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The Journey Is Everything

Rafe Esquith

2007 Grantmakers in the Arts Conference:
Taos Journey

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In the weekend leading into the 2007 *Taos Journey* conference, members of Grantmakers in the Arts and Grantmakers for Education will spend two days together in Santa Fe seeking better understanding of one another's priorities in arts and education – finding common ground. In the spirit of building this bridge between education and the arts, we sought an educator rather than an artist, a practitioner rather than a researcher, to write about arts education. National Medal of Arts winner Rafe Esquith tells the story of how he (someone with “no artistic ability”) changed his mind about the role arts should play in his students' lives and transformed his classroom into one that is arts-centered and remarkably successful.

The Journey Is Everything

Rafe Esquith

I have no artistic ability. None. Any attempt to draw anything on the board – even a single straight line – brings my students to their knees in hysterical bouts of teary-eyed laughter.

I am also the only teacher in history to receive the National Medal of Arts. Go figure. How in the world could that have happened?

When I was young and stupid, I entered my first classroom brimming with confidence and convinced I could change the world. I was more than a bit annoyed to learn that my young students had interests outside the walls of Room 56. There was an orchestra in our school, and the kids eagerly signed up to play. This meant they had to leave class twice a week for an hour during the morning math lesson. There was also a chorus, which meant another hour out of the room. I grudgingly allowed the kids to attend these music classes, while I mentally planned elaborate makeup sessions for the lost three hours.

I have to give myself a little credit – when I'm wrong, I don't go in for half-measures. I was *completely* wrong to worry about these students. The orchestra was led by a fine instructor. She was able to manage more than a hundred students who had no previous musical training, and she had them playing difficult pieces within a year. The kids adored her and couldn't wait to attend her classes.

Believe it or not, some teachers are so pathetic they actually discourage their students from taking extra art and music classes. I call these people “Copernicus teachers” because they substitute themselves in place of the sun as the center of the solar system. It's frightening to imagine the arrogance of anyone who thinks he is the only person who has something of value to share with students.

I wasn't *that* bad. I was foolish, though, to think that my music students would fall behind. I was shocked week after week: the kids in orchestra and chorus not only kept up with their colleagues, they did the best work in class. How was it possible? (Please stop snickering – I was green and very ignorant.)

This was the beginning of my journey as a teacher who discovered the importance of the arts in the education of a child. I soon learned a basic truth: Students involved in arts education are learning about things far beyond the art they study. When a child goes off to play in an orchestra, he is not only learning to play the violin or clarinet. He is also learning about discipline, responsibility, teamwork, sacrifice, practice, correcting mistakes, listening, and time management. That's not a bad set of skills for a kid to have in his pocket. And to learn them and have fun at the same time is a pretty neat trick.

Once I saw the value of the arts, I became determined to work them into my class. It was marvelous that the kids had music lessons two or three times a week, but I wanted them to have more. The only thing standing in my way was my own limited knowledge of arts education. I began visiting every school I could find that was proud of its music, art, or drama programs. Before long I accumulated a number of marvelous ideas that I incorporated into my classroom. Sadly, I've also witnessed some examples of how *not* to use the arts.

Here's an experience I will never forget: Many years ago, I had a student named Joann. I have been a teacher now for a quarter of a century, and Joann is quite simply one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. She is brilliant, beautiful, and talented. She played several instruments, but piano and flute were her specialties. At the piano, Joann was a prodigy. Her wonderful parents found her the best teachers, and Joann spent thousands of hours honing her craft.

After elementary school, she won a scholarship to an elite middle school. One semester, the school put on a production of *Candide*. I love this show and, knowing this, Joann invited me to a performance. When I entered the auditorium, I saw Joann sitting at a magnificent piano. The thought of hearing this amazing kid play Bernstein's masterpiece thrilled me. I went over to say hello before the show, gave her a hug, and noticed the rest of the musicians. They were all adults. Joann explained that the school had hired a professional orchestra to make the show “better.”

