



As a Professor at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, Dr. James Catterall's research focuses on the roles of the arts in human development. He has published numerous articles and books on the topic, including his most recent book *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art*. In March, he shared his thoughts with a group of P.S. ARTS supporters at the home of Tia and David Hoberman. P.S. ARTS was thrilled to have such a pre-eminent arts researcher speak to guests and answer our questions in this follow-up conversation.

Q: How did you come to focus your research on arts education?

A: Here is perhaps my best answer: If you had freedom and support to conduct education research on anything you liked, what would you choose? I thank UCLA for this privilege. My interest in arts education grew most from my longstanding interest in music. I joined my elementary school band at age 9, playing the trombone and baritone horn, played bass in a 1960s rock band from middle school through college, and now play cello in a local symphony and string quartet. My college rock band recently had a 40th anniversary reunion, playing in Austin, Texas – discovering what holds up and what doesn't in this business.

I devoted my first years as an education scholar to issues surrounding children and adolescents at risk of school failure, like so many academics. I became an expert on issues related to dropping out of school. Most of my research, like what pervades university schools of education, was concerned with clear descriptions of the problems involved – for me the causes and consequences of dropping out along with assessments of prevention and recovery programs. I had joined the ranks of academics inclined more to “admire” the problems they studied than to engage in solutions. After all, we're not doctors of philosophy for nothing!

Then twenty years ago I was invited to join a team of scholars, curriculum experts, artists, and a major donor to design something that would make school more engaging and effective for children in inner city Los Angeles. The design became a program of integrating the visual and performing arts with the social studies curriculum in elementary classrooms. We were interested in what goes in classrooms and the lives of children more broadly that could contribute to successful development.

The initiative, titled *Different Ways of Knowing*, grew from a pilot program at UCLA's University Elementary School to implementation in a dozen states supported by thirty foundations. I was the program's research coordinator and dug deeply into how the arts can support learning. I retooled myself as a learning and arts scholar and simply never looked back. At the time the arts were underappreciated and underexplored in the learning sciences. The arts and child development was a domain awaiting rigorous exploration.

Q: Why do you think arts education is important?

A: I'm sure the P.S. ARTS audience and I would agree on many answers to this question. I begin with the importance of experiences and awareness in the arts in the complete education of adult citizens. The arts provide windows on the world's history – on the struggles and celebrations of mankind. The arts encourage

expressive choices for human feeling and emotion, and bring mystery and wonder to a society oversaturated with machine-like views of living and working. The arts, in opposition to most of what passes for school curriculum these days, bring personal values and beliefs into things we want know about. (No wonder that our ubiquitous school assessment and accountability systems can't grasp the arts in authentic ways and thus avoid the subject.)

Closer to my own research, artistic learning and involvement bring joy and fun to in-school and out-of-school life. We see levels of cognitive and emotional engagement in the art room, the orchestra, the stage, and the dance floor that appear less frequently during regular classroom instruction. That the arts can be fun for children produces doubts about their importance among *all work and no play* educators and politicians. That the arts can be fun for children is a good reason to build the arts into how we educate our children.

Q: What were the main findings of the national arts education study described comprehensively in your most recent book, *Doing well and Doing Good by Doing Art*?

A: This study enlisted data from a twelve-year study of about twelve thousand American eighth grades who were followed to the age of 26. The main analysis compared low-income youth who were highly engaged in the visual and performing arts in their middle and high school years to low income students who lacked involvement in the arts completely, or nearly so. The two groups were carefully matched.

The arts-involved students showed a variety of what we call *doing well* and *doing good* advantages over the period studied. The doing well outcomes included going further in college, more attendance at four-year institutions, earning better grades in college, and higher levels of satisfaction in their chosen work. The doing good outcomes included systematically higher levels of pro-social behavior, including educational and social volunteerism as well as political participation.

Parallel findings showed for attendance at arts-rich versus arts-poor secondary schools. In a related observation, limited English speaking students did better in arts-rich schools too, independent of family income. And a particularly novel chapter explores a comparison of involvement in the arts to involvement in school athletics. (Both are good, in different ways.)

Q: Can you discuss in practical terms what the findings of your recent arts education study mean to educators and school administrators or educational policy makers?

A: The most practical implication of this research is that visual and performing arts education associates with a valued collection of educational and social benefits brought to individuals, and by extension to society. These observations have been shown across more and more studies the past 20 years. But this is the only known study of its kind – one that followed a large national sample of youth for more than a decade.

I would point out that the arts may not be the most direct, efficient, or thorough way to promote the outcomes found in this study. But that the arts are seen to incline students toward higher academic achievement and in positive social directions complements any benefits we would associate with learning in the arts per se.

Q: What is the focus of your current work in arts education?

A: Along with my small doctoral student team, I am usually working on several fronts. I have joined the

study of reading comprehension and narrative understanding through story dramatization. We will use the Ahmanson-Lovelace Brain Mapping Center to scan subjects to learn more about visualization, memory, and languages processes.

Following up on the *DWDG* study, I am doing preliminary work on connections between more generalized development of *right hemisphere* regions of the brain (through long term, high level pursuit of the arts), and empathic, pro-social behavior. This development is suggested in the book; we'd like to explore neurological mechanisms that may be involved.

And I am slowly developing a view of child creativity connected to cognition that I plan to write about soon. At the center of this work is the importance of what I call *ordinary creativity*. This refers to such things as generating possible solutions to problems, making coherent and valuable verbal contributions in conversations, speculating and connecting information at hand with one's own prior knowledge. Children's skills and inclinations to guess, invent, hypothesize, and even *be wrong* are hugely important to learning. I want to know more about the nature of these processes and how better understanding of them can lead to effective instructional designs.

Q: As state education budget cuts threaten to further reduce arts instruction in schools, what do you think is most important for Californians to understand about arts education?

A: The answer to this question seems straightforward. The things we most value and the things that garner our commitment are first and foremost the things we find important. When we total up what we've done over the last year and realize that we didn't exercise as much as we might have, or that we watched 26 episodes of *House* in lieu of the four books we could have read during that time, we are effectively auditing our true beliefs about what is important. Sometimes to some chagrin.

The arts gather support to the extent that our society believes that the arts are important to children and adults. I have not seen a national opinion poll, but our society surely suffers a deep division on this question. Of course, around this point swirl the currents of education goals and budgets -- driven by ebbs and flows of political organization, the actions of lobbyists, and gyrations in the economy. Not to mention the rising general concerns about literacy among our young which increase hours spent on reading instruction and limit in-school time for everything else.

But the fortunes of arts education in the long run are hinged on the value we place on the arts in our lives, and any long-term public agenda for boosting the fortunes of arts education must tend to the question of social value. As an individual or school looking out into this gulf, perhaps the best place to start is by promoting the most high-quality, accessible arts learning we can.