

Succeeding Through the Arts

By Sally Smith

“When I danced I was completely happy and forgot that I couldn’t read.”

“Once my uncle showed me how to use a hammer and nails, and I found I could make things. That was always the one bright spot in my life.”

“I hated school except for that one period a day in art or music. I was alive then. People could see the person I was in the summertime, at home, everywhere but at school.”

“Sometimes I thought my trombone was my only friend.”

CREATIVE ARTS FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

The arts engage the learner’s soul, mind, and body. They help learning become part of a person’s very special being. All the art forms offer entry into academic learning and an opportunity to reinforce skills that have been introduced. The arts can be a savior, a respite, a solace, that give children with learning disabilities and other non-traditional learners a chance to express themselves and feel good about themselves.

Young children use the arts to make sense of their world. They understand touch, gesture, rhythm, tone, and movement before they understand words. They babble, croon, and sing before they speak. They color, draw, and paint before they form letters. They dance and leap and act out stories before they can read.

Children can enjoy themselves and learn through art forms while picking up all kinds of information and processes useful for a lifetime of learning. The arts help relate the present to the past and the future and add deeper dimensions to history, geography, economics, literature, science, and civics. Students who have difficulty with the symbols of reading, algebra, chemistry, and foreign languages can often manage symbols in the arts because they can assign meaning to unique symbols and arrange them in their own way to make sense.

Children learn best when they are partners in learning and the arts demand that they be active partners, not passive learners. Many youngsters who are failing in school cannot learn through traditional, verbal approaches (being lectured to, remembering information, and writing it down). Some of them need to see images; they need to touch and to move and to talk about what they are doing, depending upon their own unique styles of learning.

Although one thinks of the arts as serious work, one associates much laughter and camaraderie with putting on a play or a dance, building on something, painting, playing in a percussion ensemble, or singing together. Crises happen all the time in the arts and they are not the end of the world. Something can always be done; improvising, using strategies, ingenuity are part of the process. Many children with learning disabilities feel their mistakes are proof of their worthlessness. The artist, by feeling free to experiment, makes mistakes and learns from them. Through this model, children are permitted to make mistakes and survive. Many great works of art have emanated from mistakes.

“Succeeding Through the Arts” by Sally Smith, *Their World*, 1996/1997. Used with permission by Professor Sally L. Smith, Head Special Education: Learning Disabilities Masters Degree Program, American University.

HUMOR IS GOOD MEDICINE

Nothing dispels an atmosphere of tension faster than laughter. If children can begin to see the funny side of a bad situation, relief is sure to follow. Artists who can laugh at themselves in an easy, accepting way are important models for children who are often see themselves as a source of worry to others and despair to themselves. Humor can be particularly useful in helping children to overcome immaturities, and to address qualities of rigidity and such characters as clinging to the familiar and insisting that there is only one way to do things.

ART ENCOURAGES CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Through art forms, artists can learn to be more flexible. They can develop ways to transition from one activity to another. In music, a drumbeat can be the transition. In painting, a color can be the signal, and in drama or dance, a prop or a specific movement can serve as symbols of transition. Although each art has its own structure, there are many different ways to achieve artistic objectives. Children should be encouraged to approach tasks in different, even unorthodox ways. Doing so can help the alternative learner grasp scientific principles in woodwork, see the fundamentals of geometry in straw sculpture, learn vocabulary in drama, and match the concept of intervals in music and mathematics.

ART FACILITATES THE LEARNING PROCESS

Underlying the artistic process is the need to preserve the integrity of the specific art form while systematically teaching the child the very learning skills necessary in order to succeed at school. While the child concentrates on his product in arts, the artist concentrates on the learning process, which can involve either readiness skills or pure academic material. For many children with learning disabilities, academic content, such as mathematical functions, grammar, syntax, and spelling, can be taught and made to stick through the arts. For example, a vowel can dance between two consonants; computing methods can be “invented” to save a flock of sheep in a make-believe encampment in ancient Syria.

ROBIN’S READING

Robin loved music. She was very bright, but was not able to break the reading code. In her music class, a system using red poker chips (loud sounds) and yellow chips (soft sounds)

was employed. When she read chips in red-red-yellow sequence, she knew this mean loud-loud-soft, and she played these sounds on a drum or xylophone. As these left-to-right patterns of sound become more complex and as she grew more adept at “reading” the symbols (which also became more complex, varying in size and shape), Robin’s ability to decode letters and words in the classroom improved.

DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION

The arts not only introduce information and reinforce skills but can be employed as aids to assess levels of learning. The kindergartner who cannot repeat a series of three taps may have problems responding to sound, hearing sequences of sounds, or reproducing sounds. This could affect his learning to read. The student who works well on one art form but not in others is providing significant data about where his strengths and talents do and do not lie. An analysis of the art forms in which a child excels gives includes to the components needed for the child to learn more effectively.

CREATIVE CLUES

Christina’s dance and graphic art abilities were superior, but she disliked music and drama and did not want to participate in either. A formal assessment later revealed that her auditory discrimination abilities were poor and that, despite normal hearing, she could not distinguish the differences between sounds nor could she decipher the blending of sounds. Her language skills were well below her age.

A teacher discovered that four of his eleven-year-old pupils could not move backward. Their classroom teacher discovered that the same four students were unable to do subtraction. Together, the dance teacher and the classroom teacher uncovered these students’ language weaknesses in using the past tense.

A woodwork teacher-sculptor observed that Eric could not hit a nail on the head with a hammer and could not line up his body in a position that made it possible for his eyes and hands to work together; additionally, he had great difficulty focusing on a printed page. When the sculptor shared his observations, the reading teacher realized that Eric’s body position interfered with what he saw, and was then able to help Eric re-position himself in a way that helped him focus.

BUILDING POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE

All art forms can help ignite the whole learning process. They capture children’s excitement, interests and passions, and can be great motivators. By producing tangible results,

artistic outcomes evoke feedback and praise from audiences. They build a sense of self-worth, confidence, and self-esteem.

Martin loved drama. Off stage, he was clumsy and awkward, always tripping and bumping into things. His eye-hand coordination was so poor that he could barely color, use scissors, or do jigsaw puzzles, and his writing was like chicken scratch. On the stage, he was a transformed person—majestic, fierce, and commanding.

WORKING AS PART OF A GROUP

Art forms tend to draw people together. They foster cooperation, group work, and helpfulness. They can promote a deeper understanding of other civilizations, different forms of worship, different practices. Diversity and difference are prized in the artist's world. Our schools, too, must learn to treasure difference. Children with learning disabilities must learn that "different is not bad" and that their differences often make them more interesting and talented.

Children with learning disabilities often experience difficulty working in a group, tending to be egocentric, and self-absorbed. The art forms engage them in ways that promote the group process.

ARTS CREATE A FORUM FOR CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

All the art forms require problem solving after the basic skills have been mastered. In painting, problems of size, shape, and color, must be addressed along with how best to express an idea. In modern dance, problems involve types of movement and the moods they convey and the use of large or contained space. In the arts, students are expected to find their own individual answers to questions, to try them out, then criticize their own work constructively, and self-correct if necessary. What is so good about arts-infused learning is the variety of possibilities. There is no "right way," no single correct answer.

ARTISTS AS TEACHERS

Artists are usually nontraditional, able to find unorthodox ways to teach youngsters. Problem-solving, ingenuity, resourcefulness, flexibility—all greatly needed in work with children with learning disabilities—are common traits among artists. Artists are often excited by the challenge of trying to reach and teach the children with special learning needs and will share their time and talent. At times, artists can find abilities that may not show up in the classroom.

ARTS SERVE AS ORGANIZERS

Students with learning disabilities are atypical learners whose responses and behaviors are, at times not abnormal but rather more appropriately seen in much young children. They are often disorganized and lack many basic skills usually acquired in the preschool years which are the foundations necessary for academic learning. Through the arts, a child can order his world, make sense of what he knows, turn muscular activity into thought, and change ideas into action. A panoply of art forms offer youngsters with learning disabilities a chance to learn while enjoying aesthetic experiences that lead to future pleasures as members of an audience and/or as artists themselves.

