

The Arts – Taking Charge of Life

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Boys and Creativity

- Boys are more variable in creativity and creative approaches than girls.
- Males are more likely to exhibit positive creativity, but equal numbers of males and females exhibit negative creativity (negative creativity in this example is defined as using a creative approach to meet a negative goal, but not to actually cause harm).
- Historically males are more creative in science and literature; females have excelled in movement and practical applications.
 - How much of that is due to societal expectations?
 - Real difference is in taking risks, and the effect of testosterone is in increasing the possibility of taking risks.
 - Modern parenting (helicopter, snowplow) is all about reducing risks.

Boys' Brains

- Male brains develop about 2 to 4 years behind female brains.
 - At age 12, females have greater myelinated sections than males
 - This may allow males to use a variety of approaches to solve problems.
- Prefrontal lobe last part of the brain to develop.
 - This is the executive decision maker—helps us make reasoned decisions and control our impulses.
 - Completes development in females around 18-20 years of age and in males around 20-25 years and perhaps later.
 - Males are more impulsive, and combined with effect of testosterone the result is that they are more likely to take all sorts of risks.
 - Problem is that without some structure in their lives, boys may take risks that can be dangerous or result in physical, emotional, or psychological injury.

How to Help Boys Use Creativity

- Boys are likely to find it difficult to take risks that do not result in catastrophe or injury.
- The arts give boys a place to take chances, experience danger within societal norms and boundaries.

Literature

Writing about events that never happened, inventing people and situations to examine feelings and beliefs and crafting language into works of beauty.

Visual Arts

Creating objects that express feelings or beliefs or try to elicit such feelings from others. Kelly Lonergan, chair of the visual arts program at WFS, says that the arts help students take charge by building their “intelligence through experimentation in exerting control, and by building wisdom through experience in relinquishing control.”

Music and the Performing Arts

Producing music or movement that conveys thoughts or ideas or tells stories through action. Lisa Wright, head of the strings program at WFS, credits music with helping students “work collaboratively, multitask extensively, and react in real time.”

Use of Risk in Drama

- If a director tells actors what to do, there is no risk involved.
- When the director gets students to become a part of their characters—the most significant part—then the student can take risks he would seldom take in real life.
- When the director’s approach is that of a co-creator as opposed to a dictator or traffic cop, students buy in to the process.
- If the director can set up an environment that is fun, joy-filled, full of discovery, even slightly dangerous, students will take bigger and bigger risks.

Dracula, Woodberry Forest School (WFS), 2001



A Risky Method: Drama Directing

- The teacher or director should engage actors immediately in discussion regarding stakes, values (personal and character-related), and “as-if emotions,” a term from director/ playwright David Mamet derived from Constantin Stanislavski.
- In terms of action, the director must watch for “inclinations.”
 - Movement should be rooted in physical inclinations on the actors’ part.
 - Natural “blocking” —movement around the stage—will come as a result.
 - Be careful not to teach students early on that the director controls every move they make, every breath they take.
 - Let them experience a “Golden Week.”

Contradictions: Fertile Ground for Risk

- Make actors aware of certain contradictions in the theater, which lead to interesting risks and clever problem-solving. For example:
- Powerful characterization results from revealing one's unique self in the role.
- It's not enough for a moment to seem real; it also has to be theatrically interesting.
- The theatrical dichotomy of what happens on stage being both real and artificial at the same time gives students a place to experience risky emotions in a structured environment.
- Mistakes on stage do not count in real life; students learn that taking risks and making mistakes provide opportunities to grow.

The Director's Part in Framing Risk

- Choose plays that have physical as well as emotional risks (part of why Shakespeare is still so vital). Example: pick plays with fighting, fencing, dance—and make your expectations open-ended. The sky is the limit. Note: boys love to fence.

The Three Musketeers, WFS, 2008



Choose Plays that are Relevant and Risky

- Choose plays that are relevant to today's problems and thus risky choices.

1984, WFS, 2018
Juliet, WFS, 2012

Romeo and



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A Very American 1984



Three Former Students: Exemplars of Risk-taking

- Jacob Foster as Cyrano de Bergerac, 1996
- Dr. (Dr.) Foster today - Rhodes scholar, leading authority on string theory, now assistant professor at UCLA specializing in research on complex systems and cultural evolution



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Mike Northrop in *The Devil in D.C.*, WFS, 1996



- Dr. Northrop today - Professor of pediatric anesthesiology and critical care pediatric doctor in the Wake Forest Baptist Hospital System

The Latest Risk Taker

- Eric Ways, *The Oedipus Project*, WFS, 2014. Eric went to Notre Dame on a track scholarship, dropped out of track, studied acting, and just got his first TV show in NY!



An Example of Risk. Two Volunteers?



What the Arts do for Boys

- Broaden communication skills
- Offer practice in risk-taking
- Encourage students to question ethical values
- Hone quick decision-making skills and learn to multi-task
- Become comfortable in front of lots of people
- Deepen memorization skills
- Develop collaborative skills especially at high levels of abstraction
- Learn to recognize and appreciate beauty in many forms
- Allow boys to try on other masks/personalities and thus, paradoxically, learn how to show and use one's unique self.

Conclusion

- Acceptable risk-taking is central to boys learning how to exercise agency in the world.
- The arts also set up a standard of excellence by which students measure future success.
- The arts give young people a proving ground where they can take their most creative impulses and use them to solve risky problems prescribed by the art they are pursuing.
- Students do so at the highest levels of brain activity and experience the unique joy of such cerebral function.
- This joy-filled practice of agency is critical to students' learning to take charge of their own lives.

Contact Us!

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