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Journal for Learning through the Arts

Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8jc1p385>

Journal

Journal for Learning through the Arts, 6(1)

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Publication Date

2010

DOI

10.21977/D96110022

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Arts Impact: Lessons From ArtsBridge

For most arts educators it is a luxury to find time to write and reflect on past teaching experiences, because they are quickly jettisoned off to the next school project. As a young dance educator, I may have spent as much time driving from school to school as I did in the classroom. This exposed me to the city in ways that most residents rarely see, and I became well versed in the expansive geographies of Los Angeles County. At the time, I simply filed away that invaluable knowledge as “experience” and did not reflect on it through critical writing. Arts educators don’t often think of themselves as community based researchers, but they do as much fieldwork as social scientists. Years later, as a teacher of teachers, I now believe that writing about what we do as arts educators can improve our teaching practice and inform community based research to strengthen arts education programs. Reflection on action helps arts educators clarify their aims, refine practices, and better understand the impact that their actions have on participants.

This essay focuses on an ArtsBridge case study at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA Arts). ArtsBridge America is a network of programs based in colleges and universities that “confronts the problem of the elimination of the arts from K-12 schools...provide[s] an alternative means to reach out to disadvantaged learners.”ⁱ



Fig. 1 Bret Harte Middle School students study tango with ArtsBridge Scholar Tanitra Flenaugh.

First, a brief overview of recent relevant literature is offered to help readers understand the connections between educational attainment, arts education, and specific social justice issues related to race, ethnicity, and gender. The overall research is informed by my participant observation over a four-year period as the Program Director for ArtsBridge at UCLA Arts. My reflections are complemented by quantitative data from participant surveys during two academic years (2007-2008 and 2008-2009).

Program impact analysis addresses both K-12 youth and university students, or “ArtsBridge Scholars.”

It is argued that praxis oriented arts education, emphasizing K-12 and higher education partnerships, can have positive impacts on both youth and university students in the arts. These outcomes suggest that arts education is a viable component to college preparedness at under-resourced schools and an effective focus for community engagement in higher education.



Fig 2. ArtsBridge Scholar Mehvish Arifeen teaches Sufi vocal music workshop.

Issues and Interventions

Instruction in every artistic genre (i.e. dance, theater, music, visual art, and, increasingly, media) is mandated by the federal government, as outlined in the State of California’s Learning Standards, and constitutes required knowledge for college preparation by satisfying aspects of the A-G course requirements for admission to a public university (i.e. University of California, and California State University systems). In addition, recent research has found that arts education provides crucial skills for participation in the dynamic regional creative economy (Otis Report 2008).

In California, access to arts education is widely accepted as a social justice issue. Recent research has found that K-12 students are neither adequately nor equally prepared in the arts (Woodworth 2007). This problem limits future educational attainment and job opportunities for youth who lack access to arts education in elementary, middle, and high school and can neither meet California’s A-G college admissions requirements nor cultivate the creative skills necessary to compete in the regional economy.

Equally perplexing to the fact that youth are underprepared in the arts is that fact that arts education teachers are not being systematically prepared in our institutions of higher learning. The preparation of arts educators at the university level often falls into the abyss separating arts and education programs and is further limited by the need for

credentialing reform. Teaching credentials do not even exist in each artistic discipline that the state government recognizes as core to student learning. For example, California teaching credentials do exist in Visual Arts and Music, but are not offered in the equally relevant disciplines of Theater and Dance. Under performing schools are under tremendous scrutiny to comply with state guidelines by hiring only credentialed educators. While the noble aim of this precedent has been to increase the professional level of all educators, especially in high needs schools, there is no way to comply with the credentialing mandate in the arts until credentials are offered in each creative discipline. This Catch-22 breaks down in the circuit between supply of qualified arts educators and school demand for their services. In addition, in the high stakes environment of high needs schools, it is critical for arts educators to know more than their craft. High impact arts educators are now able to include arts integration practices and are valuable team players in their communities by supporting student literacy and empowerment.

