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Reaching Across Community Lines: How Informal Visual Art Educational Programming Bridges the Gap

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Introduction

Economic disparity in underserved communities is in large part responsible for a lack of access to quality visual arts education. The communities most in need are often hit first when it comes to funding the arts, and the students suffer these financial consequences. How can we ensure those underserved communities receive a complete education with the visual arts? What other ways can access to the visual arts be provided to schools?

Informal visual arts education spaces can serve as an essential bridge to fill this gap by providing community based visual arts education programming. By utilizing local informal art education spaces, schools can tap into their resources and students will be able to attain an art education that serves them and their community. Creating a coalition with museums and non-profit community groups allows formal art educators the additional support they need. This also allows students access to a broader visual arts education as they engage with local artists, museum educators, and after school programs. This culture of collaboration also helps informal art education groups serve their community by gaining a better understanding of the people they serve through different forms of collaboration. Informal education spaces can move past basic facilitation by looking outward at their community to build ever widening connections (Marche, 1998, p.13).

While working with local school districts as a museum educator, I have seen first hand how the lack of a visual arts education affects a student's growth. By the museum building a relationship with the school districts, local artists, and other community groups we were able to begin a discourse that bolstered community engagement and led to programming that created a deeper connection. How can we express to other communities and organizations the importance

of these collaborations and community engagement? We will explore ways to reach across

community lines to provide access and bridge the gaps.

How to Serve the Underserved

How can we begin to identify the underserved and how to better serve them? It is no

secret that most lower performing schools lack visual art programming and that the link between

the two is very evident. In Laurie Hicks editorial *Addressing the Underserved*, she states that

" Although arts access has increased recently there still remains a disparity for those who come

from lower economic means, the elderly, those with disabilities and those in underrepresented

minority groups. Art education serves many different populations; however, some are better or

more fully served than others." (2013, p.291). While Hicks acknowledges the disparity, she also

states that more scholarship is needed to gain a better understanding on how to reach people on

an attainable level. So where do we even begin with tackling such a hurdle? There are several

approaches including collaboration between several organizations, inclusive engagement, and

interactive programming.

There is not a great deal of research into underserved populations art experiences

which highlights the larger problem. "Before the field of art education can effectively address the

persistent educational disparities across different sociocultural and economic groups, we need

deeper understandings of entangled sociocultural and political processes that create and conceal

underservedness." Kraehe and Acuff go on to explain what that means, "The term

"underservedness" moves us away from conceiving of populations, and instead draws attention

to cultural articulations and material conditions that prevent certain groups from fully accessing

and benefiting from the resources and opportunities for effective education, including high-

quality art experiences." (2013, p.294). By recognizing the disparities and openly acknowledging them, then can organizations and school systems come together to create solutions.

There are many places that can reach those who are experiences underservedness in traditional classroom settings. "Such programs take place in schools, park facilities, arts centers, art museums, retirement centers, and store-front galleries, in addition to local, state and federal prisons. Sponsoring institutions are often nonprofit and governmental, although one can also find a growing number of for-profit businesses where individuals can "drop in" to use studio facilities" (Ulbricht, 2005, p.8). With all of these places available how can community members still lack access to an art education experience? It is as simple as lack of visibility, community engagement or even a clear vision of what that organization offers. Even those who are experiencing undeservedness may not be aware that they are even lacking access. We must express to those students and families within marginalized communities that, "the world outside the classroom is far grander, more compelling, and ultimately more instructive than the world inside the classroom." (Marche, 1998, p.8). Those institutions mentioned above can also do their part by researching their community and offering programming that directly connects with them. These programs become true community-based art education, but how do we convey this to students? " It is important that students also develop a sense of community, based upon habits and skills of collaboration. We must create a community of learners who feel personally connected" (1998, p.10). When students go out into their communities and participate they are able to better contextualize their art making experiences and relate it to not only their history but the history of the community in which they live. By creating programming that connects with the community we can ensure that these students have buy in and are aware of how important their place is in the conversation.

A Museum Presence

Another way to create a broader outreach is through partnership with museums. More and more museums are emphasizing educational programming by making it a fuller part of their mission statements (Edeen, 1983). Museums are now recognizing their growing part in providing community art based educational experiences. There is a push away from making these academic institutions just historical warehouses for preserving antiquities but not all are convinced. There are still a select few elitist institutions who don't see the merit in providing visual art education in their spaces. This has led to a great deal of confusion amongst museum organizations as to what their purpose is. If museums do not realize their fullest potential as community based art spaces, they will become relics of their own past.