This wasn't the worst of it. Joann was a better musician than any of the adults, but she was allowed to play only the overture – an adult took over for the remaining two

hours. Joann could have done this easily. The adult turned out to be the school music teacher, who simply wanted to perform in the show. Hello? So many schools have lost sight of who is supposed to be the center of attention.

Teachers and parents must remember that our children should be the performers, even if they are not perfect. That's the beauty of art – we strive for perfection but never achieve it. The journey is everything. With all apologies to Shakespeare, the play is *not* the thing – the kids are.

Too many of us lose sight of this fact. As a young educator, I made the stupid mistake of refusing to teach my students certain songs because

they were “too difficult.” In truth, the students’ “inability” to play or sing something was simply a reflection of my own inadequacy. If I wanted the kids to perform better, I had to teach better. Once I understood this concept, and focused my energies on the children and the process of learning, I became a much better teacher.

One of the biggest problems teachers face today is that bureaucrats have removed us from the classroom. The publishing companies and testing services have conspired with administrators to wrest away any creativity, passion, or freedom you once may have had as a classroom teacher. From now on we will all teach the same things in the same ways at the same times for the same reasons. Orwell the Prophet was right.

Teachers need to remember something: Each person brings special gifts to the classroom. Perhaps you are a wonderful gardener. If that is the case, I believe you must supplement the basic curriculum and find a way to share your talent with the kids. If you are a terrific cook, then part of your day should be spent cooking with the kids, perhaps connecting the session with math, science, or health. Sadly, these days many potentially fine teachers are so busy jumping through red tape that they forget this basic fact: YOU are the most valuable weapon in your classroom.

In addition to my family, I have three loves in this world: baseball, rock 'n' roll, and Shakespeare. When I discovered the importance of the arts, I had no clue where it would lead. If someone had told me twenty-five years ago that European governments would be calling me because they wanted my students to perform, I would have dropped dead laughing. Yet these days countries including Norway, Australia, England, Brazil, and Austria are all inviting the Hobart Shakespeareans to give a performance.

If the story of the Hobart Shakespeareans were a Hollywood movie, I would have had an epiphany and in the space of a year, I would have transferred my class from illiterate gangsters to Shakespearean stars. But I am a real teacher. Those things do not actually happen overnight.

Instead, after discovering the importance of the arts, I struggled. I failed often and made more mistakes than I care to remember. It is *because* of these mistakes and failures that I got better. Good teachers and students recognize failure as an essential part of the learning process.

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These days, the Hobart Shakespeareans, most ages nine and ten, perform an unabridged production of Shakespeare every

year. This requires kids working harder than they have ever worked in their lives, as well as a teacher who is willing to sacrifice thousands of hours of personal time. More than a few observers, even those who admire the project and wish us well, have questioned my sanity and volunteered to get me some therapy. Perhaps they are right. All I know for sure is that I have found no other project that allows me to teach the students everything I want them to learn in a single activity.

People cross oceans to attend our performances. Sir Ian McKellen has been a guiding force behind the program, and Hal Holbrook, Michael York, Sir Peter Hall, and other giants of theater have helped inspire the students. Audience members cannot believe what they are seeing. They watch the tiny actors and ask, “How the hell does all this happen?” Let me take a little time to explore the methods and madness that take place in Room 56.

Before we do anything, I explain to the kids what I hope they will learn from the experience. They are not Shakespearean actors and probably should not plan to be. I know nothing about directing a play (if you don't believe me, come and watch a rehearsal – talk about the blind leading the blind!). We are here to learn about the power of language and to have fun working together as a team. The children will spend their year overcoming challenges, solving problems, and taking risks. They will learn a lot of difficult music and work hard to perform it well. They will learn to dance and to tell a story. They will explore themes in the play and apply these lessons to their own lives. They will analyze, dissect, tear down, and then build a play that will change their view of themselves and the world.

