

Submission for the Hawaii International Conference on Education:

1. Lessons Learned from Community Based Arts Educators
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6. Arts education is often celebrated in schools for teaching not only the arts, but skills that transfer to other subjects, in other words, “school skills.” However, when arts education is taught in a community organization, the arts frequently serve a different purpose. Many times community based arts educators have a different agenda than school based arts educators. After-school programs and community centers are more often than not concerned with life beyond school and try to impart “life skills,” such as manners and self-esteem. By looking at the missions and educational philosophies of a sample of community arts organizations, this paper examines what we can learn from community based arts educators about teaching life skills.

Lessons Learned from Community Based Arts Educators

Art Education

Student Paper

A look at how U.S. community based arts educators impart important life skills.

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Arts education is often celebrated in schools for teaching not only the arts, but skills that transfer to other subjects, in other words, “school skills.” However, when arts education is taught in a community organization, the arts frequently serve a different purpose. Many times community based arts educators have a different agenda than school based arts educators. After-school programs and community centers are more often than not concerned with life beyond school and try to impart “life skills.” By looking at the missions and educational philosophies of a sample of community arts organizations, we will see how the arts serve educators in teaching these life skills.

By their very nature, after-school programs and community organizations deal with life outside of school and therefore community based educators must respond to a different set of needs than school teachers. The Artists Collective, the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild and Kids of Survival, (K.O.S.), are all examples of community based organizations that employ the arts to give their students necessary life skills such as, learning to set goals, coping mechanisms and in some cases, an appreciation of the “good life.” All three of these organizations are located in economically disadvantaged communities and reflect the unique needs of these communities in their missions.

The Artists Collective, located in Hartford Connecticut, was started in 1968 by Jackie and Dollie McLean. Their mission was originally to provide arts instruction and prevent drug abuse, which was a significant problem in the neighborhood where they located their center. As cited in a portrait of the center created by Project Co-Arts the center is a “safe haven from

drugs on the street and from the devaluation of African-American culture and history in the media and in the schools.”(Davis, Soep, Remba, Maira & Putnoi, 1993, p.16) The center supports their goals with an educational philosophy that is based on the premise that students need to learn they are worth something. Jackie Mclean explains “the origin of many of the problems we have with our youth is the fact that they’ve been taught . . .whether it’s from the school system, television, whatever - that they come from nothing; they’re nobody; they’re thieves, they’re pimps all the worst things.”(cited in Davis et al., 1993, p.21) By valuing the African-American culture, providing quality music and dance instruction and creating a set of expectations the center helps students with the difficult task of discovering their own, positive identity, phrased simply in the portrait as the “process of being somebody.”(p.38) Although the center does emphasize the importance of good grades, students must maintain good grades to attend the classes, school skills are only one component of a larger goal. Beyond art and cultural education, the students at the Artists Collective learn to contend with the often difficult circumstances life has presented them.

The Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was also started in 1968 by Bill Strickland. Strickland grew up in the same neighborhood where he created the center and therefore understands the needs of the community well. The Guild’s main mission is to “build character and skills in personal, inter-personal, technical and artistic realms”(Jones, 1996, p.5) and to get their students into college. The Director of the Ceramics Program said “the expectation I have is for each and every one of [my students] to go to college...to see themselves through the expectations of going on to school after finishing high school, regardless of what everyone else is telling them.”(Davis et al., 1993, p.87) Strickland’s

educational philosophy is best summed up by Strickland himself “you’ve got to have excellence. Excellence in the physical plant, the teaching materials and the instructors. Excellence, excellence, excellence. It wears off and helps bring out the excellence in the students.”(cited in Hallowell & Heskett, 1993, p.2).

Life skills is a term used by the Guild and was defined by one teacher as “those ways of expressing yourself or behaving in public that enable you to become part of the mainstream.”(Hallowell & Heskett, 1993, p.4) For example, in a speech at the Harvard Graduate school of Education (March, 2002) Strickland said that students and students’ parents are expected to attend gallery openings of their work. At the openings, students are treated the same way professional artists are treated, i.e. served nice hor d’oeuvres and sent elegant invitations. Strickland believes the students reach a comfort level with “the good life” and acquire necessary social skills. By using ceramics and photography as a means to teach life skills to students, the Guild succeeds in sending 80% of their students to college, compared to the 20% that attend college from the Pittsburgh public school system (p.5).

