According to Barrett (2002), "Learners of all ages can successfully decipher the many messages circulating in the images and objects of visual culture if given the opportunities and some strategies" (p. 12).

Hamblen (1984) also identified the need for artistic perception to be taught. These perceptions are shaped through "a range of learned behaviors, values, and attitudes" (Hamblen, 1984, p. 20). However, these learned beliefs are based on the individual's society. Multiculturalism is the focus in Delacruz's (1995) article. In regards to pluralism and democracy, Delacruz emphasized the interaction of children with the diverse cultures of our society. Students are more likely to make meaningful connections, which supports artistic development, when given the opportunity to explore different cultures. Delacruz (1995) explained the importance of

“understanding art through culture and understanding culture through art are the educational objectives that reinforce multiculturalist goals” (p. 320).

Encouragement

In addition to exposure and experience, another significant facet of artistic growth is the encouragement of others. Connecting with others through art provides a boost in artistic growth. This connection can be made in a variety of ways. Global electronic media, genetically-engineering humans, visual media, as well as direct and indirect contact, are examples of ways people can connect. The connection that artwork creates between people and their situation is called *relational aesthetics* (Springgay, 2009). These links cultivate through conversations between students about their own artwork. Springgay (2009) discussed art as “a moment to be lived through, opening unlimited conversations” (p. 75). Encounters others have with art are another way connections are developed. Springgay shared how investigating art beyond the visual encourages the concept of interpersonal, affective relationships.

Relational caring is another important term in this experience (Delacruz, 2009). Compassionate teachers build a sense of respect and admiration with their students. “New technologies facilitate such caring and doing in ways unimaginable a generation ago—promoting new forms of creative expression...networking across spans of time and distance,” Delacruz explained (p. 16). Aligning new digital media with art education is critical to influencing the global civil society in which artistic development can progress. Walker (2004) addressed the fact that culture is bombarded by images in which people connect. *Visuality* refers to the socialization which occurs based on what people see. This visual culture, as well as artwork, is connected to human behaviors and development. Through caring teachers, students are more likely to develop

to their fullest potential. According to child psychiatrist, Peter Neubauer, "If you can support a human being fully, then they can become who they really are" (Retrieved from www.npr.org)

Insights and Conclusion

To me, artistic development is a natural process that must be nurtured. I believe growing creatively is as natural as learning to walk. God has instilled in every individual the internal drive of expressive communication. Each child is different, but like walking, if creativity is fostered and encouraged, the progress will increase. Obviously, the child must have a desire to advance artistically or their creative potential is reduced. To increase desire a child must be nurtured in a way that instills confidence.

I believe my own artistic development has been shaped primarily by the nurturing influences of my mother, my great aunt, and my grandmother. Being an accomplished pianist, my mother was constantly practicing, as well as giving piano lessons. On my father's side, my great aunt had a passion for photography, and my grandmother loved to paint and work with ceramics. I grew up watching my aunt take photographs, and I have inherited her old cameras, slides, and many pictures. I enjoyed spending time with my grandmother, because she was always painting. She would also take me to the ceramics shop with her where I could also create my own ceramics. Interestingly enough, my mother has recently found her biological family. Both sides of her biological family are blessed with artistic talents beyond measure. This brings a new philosophy to my beliefs about artistic development. I have determined my gifts are inherent, as I did not know this biological family until last year.

As far as the visual culture around me, I was very sheltered. I was raised spending time outside on a farm near a spring-fed creek. On Sundays and Wednesdays, we attended church.

During the week, I went to school where my art teacher was very particular about our work all looking the same. I did not like art until I was a junior in high school. It was then that my high school teacher encouraged me. But it was still through less meaningful projects of copying pictures and the old masters.

Through my undergraduate work and now graduate work, I believe I have gained a much better understanding of the importance of helping kids unwrap this intense visual culture in which we live. It is my job to help them understand and interpret what they see, so they can protect themselves and make individual decisions. I live in a community where many cultures are represented due to a military installation and engineering university. Learning from my own students, as well as my own research, and applying this knowledge in my classroom is creating a more meaningful and rich environment and experience.

My own understanding about artistic development is based strongly on our relationships and connections to visual culture. Because we are surrounded by visual images on a daily basis, I find it imperative to supply my students with the tools they need to maturely decipher these images. I am responsible to my students to encourage a healthy and positive global society. I must not be afraid to discuss and share a variety of ways that these images can affect our decisions. Artistic development is formed through connections made by contemporary visual culture as well as experiences people have with art and one another. To use these concepts in my own teaching, I must be open to learning and using new digital media. Keeping myself up-to-date, and a step ahead of my students will help me prepare them for the future.

Many factors play in the artistic development of a child. However, regardless of the mental, emotional, or physical ability a child possesses, growing creativity is as easy as simple exposure, experience, and encouragement.

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