

TRANSFORMING LIVES, CHANGING COMMUNITIES: ARTS IN A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines children and adolescents in their artistic development from working with mural artists on fundamental levels to the point where a project can be completed using their skills gained within a setting of a positive community. Today young students and adolescent can receive a good art education from the Philadelphia Art Mural Program. In the process of this program young students can complete valuable objectives while examining many avenues of human communication and behavior, while at the same time students explore the value and development the young artist can experience.

Introduction

Let me begin with an overall observation of education in my homeland of Taiwan. A relatively new democratically based culture, the subject basics have been influenced by main land China. Traditionally, learning was delivered with the teacher offering statements and facts in the form of lecturing, while the student listened. The listener was then expected to accept the facts as they were given. The student was expected to implement the facts fed within the structure of learning for life's survival. This can be referenced as a "banking" method of education, as Paulo Freire (1993) termed the concept in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He reflected on this approach to education thus:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store, but in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away - through the lack of creativity, transformation, and (at best) a misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p. 72).

Being a rather formal arrangement, education in Taiwan has changed very little over time, and the rigid structural forms do little to encourage the young students to proceed creatively with the information given them. The teaching of facts is the goal, and an ongoing sense of oppression in regard to the students' development of thinking for themselves is grossly overlooked. The students' potential is often underestimated.

Arriving in America my first objective was to learn English. With this task on-going I was also exposed to a new society not only in the ways of thinking and living in general but also in the areas of fundamental education. Having experienced the educational system of two societies, that of Taiwan in

the East and that of the West in America, I have revitalized my thinking about academic education. For the reality of education is as an institution that it is influenced and controlled by the world at large and learning needs to reflect such real life factors not just facts.

American trends and thoughts originally bring a built-in growth pattern to the educational institution. Growth is the nature of the country, American culture being a pioneering one. We must realize that institutions outside of the public educational system offer a unique influence on students and should be respected as not all individuals are eligible for a private or charter school education.

Education and Social Change

Almost any act of creation is a combination of history, a vision of the future, and a combining virtue of self, community, risk, and deliberation. These combinations of experiencing life events and exposing ourselves to mistakes can bring trepidation after all, our basic nature can make us content with what we have and therefore afraid of risk-taking. It is difficult to create without risking. It is not absolutely impossible to take the leap to experiment, but it takes time to begin the act of risk taking. In my own experience of teaching, I can feel comfortable teaching in a “safe” environment, such as Washington Irving High School, a regular established school system. After all, my upbringing was within traditional education in Taiwan and had less interaction between students and environments outside the classroom walls. Yet, even in the United States while experiencing education in teaching the discipline of art at Washington Irving High School in New York City all of the learning took place within the classroom. Everything happened within four walls between the students and the teachers. As education researcher, Paul Cobb (2001) points out, “The motive of school instruction might, for example, be competent performance on a relatively limited range of tasks as assessed by teacher-made, textbook, and state-mandated test of skills. For example, the overall motive of the forms of instruction nurtured in the professional teaching community might be mathematical understanding as assessed by the teachers’ observation and documentation of the students’ reasoning” (p. 469). To the extent that formal education is being related to text book knowledge as mandated by state accreditation, it can leave out personal creativity and life experiences so that learning becomes mundane. Thus, as Cobb points out “state mandated tests of skills” may be necessary but creativity within formal education is also a necessity.

By chance circumstances, my first introduction to Jane Golden, the founder and the director of Philadelphia Mural Art Program (PMA), at a national conference in Philadelphia was a revolution to my way of visioning teaching; this woman and her after school programs demonstrate her learning participants (the students) also learned and worked with the community at large. Jane Golden germinated the seed of a distinctive vision; namely of joining education with community events. She invited me to participate with this unique art program; I took the risk. While teaching and working with youth with many experiencing life problems and struggles the formal school environment in New York City, I also became involved with kids from the Philadelphia area who were not only dealing with general problems but also with escalating delinquency: from truancy to budding criminal backgrounds. The latter experience takes place outside of the “four walls.” Presenting quite new challenges, the different educational setting presented itself in Jane Golden’s program was an extension of the classroom. Right before me was a new concept of teaching by creating. Making the city of Philadelphia an art gallery became a unique fascination.

