

Reimagining Arts-Centered Inquiry in Schools as Pragmatic Instrumentalism

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Arts education advocates have argued for years that the arts deserve a place in the public school curriculum alongside other disciplines. The rationales to support the place of the arts, however, suffer from the kind of utilitarianism that subordinates inquiry to goals and objectives aligned with efficiency and production. The arts, on this view, are useful because they produce students with skills that will be beneficial to their future lives in the work force. This essay argues that the discourse of utility is an important problem to challenge and suggests that pragmatic instrumentalism is a better way to advocate for the arts. This is so, in part, because the practice of pragmatic instrumentalism differs from utilitarianism in that utilitarian rationales offered by arts advocates (in an effort to convince policymakers and arts educators of the positive role the arts can play in achieving societal goals) not only lack empirical support but represent a dualistic conceptualization inadequate to the task of understanding how students make meaning when engaged in arts-centered inquiry.

This essay begins with John Dewey's view that "knowing is not self-enclosed and final but is instrumental to reconstruction of situations"¹ to propose an expanded conceptualization of arts-centered inquiry as pragmatic instrumentalism. Moreover, we see a critical need to interrogate the current advocacy claim that arts education develops the creativity and innovation necessary to maintain the nation's global competitiveness. We draw a distinction between the syntactical use of the term "instrumental" in denoting structural, *utilitarian* justifications for the arts and the more expansive conceptual application of the term, which encompasses benefits that the arts provide individual students in mediating complex and connected learning. The difference has to do with the center of power. Structural, *utilitarian* instrumentality has as its intended outcome efficient management of human behavior. By contrast, pragmatic instrumentalism looks at transformative consequences for particular individuals engaged in practical, everyday transactions. By reclaiming the term "instrumental" for arts-centered inquiry, we seek to restore the notion of generativity to arts learning and critique current efforts to reduce artistry to utilitarian means for developing creativity and innovation in and for students.

RECONCEPTUALIZING INSTRUMENTALISM IN ARTS EDUCATION

Dewey's work to reconstruct the concept of instrumentalism pragmatically reflects his time and place. Noting the industrial accomplishments and scientific achievements of his day, Dewey nevertheless considers both to be inadequate in addressing the challenges confronting the world. He writes:

What is the matter? It lies, I think, with our lack of imagination in generating leading ideas. Because we are afraid of speculative ideas, we do, and do over and over again, an immense amount of dead, specialized work in the region of "facts." We forget that such facts are only data; that is, are only fragmentary, uncompleted meanings, and unless they are rounded out into complete ideas — a work which can only be done by hypotheses, by a free imagination of intellectual possibilities — they are as helpless as are all maimed things and as repellent as are needlessly thwarted ones.²

Dewey is calling for a renewed commitment to the constructively instrumental work of producing imaginative and generative ideas to meet social needs. We argue that arts education is ideally positioned to play a leading role in fostering just the kind of creativity and innovation needed to respond to today's pressing social concerns, but we question the utilitarian justifications associated with business- and government-sponsored efforts to place the arts in the service of developing skills "that enable businesses to compete successfully in the 21st century workplace."³

Karen Hamblen reminds us that over the years, advocates for the inclusion of art instruction in the school curriculum have offered rationales representing diverse philosophical perspectives. A century ago, some arts advocates argued that drawing lessons developed technical skills that were directly transferable to industry jobs, while others claimed that the arts contributed to social refinement. In both cases, however, the (utilitarian) benefits were to be seen in the future. More recently, arts advocates promote the study of art for its purported (utilitarian) connections to creativity, critical thinking, self-awareness, social adjustment, increased motivation, and higher test scores. In place of utilitarianism's "overstated, unsubstantiated, and politically motivated assumptions,"⁴ a pragmatic instrumentalist approach to art instruction provides a philosophically sound alternative. On Karen Hamblen's view, art study offers students experiences very different from those found in other areas of the curriculum. Here, Hamblen cites Susanne Langer's idea that cognition subsumes many ways of knowing and experiencing: qualitative, relational, connotative, and affective.⁵ Hamblen also argues that arts education extends opportunities for students to engage in critical inquiry, examining "hypotheses, statements of value, and the ambiguities of artistic meanings and designations."⁶ The engagement to which she refers is organic, originating in student inquiry pragmatically and instrumentally — that is, from innate, natural curiosity and the transactions that organically follow. These transactions are not preparation for a distant future where living will take place; they are enacted and mediated in the students' contexts such that understanding and inquiring are in the present. Future problems may well be solved by having such arts-rich educative experiences, but the focus is on the aesthetic inquiry *in* the present and *for* the present.