The importance of identifying successful interventions for educational achievement cannot be underestimated. California is below the national mean for high school completion (Crissey 2009). Census data also demonstrates persistent inequalities connected to gender, race, ethnicity, and foreign or native-born status. For example, census data suggests that systematic obstacles are disproportionately hindering educational attainment for African-American and Latino populations. In 2007, 17 percent of African Americans and 13 percent of Latinos in California completed a bachelors degree or higher, as compared to 31 percent of Non-Hispanic Whites and 50 percent of Asians” (Crissey 2009:10). In addition, Latinos and African-Americans earn less for the same labor that their White and Asian-American counterparts, and comparable worth disparities continue to privilege men’s earnings over the same work done by women.

Workers with a bachelor’s degree, on average, earned about \$20,000 more a year than workers with a high school diploma. Non-Hispanic whites earned more than other race groups...[and] Black and Hispanic workers earned less at all attainment levels (Crissey 2009: 2-3).

In 2007 women earned “72 percent at the high school diploma level and 74 percent at the bachelor’s degree level,” compared to men at the same educational attainment levels (Crissey 2009: 3).

Given these disconcerting findings, the question can be asked: Does educational attainment influence economic opportunity? Despite persistent inequalities by race, ethnicity, and gender, the answer is unequivocally affirmative. There is a direct correlation between educational attainment and economic stability (Crissey 2009).



Fig. 3 Centennial High School students perform step dance at UCLA symposium.

What, one might ask, does educational attainment have to do with ArtsBridge? While each ArtsBridge program site is distinctive, every ArtsBridge Program in the University of California system is held accountable to statewide Student Academic Preparation and Education Partnerships (SAPEP) goals. The SAPEP mission is to:

Raise student achievement levels generally and to close achievement gaps between between groups of students throughout the K-20 pipeline so that more educationally disadvantaged students are prepared for postsecondary education, to pursue graduate and professional school opportunities, and to achieve success in the workplace (University of California 2005).

Evaluation allows organizations to assess their ability to achieve their mission and provides valuable insights that can help improve program quality on the ground. Both individuals and groups can learn from critical reflection, and ArtsBridge is no exception. To measure each program's ability to meet SAPEP aims, participating UC campuses are held accountable through annual evaluation reports and analysis of program activities and participants. In addition to what is required through SAPEP, I collected additional information at our ArtsBridge site to both help improve the program, better grasp participant outcomes, and satisfy my own scholarly research interests.

In addition to its significance for college preparedness, arts education has also become increasingly necessary for participation in the Los Angeles regional economy. Analysis of the *Creative Economy of the Los Angeles Region (2008)* found that creative sector jobs have been recognized as "one of the largest business sectors in the [Los Angeles] region," generating "one million direct or indirect jobs in Los Angeles and Orange Counties" (2008: 1). In addition, jobs in the creative industries are on the rise, growing 2.8 percent between 2002 and 2007 (2008: 23).

A systematic lack of preparation in the skills needed for youth to compete in the creative economy has social justice implications for the next generation. It is

contradictory to disinvest in K-12 arts education in a region where the creative sector is a major force driving the economy, but that is in fact the current trend (LACEDC 2008). *The Unfinished Canvas* (Woodworth) found that a whopping “89% of California K-12 schools fail to offer a standards-based course of study in all four disciplines—music, visual arts, theatre, and dance—and thus fall short of state goals for arts education (2007: 6).” In addition, “students attending high-poverty schools have less access to arts instruction than their peers in more affluent communities” (2007: 4)

Solutions to these problems are attainable with proper attention and sustained effort from different educational sectors. Specifically, Woodworth suggests that educational institutions “develop a long-range strategic plan for arts education, dedicate resources and staff, and provide for the ongoing evaluation of arts programs (2007:4).” In addition, the report recommends “improv[ing] teacher professional development in arts education...[and] consider[ing] credential reforms” (2007:4).

