

The Arts, Artists & Teaching: LIBERATING LEARNING

Observations from a Student: Jane L. Polin, Philanthropic Advisor
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Christopher attends high school in rural Woodstock, Vermont, and is a member of the school's award-winning SPEAK-CHORUS. Through his involvement with this dynamic performing arts organization, he has developed numerous abilities: language facility, stage presence, teamwork adeptness, and production skills, among others. He has also gained tremendous insight into the inner workings of music and theatre as art forms from his own full participation: mind, body, and spirit.

Another Christopher attends Louis D. Brandeis High School on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, just about two miles north of Broadway's Theater District. In all likelihood, this Christopher will have never seen a live theater performance, let alone participated in the making of live theater, even though he attends school not far from one of the greatest concentrations of the theater arts in the world.

In the 2001 landmark school financing case *Campaign for Fiscal Equity vs. State of New York*, Justice DeGrasse addressed the role of the arts in education. In his ruling, access to a complete education—an education that includes the arts—is the right, not the privilege, of students attending public schools in the state of New York. He went on to acknowledge the potential special benefits of an arts education for students from disadvantaged circumstances.

From rural communities to inner cities across this nation, some students have access to excellent arts learning opportunities in and out of school settings. For those fortunate students that excel in their primary and secondary preparation, their college years may be spent at institutions of higher learning that also sustain diverse arts learning opportunities. Arts learning experiences before and during the college years can be life-defining for our nation's students, transforming experiences that can shape and inform both their professional livelihoods as well as their personal lives.

As a student of how the arts can impact learning, I will attempt here to reflect on lessons learned in this emerging field of arts learning, and identify some issues that demand our immediate and longer-term attention. My goal here is to provide a framework for our upcoming dialogue that can lead to productive individual and institutional action.

For all too many students, the response to the question “what’s your favorite class?” is recess, the time that they are set free. Both students and their teachers are too often trapped in classrooms, confined by a limited curriculum, and, as a result, their potential for learning is constrained. As in the finest tradition of our best liberal arts colleges, the arts and artists have the proven ability to set these students and teachers free: to liberate learning.

Knowing and Understanding the Value of Arts Learning

Americans value education as the enabler of opportunity for all. For purposes of our upcoming dialogue, we will accept that the arts and artists have a powerful role to play in this education, in meeting the most fundamental needs of our society and economy. We will agree from the outset that learning in and through the arts can contribute to the making of meaningful lives and rewarding livelihoods. In previous writings, I’ve often made the following assertion for the 21st century workplace value of learning in and through the arts:

...We now recognize the need to encourage the development of broad abilities beyond technical skills. Employers across all sectors have a tremendous need for workers who are creative, analytical, disciplined, and self-confident. We need employees who can solve problems, communicate ideas, and be sensitive to the world around them. And a growing number of our nation’s leaders recognize that hands-on participation in the arts is one of the best ways to develop these abilities in all young people.

For those of us devoted to advancing the role of the arts in the lives of all learners, the most basic questions guiding our work are now changing. Ten years ago, the

central, relentless question was: So what? Can you prove that engagement in the arts has an impact on learning? Recent research tells us, yes, such engagement does make a difference.

The *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* research initiative invited leading researchers to examine the impact of arts experiences on young people; the researchers did not set out to prove or disprove any particular theory regarding arts learning. Yet as a result of their varied inquiries, compelling and measurable evidence was revealed. UCLA Professor James Catterall examined the impact across a national database of students as well as specific schools in Chicago; he and others found that the arts could help level the educational playing field for students from disadvantaged circumstances.

Stanford University researcher Shirley Brice Heath found that the “roles, risks, and rules” of the arts also fostered higher achievement for youth in out-of-school settings. Harvard Project Zero researcher Steve Seidel found that the arts could both energize and reenergize teachers; he and then Harvard PACE researcher Dennie Palmer Wolf examined how effective arts learning communities are formed, and their significant impact on students, teachers, and artists. The ArtsConnection researchers detailed how the arts can enable students to overcome obstacles to success.

Especially with the Teachers College study, “Learning In and Through the Arts,” the *Champions of Change* research also suggested a new model for the arts and overall learning. Rather than limiting the impact to either learning in a specific discipline or the ability to promote learning in another discipline, the arts support a dynamic model in which learning in one domain stimulates and supports learning in others. Instead of a one-way street, a “rotary of learning” emerges that provides greater access to higher levels of achievement.

As reported in the executive summary of *Champions of Change*, the key findings across all the studies were:

- The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached.
- The arts reach students in ways that they are not otherwise being reached.
- The arts connect students to themselves and each other.

- The arts transform the environment for learning.
- The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people.
- The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful.
- The arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work.