The strategy of the Mural Program is to rebuild community. Originally starting with true graffiti artists, the program has grown to the point where the young citizens are being encouraged to view how present day graffiti has evolved into an ever-visible communication with entire neighborhoods; the

**TRANSFORMING LIVES, CHANGING COMMUNITIES:
ARTS IN A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

program makes visible how their involvement can be something quite vital. The themes presented reflect local culture and characteristics in an attempt to raise students' awareness or limited assumptions about diverse cultural identity and ideologies that exist within a country. The program encourages students to think about overall community needs, while also experiencing different cultural identities; this exposure brings an awareness of multi-cultural reality. The participating students are learning to express themselves in ways that impact and empower local community arts, culture and education. It is a constructive way of becoming part of the neighborhoods, for working with individuals of the neighborhoods as well as with various artists is a type of personal involvement.

As part of American culture, I see my future goal and destination as an educator as related to my investigation moreover my investigation contributes to the field of education and educators who wish to have community involvement and creativity through art as key to a good learning environment. My objective then is to explore the differences of the educational systems of the East and West and the continuing influences of the West, as it develops and has developed, and thus affects Eastern society. Much has already influenced the East but as I study and live within Western culture I believe there is still much to be learned and implemented especially in the area of creativity within education worldwide. This is not to look at the West as the ideal; along with the political ramifications that the West also faces education also has its struggles and continued growth.

The opportunity originally presented itself in Philadelphia Mural Art program as an extension of the classroom. For example, with mural art in the local community, students are provided real learning situations, perceive and experience real problems while learning to resolve problems on their own, with other students or with their art teachers, community volunteers, community residents and mural artists. The situation has evolved into serving as role models. With the Mural Art Program's concept, the environment and the community build on the evidence of the product and the response by the community and artists in residents at the program. As Education philosopher, Maxine Greene (2000), points out in her book *Releasing the Imagination*, "Community is not a question of which social contracts are the most reasonable for individuals to enter. It is a question of what might contribution to the pursuit of shared goods: what ways of being together, or attaining mutuality, or reaching toward some common world" (p. 39).

When students become involved within their own community they are working in teams or groups and can increase their learning and people interaction skills. Art connects the student to themselves and each other. Creating an artwork is a personal experience, even if done in a group situation. The student draws upon his or her personal resources to generate the result. By engaging his or her whole person, the student feels invested in ways that are deeper than "knowing the answer." After the student has satisfied his or her self by contributing on an artistic level, the community can then appreciate the art. Educator and researcher at Brown University and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Shirley Brice Heath (1999), states, "Effective youth arts organizations build strong pro-civic and pro-social values in young people, enhancing opportunities for youth to reshape the climate of their neighborhoods through local family entertainment, socialization for younger children, public service work, and promotion of the arts in their communities" (p. 20). While this insight applies well to the Mural Art Program the students in the Philadelphia Mural Art program are integrating themselves into certain neighborhood communities they will come with their own experiences. Assimilating their own experience with those of other students and neighborhoods involved is indeed a key goal the program is designed to accomplish.

Personal Observations

As an artist and art education researcher in the award winning Philadelphia Mural Art program (PMA), I have had the privilege, for the past eight years, of watching young art teachers and young graphic designers evolve from teenagers into adults while they develop their confidence and talents in the arts. During the past eight years, hundreds of young people, ages 12-19, have produced scores of videos, plays, newspaper articles, poetry, mural designs, photography, and collages while attending youth summits and art showcases. These young people have also graduated from high schools at a higher rate than average youth in Philadelphia, and they go on to colleges. Many of the young people who have participated in these programs graduate from their selected colleges in comparison to the national average of city schools of Philadelphia.

I have been given an opportunity to observe the Philadelphia Mural Art program, the Village of Arts and Humanities, and Build a Bridge¹, and the relationship between youth and young adults who have been involved with a variety of community based youth art programs. I long wanted to know what the after effects were for the young people who experienced the above mentioned programs and moved on to either college or the work world. How did their experience with an out-of-school based arts and youth development program affect their identity and developmental growth?

More specifically, by way of the above questions I want and discover in my research to have the opportunity to hear the voices and views of those young people who spent significant after school time in their adolescence in these out-of-school learning programs where assisting with not only their art work but a follow-up on their school work (homework) to reinforce positive development was the one of my primary goals.

My qualitative research and participatory interests focus on a number of factors that contribute to the artistic development of children, adolescents, and adults as reviewed broadly in community and within society. My projected audience is multiple. My initial thoughts would be that this would be a great opportunity for educators in the area of the arts to develop and initiate new formal curriculum within structured, school-based education.

