

*Teaching music: for 'feelingful' intelligence*, by Gloria J. Kiester

Music belongs in school. Not because it's fun and entertaining; nor because it's relaxing or socializing. Music often is all of these, of course. But music belongs in school because it is basic to learning. Music is a unique way of knowing.

We comprehend the world in many ways. A journalist may describe a storm as wind wreaking devastation. A scientist will pinpoint it as 28.84 inches barometric pressure and winds at 82.5 miles per hours. Beethoven describes a storm by hurling an orchestra at our ears with blasts of brass and flickers of violins. Turner expresses it by making his whole canvas explode in breath taking swirls of colors.

None of these means – words, numbers, sounds or colors – is sufficient to produce total understanding. Each provides particular insights. Together they produce more complete comprehension.

This combination happens because the brain processes information in two ways. Some information is handled bit-by-bit with the bits converging at a single point. This is the kind of linear thinking typically used in language and science. It yields facts, conclusions and “right” answers.

But the brain can also process many bits of information all at once, releasing the results in divergent direction. This sort of thinking – called “holistic” – leads to hypotheses, metaphors and ambiguity. It is basic to emotion, imagination and creativity.

In daily life we do not choose to think now in facts and later in feelings. We use both, inextricably combined, in order to comprehend. One without the other would be unthinkable.

It is equally unthinkable to consider a school curriculum complete unless it fosters both ways of thinking.

Total understanding is basic to life and basic to education. But only partial understanding results when school curricula fail to balance linear and holistic thinking. The academic and the aesthetic are essential halves.

This is why music is basic to education. To be sure, music study can be centered on historical facts or theoretical constructs. But such a focus denies music's unique contribution to learning. Its soul is then missing.

The soul of music is rhythm explored, improvised, danced and developed. It is melody and harmony and timbre combined in intricate designs and intensely personal expression.

Thinking musically means thinking in all of these ways simultaneously. Thinking artistically means seeing a multitude of responses to a given problem.

Music is creative energy captured in sound. It heightens feeling by saying what words cannot express. It is essentially ineffable.

Music is “feelingful” intelligence. It is holistic thinking with a punch. No other part of the curriculum can duplicate this unique and powerful way of knowing.

Throughout history whenever humans have confronted the ultimate questions of life and death, they have turned to the arts for expression. Some cultures have been found to exist without reading and writing, but not one has been found without the arts.

No verbal equivalent to the Beethoven Ninth Symphony or the Sistine Chapel or the Taj Mahal exists. Nor is their message understood by simple contact. Their meanings must be searched out, uncovered, examined and experienced within the artists’ cultural contexts. The process is both lengthy and demanding.

Schools that fail to foster the development of feelingful intelligence deny students access to a stunning part of their culture. They deny them a basic key to understanding themselves and other peoples. They deny them communion with the most profound forms of human achievement.

In the coming century survival will depend upon those who have learned to handle threats with imagination, change with improvisation and human relations with empathy. Therefore quality education must mean total education.

That means teaching and learning in every way possible – not just reading and writing and calculation – but also feeling and moving, drawing and singing, dancing and creating.

And that is why music must exist in the schools at the heart of the curriculum – not as entertainment or relaxation, but as a unique way of knowing and as the foundation of feelingful intelligence.