The *Champions of Change* researchers also found that high-quality arts learning experiences had the following characteristics:

- They enable young people to have direct involvement with the arts and artists.
- They require significant staff development.
- They support extended engagement in the artistic process.
- They encourage self-directed learning.
- They promote complexity in the learning experience.
- They allow management of risk by the learners.
- They engage community leaders and resources.

Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development, the new research compendium from the Arts Education Partnership, will soon provide additional evidence from scholarly studies done across the country. We can now respond more fully and thoughtfully to the “So what?” question with significant research findings, even though advocates and skeptics alike will pose still unanswered questions.

The relentless question “Who cares?” can also be better answered. In the recent research done by the Ad Council and Americans for the Arts in preparation for an arts education public service campaign, the findings were also conclusive: Parents want arts experiences for their children. The parents and other adults did not need to be convinced about the value of the arts in the lives of children. The issue for them was how to provide that experience, especially if their local schools did not support arts education programs. As a result, the current public service campaign was built around a message seeking action: “Art. Ask for More.”

The recurring debates of the last two decades are also becoming irrelevant. In the early 1990s, the loudest discussions in this field concerned the merits of a discipline-

based approach to learning the arts versus integrative approaches involving the arts and other curricula. That debate is now largely silenced: We need both. We need discipline-based approaches to learning the arts that can provide content and technical depth, and integrative approaches that can enhance and deepen learning in multiple disciplines, including the arts.

Similarly, the debate concerning the value of in-school versus out-of-school arts learning experiences has also faded. Arts learning advocates feared that designating support for the arts in after-school and weekend programs would diminish their presence in the core curriculum. With the increased recognition for the arts as part of the core curriculum in the recently passed *No Child Left Behind* federal education legislation, and the continued support and demand for extended learning opportunities in such programs as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, the reality is that progress is being made on both fronts, if not in all communities. This debate has quieted for the same reason as the previous one: We need both. We need in-school and out-of-school arts learning opportunities.

As a result of this evolution, the term *arts education* tends to be used to describe school-based programs, while the term *arts learning* encompasses arts experiences linked with learning in and out of school. For the purpose of the discussion here, I will use this broader term, arts learning, to describe arts experiences, with and without trained artists, also with and without professional teachers.

The new dominating question is “Now what?” How do we provide high-quality arts learning experiences for all students? So many of the critical issues for the arts learning field now center on implementation. What models or exceptional practices exist? How do we replicate them? How do we improve our existing models and practices? What are the gaps? How do we address these gaps? What are the missing resources—human, financial, and technical?

The Student Arts Learning Experience

Regardless of where he lives or goes to school, Christopher needs access to high-quality arts learning opportunities, both in and out of school. As a primitive typology, here are examples of what he might be experiencing:

- **Disciplined-based, in-school programs.** Depending on the commitment and resources of a given community, conventional classes in specific arts disciplines may be offered, and even required, toward high school graduation. Based on the most recent “fast response” survey of the U.S. Department of Education, these classes are most likely to be given in art and music; theater and dance rarely have full-time or even part-time teachers present at the high school level.
- **Integrated curriculum programs.** Classroom teachers, working with or against the culture of a given school, may seek out artistic partners to enliven and enhance the learning environment. In many instances, these teachers have gained knowledge about integrating the arts into their classroom practices through professional development programs, and reach out to local artists, such as the Everett Dance Company in Providence, Rhode Island, who can help teach the basics of high school physics.
- **Extended learning opportunities.** In many cases, high school students experience the arts through after-school, extracurricular clubs or out-of-school programs. Whether these programs are held at the school or another site, such as a Boys & Girls Club or similar youth development center, the content and quality of the arts learning experience tends to vary directly with the quality of the adult teaching artists involved.
- **Artist-in-residence programs.** An organization such as Studio in a School places visual artists in spaces within schools; the assigned artists create actual working studios within the schools. Art teachers who continue to pursue their own artistry on a professional level outside their schools are also more likely to nurture arts-making, not just arts-appreciation, in their students and colleagues.
- **Arts-institution based programs.** In some communities, students may take their arts coursework at local arts organizations. As arts organizations and their leaders commit to community outreach as an institutional responsibility, education pro-

grams have grown dramatically. Overall, museums and other visual arts institutions have a stronger, longer tradition of viewing education as a core program than performing arts organizations.