There have been several high quality studies that offer evidence of the positive impacts of community-based programs that integrate arts education and youth development. Federal and States Arts agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Prevention, Americans, for the Arts (1998), and the National Endowment for the Arts and National Governors' Association Center, for Best Practices (2002) have recognized the importance of the fusion of arts learning and positive youth development and there have been many articles written in art education and after school education periodicals about the success of such program designs. Even with this personal research, there are many community-based youth programs where there is still a lack of understanding and resources to support such high quality learning. This emerging field is one that merits further examination.

Therefore, I feel there is a need to shed light on the scope of the practice and methods of community arts learning (in the variety of arts genres) and youth development. By painting the big picture of the philosophies and methods we can then zoom in and situate a study of a particular community-based programs and services and their impact on the individual youth participants. Then, we can zoom out again to assess how those findings can impact the field. I would also like my research to benefit the field of community based art programs. I have conducted a qualitative research study that give the young adults, who have since left high school, and have grown into adulthood, an opportunity

¹ Two programs in Philadelphia similar to the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

to reflect on and analyze their journey as people who once belonged to a supportive community arts learning environment.

Review of Literature

The research article, *YouthARTS Development Project* (Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1998), found the collaborative efforts of local arts agencies in Portland, Oregon, San Antonio, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia included a controlled two-year research study (1995-1997) where the three cities rigorously evaluated their arts programs for at-risk youth. Data on the results of the demonstration projects were evaluated by an independent research firm under contract with the Justice Department. They found out art programs can effect meaningful, positive change in the lives of young people most at risk. Researchers under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Justice found that when compared with control groups of young people not involved in an arts program, participants in youth arts programs showed a better attitude towards themselves and their role in the world. There were also fewer new court referrals and, for those repeat offenders sentences tended to be less severe. An increased ability to express anger appropriately and to communicate effectively with both peers and adults also became apparent. The report also found the youth participating had an increased ability to stick with a complex task through its completion became evident (Clawson, Heather and Coolbaugh, Kathleen Youth, 1998).

Another research report called *Massachusetts Cultural Council YouthReach Initiative: Impact Evaluation*, written by Madison (1997), provides an independent analysis of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's YouthReach Initiative, funding arts-based youth development programs for some of the state's most vulnerable young people. Included in the research were extensive pre-program and post-program measures of student attitude, life skills, and personal self-esteem. This quantitative data was supplemented with qualitative findings from focus groups of parents and young people themselves (Anna, Madison, 1997). Dr. Madison's report was followed up in 2002 with a survey of YouthReach students' post-high-school plans. The program evaluations demonstrated that youth have learned to take their life more seriously demonstrating a more mature outlook in responsibility and in cooperation in working with others. This report not only gives crucial evidence of life skills that prepare young people for college, the workforce, and world beyond but also shows immediate results in less truancy and in high school graduation statistics. After participating in YouthReach program, the number of students who reported that they liked school doubled. In 2002, 100% of high school seniors who participated in a YouthReach program graduated. Eighty two percent of those students are now in college.

In the research article "Champions of Change: The Impact of Arts on Learning Arts", published by Education Partnership and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Washington, D. C. (1999), builds on previous research in the arts and learning, Champions of Change explores why and how young people were changed through their arts experiences. It features articles by nationally-recognized teams of researchers and includes multiple studies that range from an examination of data from 25,000+ students from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey to a study of two education programs conducted by Shakespeare and Company (Fiske, Edward, 1999).

Key findings from this research article are:

- The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached and connect students to their own person and each other.
- The arts transform the learning environment by providing a unique focus for social interactions and engagement.

- The arts provide teachers, parents, and adults -- individuals that are rarely given sufficient or significant opportunities for their own continuing education -- with an opportunity to participate in lifelong learning.
- The arts provide new challenges, exposure to professional artists, and potential mentors for successful students that have already outgrown their learning establishments.
- The arts foster the generation, development, and communication of new ideas and, therefore, directly connect to the development of skills needed in the workforce (Fiske, Edward, 1999, pp. 26-27).

Analyzing the research article, “Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons from School Districts that Value Arts Education” published by the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership, Washington, D.C. (1999), Pia Moriarty, Ph.D., (2004) examined the practices and conditions that create and sustain district-wide commitment to arts education for all students are identified in this two-year study of American school districts.

Key findings from Pia Moriarty's research article addresses and points out the involvement of many aspects of society:

- Active engagement of all types of individuals in the community including parents and businesses.
- A supportive policy framework provided by the Board of Education.
- Well-articulated visions for arts education from superintendents.
- Collective support from a cadre of principals.
- Encouragement of effective teachers of the arts in the continued pursuit and mastery of their art forms as well as teaching competence (Moriarty, 2004).