They are not here to impress anyone. The actual performances at the end of the year are fun – it's always nice to be on the receiving end of a standing ovation – but the real reward is in the work itself. No amount of applause

can compare to the journey of discovery the kids undertake, the thousands of hours of work that go into making each production extraordinary. The process is all.

Cynics who have never attended a Hobart Shakespearean show sometimes doubt that the children really understand the words they are saying or the meaning behind them. They are dead wrong. The kids are engrossed by Prospero's resolution to forgive his enemies, Hal's search for honor in a dishonorable world, or Macbeth giving in to temptation. As Sir Ian McKellen has remarked, "The best thing about the Hobart Shakespeareans is that they know what they're saying, and that can't be said for Shakespearean actors." I think it's a safe bet that Sir Ian knows what he's talking about.

Michael York taught my class that in Shakespeare's day people did not say they were going to watch a play. They said they were going to *hear* a play. The Hobart Shakespeareans learn the plays by listening; all of Shakespeare's plays are available on CD. By hearing professional actors speak the words, the kids get a far-reaching understanding of whatever play they are listening to.

During these audio lessons, the kids also have the text in front of them. They read while they hear the lines spoken by brilliant actors. I stop the CD frequently to explain particular phrases. Some expression I let pass on the first listening. After hearing a scene several more times, the students catch on. It is amazing how quickly the kids can learn lines when they understand the words. It's no different from the pop songs they learn from the radio.

Our Shakespeare productions are performed right in our classroom. We clear the room of desks and install a bleacher section that seats thirty-three. The actual performance space is perhaps two hundred square feet. Despite the tiny area, we are able to perform unabridged plays complete with sensational choreography, a full-blown rock 'n' roll band, and perfectly articulated Shakespeare. You can see pictures of the shows at www.hobartshakespeareans.org.

People often describe our shows as rock concerts disguised as Shakespeare. The text of the play is never altered, but we throw in a dozen or more songs to spice things up. During the first two months of rehearsals, the students learn to play and sing dozens of potential tunes that might enhance a particular scene in the play. By the third month of practice, our song list is in place. For the next six months, the band rehearses constantly and the

singers diligently work out the vocals. Soon the show's sound track is ready.

The coolest part of all this is that the songs are interwoven with the text. When a character has a soliloquy, or a regular scene allows it, the song begins, then stops while the scene continues, then starts again, and so on. It's almost like opera. We've used John Lennon's "Jealous Guy" when Leontes begs forgiveness in *The Winter's Tale*; the Animals' "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" as Henry V prays before battle; the Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to

Beg" when Master Ford asks his wife to take him back in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; and the Doors' "Riders on the Storm" when the witches enter in *Macbeth*. All of the songs are played and sung with precise

attention to detail. To add to the experience, my students learn sign language. By having some of the performers sign the songs, another layer of communication is added to the show. It's very powerful.

The students also perform two or three spectacular dance numbers during each play. This brings up a crucial factor in my journey as an arts teacher. How is it possible that a man with absolutely no talent (that would be me) creates a play with professional speaking, musicianship, and dance? It happens because of the most beautiful part of the arts. The arts invite collaboration.

I am no expert. I am very good at creating a safe haven where kids are motivated to work hard, take risks, and have fun. In my journey, I have met dozens of people with far more talent than I have. It is my friend Barbara who works with the kids to teach them to sign. I teach the kids guitar and piano, but my friends Dan and Joann, professional musicians, score the music for us. A fantastic choreographer named Sarah brings thrilling energy and brilliance to the plays. Suddenly, the Hobart Shakespeareans are ready to dazzle the crowd. So now you have learned a secret in Room 56: All of these talented people do all the work, the kids take all the chances, and I get all the credit!

In his brilliant book *The Little Prince*, St. Exupery reminds us that "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." In an age when our obsession with testing dominates the classroom, the arts remind us that not everything can be measured on a standardized test. The measure of a teacher's success with a child is not how the child does on the test at the end of the year but how that child does for the rest of his life. The arts give children skills that last forever.

