

Why Should Music be Valued as Highly as English, Math or Science?

Music belongs in our school. Not because it's fun and entertaining; nor because it's relaxing or socializing. Music often is all of these, of course. But music belongs in school because it is basic to learning. Music is a unique way of knowing.

We comprehend the world in many ways. A journalist may describe a storm as wind wreaking devastation. A scientist will pinpoint it as 28.84 inches of barometric pressure and winds of 82.5 mph. Beethoven describes a storm by hurling an orchestra at our ears with blasts of brass and flickers of violins. Turner expresses it by making his whole canvas explode in breathtaking swirls of colors.

None of these, - words, numbers, sounds or colors – is sufficient to produce total understanding. Each provides particular insights. Together they produce more complete comprehension.

This combination happens because the brain processes information in two ways. Some information is handled bit-by-bit with the bits converging at a single point. This is the kind of linear thinking typically used in language and science. It yields facts, conclusions and “right” answers.

But the brain can also process many bits of information all at once, releasing the results in divergent directions. This sort of thinking, called “holistic”, leads to hypotheses, metaphors and ambiguity. It is basic to emotion, imagination and creativity.

In daily life, we do not choose to think now in facts and later in feelings. We use both, inextricably combined, in order to comprehend. One without the other would be unthinkable.

It is equally unthinkable to consider a school curriculum complete unless it fosters both ways of thinking.

Total understanding is basic to life and basic to education. But only partial understanding results when school curricula fail to balance linear and holistic thinking. The academic and the aesthetic are essential halves.

That is why music is basic to education. To be sure, music study can be centered on historical facts or theoretical constructs. But such a focus denies music's unique contribution to learning. Its soul is then missing.

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