These issues can all be applied to art education as dimension, proportion, following design and diagrams must be learned and followed through, especially if a major project is going to be completed successfully.

Vygotsky's (1960/1981) themes of learning and development also have influenced my conceptualization of my research. A primary tenet of Vygotsky's psychology is that individual mental functioning is inherently situated in social interactional, cultural, institutional, and historical context. Therefore, to understand human thinking and learning, one must examine the context and setting in which thinking and learning occurs. Youth development has been looked at carefully over the years, especially in the field of psychology. But increasingly, the field of the learning environment of education has gained more of a role in how an individual is understood, especially in terms of psychological development. In this paper, I have integrated youth development theory and practice by applying foundational theory and leadership while also focusing on academic concepts to my concentration-specific work of creating and execution of mural art namely within urban communities. I assess my own strengths and weaknesses as a youth development leader, lot at an organization's effectiveness in funding, resourcing, and supporting the needs for implementing youth development. I will be using and integrating youth development theory with the practices used in the after school art programs.

I have looked at the creativity of individuals becoming involved within their local communities on an urban setting and how specific outreach programs available to students on were developed and made on an after school basis. I want to define my research, analysis, and look at multiple sides of the approach to figure out how a combination of formal education in the creative arts can help the

individuals involved in the program to become more expressive. I anticipate my interest of research may offer an encouragement of effective practices for teachers of the arts in the continued pursuit and mastery of their art forms as well as teaching competence.

Projected Methodology

My method of research for this project has been quite extensive. Through my work and through my reading, listening as well as holding conversations with colleagues and professionals have been of invaluable support.

Given my extensive review of the literature I have found a pilot study of practitioners and researchers conducted in 2010 – 2012. I found that the current studies describe programs that have a huge variety of philosophies, program designs, and practices, as well as artists, youth and community involvement. A variety of socio-economic geographies in local cultural institutions, community centers and informal settings were involved:

- The Surdna (2002) study looks at interplay of artistic and personal development.
- Heath's studies from 1987 through 2009 look at a variety of programs to assess the young people's language development, risk taking, rule making, and role playing.
- Champions of Change (1999) looks at transference of arts learning to academics, identity development and resilience.
- NEA and Youth Reach grants (Massachusetts Cultural Council, Colorado, and Ohio Art Councils) support community arts & youth development projects (1997).

While these studies address the impact of community arts and learning in broad strokes there is no research that deeply explores the actual ways of making and experiencing the arts in language and metaphorical thinking. Knowledge and skills, in the medium and materials are used for exposure and cultural experiences and leadership opportunities, etc. All display a manifest interest in the intrinsic and instrumental impact on the individual youth. This analysis has also led me to appreciate the critical role of social relations in individual lives, whether in households or in classrooms, and the paramount importance of these relations in understanding human activity, especially how mental activity can be developed and explored. Meanwhile, the above cited studies employed methods of observations, surveys and focus groups of the young people currently engaged in these programs. I have similarly used some of these methods. However, there is a dearth of research that includes longitudinal studies on the intrinsic impact on the individual learner once they leave these community arts programs and become adults negotiating their way in the world. I want to build many synergistic relationships with individual youth and teaching artists by interviewing with them; I hope such a phenomenological approach will support the application/implementation of my research findings.

Type of Study

In the book, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (Creswell, 2007), the research method scholar John W. Creswell has given a definition and background of Phenomenological Research as

A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a

phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. To this end, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon. This human experience may be phenomena such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery. The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Creswell, 2007, pp. 57-58).

In this study, I cultivate a phenomenological study, a phrase of qualitative researcher and writer John W. Creswell, about issues of the collected data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2007).

The study will be an investigation of individual youth and how their past experience in out-of-school based arts and youth development programs impacted them. I want to know what role that arts currently play in their lives. I want to know if these young people, in fact, become artists, use the arts in their work or become passionate audiences of the arts. As noted above, “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. To this end, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Thus, in a similar way I will investigate and go about finding this phenomenon; namely, to see what has happened with the students after their involvement in the program and how it has influenced their life either from a positive or negative point of view. Interviews will be necessary but must be objective. Listening to what the former student really has to say will be of utmost value.

I, as a community art researcher, will delve into various multicultural youth community situations, familiar and unfamiliar, to evaluate what is happening in the practice of useful artistic and academic skills. Using skills such as observation, interviewing, analysis of both primary and secondary sources, application of relevant theories, and responsible treatment of both subject and audience will lead to an acceptable presentation of results.

