



## **Some Thoughts on Community Arts Training and Network Building**

The following outlines some basic issues that should be considered as agencies and communities contemplate the creation of community arts training programs and support networks. To be effective, we believe the support infrastructure for arts-based community development should be made up of two distinct, but interrelated components. The first is the creation of a network and support system for community arts partnerships. The second is the development of a community arts partnership training program or institute, distinguished from, but supported by, the network. To date, this approach has manifested most fully through of the ongoing work of Community Arts Training Institute (CAT) developed by the St. Louis Regional Arts Council.

1. ***The Community Arts Network:*** The most effective approach to building a community arts network would be to create a consortium of community institutions and funders who understand the need for a larger support system for artists working in community settings. The institute and its participants are the fuel in the larger system of support resources that constitute the network.
  - 1.1 **The Resource Center:** The bulk of the learning resources and materials that would comprise a Resource Center would be derived from the process and products created by the institute. One obvious example is a resource center that is designed and organized using resource material developed for the institute. In its initial stages, the institute's resource center would likely provide the fellows the in-depth information they will need to build on the training by learning more in specific areas, such as child development, teaching seniors, or fund raising. The resource center could be developed as both a traditional library and as a digital library.
  - 1.2 **Community of fellows and practitioners:** The ongoing building of a core network of fellows is essential to the life and continuity of the network. These people would be institute graduates linked both through their participation over time and by collaborative projects growing out of the institute. In addition, there would be an extended network of community arts practitioners, subject matter experts, and new and veteran learners with widely varying levels of expertise. The network would offer a variety of ways of providing links and referrals. These might range from a directory of programs and practitioners, to seminars and symposia on specific topics related to the field, to internships, apprenticeships and mentorships, and one-on-one technical assistance. This network would not only provide access to practical resources but it would gives the field

a strong sense of identity that says that there is a group of people here who are committed to high standards and mutual support. This is very important because the field, as it is now constituted, is very vulnerable and unstable. It does not have the capacity to validate best practices and learn from itself. The underlying value embodied through such a network is respect for the people who are doing this work—not a solicitous respect, but a self-generated respect. The presence and quality of the network says, “The more we work together at the highest level, designing for decades, not for seasons or program years and for the future vitality of the larger community, the better we get.” That is how you get respect in the community.

## 2. *The Institute*

- 2.1 **A Pilot Program:** The first step in the building of the network is, of course, the institute. The focus needs to be to create a solid pilot program that can serve over time as the foundation for the development of the rest. Everything else will depend on how the institute proceeds.
- 2.2 **A Program Partner:** It would be worthwhile to consider finding a community development, human service organization or university to act as a principal partner(s) in the development of the program. In this role this organization could provide some faculty. This will be significant investment of time and money for any agency.
- 2.3 **Faculty:** It is recommended that three faculty members be used to develop the curriculum and provide instruction for the program. The selection of the faculty should be completed as early as possible in the development of the program. This is important because the faculty team will need a significant amount of time to develop curricular goals and content, and most importantly build a flexible and trusting work relationship. One of the faculty members should be a seasoned community development or human service professional with instructional experience. The faculty should also include at least one arts professional with significant experience working in community settings.
- 2.4 **The First Fellows:** In the beginning you will be developing a cadre of people who both need and create the rest of the network. Who these people are, particularly in the first few years, will be critical. A fairly small group of 12 to 15 fellows, split evenly between the arts and non-arts sectors (community development, human service, public safety, etc), is recommended for the initial institute(s). The arts group should be multi-disciplinary, with both practicing artists and administrators. The non-arts component should represent a diversity of fields and responsibility levels. These fellows should be selected for their leadership capacity, not for their position. The small number will allow the voices and experiences of each participant to have a strong presence in the developing community of fellows. Particular care needs to be taken to make space in the curriculum for the stories, debates, and reflections that will rise up from the group.

Combining this experience with an arts intensive, active learning curriculum will help generate commitment and ownership for institute participants and faculty. This combination creates a curriculum that is not just provocative and demanding, but also personifies the standards, values, and practices it seeks to impart.

The institute's learning community should also reflect diversity in ages. There is a tremendous shift occurring among younger artists and human service professionals across the country. This generation seems to have less of a sense of entitlement, but also less of a connection to the larger community. One manifestation of this change among younger artists is a wariness of becoming institution-dependent and a desire to be more self-sufficient and entrepreneurial. This emerging perspective will be important to include in the community of fellows.

**2.5 Participant Selection:** The process of finding the fellows should be done in collaboration with your community-based partners. A good approach is to invite community leaders and respected community-based organizations to nominate prospective fellows. These nominations can be a very dynamic way of engaging a wider spread of organizations and individuals in the development of the institute. Every nominator will need to know about and understand the institute's aims and philosophy. Thus the act of nomination helps to build community awareness and ownership of the institute's development and growth. In other sites, it has not been uncommon for organizations to lobby vigorously for their nominees. Then, as interest and ownership increases, attitudes about community arts and its practitioners change for the better. These changing attitudes increase the potential that other funders and sponsors will emerge to provide the resources necessary to continue to develop and grow the institute.

For the individuals being nominated, the selection process increases the prospect that they will consider participation an opportunity rather than a run of the mill option or an obligation. When fellows come to the training out of self-interest, with a sense that they will benefit from the experience, they are more likely to go the extra mile. High-level adult learning requires this kind of extra effort. When it occurs, it naturally builds commitment and ownership, which in turn lays the foundation for the development of leadership.