Still, as Liora Bresler argues, although utilitarian, humanistic, and instrumental research orientations differ with respect to the role of the arts in the curriculum, they need not be considered mutually exclusive, depending on how broadly "instrumental" is conceptualized. Like Hamblen, Bresler points out that the arts fulfill both economic and democratic functions within the education system. She writes:

The attempt to ground the arts in a pragmatic, instrumentalist framework has characterized arts education since its introduction to formal schooling in the nineteenth century, when

advocates emphasized the arts' contributions to the world of work (for example, in drawing skills) and to good citizenship. "School arts" is a hybrid genre, existing between the educational and the artistic. Artistic forms and values are transformed or created as they enter the embrace of the school institution, assuming the look, practices, and goals of academic subject matters.⁷

Bresler draws a clear distinction between instrumentalist and utilitarian approaches to education. She argues: "A utilitarian approach to education is promoted by the voices of businesses and community members that associate education primarily with jobs, the economy, and the production of good citizens."⁸ Warning that since education involves initiating the young into the norms and beliefs of the society they inhabit, it is necessary to consider whose values are being advocated in research, policy, and practice. Said differently, arts inquiry as pragmatic instrumentalism may lead to future benefits in a world of work and career. The problem is the knowability of that transfer as being specifically caused by particular types, methods, or models of arts inquiry. Epistemically, we cannot "know" so far ahead of time what, specifically, will be *utilized* from arts inquiry in future work. Indeed, ceding that it might or, more likely, will influence decisions and understandings about the world in the future does not untether that future from the pragmatic present. To Bresler, the tensions within arts education resulting from narrowly conceived justifications for its educational value "reflect the problematic nature of a field that is not critical of itself."⁹

We are similarly skeptical of advocacy efforts to market the arts as purveyors of creativity and innovation, arguing instead that arts-centered inquiry itself opens up inherently creative possibilities for individual students living connected lives. In critiquing the current arts advocacy discourse, we pay particular attention to the theme "21st Century Skills" which permeates arguments justifying the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum. We find phrases such as "essential skills for success in today's world"¹⁰ philosophically at odds with the sensory immediacy and open-ended experimentation of aesthetic inquiry. A pragmatic instrumentalist approach connects the conception of continuous student growth to actions that support such learning. The utilitarian view defines student success in terms of *projected* economic indicators in an *a priori* assumption about what the future world will (necessarily) hold.

PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS IN A MARKET-DRIVEN POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Over the past two decades, advocacy claims of positive outcomes for students who study the arts have included improved overall academic performance and standardized test scores, enhanced personal identity and social skills, increased problem-solving, reasoning, and communication capabilities, expanded creativity, and greater self-discipline.¹¹ The problem is that such specific claims are not warranted. While it has been demonstrated that students engaged in the arts generally do better in school and on their SATs, compared to students who are not involved in the arts, correlation is not the same as causation. As Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland reveal, there is no evidence to support the claim that arts training actually causes scores to rise.¹² Similarly, Elliot Eisner criticizes advocacy strategies that draw associations between participation in the arts and non-arts outcomes.

Eisner writes, “To use the arts *primarily* to teach what is not truly distinctive about the arts is to undermine, in the long run, the justifying conditions for the arts in our schools.”¹³

Still the trope persists that arts education can reinvigorate the nation’s schools. As recently as May 2011, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) released a report that cites “decades of research show[ing] strong and consistent links between high-quality arts education and a wide range of impressive educational outcomes.”¹⁴ In particular, the committee focused on “the need for federal and state education leaders to provide policy guidance for employing the arts to increase the rigor of curriculum, strengthen teacher quality, and improve low-performing schools. Building capacity to create and innovate in our students is central to guaranteeing the nation’s competitiveness.”¹⁵

By contrast, an expanded conceptualization of the term “instrumental,” which pragmatically connects arts-centered inquiry with its consequences for student growth, values learners and the unforeseen possibilities that learning generates. A student’s painstaking working out of a melodic phrase, a heated class debate over a painter’s symbolic vocabulary, or a comedic improvisation on a political issue may all contribute to the development of “life skills,” but the value of the arts in schools lies in the continuity and generativity of the human transactions taking place there each and every day. Indeed, phrases often repeated in the advocacy discourse to justify arts education such as “intrinsic value” and “art for art’s sake” ring hollow unless students have opportunities to engage with the arts in ways that enable them, as Maxine Greene writes, “to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened.”¹⁶ Advocacy arguments, which conceptualize “intrinsic” and “instrumental” in opposition to each other, retain a pure/practical dualism that impedes understanding of student growth taking place *in the arts*. The continued use of the terms “creativity” and “innovation” reflect the same dualist perspective within arts advocacy discourse, even when the terms operate synecdochically.¹⁷