While this research focuses on school based arts education, it is also important to recognize that artists act as educators in numerous ways, including: 1) as credentialed teaching specialists in schools; 2) as teaching artists in schools or communities; 3) as teaching artists after school in community settings; and, arguably, 4) through live performance, exhibition, or Internet services (such as those quickly growing on YouTube). In Los Angeles, arts education in K-12 classrooms is generally taught by teaching artists (creative experts and culture bearers who do not necessarily hold teaching credentials), or arts specialists with a credential to teach.

Systemic Change

Structural changes are required if we are to meet the aim of full access to a quality education that permits multiple strategies for processing, analyzing, and problem solving. In this case, creating systemic change requires taking a broad view of the field that emphasizes the connections among different educational institutions, as well as changes within specific schools and universities.

ArtsBridge provides a useful opportunity to look both within and among schools for educational reform. The program raises intersecting questions: 1) how can under-resourced K-12 schools better prepare K-12 students in the arts; 2) how can higher education prepare the next generation of arts educators and researchers; and 3) how can we work together across the K-20 pipeline to forge partnerships that create solutions?



Fig. 4 Gage Middle School students perform modern dance at UCLA Symposium.

In California, the task of credentialing teachers in the approved arts disciplines has primarily been relegated to the California State University system, while research oriented universities have generally steered clear of this issue. However, there is a precedent for inclusion of arts education programs in research universities. For example, reputable research universities--including Harvard University, New York University, and the University of California, Berkeley--have begun to offer graduate degrees in arts education. Of the three aforementioned programs, only New York University offers a useful teaching credential in the arts along with the graduate degree. The flexibility of providing both a graduate degree plus a credential offers graduates greater options to pursue careers as arts administrators, researchers, or classroom teachers.

While at UCLA, I was able to review the resources offered in arts education at the time and to forge partnerships to expand our arts education offerings. When I began directing ArtsBridge in 2005, an undergraduate music degree in collaboration with the Graduate School of Education and Information's Science (GSEIS) Teacher Education Program (TEP) prepared and placed music teachers in public schools. In addition, an array of valuable arts outreach programs provided public services to schools. ArtsBridge was able to address the credentialing issue in dance by collaborating with GSEIS's Teach LA/Teach Compton program and the Los Angeles Unified School District's Arts Education Branch and provide a Physical Education: Dance Emphasis credential option that prepared, credentialed, and hired teachers for work in high needs schools. We found new solutions by leveraging our different resources. This is something that every university can do by taking inventory of its educational assets and forging partnerships to attain common inter-disciplinary goals.

Currently, the recession has brought drastic budget cuts that have severed and/or destabilized recent infrastructural achievements in arts education, including K-12, higher education, and non-profit arts organizations. Relevant to this discussion, 2009-2010 brought the elimination of the full time ArtsBridge Director position at UCLA Arts, and

the Los Angeles Unified School District eliminated its Arts Education Branch. Time will tell how the current cuts will impact Los Angeles youth and teacher preparation in arts education. Within the context of fiscal restrictions and programmatic change, it is important to take a proactive stance. I have attempted to do so by: 1) recording and remembering local histories of action through community based research; and 2) assessing program outcomes to ascertain whether or not former investments of energy and capital made an impact.

ArtsBridge Program Outcomes

This section shares statistically relevant program outcomes from the UCLA Arts ArtsBridge program from 2006 to 2009. This statistical summary is best seen in tandem with the rich qualitative reflections offered in the process compendium, *Art = Education: Connecting Learning Communities in Los Angeles* (Shimshon-Santo, et al, 2010).

With the capable guidance of Mark Hansen, at SRM Evaluation, we developed original logic models, convened focus groups, and refined survey tools to evaluate the program. Developing new logic models for program evaluation allowed us to outline clearly proposed connections between creative service inputs and projected short term outputs and long terms outcomes. The logic models also allowed our program to include areas of assessment that went beyond participants' interest levels in attending college. After one Lynwood High School student named Ulysses explained in a focus group that ArtsBridge "helped students find their true self," we wanted our evaluation methods to include participants' perceptions of self and peers, community awareness, and the vision of their future.

