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EXPERT MASTERCLASS

Why the Tech World of Tomorrow Wants Art Students

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Speaker

Corey D. Mitchell, Teacher, Northwest School of the Arts, USA

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

This session explored how teachers can connect with students through the power of ideas and emotion. A veteran acting and musical theater teacher, and top 50 Finalist for the 2017 Global Teacher Prize, many of Mitchell's former students are now professional performers, directors and playwrights.

"Arts students are awesome. Artists are the problem-solvers of society," declares Mitchell. "Artists also seek social justice. Those students who say 'it's not fair' have the heart of an artist. These are the students who are the most acutely aware of societal injustice. Most of the time, it's the artistic students in the class who are named as the trouble-makers."

Mitchell defines an artist as someone who rebels and pushes against authority, and therefore draws a direct correlation between these anarchistic personality traits and the questioning mindset of those who are curious. This provides a unique advantage to teachers, as artists naturally see the connection between science and the arts, music and science, and theater and math. "The connections are all there. (As artists) we long for teachers who will help us to make those connections."

In 2012, his school (Northwest School of the Arts, Charlotte, NC) had the honor of being the first school to produce the musical: "The Color Purple". Mitchell felt this was an opportunity to create musical history and invited a film crew to follow them through the process. The school rented all the Broadway sets, and Mitchell cast talented





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Q U D W A

students who typically may not have expected to win the roles. The journey that the cast went on to pursue their dreams and create this musical first is now the subject of a film in its own right, entitled “Purple Dreams”. The film was presented at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, and was also shown at the RiverRun International Film Festival earlier in 2017.

Starting out as a four-week project, the film actually took four years to complete, as the cast blossomed, confronted their demons and became even more determined to pursue their careers. For Mitchell, the project was life-changing.

“I just knew that once they had done this, there would be nothing they couldn’t do”.

Mitchell was able to see beyond the original stories of the cast, and describes them as “worthy of their own script.” Citing some extraordinary examples, amongst the diverse ensemble of school children was a 19-year-old who was a sophomore in high school and due to graduate, a child whose father was killed, and a child who was homeless. Mitchell claimed that their talent transcended the difficulties they were facing at home, and described how the process of musical theater was able to truly and positively change the lives of those who were involved.

“I see the potential of those kids. And that’s what most art teachers do. We single out students, recognize them. Dame Helen Mirren once showed me the contents of her purse, where she carried the watch of one of her primary school teachers. The reason she carried this watch around with her was because she had never forgotten this particular teacher who gave her a book which showed her the power of literature.”

People remember their teachers. They remember those teachers who recognize their talent and who encourage them to pursue it. **Therefore, Mitchell states, it is critical to develop real relationships and give honest feedback to students.** He gives an example of certain people on *American Idol* who cannot sing and the fact that it is unbelievable to us - as viewers - that they think they can sing. However, he blames the lack of transparency shared with them by their teachers and loved ones, who clearly have not given them honest feedback before they went on national television.

Mitchell also questions whether the biggest troublemakers in class are nurtured or punished, and advises teachers to look for the optimal ways in which these students can work. “Hand them an iPad or a musical instrument. Give them something that engages them and be that teacher who recognizes their talent.”

He describes how artists are highly sensitive - they may cry, and it is critical that they then need to maintain that ability to cry. Mitchell gives the example of Michael Jackson talking about the style of percussion that he would create with his mouth. At the time, Jackson described this as wanting to create his own musical





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Q U D W A

instrument. Mitchell defines this response as highly sensory: the ability to hear and imagine a musical instrument that has not been invented.

“It’s not what you’re looking at, it’s what you see,” explains Mitchell. **It is imperative that teachers regard artistic children with empathy** – we need to try to understand the world as they see it. He aims to inspire children to truly look around their environment and their own neighbourhood, and attempt to understand what is happening on their doorsteps. He then aims to help them make sense of that through his theater and arts classes.

“Finally, we need to help children understand that no single test defines their worth. Art is the heart of education, it’s the feeling. Intelligence without feeling is the very definition of a psychopath. And so many of us are offering our kids a psychopathic education because it’s missing the arts. Every kid should have access to a high quality arts education which enables them to see the world from a different perspective from the world that they are used to. Art is an elevated state of creativity.”

His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the UAE, made the following statement: “I am not a teacher, but from my experience I have seen so many talented politicians who were - in one way or another - artists. Many people in this room will be familiar with Sheikh Zayed, who was a poet. We see many examples of passionate leaders who have an artistic skill. We undermine them often and we do not value them enough. People do not appreciate enough the art that we have in schools, the education.”

In response to a question from His Highness about whether sports are another field which represent the arts, Mitchell concluded: “Many of the qualities that we teach in art are the same as those we teach in sport. I do see parallels. There is beauty in both. Where there is beauty there is art. If you are looking to cross-discipline then look for the beauty in your subject matter, and there you will find art.”

MAIN TAKEAWAY: Tomorrow’s world of technology requires students to understand and love art, and then apply their passion and sensitivity to their study of the sciences.

