

# Education Beyond the Classroom: Arts and Culture

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Say the word 'education' and a certain image comes to mind. Morning assemblies. Grogginess. Tables and chairs. A teacher, lecturing from the front. A blackboard. Books and stationery. Children in uniform. A formal structure to the process of learning is seen as both inevitable and necessary – fueled by the idea that obedience, discipline, and orderliness are the fundamental building blocks of a comprehensive education.

The Canadian band, Brad Sucks, commented on the phenomenon in one of its biggest hits, *Dropping Out of School*: "Stomach's turning, books are burning – I found better things than learning." The sentiment is illustrative of the general sense of unease and reluctance that children experience at school. It is no wonder, either, taking into consideration the generally constricted and hierarchical system that tends to prevail.

There are naturally two main responses to this: to rethink the entire education system, adopting a long-term vision for reform – and alongside that, to see formal education as one facet of a much larger project for personal growth and intellectual development. The former is political in its nature, with various incentive structures – most prominently the state deploying education as a means of ideological propagation – functioning to obstruct initiatives that seek drastic changes. On the other hand, the latter reorients the focus of education and learning to the individual: placing them at the helm and allowing them to decide, based on their unique temperaments and personal dispositions, what kind of information to expose themselves to.

This is where arts and culture, within a broader context of urban vibrancy, come in. Film, comedy, music, literature,

theater, crafts, etc. are all entire universes within themselves. Historically, they have functioned to expand people's horizons, enhance their imaginative capacities, and overwhelm them with a sense of awe, hope, wonder, and excitement. In recent times, however, they have been pushed to the margins.

The sociologist, Max Weber, perceived modernity as an epoch of 'disenchantment' – a gradual decline of mystery and meaning in people's lives as science and technology demystified all aspects of existence. (Jenkins, 2000) Jean Baudrillard, one of the foremost thinkers of the postmodern tradition, takes this sentiment further. In his seminal book, *Simulacra and Simulation*, he describes technological advancements as leading to a general environment of unreality – where people's faces are turned into projectors for screens (due to their addictive nature), the content of which is essentially a simulation. However, rather than being a representation of reality – which was the case in bygone times – simulations are now 'simulacra', i.e. depictions that are presented as reality when they are actually fiction. (Baudrillard, 1994) A classic example is the news media industry, which is known for its hyper-partisan nature – cherry picking information and highlighting only those aspects that advance the sociopolitical agendas of their owners. The result of all this is a blurring of the lines between what is real and what is not.

Within this context, there is a grave need to adopt a skeptical approach towards technology and the internet – which are slowly but surely turning into cesspools of narcissism, toxicity, and petty one-upmanship contests. Although rich with educational resources, the internet cannot be navigated a la carte – one must necessarily be

exposed to a plethora of distractions in the form of social media, advertisements, news alerts, and more. This means that for the average person, a substantial amount of time that could have been spent learning is squandered in the consumption of junk media.

Alongside this, a revival of traditional arts and culture ought to be pursued – not in the sense of romanticizing the past, but of reorienting the activity around real social interactions. This will involve radically rethinking urban spaces, whereby propertied interests are replaced with people as the highest priority. This will mean more pavements, dedicated cycling lanes, parks and recreation facilities, community centers, street vending zones, public transport, and much more. A culture of debate, discussion, exchange, and entertainment – once it gets off the ground – will naturally function as a source of rich learning for people, who will voluntarily engage in the activity as opposed to merely being a passive (and captive) audience in a classroom setting.

Indeed, arts/culture is a multimillion dollar industry around the globe – functioning to challenge the status quo and enriching the quality of people's lives by articulating complex, multilayered ideas in a manner that is both comprehensible to audiences/participants and resonates with them at a deep level. Furthermore, it has been established that 'people skills', or soft skills, are arguably just as important – if not more – than technical ability in determining one's life outcomes and financial success. This means that as people begin to incorporate arts and culture into their regular schedules, in which they set aside time to engage with others in a context that is mutually beneficial, they will slowly develop their emotional intelligence,

learn to express themselves better, and be more tolerant and accepting (even celebratory) of the vast internal variety that they see in their societies.

Gatherings of this sort are also opportunities for networking, whereby people gain exposure to groups that they may collaborate with in the economic arena – leading to growth and prosperity by leveraging one another’s unique talents and resource pools. Furthermore, a gradual strengthening of civil society is likely to be observed through arts and culture – which have historically played a pivotal role in sociopolitical movements around the world, serving as the pulse and animating force for resisting oppressive practices and holding those in power accountable. This is because art as a whole can be seen as a question mark, forcing ‘neutral’ observers to confront uneasy realities – and to imagine new and better. The line between what is possible and what isn’t, in popular conception, is blurred through arts and culture. It is the one space in which democracy blossoms: everybody has an equal place in the mix and can shape the collective consciousness as they please. (Moller, 2016)

The greatest thinkers the world has ever produced have not, in large part, credited formal education as the cause of their success – instead, the recurring theme among them is a facilitative environment which allowed them to think freely, participate in their communities, and be able to integrate into society at large. Far from the atomized, tech-driven lifestyles of today, a spontaneous sense of inquisitiveness within a larger context of societal vibrancy is what produces the best human beings: those capable of leading others. Exposure to ideas, new and old, is vital for this – and no grouping or institution outside formal structures generates those better than the arts and culture community.

In the words of John Keating in the film *Dead Poet’s Society*, “We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”

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## Works Cited

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