

The Catalyst

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 4

2002

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Kathleen B. Fullilove

University of Southern Mississippi

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Recommended Citation

Fullilove, Kathleen B. (2002) "The Direct Connection between Art Education and a Student's Well-Being in Our Ever-Changing World," *The Catalyst*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.18785/cat.0101.04

Available at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/southernmisscatalyst/vol1/iss1/4>

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The Direct Connection between Art Education and a Student's Well-Being in Our Ever-Changing World

Kathleen B. Fullilove

In first grade, I asked my art teacher to remind me how to mix orange paint; she wanted to know if "I was stupid." This simple statement not only hurt me to my core, but also left me with the false impression throughout most of my education that I was stupid. How impressionable our young minds are! I am now a 39 year-old practicing artist showing in five galleries. Soon, I will graduate with close to a 4.0 GPA, yet that insensitive remark of so long ago stays in my mind.

It is my belief that many of our world's problems could be solved or eliminated if we put more focus on art and other creative outlets instead of relegating art to the bottom of academically important studies. Art instruction gives students tools that are applicable anywhere, anytime, and in any situation that occurs for the rest of their lives. The process of making art teaches problem-solving skills and creative thinking. Art also teaches tolerance and acceptance of other points of view. It provides us with a way of seeing what the other person is think-

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ing. Knowing this, how can art be less important than other academic areas of study?

A teacher has a profound power to influence a student's life in either a positive or negative manner. As I got older, my former teacher's callous remark helped me realize the impact a teacher can have on a student. That realization, combined with my passion for art and art education, is the reason I decided to become an art teacher. I am not sure the general public fully realizes the ramifications

that a teacher's actions can have on our students. Hopefully, however, parents do care about the caliber of the people who often spend more hours a day with their children than they do.

In a recent issue of the *Clarion Ledger*, an article titled "Teaching proposal has potential harm" outlined a proposal made by the Board of Education of Hattiesburg. According to the article, the Board of Education has proposed allowing anyone with a bachelor's



Fullilove finalizes some sketches on the floor of her Petal studio.

degree to become certified to teach after completing a "three-week boot camp." According to the *Clarion Ledger*, "There are no grade-point requirements, no major, no minimum of hours, and no specialty area tests for the teacher candidate to pass." This proposal is very alarming. It would essentially qualify lay people to teach. It makes me wonder whether the members of the Board of Education have any understanding of the responsibility held by an educator. I hope this proposal is amended; if not, there will be a great potential for damage to our students. A dedicated teacher gives all he or she has to offer to his or her students.

As I continue to learn about the process of educating, and what a large part teachers have in forming, well-rounded children, I am appalled that the Board of Education would even consider this "boot-camp certification" as an option. This is not the answer to Mississippi's education problem. When I say "potential for damage," it is an understatement. Maybe child abuse is a more accurate term. Teachers are not babysitters and unfortunately, a teacher may sometimes be the only stable force in a child's life. An intuitive teacher is often the only lifeline keeping a student from real trouble.

Through my experience as both an art student and as an art instructor, I have

noticed that art teachers seem to fall into two categories: those who teach strictly "by the book," and those who encourage truly creative thinking and expression. The teachers I find most troublesome

are those who teach art strictly "by the book" and those who are not able to put personal preferences aside concerning a style of art or art movement. Granted, art history, the principles of design, art elements, and other technical aspects of art are important for an art student to know. However, after a student has a grasp on these concepts, it is equally important that they be encouraged to explore his or her own creativity using the new information acquired.

