

New Standards for a New Century: Contemporary Arts Education and Contemporary Teaching and Learning

by Arnold Aprill

In a post modern world of radical shifts in populations, identities, and cultures; of massive amounts of changing, hyperlinked information; and of widely distributed means of information production, our education systems need to teach our students to become global thinkers developing a broad range of capacities that our current approaches to teaching and learning simply don't support. A post modern world calls for inhabiting what Lauren Stevenson and Richard Deasy call the "Third Space", a place of teacher and student synthesis, analysis and expression, requiring **Conceptual** curriculum (enduring abstractions and challenges, not just content), **Big Ideas** in teaching and learning (concepts that invite questions), and an understanding of the **Aesthetics of Cognition** (the beauty and mystery of creative and critical thinking.)

A recent report in the U.S., created by the National Center on Education and the Economy, urgently calls for more creative and critical thinking in our schools. The report is titled "*Tough Choices, Tough Times*", and our times and our choices have become significantly tougher since 2007, when the report was first released.

The document recommends pedagogy that scaffolds:

...comfort with ideas and abstractions, analysis and synthesis, creativity, innovation, self-discipline, organization, flexibility, ability to work on a team (p. xxv)

As that report states, meaningful 21st Century education depends

"...on a deep vein of creativity that is constantly renewing itself, and on a myriad of people who can imagine how people can use things that have never been available before..."

Information technology educator Alan November states:

We need to emphasize the necessity of students learning with others around the world and stress that 3 skills are needed to teach our children:

- 1) We need to teach our students to deal with massive amounts of information*
- 2) We need to teach our students global communication, starting with Kindergarten*
- 3) We need to teach our students to be self-directed and understand how to organize more and more of their own learning.*

We can't avoid learning these tools. We can't walk away from this.

So how DO we scaffold comfort with ideas and abstractions? How DO we teach our students to be self-directed and to understand how to organize more and more of their own learning?

One way for arts educators to do that is to recognize that the arts are not only about virtuosity and skill acquisition, but are also a mode of thought. The arts produce emotional responses, but the arts are also cognitive. The organization I work for, the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) www.capeweb.org organizes its arts education partnerships (collaborations between teachers and artists in which the arts and other academic subjects reinforce each other rather than compete with each other) around Big Ideas.

What are Big Ideas? We haven't been very good at explaining what we mean by the concept, though like the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on obscenity, we think we know it when we see it.

But that is not good enough. Many of us who are working to understand the role of contemporary arts in contemporary education are putting a lot of thought into how we best describe and document what we know to be powerful in practice (and to be weak in scaling up and in pleading its case at the education policy level).

Here are some first attempts at a description:

Big ideas usually reflect upon processes, typically have both metaphoric and concrete elements, and as American arts education activist Eric Booth points out, usually have the quality of verbs rather than nouns. Of something happening, or something transformed or transforming, encountered or encountering. Relational. They contain a bit of poetry and mystery, but are not so abstract that they can't be investigated.

Not every idea is a Big Idea. Little Ideas are just that. Little ideas. Big Ideas are intriguing. They invite questions and multiple answers. They create a spirit of inquiry.

CAPE classrooms have investigated such Big Ideas as Structure ("How are such different things as governments, bodies, buildings, and dances structured?"), Harmony ("How do different elements work with each other in satisfying ways?"), Scale ("When is something big and when is something little? Compared to what?"), Shape ("What are the shapes in our world, and how do they fit together?"), Mapping ("How do we make symbols of how our world is arranged?"), Stewardship of the Earth ("How can we take better care of the planet?"), Freedom/Captivity ("How did Japanese Americans maintain hope in WWII internment camps?"), etc. A laundry list of types of ancient Native American dwellings is not a Big Idea, but an investigation of what made each of those houses homes is. Naming the names of dinosaurs is not a Big Idea. Developing theories of dinosaur extinction is.

Big Ideas like these have activated enthusiasm among teachers and learners and produced extraordinary art in CAPE classrooms.

But our partners have tended to either love the idea of Big Ideas, or else found the whole concept to be impenetrable. What we lacked was a workable definition. And that's where our colleague Catherine Main, Director of the Early Childhood Program in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (and a

CAPE parent) has come to our rescue, sharing a definition of Big Ideas that may save us from our tongue-tied enthusiasm:

“A big idea is an overarching idea that unifies, inspires, and resonates with children, an idea that is rich with possibilities and permits teachers and children to work together in many ways.”

