

The Arts: Neglected Engines of Economic Development

Governor Rell's proposal to reduce funding for the arts coupled with the severe impact of the recession makes it imperative to voice urgently the importance of support for the arts from government, philanthropic, and private sources. We know that art constitutes a force for human improvement and provides enhancement to communities seeking to attract business and investment. But as cogent as these traditional arguments may be, we must move beyond them because they define the arts as ancillary and ornamental activities rather than as essential drivers of economic and social well-being.

Our global economic environment shows the way. It compels us to claim for the arts their rightful place as developers of the intellectual and creative qualities that are indispensable to global competition. The current business-education dialogue is focused on immediate applicability: that is, STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), which translate readily to the factory floor and the engineering school. These programs are relevant and necessary, but they do not address the whole problem of education for economic leadership. The STEM focus ignores the role of the arts in developing the intellectual attributes driving competitiveness in the global arena – adaptability to change, *thinking outside the box* or innovation, and learning acumen.

Instead of reducing the place of the arts in the K-12 curriculum, we should restore and enhance their presence. We should also be encouraging our post-secondary students – regardless of their majors – to be studying art history and taking studio courses. Engagement with the arts fosters not only critical thinking and historical perspective, but the associative, interpretive, and imaginative powers that underlie innovation and competitiveness.

This notion has a distinguished pedigree. In 1942, when the economist Joseph Schumpeter defined the dynamic of economic progress as *creative destruction*, his language echoed the iconoclastic avant-garde artists of the day more than the economic elites. It was 1959 when Peter Drucker coined the term *knowledge worker*, thereby opening the door to thinking about industry as an intellectual and creative activity. Since then, we have seen many companies where

corporate hierarchy, functional distinctions, spatial organization, and the structure of the work day have been broken down to allow for greater access to information, and a more accommodating environment for the associative processes that lead to innovation.

Globalization has increased intellectual expectations for the contemporary workforce. Corporations are adapting to the phenomenon of accelerated change that results from advances in knowledge, technology, and the vast expansion of both information and its accessibility. They are flattening their organizations, with leadership and responsibility for independent initiative disseminated more widely throughout. Firms can no longer confine knowledge and strategic initiative to the upper echelons of management; they require mid- and even lower-level employees capable of rapid response to changes in the competitive environment. Consequently, in the knowledge economy a much larger portion of the workforce needs to exercise the learning acumen, creativity, and adaptability that had previously concerned only top management. Let's consider, then, with a few concrete examples, how engagement with the arts fosters the qualities of mind necessary for competitiveness.

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No advocate of adaptability to change could ask for a better training ground than involvement with theater, the plastic arts, music or literature, and many other media of expression. The arts compel critical thinking because they confront the world view embodied in the work of art with that of the audience. In our era of modernisms, this confrontation motivates change by aggressively challenging society's conventional values and perceptions.

For example, quest stories are one of our culture's most enduring literary forms. Each work engages the reader with a search for meaning and for the order of the world, a literary experience akin to the corporate strategist's search for a new direction in evolving competitive circumstances. *Consider the shift in*

intellectual gears required of the reader who moves from Dante's medieval, theologically structured universe in the Divine Comedy to Leopold Bloom's Dublin wanderings in James Joyce's ironic and iconoclastic Ulysses, with each work showing a great debt to Homer's ancient epic poem - The Odyssey.

Art shifts social and intellectual paradigms in much the same fashion that scientists progressively modify theoretical paradigms with each discovery. But our nation's educational policies - narrowly and short-sightedly focused on the immediately applicable - deny our students this apprenticeship of change. As the practice and study of the arts disappear from the K-12 curriculum, we cut students off from experience in the evolution of ideas. *Reflect, for example, on the contrasting ideas of humanity embodied in the serene figures of Greece's Parthenon frieze versus the terrified figure in Munch's famous Expressionist painting, The Scream.*

Perhaps the least appreciated value of the arts to economic and workforce development is the interplay of the conceptual and the practical in artistic work. Artists forge new ideas in movement, language, sound and matter. Like the applied scientist who translates theoretical breakthroughs into new medicines or new technologies, the artist is always testing the conventional limits of medium and artistic process. *Think about the sonnet: a short, extremely regulated poetic form limited to 14 lines, a set number of syllables per line, and a pre-established rhyme pattern. Despite its constraints (and often because of them), the sonnet form has inspired some of the greatest poets – Shakespeare, Petrarch, Ronsard, Wordsworth – to take on the challenge and produce endlessly innovative works.*

A nation without vigorous artistic activity and education dulls its imagination and competitive energy. We must demand the restoration of the arts to an important place in the school curriculum. And we must maintain in our communities abundant artistic activity as the well-spring of the critical and imaginative power that moves us forward as individuals and as a nation.

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