The focus groups we convened included a diverse spectrum of participants, including youth, ArtsBridge alumni, host teachers, school principals, and district representatives. The different perspectives provided by youth and adults increased transparency, inspired momentum, and allowed the groups to include and value the perspectives of different types of stakeholders.

Finally, we developed new survey tools that allowed data input and statistical computation to be done online through SurveyMonkey as well as in a paper format. The online shift proved challenging, since our site belonged to a broader network that was not digitizing at the time its survey tools. However, while this was initially cumbersome, it was nonetheless a positive attempt to bring evaluation methods forward to meet 21st century procedures. In addition to asking some new questions and digitizing the answers, we decided to include in our site student surveys, rather than simply host teachers' or ArtsBridge Scholars' perceptions of their students, to allow young people to express their views on program participation in their own voices. Also, the emphasis on quantitative data was matched by collection of valuable and qualitative assessments through student work samples, lesson plans, journaling, and academic writing. Finally, the assessment processes, products, and perspectives were shared with the broader public through: 1) school site culminations; 2) an annual symposium at UCLA; and 3) a community-based publication.

During the first year of the previously mentioned assessment, we were able to include only post-participation information. However, by the second year, we were able

to perform preliminary, mid-level, and post participation surveys of youth, scholars, and host teachers. These processes increased the viability of data collected, proved useful to program planning on the ground, and, also, satisfied SAPEP requirements. (While the data collected from host teachers was also useful to the program, this essay focuses solely on outcomes for participating K-12 youth, and UCLA student scholars.)

Year One

Vivid psycho-social impacts emerged from the 2008 data regarding self-awareness, self-esteem, and positive peer relationships among youth. Over half of the youth (55%) reported that they discovered new talents or abilities in themselves as a result of program participation. The same was also true of their vision of their peers. Fifty percent of the participants reported that they discovered new talents or abilities in their classmates as a result of program participation. Youth also reported that their views about schooling and their future life opportunities shifted substantially as a result of program participation. Importantly, 67 percent reported that, through participation in ArtsBridge, they became more confident about [their] future." This finding tracks a tangible rise in self-confidence and hope. Student views about higher education also changed dramatically: 64% reported becoming more interested in going to college; 49% became more interested in a career in the arts; and 67% reported greater confidence in his/her ability to attend college.

The 2008 impact data for ArtsBridge Scholars was equally as positive as it was for the students that they were instructing.. They reported that the program helped them better value their roles as artists in society and envision their own future goals. After participation, 100% of the ArtsBridge Scholars strongly agreed with the notion that artists make positive contributions to society, and all of the scholars reported that they were proud of their artistic abilities and how they were using them. 72% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped them identify future goals upon graduation.

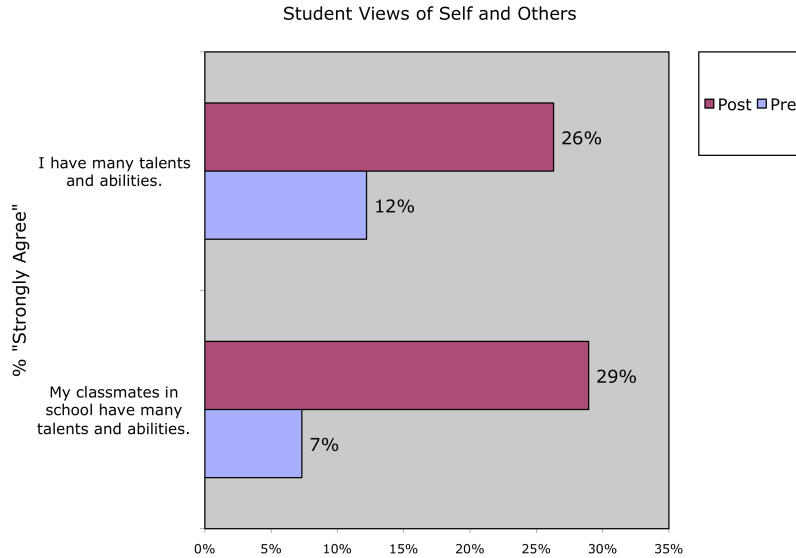
Also interesting, 33% of the 2008 ArtsBridge Scholars indicated that UCLA had prepared them "extremely well." In comparison, when asked about their experiences with ArtsBridge, 56% indicated that their experiences had prepared them "extremely well" to pursue their future plans. This finding suggests that the scholars believe that ArtsBridge provided better, or more relevant, training or preparation for pursuing their goals than UCLA. Also important, 82% reported that through their experiences as ArtsBridge scholars, they were more likely to pursue careers as teaching artists.