Site

I have been given the opportunity to do participatory and qualitative research collection on local concerns: witnessing, analyzing, and putting words into action by being involved in the Philadelphia Mural Art Program. Moreover, I have been given an opportunity to analyze the relationship between youth and young adults from the above community based art programs.

This research will also involve and adapt literature analysis, qualitative research, and content analysis. A phenomenological study will be the main focus and will explore and give the young adults, who have since left high school and have grown into adulthood, an opportunity to reflect and analyze their journey as people who once belonged to a supportive community arts learning environment. I also intend to test and verify theories and purposes that which will pertain specifically to this particular research.

Participants: Who and Why

I wish to pursue a current analysis of former participants in these programs that have moved on to either college, college graduates, or the work force. I wish to investigate how their experience with an out-of-school based arts and youth development program influenced the participants’ identity development and growth into adulthood, for I believe this subject captivating and useful as it will help qualify and

quantify how participants can give insight into changes such programs may offer for current leaders and donators. More specifically, I wonder what aspects of their art learning and youth development experience influenced their current work and what effect such a worldview may have if indeed they see themselves as activists in their communities.

To help build a foundation for my methodology another major reference research method book that I reviewed was *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and Social Services* by I. E. Seidman (Seidman, 2005). The focus of this book is on in depth interviewing process for graduate research. Seidman places tremendous emphasis on the value of human experience and meaning, which can be ascertained from successful interviewing. The book successfully sweeps from the philosophical core meaning behind an interview, to the highly detailed elements that can be used during the interview. In the introduction of the book Seidman (2005) notes that his lengthy career as an educator, administrator, scholar, and professor have contributed to his research. A practical approach of my subject has actually been its hands on, where I want to interview individuals and find out how their experience with an out-of-school based arts and youth development program influenced the participants' identity development and growth into young people in fact.

I have interviewed many participants during their time in the related programs and have found them willing to share their thoughts and perspectives while actively involved. Additionally, I also have access to the programs mailing lists that are maintained and I can also discover an alumni gathering place where these adults gather and exhibit a friendly atmosphere. These facts alone make individuals and opinions readily available.

Collection of Data

In his book, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (Creswell, 2007), points out the key dimension of good collection procedures:

Data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Often data collection is phenomenological studies consists of interviews and multiple interviews with participants. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. Other forms of data may also be collected, such as observations, journals, art, poetry, music, and other forms of art. Van Manen (1990) mentions taped conversations, formally written responses, accounts of various experiences of drama, films, poetry, and novels (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

Following such recommendations, I have identified a group to work with and investigate initial history. I have defined consistency by developing three or four stages during the interviews with a logical progression of questions. Working within the community about social thinking I have asked questions about social and aesthetic thinking and assumed nothing.

As Creswell suggests, the intrinsic routine of a Phenomenological research is seeking to give an in-depth description of the project from interviews with individual youth participants and community residents. How does an individual's story communicate something about the larger story of my ethnographic experience, of the organization's broader (or deeper) impact-on individual lives, or on the quality of locally-lived life? The process of individual development within the context of community should thus be raised to a conscious level as it is what the outcome of the researching is serving. This responsibility should be that of the "I" as the art educator and as a leader can help the

individual's bring out their own relationship dynamics in relation to the community at large (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

My qualitative research work has been logged by writing field notes, journal entries, observations, urban research, data collection, contemporary documentaries and interviews with the sites of programs in the Philadelphia Mural Art Program. As a youth worker/leader, while working with directors, I obtained insights from my interviews by analysis. These are from my “primary sources” of research. My “secondary sources” revolve around the published scholarly works and youth programming based on youth development theories which I bring to bear as I analyze some major issues in my sites of programs.

My own decade of practice and long-standing relationships with scores of young people who participated in some community arts programs where I taught and served include the following: my work as an art director at Jiang’s Art & Services in Philadelphia; as a teaching artist in Philadelphia Mural Art Program, art classroom teaching at Washington Irvine High School in New York City, and practice leadership as a fellow in Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Service (IRIS) in New Haven, Connecticut. Drawing on these experiences, I communicate here how an individual’s story will convey material about the larger story of ethnographic experience, of the organization's broader (or deeper) impact-on individual lives, or the quality of locally-lived life.

Ultimately, I see my destination and vision as an investigation shown by my research of how organized artistic programs can shape and contribute by informing the local educational venues and government about how community art educators can deepen our work to better design and assess our programs. To best serve our young children’s development into healthy, caring adults and human beings who have rich artistically and cultural experiences as individual active members of their communities and society at large is the overall goal such exploration is necessary.

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