

The Arts: A Tool for Education
By Jeanne Alarcon
Palm Desert, California

AS an artist who has been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for about twenty years, I have found that my art background and faith are two of my best qualifications for the job I've undertaken recently—teaching elementary school; this year I taught my first class of second graders. People thought I should be glad to have my first paid summer vacation, but I wasn't so anxious to say good-bye to the children; I wondered if I had done all I could to prepare them for next year.

Our world has become increasingly complex—on the one hand there are students using computers at school and at home whose parents read to them while still in the womb. On the other there are students who live in poverty, who are never read to at home and who suffer from abuse or neglect. Many have trouble understanding English. This is where my practice of Buddhism has helped me, for I know that anything is possible for all students and their families, no matter what their backgrounds. I believe the answers lie in education, in cultural exchange through the arts and in respect for the dignity of each individual.

The arts can be a wonderful stimulus as well as an equalizer; not only are they enjoyable but they are powerful tools for education. Our lives are enriched by creativity—either by appreciating what others have created or by expressing ourselves in a creative manner. Through music, art, drama and dance, we can communicate with youth and they with us. Students begin enjoying actively participating in school even before they acquire basic reading and writing skills.

The school where I teach is located in a fairly remote community where the majority of the students are underprivileged. Many have never been read to until they attended school; at home they have no books, paper or pencils. They also experience a variety of distracting situations at home that children shouldn't have to deal with. But they do, and they come to school eager to find out what I have planned for them.

In the classroom, capturing and keeping my students' interest is the most important part of my job as an educator. Almost any subject can be more stimulating if I present it in a way that adds interest and pleasure rather than "just the facts." By using visuals and allowing my students to draw pictures to present their ideas, many details and explanations that are beyond their ability to communicate orally, much less through the written word, can be expressed and understood. Through play-acting, skits, puppet shows and so on, a lot of wonderful ideas can be shared.

In no way are any of these a substitute for reading, writing or arithmetic. But even when a student has a command of the written language, lessons can be enhanced in a number of ways through some form of art. For example, when students are asked to write a book report, it is much more interesting if they also illustrate their favorite scene or write their reports on "cut-out shapes" of construction paper.

It is not necessary to have a background in art in order to put these methods into practice. All the methods classes I took recently stressed finding something that appeals to the students to capture their interest first, then incorporating the heart of the lesson into a particular project or activity. It is difficult to teach students if they aren't paying attention.

One of the challenges I face is encouraging students to write something original and creative. They always say, "But teacher, I don't know what to write."

Title: Jeanne Alarcon: The Arts: A Tool for Education
Subject: Living Buddhism 07/97 v.1 n.7 p.24 LB9707p24 Palm Desert, California
Author: Jeanne Alarcon
Keywords: Alarcon Artists Arts California Career Desert Education Educational Educators Experiences
Features Historians Jeanne Palm People Scholars Tool

I didn't invent the following idea but I've used it effectively. I give each student a copy of a tangram, a square divided into different shapes (squares, triangles, parallelograms) that can be used as a math lesson. The students cut and use these to create a flower, robot, bird, etc., that they incorporate into a drawing. Only after they tell one another about their picture do I ask them to write a story about their drawing. Some of the best creative writing all year came out of this project and the students loved it.

Another way I use art to teach is to conduct an art lesson in which I ask my students to divide their paper in quadrants and follow my instructions in drawing either straight lines, angles, curves or squiggly lines specifically where I tell them to. I explain to them that all drawing consists of these shapes. This exercise results in very unique drawings whose elements we label as mountains, lakes, rivers and the ocean, and can be a science lesson to teach about how water is recycled.

I also use a form divided into four sections that are labeled *characters*, *setting*, *problem* and *solution*. There is a place to draw and a place to write in each section. I use it to teach the elements of a story and we do a book report together.

Song is another wonderful tool for capturing and holding students' interest. Using movement and dance makes it even more fun. Memorization can be fun when the information is put into a song. A story can be memorized if it is put to music. An entire social studies unit can be written into a performance and performed for parents. The students feel such pride that the ideas and information presented will never be forgotten. Even classroom skits and theater make the material more important to the students—what's important to them is what they will remember.

Some people may think much of this is a waste of time. Some say, "Back when I was a kid, we sat and listened or we got a ruler across our knuckles." Others will say that this is the age of technology and we need to feed them all the information they can use.

My students' faces and the progress they make tell me otherwise. □