Year Two

In 2009, pre and post surveys queried youth in the following three areas: academic language in the arts; perception of self and peers; and future interest in college. Since the full range of findings cannot be properly discussed within the confines of this article, I will focus on the area of greatest statistical impact -- self-esteem and positive peer relationships.

Given the low levels of access to arts education in ArtsBridge partner schools, many youth are denied the opportunity to cultivate their areas of creativity. We wanted to find out if increased opportunities for creative expression might help students identify new avenues for self-expression and personal success. Quantitative analysis suggests an

exponential rise in positive impact on self-perception, as well as opinions of classmates, as a result of program participation. The results are shown in the table below.



The ability to perform pre and post participation surveys provided a clearer picture of impact.

At the start of the program, only 7% of students strongly agreed with the statement, "My classmates in school have many talents and abilities." At the end of the program, 29% strongly agreed -- about four times the initial percentage. Overall agreement ("strongly agree" and "agree somewhat") also increased substantially -- from 24% to 58%. Concerning students' self-concept, 12% of students at the start of the program strongly agreed with the following statement: "I have many talents and abilities." At the end of the program, 26% strongly agreed. Overall agreement increased from 39% to 50% (Hansen and Shimshon-Santo, 2009).

With positive impact observed among youth participants, how did program participation impact the ArtsBridge Scholars? As we built capacity, and program rigor grew between 2005 and 2009, we created new courses to support teacher preparation and required a two to three quarter commitment, roughly one academic year, from the emerging arts educators. This allowed them to meet weekly under faculty guidance and to build a teaching community with their peers. By the 2008-2009 academic year, it became clear that the program's rigor was satisfying for some and unsatisfying for others. Either way, the program provided an important experimental space for young artists to gain professional preparation, and determine whether or not they wanted to include teaching in their professional or academic profiles. This realization was a valuable lesson for an emerging artist early in his or her career.

For the scholars who enjoyed arts pedagogy, many continued on to graduate programs in arts education at other institutions, including Harvard University, New York University, the University of California, Berkeley, or California State University credentialing programs at California State University Dominguez Hills or Long Beach campuses. Other scholars were hired directly into Los Angeles charter schools and taught visual art or dance education full time while they pursued a credential. Still others were accepted into the Teach for America Program. Other alumni took alternative paths by pursuing graduate studies in their artistic genres, which involved an educational component such as new media designs for educational games, or taught their craft in the community.

To enhance our understanding of the long term impact of program participation on UCLA students, we surveyed ArtsBridge Alumni from 2005-2009. Alumni were asked to respond to a survey regarding their current endeavors, future plans, and to rate how participation in the program prepared them for their lives after graduation.ⁱⁱ Survey results found that the majority of ArtsBridge alumni (86%) had gone on to teach art after graduation. This included teaching in public schools and non-profit art centers. Many explained that their ArtsBridge experience prepared them for leadership to initiate new arts education programs and to teach the arts in ways that involved a wellspring of integrated topics from new technologies to dance, college preparation to young women's empowerment, and educational outreach. Since graduating from UCLA, 47 percent of the alumni respondents had pursued further schooling, and another 47 percent planned on completing further studies in the future. Once again, they previewed the program more favorably than their overall university studies. Thirty-three percent of the alumni claimed that UCLA prepared them "extremely well" for the work they were now doing, while 67 percent rated their ArtsBridge experience as preparing them "extremely well" for their lives post graduation. Alumni identified two salient skills developed in the program as particularly important: 1) curriculum development; and 2) community participation. One respondent explained: "ArtsBridge really helped me cultivate a sense of independence toward my work; ArtsBridge engages students at a level that entails more responsibility--not only to oneself, but to their supervisors and students. I feel like it prepared me to teach in any environment in California, if not the U.S., and I'm very grateful for that experience."