"Museums are unique educational environments in which learning is largely informal, non-sequential, and usually involves a high degree of social interaction on the part of visitors. Museum learning is frequently intergenerational and geared to enlightened recreation rather than the accumulation of large amounts of information. Museum educators, in working with and observing large numbers of non-school visitors of all ages, interest levels, and backgrounds, recognize that people learn in museums in a variety of ways; therefore, they utilize mimes, storytellers, musicians, dancers, actors, AV productions, gallery brochures, self-guided activities, and interactive exhibit devices to meet visitors' needs and interests. "(Zeller, 1987, p.53). Museums have the ability to create programming unique to their community and to provide that community with tangible resources, like technologies, that are otherwise not available to them. A quality art education can be achieved by utilizing the resources provided by these institutions. When I first started my career path in community based art education I came across many institutions who never had education departments before or many whose education departments

served other purposes first. This greatly baffled me as how can you house history and refuse to actively teach every aspect of it? By growing art educational programming at museums communities can have access to another space to grow and explore in.

Going Beyond Facilitation

How can we ensure that the educational experiences in museums and community based programs go beyond formal education and achieve a level of meaningful engagement. Kothe defines this act by going beyond art waitressing in museums to create meaningful interactions. Art waitressing is defined as serving an art experience to visitors which eliminates the possibility of creating a real relationship and instead serves up limited experiences. (Kothe, 2012, p.19) Often museums and other arts based institutions approach their art educational experiences in similar fashion to school based curriculum by trying too hard to align with national or state standards. However, in order to engage those groups who are underserved or who do not have an arts background they must realize their approach must move away from academic to an interactive space that is in collaboration "with" patrons and not just "for" patrons. Kothe also points out that it is important to approach this as a shift from "me" to "we" when thinking about programming (2012). This switch allows students to have confidence in their participation and shows them that there are endless possabilities.

In *Revitalizing History* by Paul E. Bolin and Ami Kantawala, several means of interactive engagement methods are outlined. One story in particular reveals the history of Anna Curtis Chandler's storytelling practices at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Each unique storytelling experience was acted out with grandiose costuming and backdrops which engaged every viewer. Chandler successfully integrated her museum's collection into the stories while connecting with her community on a deeper level. By having volunteers assist her with performances and

engaging with visitors during the story times, Chandler was able to create a program that

resoundling connected with all those who attended (Bolin & Kantawala, 2017). Her stories went

beyond just serving up information on art but instead became a meaningful and engaging

interaction.

During my participation in creating programming for the Cheryl Pope show *Not Without

a Fight*, we were able to successfully integrate a multitude of programming that helped students

participate in visual arts education on their own level. The show incorporated sports imagery

along with elements of literature, poetry in particular, to speak about violence and injustices in

marginalized communities. For this show we connected with sports community groups, smaller

schools and local poets to create programs that reached across the whole community. By

providing a diverse array of free programs we were able to address barriers of underservedness

and welcomed those who have never had a museum experience.

Conclusion

Lack of resources often leads to lack of access to art educational programs in

underserved communities. It is the job of community based art educators to ensure this access

and engage those communities by creating programming that connects with that community's

experiences. By museums and community groups acting as more than facilitators, students can

begin to understand their place in, not only their community, but also their own art educational

experience.

Through my work in two multiethnic communities: Elgin and Rockford, I have

witnessed first hand the divide of art educational access amongst varying members of the

community. Those who had little to no access to art educational programs were also in the lowest

performing school systems in the most dangerous neighborhoods. By creating free programming

and increasing community outreach we were able to bring large sections of those who had

limited access into the museum to engage in a space they had never been before. Through this

engagement students were able to connect their personal art educational experiences at home

with larger concepts of art history; they no longer felt intimidated by the museum experience. It

is the responsibility of the museum and community based educators to reach out to their

population to create a relationship that will be mutually beneficial and break down the barriers of

access. If community organizations come together with school systems and create a culture of

collaboration they can begin to attack the issue of underservedness within their community.

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