

Erica Halverson - How the Arts Can Save Education Transcript

- Hi, everyone, my name is Erica Halverson, and I'm a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And I'm the mayor of Whoopensocker, a community youth arts program in Madison that engages elementary school students in creativity through writing, performance, and improv. I'll tell you some more about Whoopensocker later. In our time together, I'm gonna share some ideas from my book "How the Art Can Save Education" in the hopes of sparking a conversation among us about the ways in which we can use the arts to transform kids' lives for the better. The age of accountability in education is losing its momentum. Education is in a time of profound change. We are increasingly aware of how learning outside of school provides life-giving opportunities for our most vulnerable kids. The arts; dance, theater, music, the visual arts, and the digital and design arts offer us a way to reimagine what good learning and teaching are and how to design learning environments that work for all kids. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools and exposed ever-present inequities in education. And though it has been heart-wrenching for teachers, students, and families, the disruption has also offered us the opportunity to fundamentally rethink what education can be. Gloria Ladson-Billings has called for a hard reset on education and for us to reconsider the kinds of human beings we want to produce. In my book "How the Arts Can Save Education", I describe how the arts provide new models for learning that embrace the social, cultural, and historical assets that kids bring to the classroom. I also share how an arts-based approach to teaching focuses on risk-taking as the most important aspect of a successful classroom. I offer a framework that leverages how arts practitioners do their work to design learning experiences for all subject areas. Throughout, I use my own arts organization, Whoopensocker, as a model for how to reframe learning as acts of metacognitive representation, identity development, and collaboration. Oh, and lots and lots of joy. Before we go on, I wanna make a few things clear. Mine is not a book about arts education. There are many fine books on how to teach the arts, both in and out of schools, and I encourage you to read them all. What I am offering is something more. I use arts practices to fundamentally rethink what learning outcomes we should value, how we should teach, and how to design learning environments and experiences that can serve all kids. In my world, we are not teaching and learning the arts. The arts are teaching and learning. I use the terms arts education, arts practices, and art-making throughout the book. Across all of these, I'm referring to the arts as a collective set of disciplines where people produce things. Those things can be physical artifacts like clay pots or short films, or they can be ephemeral performances like a music concert or an improvised scene. Many of my examples are drawn from the performing arts because I have been performing my whole life. But this argument is inclusive of all forms where creative expression is involved. Okay, on with the show. I wanna talk with you today about how we can reimagine curriculum through the lens of design. An art-making perspective on the learning environment focuses on design as a process for creating where educators customize to choose and support a curriculum that works for their context and their students. While learning is a naturally occurring phenomenon, as situated learning experts Lave and Wenger tell us, learning something in particular requires

design. Design allows us to set the rules of engagement so that creativity can happen more readily within the constraints of the designed environment. We call these rules design principles, and I offer three arts-based design principles that structure learning environments for representation, identity, and collaboration. Design principle one: conceive, represent, share. The best way to teach something new is to take an idea or concept, represent it using the tools of a medium, and share it with an audience who has a reason to care about what you're saying. This principle follows the telling adapting performing model we use in Whoopensocker. Design principle two: assessment is authentic, embedded, and constant. Assessment is built into the structure of any art-making learning environment and is embedded throughout both the process and the products of art-making. In the arts, we use critique as a mechanism for assessment during the process, and we rely on sequenced representations to holistically capture process at the end. To assess products as outcomes of learning, we rely on external audiences to provide feedback in the form of reactions, suggestions, and recognition. All of these assessment mechanisms are authentic. That is, seamlessly embedded in the conceived-represent-share cycle. So no external measures have to be introduced. In a good art-making learning environment, assessment is happening all the time as a helpful component of the learning process. Design principle three: ideas first, tools second. New learners in art space learning spaces can get overwhelmed by the range of tools available. What does this button do? Where am I supposed to stand? What form of rhyming and meter should I use? Instead, I have found that we learn to use new tools best when we need them to accomplish a task around ideas that we care about. It is much harder to memorize math equations without needing to use them to solve a problem than it is to have a problem and then try to learn how a particular equation helps you to solve it. Ideas First, tools second means that we take a just-in-time approach to working with tools and materials, offering formal lessons on complicated tools only when learners need them to develop their ideas. Now, I wanna tell you a story that highlights these design principles in action. It is the story of my own community youth arts program, Whoopensocker. If you didn't catch that name, don't worry, you will. It is the middle of March, 2019. Spring break is looming on the horizon. And if you haven't ever been to Madison, Wisconsin, that horizon is gray, cold and wet. It is hard to find joy when the temperature never gets quite high enough to take off your scarf, except in a public school building where the heat is so intense and dry that the liquid in your water bottle evaporates before you can drink it. But there is excitement coming from inside the auditorium at Imagination Elementary School. It is Whoopensocker show-day, which means every student is filing into the room to watch a group of professional artists from across the city perform stories written by third graders from their school. This is the fourth year that Whoopensocker has been at Imagination, so older kids have already had their stories performed in past years. And some of the younger kids have seen past shows or have siblings who participated in the program. The Whoopensocker actors are already on stage warming up by playing the exact games, 3 Things, Zip Zap, Zop. They played with kids when they were teaching artists in their classrooms. Kids cry out, "There's Andy" or "Hi, Janine," and there's even an unexpected hug between a fourth-grader and a Whoopensocker teaching artist from last year who was just there to watch the performance. Amanda, the director of the show, calls for attention from the stage with our

