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Arts Education and Cognitive Development: Compiling the Research

Posted by [Mr. Jeff M. Poulin](#)<http://www.americansforthearts.org/users/727>),

Mar 16, 2015

[4 COMMENTS \(/2015/03/16/ARTS-EDUCATION-AND-COGNITIVE-DEVELOPMENT-COMPILING-THE-RESEARCH#COMMENTS\)](http://www.americansforthearts.org/users/727)

[Mr. Jeff M. Poulin](#)
(<http://www.americansforthearts.org/users/727>)

More and more, we at Americans for the Arts are talking about the transformative power of the arts, echoing the work that has happened at a local level in the arts across America for the past several decades. However, as I move more and more into the education space, I hear a call for the hard facts amongst the heart-warming stories. Education decision makers want to see results, they want to see change, and they want to draw a correlation between the two.

As a professional arts education advocate, I can keep up with most of these requests, but recently I found myself at a bit of a cross roads. I was in Los Angeles, speaking with a self-described 'music education evangelist,' who was telling me all about [some research](#) (<http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2014/09/community-music-programs-enhance-brain-function-in-at-risk-children.html>) that had

been conducted on the impact of arts education on the cognitive functions of the brain. Arts Education, he said, could work to close the opportunity gap faster than other – more conventional – tactics.

I was blown away.

I basically know nothing about cognition or brain development (beyond 10th grade biology), so I instantly wanted to know more. In January, at the annual Winter Council Meeting of the [Arts Education Advisory Council](http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/council) (<http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/council>), I was affirmed in my curiosity when one of the ‘trending topics’ which the council identified was the growing pile of research on the topic of arts education and cognitive development.

One item which came up in discussion was the infographic published last year by the University of Florida, which demonstrated STEM vs. STEAM in the brain. I have a great amount of respect for this infographic, because it distills down a complex topic backed up by robust research into an easy-to-understand image for advocates, educators, or decision makers to use in their own specific ways.



(<http://education.arts.ufl.edu/stem-vs-steam-brain/>)

I often converse with artists, educators, and education decision makers as advocates for arts education. We often discuss how to best make the case for arts education in any given community. To this, my standard response is, “Craft an effective personal advocacy campaign by combining robust data with a compelling story.” (Learn more by reading [this e-book series](http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/tools-resources/arts-education-navigator-series) (<http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/tools-resources/arts-education-navigator-series>!))

We have so much diverse data about the benefits of arts education (more in [Facts & Figures](http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/tools-resources/arts-ed-navigator/facts-figures) (<http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/tools-resources/arts-ed-navigator/facts-figures>)). If you are thinking about the civic benefits of arts education, we have it. If you want to inform a decision maker about the academic benefits of arts education, we have it. What about the effects of arts education on school culture? Yup, got that, too.

Now, only if we had a bunch of research that would appeal to the more scientific folks in the crowd – perhaps some information on the intersection of arts education and cognitive development?

Well...now we do.

For a start, you may want to check out the 2008 Dana Foundation [Report Learning, Arts, and the Brain: The Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition](http://www.dana.org/Publications/PublicationDetails.aspx?id=44422#sthash.BGAURPxv.dpuf) (<http://www.dana.org/Publications/PublicationDetails.aspx?id=44422#sthash.BGAURPxv.dpuf>). This week, we have assembled some great thinkers on the topics of arts education and cognition. They represent the fields of research, education, artistic practice, and more. Coming from universities, local programs, and national institutes, these bloggers represent a cross section of work happening at the intersection of cognitive development and arts education.

We have asked these bloggers to distill this data, make it more accessible, and bring it to life in their posts. As March is also Youth Arts Month, I would ask that you act as an advocate yourself: when you read a post this week that really appeals to you, share it with your community. Whether it is through Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, or carrier pigeon, be sure to tell someone about it!

Happy reading!

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4 responses for Arts Education and Cognitive Development: Compiling the Research

Beth Lawson says

March 17, 2015 at 8:34 am

Commenting to encourage your continued blogging about these topics, Jeff! I currently work in training and education for the Army and we discuss how the brain/learning thing works a LOT! One of the books I use to teach this is John Medina's Brain Rules. Here's a link to his website that has videos, a good slide presentation, and book excerpts: <http://www.brainrules.net/> (<http://www.brainrules.net/>)

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Mary Palmer (/users/5541) says

June 18, 2015 at 3:56 pm

Great content, Jeff! Thank you for assembling these important data points. What we now know about brain development clearly SHOUTS that arts education matters... at all ages. Let's make your blog our required reading! :)
Mary

Please [login \(https://blog.americansforthearts.org/modal_forms/nojs/login\)](https://blog.americansforthearts.org/modal_forms/nojs/login) to post comments.

Mr. Jeff M. Poulin (/users/727) says

March 19, 2015 at 3:44 pm

Thanks so much Beth and Ramona!

Please [login \(https://blog.americansforthearts.org/modal_forms/nojs/login\)](https://blog.americansforthearts.org/modal_forms/nojs/login) to post comments.

Ramona Baker
(<http://www.ramonabaker.com>) says

March 16, 2015 at 11:29 pm

Jeff,

Thanks for bringing all of this information together in one place. Your point about our advocacy work requiring both hard facts and personal stories is also reflected in the terrific infographic. We need to speak to the logic areas and also speak to the creative areas. And we need both because half is not enough. Thanks for all your thoughtful work on behalf of arts educations.

Ramona

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