Advocacy texts produced by Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) underscore the need to provide philosophically grounded opposition to arts advocacy claims at the intersection of practice, research, policy, and corporate sponsorship. Formed in 2002, P21 is a public-private partnership whose Strategic Council members include the National Education Association, major technology companies, and education publishers, as well as Crayola and the Walt Disney Company.¹⁸ We point to the P21 Skills Map for the Arts, one of five skills maps, to interrogate its underlying philosophical assumption that creativity and innovation are commodities that can be traded across domains. We worry that arts educators risk abrogating their primary responsibility to their students in relation to rich and generative arts-centered inquiry, when the voices of corporate interests promoting utilitarian student outcomes provide the central themes for the arts advocacy discourse.

The P21 Skills Map for the Arts defines creativity as demonstrating originality and inventiveness in work. In the same framework, innovation is defined as “acting on creative ideas to make a tangible and useful contribution to the domain in which innovation occurs.”¹⁹ The inclusion of the sections on creativity and innovation in the P21 Arts Skills Map has ironic implications. First, their inclusion is unnecessary. Based on the sample activities offered by the arts educators invited to collaborate on the project, creativity in the arts *is* arts-centered inquiry. It is what the arts do. For example, in an eighth-grade performance task demonstrating creativity, students “identify a topic, research, explore options, select and develop ideas, get feedback, revise, refine, perform.”²⁰ The P21 Arts Skills Map seeks to manufacture creativity in schools. In contrast, the pragmatically instrumental course of action is to promote students’ engagement in substantive arts-centered inquiry over the course of several years and in varying and variable artistic ways. Put in Deweyan language: the P21 Arts Skills Map intends the arts as means to an end; pragmatic instrumentalism understands means and ends as conjoint and inseparable.

The second philosophical irony is that whereas the P21 Skills Map for the Arts defines innovation in terms of tangible and useful contributions, P–12 students learn and develop in mysterious and idiosyncratic ways.²¹ Engagement with the arts very often has consequences for students that are intangible and yet powerfully instrumental to their growth. Learning activities in which students use technology to manipulate sound, text, and graphics to produce novel artifacts may be innovative, but they are not necessarily educative.²² As Dewey reminds us, “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative.... Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”²³

We urge educators and business leaders to acknowledge the complex kinds of thinking that students who are engaged in arts-centered inquiry demonstrate and to figure out ways the value of such inquiry in schools might be supported and sustained. Noting that the curriculum often determines the kinds of thinking that takes place in schools and criticizing those who would privilege the intelligence exercised in the use of language and mathematics over the kinds of thinking demonstrated in artistic production, Dewey writes:

Any idea that ignores the necessary role of intelligence in production of works of art is based upon identification of thinking with use of one special kind of material, verbal signs and words. To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical.²⁴

Dewey emphasizes making sense of the whole situation, that is, apprehending meaning in “relations of qualities.” The Arts Skills Map, by contrast, largely focuses on discrete work habits, presumably important for future success in twenty-first century work settings.

To be sure, many before us have adopted a Deweyan philosophical stance when critiquing education policy and practice and have argued the need for a pragmatist approach to organizing subjects in schools such that they become, as Dewey writes

in *How We Think*, “instruments for forming alert, persistent, and fruitful intellectual habits.”²⁵ What has changed, however, is the context in which advocacy efforts — including those focusing on the arts — are enacted. In contrast to past arts advocacy campaigns which brought together supporters within a particular school district, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills is able to mobilize professional organizations of arts educators and corporate partners on a national scale around the idea that “the arts promote work habits that cultivate curiosity, imagination, creativity, and evaluation skills.”²⁶ The refrain of “21st century skills” dominating the arts education advocacy discourse appears in P21-sponsored webinars and on the website of the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, “a newly formed partnership of organizations and states who will lead the revision of the 1994 National Standards for Arts Education.”²⁷ Questioning the trend to adopt national common core standards based on skills acquisition, we offer as an alternative Dewey’s view that the “business of education” is to cultivate deep and effective habits of inquiry and reasoning appropriate to whatever problems might present themselves.²⁸