signature, "Whoop it up!" Nearly the whole room replies, "Sock it to me!" They know the show is about to begin. The show represents the culmination of six weeks of artists' and residents' work in third-grade classrooms. Whoopensocker has been bringing teaching artists into classrooms in Madison since 2015. Our mission is to get kids, all of the kids, to express themselves creatively and to see their stories, poems, arguments, and plays adapted and performed by professional artists. When we enter into a residency agreement with a school, we ensure that we can work with the whole grade regardless of the kids' perceived ability status. As they say in the best Pixar movie of all time "Ratatouille", "Anyone can cook." Once a week, a team of teaching artists leads 90 minutes of classroom activities designed to inspire and stretch kids to write, draw, perform or dictate stories around a theme. In the first week, we introduce our own make-believe world, Whoopensocker City, and we walk through the basic components of a fictional story. After that, we choose a particular inspiration for storytelling. Writing stories from pictures, true stories, playwriting, and arguments designed to make a change. Each theme serves as the foundation for the skills and habits of mind we want learners to develop. In the final week, we collect the stories kids write throughout the residency and share them so they can adapt and perform each other's works. Whoopensocker, noun: something extraordinary of its kind. Calling our program Whoopensocker and creating a special place known as Whoopensocker City where the program happens is an intentional designed choice. It allows us to create a whole world that we can co-occupy during our residency time. Teaching artists, kids, and classroom teachers all become part of Whoopensocker City as a way to acknowledge that we are doing something different than we typically do in school but that all school people are welcome. Principals often visit Whoopensocker City. They come to classrooms and adjudicate arguments about whether pets should be allowed in schools, a favorite debate during make-a-change day. They make cameos and performances, usually as themselves, but sometimes dressed up as other characters. These are still school days, but they are Whoopensocker days. Whoopensocker City allows us to create a classroom space where all students can express themselves freely through writing and performance as individuals and as collaborators. Throughout our time, we tell stories in a variety of formats. We play theater games and introduce the day's theme in a whole group. On playwriting day, teaching artists solicit suggestions for characters and settings and then improvise through a short dialogue with actions that pairs of kids can then volunteer to reenact for the class. We also do a lot of story writing in small groups. Each classroom has enough teaching artists to keep the teacher-student ratio to around 8:1. This allows us to split the class among the teaching artists and work in small groups to create and then perform stories for the rest of the class. For example, on true story day, teaching artists tell the story of something that really happened to them and then help the students and their groups create a performance of that story for everyone else. There is also a lot of time during the residency for kids to work alone or in pairs telling their own stories. We encourage them to use whatever media of storytelling is most available to them; writing, drawing, cartooning, talking out loud for another person to transcribe in order to best express themselves. By third grade, we have found that many kids are worried about doing it right. Doing it right seems to include correct spelling and punctuation and the appropriate number of sentences or words. In Whoopensocker City, we