- **Community-based arts programs.** Jacob's Pillow, the world-renowned dance center based in Becket, Massachusetts, recently supported a multiyear arts learning program focused on Jazz Tap. This arts learning initiative engaged multiple organizations throughout the region—schools, arts organizations, colleges, and even places of worship; the participants ranged from the very young to the very old. Regional performing arts presenters, such as the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, based in Louisville, Kentucky, have often taken the lead in developing education programs involving individual artists as well as smaller community-based organizations.
- **Arts training programs.** Fine arts colleges and conservatories have regularly offered pre-professional training to high school students identified as gifted and talented. These same institutions are also now establishing programs for students at all levels of proficiency, from beginner to expert, and that better prepare their own graduates for work as teaching artists. At the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, the Learning for Music program has changed music and learning within local elementary schools, but has also altered the Conservatory's own education and training programs.
- **College- and university-based programs.** With an explosive growth in student service learning programs and a constant need to bolster town-gown relations, many institutions are increasing their interaction with local elementary and secondary schools through their arts resources, such as The Hood Arts Center at Dartmouth College. For more than two decades, Wesleyan University students in Middletown, Connecticut, have worked with local teenagers at Oddfellows Playhouse, a theater program they founded together. At other institutions, AmeriCorps, Community Impact, and other service learning programs have contributed to fostering these relationships by involving the arts and artists.

Liberating Learning: Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers

Our Christopher who lives in Woodstock, Vermont, is engaged with at least one of these programs; the Christopher in New York City may have access to such experiences, but the connection has not been made for him. What are the visible and hidden barriers for the arts-deprived Christopher and other students like him?

In *Gaining the Arts Advantage*, a community commitment was identified as the essential factor to providing high-quality arts learning experiences for all students throughout a school district; that report also cited 12 other factors critical to success. Harvard Project Zero Executive Director Steve Seidel speaks of the need for the commitment from the individuals “inside the room”—students, artists, teachers—as well as those “outside the room”—administrators, parents, taxpayers, and so on. In *Artistic Talent Development for Urban Youth: The Promise and the Challenge*, both the obstacles and success factors for individual students are identified and described in detail.

To help us map the gaps that leave a student, a classroom, or even a community isolated from the arts and artists, I created the grid found in Diagram A. While arts learning occurs through and, sometimes, in spite of systems of vast complexity, the key components are here: student, teacher, artist, and school setting.

Diagram B maps how Christopher might experience the musical arts and artists in an arts-rich school supported by a committed community. Diagram C explores how the New England Conservatory has expanded its educational offerings from a narrow emphasis on the professional preparation of musicians at the tertiary level to one that now includes both elementary and secondary level program offerings.

Examining where an individual or institution “lives” within this diagram might help us better understand what is or is not happening in a given field or community. The grid lines themselves can represent a well-defined program focus or a limiting boundary, depending on the situation. Only in the most rare instances, where resources are abundant, can a single institution live within all nine boxes in all artistic fields. But through an inclusive, ongoing process, such as the utilization of the *Community Audit for Arts Education* devised by The John F. Kennedy Center for the

DIAGRAM A

	elementary	secondary	tertiary
student			
teacher			
artist			

DIAGRAM B: MUSIC PROGRAMS

	elementary	secondary	tertiary
student	suzuki violin program	orchestra/ensembles	college radio station
teacher	creating original opera program	partner in teaching an integrated course	coursework in portfolio assessment
artist	in-school residency	community music school teacher	artist-in-residence

DIAGRAM C: NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY PROGRAMS

	elementary	secondary	tertiary
student	learning through music	weekend programs	conservatory degree programs
teacher	learning through music	seminars/short courses	non-degree programs
artist	lecture/demonstrations	private lessons	master classes

Performing Arts, individuals and institutions can better understand how they do or can contribute to an overall arts learning vision for their community.

As we begin to engage in a dialogue around “now what?,” the grid can be used as a simple diagnostic tool for understanding where we are and where we might go in advancing the role of the arts in learning for any given individual, institution, or community. Since each of the nine boxes or any of the six columns or rows could easily command an in-depth discussion, I would recommend we pay special attention to these two rows and one column: artist, teacher, and tertiary education.

In addition, these particular issues suggest bridges to be built and/or barriers to be broken, and questions for our upcoming dialogue:

- **Teaching/professional development resources:** Several recent high-profile reports, such as *Investing in Teaching*, have made the compelling case for improving the pre-service and in-service preparation of teachers. Yet few have identified the arts as an area for intensive preparation. Expanding arts learning opportunities for current and future teachers and their administrative leaders is certainly the foremost vehicle to the most cost-efficient and rapid growth of high-quality arts learning opportunities for their students. How can we best prepare the most teachers?
- **Artist/professional development resources:** Even if an artist undertakes the coursework required for teacher certification, he or she often lacks the adequate preparation for performing well within educational settings. The field of arts learning misses the contributions of Affiliate Artists, the national organization that readied countless performing artists for work in schools and other community settings; this founder-driven organization folded around ten years ago and has not been replaced. How can we now best prepare the most teaching artists?
- **Diversity within the arts learning profession:** Yolande Spears, the capable Education Director of The Bushnell, a regional performing arts center located in Hartford, Connecticut, is one of the very few visible African-American leaders in this field. Effective partnerships have been established on only a limited basis with

organizations that focus on the needs of minority children and youth. Program leadership—artists, teachers, staff, board—within either arts organizations or educational settings rarely reflect the community’s complete demography. How can we prepare a more diverse set of leaders for the field?