Fig 5 Jefferson Elementary School students study the color wheel and learn to mix colors.

In summary, responses from youth and scholars demonstrate significant professional, personal, and academic, impact from participation. For youth, the findings suggest that program participation was a positive tool for developing personal and social value among students in under-resourced neighborhoods. For UCLA students, program participation was ranked more valuable than for their overall general education, provided real world experience that they found useful post graduation, and helped them clarify their future goals.

Conclusion

I began this research by advocating for reflective teaching to improve teaching practice and community based research. I then introduced the general aims of ArtsBridge America and presented the case study of the ArtsBridge site I had directed at UCLA between 2005 and 2009. Next, a brief overview of relevant recent research emphasized three areas: 1) how educational attainment relates to poverty in California; 2) the importance of the creative economy in Los Angeles; and 3) the failure of California to reach federally mandated goals in arts education--particularly for under-resourced neighborhoods. This general background was used to frame the ArtsBridge case study. Next presented was the State of California's college preparedness goals as elaborated through SAPEP, explaining how ArtsBridge programs in the University of California system are held accountable to SAPEP goals. Finally analyzed in the research were program outcomes for K-12 youth and university student participants.

This case study suggests important roles for higher education partnerships with under-resourced K-12 schools. Data elucidates a positive impact from program participation for both K-12 students in high needs schools and university arts students at UCLA. The findings demonstrate that participation supported educational attainment, as well as increased satisfaction with schooling.

Substantive improvements were also found in perception of self and peers, as well as self-efficacy. In her study, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem*, bell hooks discusses the historical roots of negative perceptions of self and peers and defends the importance of building a positive self esteem for personal and social uplift. She writes, [the] "combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust...[are] the tools we need to build healthy self-esteem" (2003: 213). This suggests that the positive impact on self esteem found through ArtsBridge may be due not only to the creative impulse of artistic practice itself, but, also, to the program's success cultivating ongoing, reliable, caring relationships among individuals and groups in high needs learning communities and the university.

While there is growing recognition of the general importance of creativity in education (Robinson 2001), this analysis finds that creative pedagogy can also support broader social justice aims when linked to long term community partnerships that connect the K-20 pipeline. In order to promote personal and social uplift, all students, regardless of the neighborhoods in which they are raised or the schools they attend, deserve the opportunity to identify and cultivate the creative skills required for participation in higher education, and in today's innovative creative economy. The lack of arts education opportunities for Californian youth requires broad based systematic efforts to increase

access to youth and to prepare future arts educators.

Higher education in general, and departments and schools of Education and the Arts in particular, are uniquely positioned to collaborate and prepare a new generation of artists, educators, leaders, and activists who understand how creativity feeds into educational reform and social change. Symbiotic community partnerships, such as those cultivated through ArtsBridge, can facilitate meaningful connections between inner city schools and universities.

Uniting the K-20 pipeline in the arts to foster educational and creative achievement is the impulse driving the collaborative work at ArtsBridge. Our mission has been to improve learning conditions in high needs schools, prepare a new generation of artists and arts educators to hone their skills in urban settings, and create space in the university for rigorous praxis oriented arts education. Through thoughtful collaborative action, ArtsBridge sparks a range of connections and pathways for participants to cross over into the future to which they aspire.

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ⁱ www.artsbridgeamerica.com

ⁱⁱ Fifteen alumni responded to the survey. Of the respondents, 20% participated during 2007-2008, 40% during 2006-2007, 33% during 2005-2006 and 13% during 2004-2005 academic years. While at UCLA, 57% of the respondents were World Arts and Cultures majors, 36% were Art majors, 7% were Design|Media Arts majors, and 7% were Music majors. 93% of the group participated in ArtsBridge as undergraduate students.