Many children with special learning needs have trouble integrating several processes at once. These students look like they are not paying attention to anything but, in fact, are attending to every stimulus in the environment. They are bombarded by sights, sounds, and movements in the room and often cannot assign priorities to stimuli, choosing which is most important. Film-making activities can provide a model for "frame and focus." The drumbeat in music focuses attention, as does the dramatic voice, the large gesture, and the graphic organizer. Through the intensity of art experiences, children can ignore footsteps in the hall, light tumbling in through the blinds, the arm of a neighbor brushing against a chair, or the jangling earrings of the teacher. The arts can be taught in a way to help students filter out what is important from what is unimportant.

COLOR, SHAPE, FORM, AND SOUND

Discriminating through the hands, the eyes, the ears, and all the senses in part of artistic experience. Learning to look and listen, and remembering what is seen and heard are emphasized in the arts. Through art forms, youngsters with learning disabilities can be helped to develop and strengthen the perceptual skills which form the foundations for future learning.

BRIAN'S ROLES

Brian was asked to play the part of a strong king and then a weak king in his drama class. From his portrayal, the characters appeared to be identical, although he knew they were different. He could not isolate the main characteristic of each king and was unable to integrate gesture, movement, and speech. By teaching him different ways of to understate or exaggerate his walk and slowly adding associated gestures, facial expressions, and oral commands, he learned to act the

parts. His increased capacity to organize and integrate effectively in drama also carried over into the classroom.

ARTS HELP STUDENTS LEARN SEQUENCES

Discipline and a progression of steps underlie every artistic endeavor. Students with learning disabilities need experiences that have clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Understanding sequences is vital for the child who can talk to you about Homer or gravity but cannot tell you the days of the week in order, name the seasons, count to twenty, or say the alphabet in proper sequence. Knowing what to do first, what happens next, and planning for the last steps is as crucial for a crafts project as it is for drama or dance. The same organization is necessary for effective reading.

BARNABY'S WOODWORK

Barnaby was particularly successful at working with wood. The wood was strong and stood up well to his clumsy handling. A sculptor helped him draw a basic design for a chair, reminding him that it did not have to be great art. With a design in hand, Barnaby had to figure out what materials he needed and through informal discussion, they agreed upon what had to be done first, what the next step would be, and then the next. As he proceeded, Barnaby took over the verbalization process, explaining what he had done and what he would do next. As the chair took shape, Barnaby repeatedly measured it against his own body as a source of reference. Before he was permitted to take it home, Barnaby had to teach another child to make a chair or explain the process clearly to another person. In this way, the experience became organic—a part of his being.

LIMITING THE ENVIRONMENT WITHOUT LIMITING THE CHILD

Youngsters with learning disabilities need to deal effectively with the freedom that is usually ascribed to the expressive arts. While a teacher can be a focusing agent for these children, the material used can also be helpful.

For each project, the arts teacher must limit the student's space, time, and choices. The teacher must also monitor the materials used, amount of work to be done, number of directions given, and limit the amount of discussion that follows without limiting the child. Limiting options does not, however, mean limiting the child's ability for self-expression. In fact, parameters and borders will allow the students to organize time, space, and place. Clear, precise directions, given one step at a time, are a must.

ALVIN AND MARY'S FOCUS ON FILM-MAKING

In film class, Alvin and Mary decided to create and film a melodrama. First, their teacher guided them to construct a plot for the story. When they actually started shooting the film, the filmmaker who was teaching them frequently reminded Alvin and Mary to "focus and frame," to keep their camera on the main action. The constant attention to visual focus in film-making paid off in their ability to give more attention to visual detail in their reading program. During the editing process, the filmmaker encouraged them to organize the sequences to make the film interesting, exciting, and understandable. Mary and Alvin had to think clearly about the main point of their film, and to decide what should come first, next, and last.

Putting in music and sound effects help them to understand how sound establishes mood. Alvin and Mary overcame their tendency to become easily confused and disorganized and to back out of situations. While making the film, they were not only having fun but also discovering new strategies to help them organize and integrate. They brought these strategies back into the classroom.

In ancient times the purpose of education was to expose children to adults with special talents so that they might absorb their wisdom and values. This continues to be a purpose of education. Vibrant human beings, actively engaged in their own intellectual and artistic pursuits and excited about learning, bring a contagious spirit of growth to children. The arts are essential to quality education and bring with them the spirit of the ages.