We maintain that arts-centered inquiry, though not sufficient for carrying out the entire instrumental work of a comprehensive curriculum, nevertheless contributes to fostering growth and continuity within it. Recalling Dewey’s philosophical commitment to connecting values with human needs,²⁹ we adopt James Garrison’s definition of inquiry as “the creative activity of transforming needful situations into more desirable circumstances.”³⁰ According to Garrison, inquiry is as much a moral task as an aesthetic adventure because imagining possibilities that expand freedom requires practical wisdom and practical reasoning to ensure that consequences of action are morally desirable, not merely desired.³¹ We point to potential negative consequences for students when policymakers and educators seek ways to use the arts to boost achievement or spark innovation without attending to the nurturing of deep structural understandings on which individual creativity depends.

TOWARD HOPEFUL POSSIBILITIES

The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman, spoke before the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) on April 9, 2010 to enlist its help in advocating for more arts education across the nation. Landesman made the claim that “the arts help maintain our competitive edge by engendering innovation and creativity.”³² His conceptualization of the role of the arts in education may sound utilitarian, but he goes beyond a narrow consideration of specific goals or ends, as evidenced by the link he makes between arts-centered inquiry and the development of two habits instrumental to reforming education, namely, the “lessons” of strategic thinking and *productive failure*.³³ In particular, Landesman connects the fostering of innovation with learning environments that emphasize creative problem-solving strategies over rote memorization. He believes that innovation happens in spaces where it is okay to fail and noble to try again. In Landesman’s vision lie possibilities for stakeholders in advocacy, research, policy, and practice to begin to conceptualize the instrumental value of the arts as generative learning *in* the arts *by* students.

In considering the pragmatically instrumental role arts-centered inquiry might play in fostering just the kind of creativity and innovation needed to respond to

today's pressing social concerns, we envision the possibility of an expanded advocacy discourse among researchers, educators, policymakers, and the public that conceptualizes the arts in schools as instruments of transformation for individuals living connected lives. From a Deweyan perspective, connecting arts-centered inquiry with social change means helping students learn to balance a playful open-mindedness with serious attention to the demands of the subject matter. Yet Dewey adds a note of caution: "The child forced into premature concern with economic remote results may develop a surprising sharpening of wits in a particular direction, but this precocious specialization is always paid for by later apathy and dullness."³⁴

Dewey argues that in designing the conditions for learning experiences, educators must exercise wisdom in judging which attitudes and habits being developed are conducive to students' continued growth and which are detrimental.³⁵ Consistent with the naturalistic stance, which sees the live creature in transaction with the environment, Dewey's philosophy of art assumes the primary task of restoring continuity between aesthetic experience and everyday living.³⁶ A Project Zero study by Lois Hetland et al., inquiring into potential benefits of studying the arts, focuses on the connection between habits formed in visual arts classes and students' engagement with the world.³⁷ The data collected led the research team to develop a Studio Thinking Framework comprised of eight Studio Habits of Mind: Develop Craft, Engage and Persist, Envision, Express, Observe, Reflect, Stretch and Explore, and Understand Art World.³⁸

While only one approach — and one not to be adopted wholesale — Studio Thinking connects the arts studio with everyday life in the way it challenges students "to put skills to use in new contexts"³⁹ and to "notice the world around and connect it to learning in art."⁴⁰ A common theme emerging from the Studio Thinking research is the practitioner's commitment to students' experimenting and risk-taking, letting mistakes lead to unexpected discoveries.⁴¹ In acknowledging the strategic thinking that happens in the arts, the Project Zero research supports our argument that reimagining arts-centered inquiry as pragmatic instrumentalism entails supporting students as they develop habits instrumental to subsequent learning in and beyond arts domains.

In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey argues that the traits of objects and events we experience are effects, not causes, and that what knowledge concerns itself with is our ability to judge initiating actions that direct some phase of connected changes toward a stable, albeit contingent, result.⁴² Related to Dewey's reconnection of knowledge with action is his attempt to eliminate the divide — persisting since ancient Greece — separating the lofty "pure activity" of the ideal and eternal from the inferior practical arts. In arguing for a reconsideration of pragmatic instrumentalism as a way to reimagine arts-centered inquiry, we continue Dewey's work to eliminate the divide separating the lofty "pure activity" of the ideal and eternal from the inferior practical arts by addressing philosophical tensions, ironies, and contradictions underlying current arts advocacy debates. Dewey writes: "In reaction against the age-long depreciation of practice in behalf of contemplative knowledge, there is a temptation simply to turn things upside down. But the essence of pragmatic

instrumentalism is to conceive of *both* knowledge and practice as means of making goods — excellences of all kinds — secure in experienced existence.”⁴³