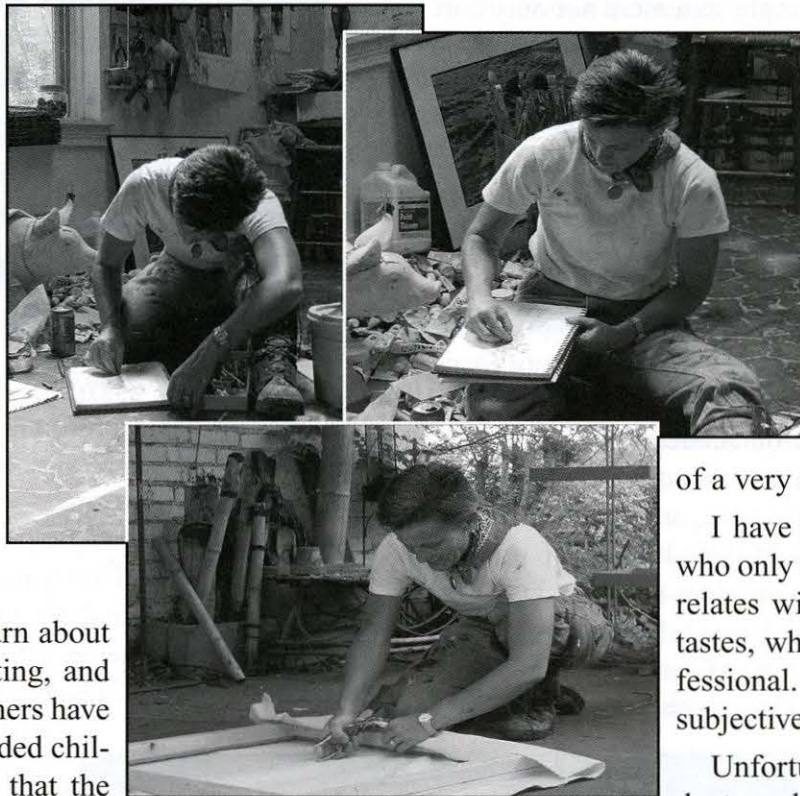
I have seen teachers dogmatically teach art as if it was as concrete as math or science. This takes the magic out of a very subjective process.

I have also seen art teachers who only validate work that correlates with their own personal tastes, which I find very unprofessional. Art is an extremely subjective area.

Unfortunately, when the student needs help the most, I have often seen them met head on with negativity and criticism from art teachers. More disturbing is when this harsh criticism happens in front of other classmates, making the situation even more degrading. I know of these things from personal experience, and a child's or student's love for art can permanently end here.

Fortunately, I have also had far more dynamic, knowledgeable, and energetic teachers than my first grade teacher. These teachers drastically changed my life. They helped me change

the way I view the world, and most importantly, they helped me to realize that I can do anything I want. They focused on each student's strengths and helped him or her overcome his or her area of weakness. These teachers stressed the fact that




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anything can be accomplished if one is willing to work hard enough for it. They did this by being creative teachers, demanding hard work, and giving many different options in order to accomplish a goal. In other words, they use the same creative process to teach as one would use when making art. As a result of having these instructors, I surpassed limits I did not even know existed and am able to produce more work than I ever would have thought possible. These teachers made me believe in myself and live the life of being an artist instead of just dreaming about it. They also left me with few delusions concerning the amount of work required to be an artist. My thanks seem so inadequate for what they freely and openly gave me on a consistent basis.

Many large companies are now looking harder at resumes that include some kind of an artistic background. These businesses now are realizing the importance of having an employee who is versatile in their thinking and problem-solving abilities, the so-called ability to "think outside the box."

As an artist, one of the most important lessons I've learned is that there is always more than one way of doing things. Even areas that seem absolutely black or white can be approached in a way that makes the gray visible. A good art educator instills this creative way of thinking in the student. A student can then apply this manner of problem solving to any area of their life at any time. This is an invaluable tool.

We cannot afford to let art be eliminated from our students' core curriculum or to have unqualified teachers. Teaching a student to be aware of all of his or her options seems only logical and so easy. If we all stopped for a moment to see all the thousands of grays between the black and white, our world would be a different, less hostile place to live. It is my strong belief that having art in his or her background can make a difference in a student's life. Ultimately, this larger, more open-minded way of thinking can change our society; making us all more tolerant of views that differ from our own. Think about the ramifications of this thought. They are infinite. 

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References

"Teacher Proposal Has Potential Harm." *Clarion Ledger*, 14 Apr. 2002.

About the Author

"There are visual images bombarding us every day. Those images, or parts of them, stay with me, sometimes for a long time, sometimes just a few seconds. The ones that have the most profound effect on me end up in some shape or form in my work. An idea can originate from many sources, such as dreams, emotions, conversations, or just being without thinking about art.

"Pottery was my first form of expression in art. Over the years, painting, drawing and sculpture have become my true passions. When painting, I love to mix the mediums. It is not uncommon for me to use pastel, collage, acrylics, and oils in a single painting. At the same time, I crave the simplicity of charcoal and paper. The creative process is limitless, infinite, and timeless. Art crosses all barriers."

Kat Fullilove has studied art for more than 20 years at Louisiana State University, Southeastern Louisiana University, Delgado Community College, and The University of Southern Mississippi. She has shown pottery and watercolors in New Orleans, and acrylics and mixed mediums in Hammond, La., and New Orleans. Her artwork has appeared on the cover of Inside Northside Magazine, as well the first issue of Catalyst.