- **Emphasis on the role of technology:** Listen to most college or university leaders and you’ll probably get the lecture on how globalization and technology are transforming higher education. Even though the arts and artists have profound roles in addressing both issues, and often represent the very content and form for the use of technology, they are absent from the conversation. How does the arts learning agenda link to the learning in and through technology agenda?
- **Emphasis on the student:** Children and youths have limited rights and resources in determining their pre-college learning experiences; adults rule. By creating more vibrant arts learning experiences that involve their adult caregivers, principally parents and teachers, not only will these adults benefit, but they also may help provide the additional resources to sustain high-quality programs. How do we engage more adults in arts learning?
- **Disconnect with measures of the educational improvement/reform agenda:** In an era that will be noted for a preoccupation with high-stakes testing, the thoughts of artists and teachers concerned with learning in and through the arts are unheard in the conversation and media coverage, except when “trade-offs” between “test prep” and education programs are discussed. Yet arts learning leaders must also be concerned with the issue of accountability, whether achievement is measured through a performance, a test, or some other means. How do we achieve accountability? Measure our results? Connect with the educational improvement/reform agenda?
- **Program quality:** As the arts learning field grows to encompass programs that range from exposure to immersion in the arts, program quality is a primary con-

cern. Weak programs damage credibility and practice within the field. In certain areas, such as K–12 dance education, an inventory of “best practices” does not even exist. Practitioner knowledge is also often limited concerning “proven processes,” such as project-based learning, which offer exemplary and instructive models from the sciences and other disciplines. As the field evolves and expands, benchmarking, evaluation, and other efforts that can address and improve program quality are essential. How do we improve arts learning program quality?

- **Credible and measurable evidence:** To ensure both greater accountability and better program quality, more high-quality arts learning research is needed. Recent research has advanced the field and raised the level of discussion. Research that goes beyond program evaluations could provide new knowledge that would make additional program investments even more effective. The current national agenda also now demands “scientifically-based research” in many resource allocation decisions. The 1997 Arts Education Partnership publication *Priorities for Arts Education Research* makes recommendations that are still relevant today. How do we best activate the research agenda?

Nourishing a Flourishing Field

As the result of countless individual and institutional efforts in communities large and small, artists and teachers are finding ways to improve teaching and learning in schools and other settings here in America and around the world. While the work to be done in building bridges and breaking barriers is enormous, the accomplishments are real, and arts learning is emerging as a flourishing field of practice and policy.

Leadership in the arts and education exists largely at the most local level, but supportive players are being established at other levels, too. The Arts Education Partnership, funded primarily with resources from The Department of Education and the National Endowment of the Arts, is now entering its fifth year of programming and has become a vital convener and disseminator for the field. The education program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts also plays an active

national role in supporting and recognizing local efforts. Technology initiatives, such as The Kennedy Center’s ArtsEdge and Young Audience’s new Arts4Learning on-line programs, have the potential to help transfer knowledge across the field without borders.

The funding within the field is almost entirely local, too. At the national level, the National Endowment for the Arts is arguably the most consistent and long-running player; they also demonstrated that policy can change both well and quickly in updating their Education and Access funding guidelines to reflect the findings of *Champions of Change* within a year of its release. Private national funders have not yet been active in providing long-term, field-building support, but have expressed interest in the relationship of arts learning work to their existing programs in the arts, education, and youth development.

To grow the arts learning field, “gardeners” are also starting to appear to support a new “profession.” This author was recently approached about the possible launch of a “journal” for teaching artists; such a journal is a sure sign of a desire to nurture individuals within a profession. Other efforts, such as the National Conversation On Artist Professional Development & Training, engaging a consortium of institutions, are also identifying critical needs and resources for the field. Such initiatives, which look beyond any single individual or institution or community or proverbial “plant” in this field, are essential to creating a sense of whole, and a sense that arts learning is not just random, isolated activities that are not linked by common standards and concerns.

While the Arts Education Partnership and other national entities have made major contributions in meeting the needs of primary and secondary school audiences, efforts to link K–12 arts learning initiatives with higher education have been extremely limited to date. The Association of American Colleges for Teacher Education and other higher education associations have developed some modest projects, but they have not yet begun to address the vast pre-service and professional development needs for both artists and teachers. By better reflecting on connections to higher education, pathways within secondary and even elementary education may also be redesigned.

To liberate learning for Christopher in Vermont, New York City, or anywhere else, he needs to work with an artistic teacher or teaching artist that is both passionate and prepared. In our upcoming dialogue, we will have the rare opportunity to see how we collectively, as individuals and institutions, can take action that will nourish such artists and teachers, and, consequently, all their students, within this emerging field of arts learning.