Kids of Survival, K.O.S., located in the South Bronx, was created by Tim Rollins and operated from 19—to 19-- . Due to a lack of funding, the program is now closed. Rollins’ mission was similar to Strickland in that he wanted his students, at risk high school students, to attend college. His pedagogy included reading well known works of literature and creating artworks, frequently paintings, in reaction to the books. Nick Paley who interviewed Rollins and his students said:

This complex process of cultural production/politics operates at yet another more encompassing level. Compared to programs of traditional academic inquiry which rarely give students reason to connect their work with the forces outside

of the academy, Rollins and K.O.S. have forged links between the artistic/educational /cultural activities and institutional and cultural organizations in the larger social structure, demonstrating the valuable contributions young people can make to cultural interpretation. (Paley, 1995, p. 40)

In addition to the process of connecting the books to the students' personal experiences, Rollins, who becomes a father figure to the children, used the successful completion and the popular appreciation and sale of the artworks to empower his students.

The paternal approach Rollins utilizes highlights another unique difference between school based arts education and community based arts education. Rollins has gone so far as to take away a student's Nintendo play station for a month (Rothstein, 1996). Although Rollins may be an extreme case, all of the organizations break the barriers of the standard teacher/student relationship seen so often within schools. The educators in these organizations may give out their home phone numbers to students or pick up parents at their homes to drive them to meetings. Dollie Mclean expects the children to "shower every morning, come in here clean...to walk in and say 'Good morning' or 'hi how are ya doin?'" (cited in Davis et al., 1993, p. 35). These are skills that may not improve their grades, but will certainly improve their interactions with others and therefore their lives. The Artists Collective refers to this unique relationship as creating a sense of "family"(Davis et al., 1993, p.31), the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild refers to it as supplying "mentors"(Jones, 1996, p.6), but for all the organizations, the close, personal relationship between the educators and students is an essential element in teaching life skills (Davis et al., 1993, Jones, 1996).

Another similarity among all three organizations is the provision of high quality arts instruction and facilities. As Bill Strickland suggests by providing excellence the students can

achieve excellence (Hallowell & Heskett, 1993, p.2). In addition to providing exceptional arts instruction, both the Artists Collective and Manchester Craftsmen Guild have moved their centers from humble neighborhood buildings to self designed, multi-million dollar facilities. In a description of the Guild produced by the Guild the move was explained as follows, “the former environment does not command respect from the students because the environment does not respect the students or show caring on their behalf. Learning, therefore, is less likely to occur. The latter environment...is more conducive to learning” (Jones, 1996, p.11) Although K.O.S. did not have funds for a state of the art facility, Rollins exhibited his and his students’ works in what was probably the best contemporary art gallery in New York City (Geller & Goldfine, 1996). Whether the funds are available or not, all the centers give their students the most exceptional, high quality experience that they can and therefore expect excellence in return.

The Artists Collective, the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild and Kids of Survival are all excellent examples of centers that do not teach art for arts’ sake, although high quality art instruction is not sacrificed, but rather use arts education as a way to empower students. Their missions and educational philosophies clearly define the centers as organizations that deliberately teach life skills rather than school skills. By using the arts as a vehicle to set high expectations, to establish support systems, to help students see beyond their present circumstances, help them set goals and find their identity, community arts centers provide students with the life skills necessary to succeed in life that they may not be learning at school or at home.

The question then becomes: what can school based arts educators learn from community based organizations? Should teachers take on a more active, parental role? Should teachers perhaps pay more attention to the classroom by creating an excellent environment that

respects the students and therefore demands respect? Perhaps teachers can work with local cultural arts organizations to create more opportunities for students to work with the arts outside of school. The arts frequently serve as a vehicle for teaching numerous lessons beyond art, so adding life skills to the list of added bonuses and learning from community based arts educators seems like a small, but important step.

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