- Chaille, C. (2008). *Constructivism across the Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms: Big Ideas as Inspiration.*

Unifies. Inspires. Resonates with children. Rich with possibilities. Permits collaborative work.

Simple, elegant, accurate, and USEFUL. Just what a definition should be.

So now that we can describe it, what is the value of using this Big Idea approach?

“...when curriculum is organized around concepts, there is room for multiple inquiry questions, multiple approaches to teaching, and multiple products in terms of student work in various disciplines and media. A concept is a mental construct that is timeless, universal, and abstract. Concepts are on a higher level of abstraction than topics or facts. Teachers are not asked to think conceptually when they plan curriculum. They are typically asked to organize around topics, ‘themes’, or activities, rather than concepts that translate...Standards that teachers rely on to guide their curriculum are often narrow and too numerous to teach well...There are often so many standards that the unit loses focus. Inquiry allows teachers to cluster those standards in a meaningful way in order to integrate content and build on each other’s work.”

- Gail Burnaford, *Building Curriculum, Community, and Leadership in Elementary Schools: A Study of Professional Development for Arts Teachers* (2008) in press, referencing the work of H.L. Erickson

This allows teachers to connect teaching across the curriculum (interdisciplinary thinking) and across grades (a “spiral curriculum”, in which Big Ideas are visited and revisited in increasing depth across a student’s school career). What this more conceptual approach to curriculum does is suggest a whole new set of content standards. The province of Queensland in Australia is entirely rethinking instructional content around **New Basics Curriculum Organizers**.

Each New Basics cluster is designed to help students answer a critical question:

- **Life pathways and social futures:** Who am I and where am I going?
- **Multiliteracies and communications media:** How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?
- **Active citizenship:** What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures, and economies?

- **Environments and technologies:** How do I describe, analyze, and shape the world around me?

This appears to be a very promising pathway, and teaching artists have an important role to play in assuring that break-throughs in curriculum design such as the New Basics experiment become concrete, innovative, and expressive. And as we move into more contemporary teaching and learning, how are we going to remain rigorous about our work, and how will we assist educators in transitioning into a broader sense of curriculum? Our good colleagues at CapeUK (www.capeuk.com) introduced us to a set of criteria (developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the body that oversees British curriculum development) for looking at student creativity in the classroom in a more fine-grained manner, a set of criteria that we are finding very useful. We are now documenting evidence of students:

- Questioning and challenging
- Making connections and seeing relationships
- Envisaging what might be
- Exploring ideas, keeping options open
- Reflecting critically on ideas, actions, and outcomes

This is not only changing our thinking as an arts partnership organization, but is also assisting our partner teachers and artists in moving into a more contemporary approach to both art and education.

What will this new approach look like? New inter-cultural global communications systems are creating whole new “languages” (young people are adept, unlike their elders, at multi-tasking and at composing and “reading” multi-media messages), and our young people are growing up in a world full of massive shifts in world populations. Old identities are morphing, the U.S. is rapidly become a bilingual nation, and all the clichés about moving from an industrial economy to an information economy will require a “whole new mind”, to use business writer Daniel Pink’s phrase. Access to information on the internet and students’ access to new tools for composing, producing, and distributing films, texts, images, music, blogs, podcasts, websites, etc. will shift all education toward increasingly student centered learning, more project based learning, greater need for “soft” 21st century learning skills (“*comfort with ideas and abstractions, analysis and synthesis, creativity, innovation, self-discipline, organization, flexibility, ability to work on a team*”), more cross-disciplinary learning, more differentiated instruction, more inter-age work, more connections between life inside and outside schools, more attention to early childhood and to young adult education, and more “real world” tasks. Rapidly changing technologies will call for “just-in-time” learning and flexibility in dealing with technologies that become obsolete before they are perfected. All this argues for an increasingly integrated curriculum – not just between the arts and other subjects, but between all other content areas as well. New technologies will also support more comprehensive curriculum in the performing arts – moving beyond performing into composing, directing, choreographing, and playwriting.

Another change in the terrain of arts education will be the on-going creation of new classics and new canons. Popular and “outsider” arts are now considered



legitimate subjects for arts learning. Students study quilting. There is a classic Jazz program at Lincoln Center in New York City. Film study has become a regular subject in many high schools. Middle-schoolers study computer game design. Most of this was unimaginable twenty years ago.

So let us welcome ourselves into the 21st century! For a navigation map of this brave new world, check out the KnowledgeWorks Foundation Map of Future Forces Affecting Education <http://www.kwfdn.org/map/>

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