Given that in adopting a pragmatist approach to inquiry, provisional conclusions continually become instruments of new inquiries, reimagining arts-centered inquiry as pragmatic instrumentalism affirms the generative possibilities of the arts. Any attempt to force the arts into a framework of twenty-first century skills raises the question, “Does arts education develop creativity?” In other words, designing “skill maps” for the arts assumes rather than demonstrates the point in contention, namely, that arts education is a useful vehicle for producing creative workers for the national economy. We offer an alternative way to conceptualize arts-centered inquiry and urge arts educators, researchers, policymakers, and advocates to provide warrant for the instrumental value of the arts in schools by connecting the complex meanings mediated in arts-centered inquiry to their generative consequences for student learning.

1. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 84.
2. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1931), excerpted in *The American Pragmatists*, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Gail Kennedy (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 182.
3. Thomas L. Birch, “Tough Times: Advocacy Strategies in an Economic Downturn,” *NASAA Advocate* 12, no. 1 (2009): 2, <http://www.nasaa-arts.org>. The advocacy trope of creativity and innovation for U.S. global competitiveness is also evident on a number of other websites, including those of the Arts Education Partnership (<http://www.aep-arts.org>); the California Alliance for Arts Education (<http://artsed411.org>); BigThought, an arts partnership based in Dallas (<http://bigthought.org>), the College Board (<http://advocacy.collegeboard.org>); and Partnership for 21st Century Skills (<http://www.p21.org>).
4. Karen A. Hamblen, “Theories and Research that Support Art Instruction for Instrumental Outcomes,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 98, no. 3 (1997): 27.
5. *Ibid.*, 28. See also, Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 240–241.
6. Hamblen, “Theories and Research that Support Art Instruction,” 29.
7. Liora Bresler, “Research, Policy, and Practice in Arts Education: Meeting Points for Conversation,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 99, no. 5 (1998): 13.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 14.
10. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, “Framework for 21st Century Learning,” <http://www.p21.org/overview>.
11. Constance Bumgarner Gee, “The ‘Use and Abuse’ of Arts Advocacy and Consequences for Music Education,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 103, no. 4 (2002): 5.
12. Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, “Art for Our Sake: School Arts Classes Matter More Than Ever — But Not for the Reasons You Think,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 109, no. 5 (2008): 30.
13. Elliot W. Eisner, “Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?,” *Art Education* 51, no. 1 (1998): 12.
14. President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools* (Washington, DC: President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011), vi, <http://www.arteducators.org/research/research>.
15. *Ibid.*, viii.

16. Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 6.
17. For a discussion of the role of metaphor and synecdoche in educational policy discourse, see F. Tony Carusi, "The Persistence of Policy: A Topological Analysis of Contemporary Education Policy Discourse in the United States" (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2011).
18. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "About Us," <http://www.p21.org/about-us>.
19. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "21st Century Skills Map: The Arts," 6–7, <http://p21.org>.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. See Samuel Hope, "Creativity, Content, and Policy," *Arts Education Policy Review* 111, no. 2 (2010): 40–43.
22. See the sample activities listed on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Map: The Arts, "Innovation," 7.
23. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 25, 27–28.
24. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), 46.
25. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), 168.
26. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "21st Century Skills Map: The Arts: Introduction," <http://www.p21.org>.
27. See Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "P21 Arts Skills Map Webinars," <http://www.p21.org>; and National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, "About Us," <http://nccas.wikispaces.com>.
28. Dewey, *How We Think*, 27–28.
29. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Intrinsic Value," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26, no. 1 (1965): 17.
30. James W. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), xv.
31. *Ibid.*, 22, 51.
32. National Endowment for the Arts, "Rocco Landesman Comments at the Arts Education Partnership's Opening Plenary," National Endowment for the Arts, 17, <http://www.arts.gov/news/news10/ELI-Rocco.html>.
33. *Ibid.*, 46–70.
34. Dewey, *How We Think*, 218–219.
35. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 38–39.
36. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.
37. See Lois Hetland, Ellen Winner, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly M. Sheridan, *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).
38. *Ibid.*, Figure 1.2.
39. *Ibid.*, 18.
40. *Ibid.*, 98.
41. Winner and Hetland, "Art for Our Sake," 30.
42. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 106.
43. *Ibid.*, 30, n. 1.