That said, following is an assessment that is better than a standardized test. It is an essay written by one of my former students, who is now a top scholar at Notre Dame. It is a reflection on what the arts meant to her all those years ago when she was a little girl.

My heart begins to beat as the lights start to dim and the chattering of students slowly dies down from scattered mumblings to silence. The tiny room is flooded with lights, and I look out into the audience. An eleven-year-old boy walks out onto the stage, or classroom, I should say, to the opening lines of his character, Benedick.

*My heart starts to beat again quite rapidly as my turn approaches. The crowd laughs and I take it as my cue to step onto the stage. "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick, nobody marks you." It is 6:00 p.m. on June 15, 1998, and I have just started my twelfth and final performance of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.*

I was first introduced to Shakespeare when I was nine years old by a teacher, Rafe Esquith, who was famously known at my elementary school for directing a Shakespeare play every year. Not wanting to turn down an opportunity to be in one of his "famous" plays, I immediately said yes when he asked me.

Now I put "famous" in quotes because, at my elementary school, being asked to participate in a Shakespeare play was as if I had been asked to join the cool and exclusive group in school.

*The following year and the year after that, I was given the opportunity to be in *The Winter's Tale*. All the plays were performed in our tiny classroom, Room 56, and on that night of the final performance I could only think to wish how I could stop time.*

I wish I could put all the feelings that evening into a jar and carry it around with me wherever I go, because the emotions in Room 56 that night were full of delight, passion, and energy. Putting together those plays every year not only taught me about Shakespeare, but I also learned about teamwork, and humility, and that when one of my fellow classmates was on stage, it was his turn to be in the spotlight, not mine.

I learned how to play many instruments because we incorporated pop songs into many of the scenes. I became aware of the values of responsibility and hard work, and that if I did not have my lines memorized by a specified date, it not only hurt myself but also slowed down the rest of the production.

Who would have thought that one could learn so much just by being in a play? I learned my most valuable lessons during those two years in Room 56, and I treasure all of the experiences that I had in that tiny little classroom.

Hobart Elementary School is located in the heart of Downtown, and as I look back at my elementary school years, I think about the horrible environment I grew up in.

There were kids who didn't know how to speak English, even teachers who did not know how to speak English. A rape or abuse case occurred at least once a week at school, policemen being seen frequently on campus.

Yet during the fifth grade, when I walked into Room 56, everything changed. The world outside stopped existing and disappeared. Instead of gang fights and beggars, my life turned into guitar lessons, and history productions, and Shakespearean characters.

My fears and horrors were replaced by happiness and laughter. It became my second home, and my classmates became my second family. I did most of my growing up in Room 56, and it shaped and molded me into the person I have become.

No matter what else was happening anywhere in the world, all my troubles could be fixed in this safe haven, and I constantly retreated to it when I had family troubles. And even today when I am looking for a place where there is only love and joy, where anger and hatred do not exist, I still retreat to Room 56.

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It is through the arts that we can help build safe havens for all our children. And there is an art teacher within everyone. I have been able to incorporate them into my classroom and have no talent at all. In closing, let's remember Shakespeare's advice from *Measure for Measure*:

*Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt.*

*Rafe Esquith has been teaching for twenty-five years, the last twenty-two at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School in Los Angeles. Despite language barriers and poverty, his students go on to attend the finest colleges in the world. Among Esquith's numerous awards are the Disney American Teacher Award, Parents Magazine's As You Grow Award, and Oprah Winfrey's Use Your Life Award. In 2003 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts, making him the only teacher in history to receive this honor. His latest book, *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*, is a New York Times bestseller and his earlier work, *There Are No Shortcuts*, led to the filming of the award-winning PBS documentary *The Hobart Shakespearians*. Despite international acclaim, Esquith continues to teach every day in Room 56. He is very happily married to Barbara Tong.*

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