empower kids to write in whatever way makes sense for them and for their ideas. Our standard line when it comes to these concerns is we're really good at reading spelling, so don't worry about us. It's not that we don't care about spelling. It's more that we don't want the right form to get in the way of expression, creativity, and joy. Whoopensocker teacher artists later team up with classroom teacher partners to use story writing as a pathway for moving their students toward mastering standard spelling and grammar practices. Whoopensocker kids also write in whatever language is most comfortable for them. In Madison, there are a fair number of third graders for whom writing in Spanish is much easier than writing in English. This works for us since the schools we work in typically have bilingual resource teachers in the classrooms, and we try to have at least one Spanish speaker on our teaching artist team. There are also kids who speak in practice languages at home other than English, and they are eager to try out hybrid language practices. We've seen stories that have components of Mandarin, Arabic, Monge, Russian. Most of these stories represent a mix of kids current expertise in both their home language and academic English. Every residency, usually an entire grade of anywhere between 70 and 95 students, produces hundreds of stories. The Whoopensocker team collects the notebooks that we have given kids to write their stories in, and we read everything. That's right. We sit around a giant table, always with snacks, and we go through every journal. Every kid gets feedback from two of us in the form of within story notes and a short letter at the front of their journal, remarking on a particular memory from the residency that stood out to that teaching artist. We encourage kids to write everything down and tell them that they can fold over the pages that contain stories they don't want anyone to read. Occasionally that happens, and we respect their privacy. Though we don't see the kids in that final week of work, we pay our two teaching artists for their time, and we think of this feedback session as a critically important part of our model. The other thing that happens in that final week is that we start to identify which pieces from the residencies ouvrage we want to include in our totally original vaudeville-style sketch show that we premiere at the school for the authors, their peers, and the broader school community. Many of our teaching artists are also performers; musicians, actors, circus artists, MCs, dancers, and every residency culminates with a group of performers creating and sharing an hour-long show comprised entirely of kids' stories. The overall aesthetic for the show is what I refer to as a "Charlie Brown Christmas". That tree that Charlie Brown buys might look sad, but it's real, and with a little love from the rest of the kids, it comes to life as the beautiful symbol of togetherness that it's meant to be. Just like Charlie Brown and his friends, our performances are simple and evocative, and everything the kids say is taken seriously. This Whoopensocker company performance is where everything comes together. Each 60-minute show highlights about 20 student-authored stories told in short one to four-minute bursts of pure creativity. We aim to include as many student writers in each show as possible. And before each piece, the writers are called out by name in front of the whole audience to recognize their contributions. Any one show is likely to contain Broadway belting, a Drake rap, a performance art piece told with no words, and a young banana who pretends to be sick so her mom doesn't make her go to school. I'm gonna show you an example. The Whoopensocker classic, "I love Harrison Ford and You Can't Tell Me No". ♪ Harrison Ford is a good man ♪ ♪ He's 74 and a good actor ♪ ♪ Harrison Ford is a good man ♪ ♪ So if you're one of

those people ♪ ♪ Who tell me I can't ♪ ♪ All those non-encouraging people ♪ ♪ So if you're one of those people ♪ ♪ Then that's your problem ♪ ♪ Harrison Ford is a good man ♪ ♪ He's 74 and a good actor ♪ ♪ Harrison Ford is a good man ♪ ♪ The moral of the story to conclude ♪ ♪ Stick to your dreams ♪ ♪ Stick to your dreams ♪ ♪ No matter what ♪ ♪ No matter what ♪ ♪ People tell you ♪

- I love you.

- I know

- Our schools are in desperate need of new approaches to teaching and learning. Art-making spaces provide new approaches in the form of time-tested, proven practices for learning that draw on learners' identities and communities and allow makers to take control of their own learning. I don't wanna overwhelm you with specific arts practices that require years of expertise to achieve competence. Instead, I want to identify the pathways for ready access to arts practice that provide deep and meaningful connections to big ideas across disciplines. And though an educator's mastery of art form is not required to transform learning outcomes, teaching strategies, or the design of learning environments, collaboration with those who do have expertise is essential. My recommendations come in the form of three big ideas. Big idea one: honor risk taking as a core feature of teaching and learning. Educators must take time and space to scaffold risk for all members of their learning community. This includes educators who are coming to art space practices for the first time. No one is prepared to learn, much less engage in a production cycle of conceiving, representing, and sharing without a willingness to take risks. Modeling how to take risks and how to respond in ways that keep the flow of ideas going is the first big idea of building the arts into everyday teaching and learning. Big idea two: embrace identity and representation as core ideas, but do not mistake one for the other. Representation and identity are two primary outcomes of participation in arts practices. And while young people often use artistic representation to explore and share their identities, it's important not to romanticize creative expression. People use the arts to experiment with who they are and who they might become and to test out new concepts and ideas. We need to allow these expressions to live in a playful space of experimentation for testing out new ways of being. We wanna be careful not to define makers by what they create and not to conflate the art people produce with their understanding of who they are. Big idea three: take collective responsibility. You do not have to do this alone. All arts-based learning experiences are distributed across a learning ecology that includes formal and informal educators, young people, and a host of analog and virtual tools and resources. The knowledge built into the tools and techniques of art-making are a kind of asynchronous collaboration with prior generations of artists, and the practices of conceiving, representing, sharing, and assessing are actively synchronous collaborative activities. Becoming a participant in this ongoing art-making process allows you to take your part in keeping the conversation rolling. I can't promise you that embracing an arts-based vision for learning, teaching, and design will be easy, but the stories, examples, and ideas that I share in my book can help you to see how my colleagues

and I use the arts and art-making to bring joy to classrooms and to lead the way toward a more equitable and just educational future for all. Thank you so much.