

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts,
Research Strand, Vol. 6 No. 2, Fall/Winter 2019, pp. 1-7

Ubiquity: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/>

ISSN: 2379-3007

The Arts Sustaining Our Education and Nurturing Our Humanity

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The Arts Sustaining Our Education and Nurturing Our Humanity

The arts have been an integral part of humanity, enriching, nurturing, and expressing human ideas and behavior since before recorded history. In that history, the arts have revealed social norms, cultural values, practices, spiritual beliefs, racial identities, and many other aspects of human life (Lightfoot & Milbrath, 2010). The arts have been rendered in diverse forms, mediums, styles and modalities. Examples from prehistory are [animal cave paintings](#)¹ on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia from 30.000 B.C. (Marchant, 2016), a [Stonehenge](#)² architectural masterpiece from 3500 B.C., and from the recorded period, Rembrandt's painting [The Prodigal Son](#)³ (c.1669); [Venetian Canal](#)⁴ (1894) photography by Alfred Stieglitz, Solon Borglum's sculpture [The Waters](#)⁵ (1913-1914), James Joyce's novel, [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#)⁶ (1916), and the film [The Tree of Life](#)⁷ (Malick et al., 2011).

The arts bring human experiences into a palpable shared existential experience; intuitive aesthetic moments that are lived through with our imagination. Existentially speaking, we experience vicariously what others experience via the arts they make that invoke a response in each of us. For example, when people who are depicted in the painting, prose, or other media suffer or die, we too may suffer and feel that we have died. Rybicki (2015) uses fiction writing to explain this relational human art connection: “[S]tories and poems fortify a culture and sometimes elevate the human spirit to where they remind their readers, as in this poem, that we are all members of one human family” (Rybicki, 2015, p. 65). In a sense, the arts connect humans through their ability to mirror and represent the human “affective and emotional experience” (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012, p.54).

The arts also awaken, inspire, and feed the human consciousness, helping human beings develop a sense of what is right and wrong. They mobilize people to take social action to fight

injustice and prevent harm in other people's lives, communities and institutions, locally and globally, and they enable people to imagine new possibilities and build alternative realities and worlds than those which constrict and limit their freedom, happiness and well-being (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012). This is because, as Garcia (2019) observes, "The most powerful forms of digital activism have been messages, images, and resources that bring individuals closer in the analog world" (p. 193).

As they are foundational to human existence (Markus & Blackhawk, 2015), the arts are foundational to learning, as they encourage imagination, creativity, and engagement (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012). With instructional guidance and curriculum, they can also promote justice-oriented interactions and community activism on a micro-level (among individuals within the classroom) and on a macro-level (within larger communities and beyond).

The articles that appear in this issue point to the many experiences and opportunities that the arts offer to us today. Specifically, in "This is Music Therapy in the Real World': Standardization, Curricularizing Joy," Leah Panther explores one teacher's efforts to awaken and nurture the music-human connection in students in a music appreciation class in an urban Catholic high school. Panther highlights how this teacher's pedagogy, which draws on musical pieces that reflect and connect to the students' interests and lives within their communities, celebrates these students' multiracial, multireligious and multilingual identities. It also investigates the ways in which the teacher nurtures the students' critical consciousness and the potential to social action in recognizing, honoring and promoting their cultural heritage, individually and collectively, in their lives and in their communities, with and through music appreciation and expression. In the context of standardized testing, Lexile-driven content, and instruction pushed down by the administration, Panther positions this teacher's pedagogy as a

“humanizing” and “culturally sustaining” approach that confronts and rejects the reductive literacy curriculum and instructional practices expected of this teacher in her teaching context. The reader will find details about the alternative approach to literacy instruction practiced by the teacher in this article.

In “Studio Habits of Mind, Picture Books, and Student Multimodal Ensembles,” Sylvia Pantaleo examines the impact of visual art and design principles taught with picture books on visual literacy development and multimodal composing among Grade 4 students in her classroom. She is also interested in how children’s exploration of art and certain art design principles in picture books and their application of these design principles in their own art creations build their “particular attitudinal and cognitive dispositions.” To uncover these experiences with the arts and children’s ways of learning about the arts and reflecting upon them, Pantaleo employs Hetland, Winner, Veenema and Sheridan’s (2013) Studio Habits of Mind of the Studio Thinking Framework. The children’s insights and reflections are powerful, and their multimodal picture book stories translate the art design principles in ways unique to their interests, perceptions, and new understandings. Educators will find in this article strategies for teaching art design principles in their classrooms, and there are also recommendations for future research on the Studio Habits of Mind and student learning.

Collectively, the articles in this issue of the *Research Strand of Ubiquity* promote appreciation, exploration, and intentional use of the arts in teaching and learning and for centering pedagogy and literacy practices that utilize the arts to nurture and sustain human art connection, cultural and community identities, creativity, and critical thinking.

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Author Bio: Ewa McGrail is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Georgia State University. In her research, McGrail examines digital writing and new media composition; copyright and copyright awareness, as well as media literacy and social representations of outgroups or individuals who are otherwise not in the mainstream.