For this and other reasons, the selection process should be a little like applying to college. After being nominated, prospective fellows should be asked to respond to a series of questions in writing to elicit their ideas about community art and their motivations for participating in the institute. Next, a panel made up of the institute's faculty members would interview each nominee in person. The final selection should be up to the faculty and sponsor agencies. In the interview process you are building the community of fellows. Both individual potential and how the mix of individuals contributes to the overall composition of the community of fellows should guide

selection. The more diverse the group, the greater their capacity to challenge and teach each other. Other communities that have instituted long-term training programs of this type have made it a point to ensure that each fellow is compensated in some way for their time. For agency-affiliated participants this is usually not a problem. For individual artists this has required a stipend of some kind.

**2.6 Program Manual:** A manual can be a core resource for this type of program. The manual should both articulate the ideas and philosophies represented by the institute, and also be filled with relevant material from both the arts and human services sectors. This would be material specific to the curriculum and reference material for continued inquiry.

**2.7 Adjunct Faculty:** Another critical resource is the adjunct faculty. These are experts or representatives from the community who can provide insight into the current state of the community, such as public safety, youth services, arts community, or the network of neighborhood associations. The goal is to expose participants to quality new information about aspects of the community with which they are unfamiliar. In the process you both build knowledge and common ground among fellows and between fellows and presenters from the community. Discovering shared issues in areas such as community development and funding and can dramatically increase levels of mutual self-interest and, eventually, collaboration.

## **2.8 Curriculum**

**2.8.1 Standards:** The development of standards is a critical aspect of the institute's development. The standards are the values and principals that will inform the curriculum and eventually guide the fellows' work in the field. An example of a standard is *sustainability*. It is important that arts-based community development efforts make lasting contributions to the communities they engage. Realistically, very few of the institute's participants will start out with the resources they will need to establish full time permanent programs in the communities or institutions they are working with. Nevertheless, if their programs are not designed with lasting impact in mind, it is very unlikely they will ever be more than a temporary enhancement. This standard is very difficult to communicate. There are always a thousand barriers to sustainability, particularly for arts programs. Building a resource that is good and doesn't fade away is very difficult. These difficulties do not exempt sustainability from being an important standard.

The curriculum should be built to reinforce and reiterate the institute's standards in a variety of ways, throughout the training experience. The teaching model used by CSA&C to reinforce the teaching of standards provides learning opportunities via the head, the heart, and the hand. For the standard of sustainability, this method might

manifest as a lecture, fieldwork, and arts-base training exercises—all emphasizing the value and practice of building sustainable programs. Finally, and most importantly, the Institute’s commitment to creating an enduring network of fellows reinforces and personifies the standard as a critical and authentic standard of effective practice.

**2.8.2 Trust and Support:** The care and nurturing of the faculty and fellows will be another important aspect of the institute’s curricular design. All participants are cared for in a way that communicates the high regard in which they are held. Along with this support, the program will also need to facilitate the creation of a trustful environment for fellows to share their thoughts and feelings about the challenging and painful aspects of the work. This cannot be forced. It is largely dependent on the character and maturity of the fellows and the time they spend together creating a safe space.

**2.8.3 Curriculum Content:** The following are broad subject areas that have been addressed in training programs I have worked on over the past decade. They not offered as a curriculum outline, bur rather, as an example of the breadth of possible subject matter.

- *Research & Reconnaissance:* What do artists, arts organizations, and community partners need to know before entering into collaborations? How do you discover what you don’t know? What questions do you need to ask? Where do you find the answers?
- *Environmental Issues:* How do racism, classism and other biases that exist in our communities affect community arts partnerships? How do we prepare ourselves to deal with these issues?
- *Community Issues:* What are the critical issues facing communities today? How are those issues perceived in different communities? What trends are emerging as our communities develop that will affect our work?
- *Partnership Strategies 1:* What skills do partners need to enter into successful collaborations? How do partners find common ground and mutual self-interest? How can partners work together to avoid and solve disagreements?
- *Partnership Strategies II:* How do partners share power, define success, and build trust? What does it take to create a successful long-term partnership?
- *Survival Strategies:* What political, economic, and social strategies can artists and their partners employ to support high quality, sustainable arts programming in community and institutional settings?
- *Research, Evaluation and Assessment:* What are you trying to accomplish and how do you know if you have succeeded? What information is useful and relevant to whom (your community partners, funders, the media, government, etc.)
- *Teaching Strategies:* How do you adapt your arts and teaching skills to various community sites? How much adapting can you do and still be effective? How can new information, concepts and ideas about human learning contribute to our programs?
- *Legal Issues:* Who owns the work? Can we be sued? Should I have a contract?

- *Advocacy (PR, Funding)*: How do we translate the results of our work into more support for our programs?

The formal class period represented by these subject areas might be followed by field placements in an array of community based programs that offer opportunities for the development of master/apprentice, mentor/mentee relationship. A year of periodic follow-up would complete the program.

#### **2.84 Some Characteristics of Responsible Community Arts Training.**

The process of creating a coherent, difference-making learning community requires must be informed by teaching strategies that embody the program's goals and values. The following have informed CSA&C's collaborations in St. Louis, Tulsa and San Diego.

- Provide participants and faculty enough time together to explore the issues that arise from the evolution of their own temporary community and to address some of the basic questions that emerge in the development of community arts programs.
- Provide students an opportunity to learn what it is that they need to know in order to engage communities respectfully and effectively.
- Provide students a range of strategies for finding out what they need to know to engage communities respectfully and effectively.
- Emphasize basic community development strategies and skill development including the history and ecology of arts-based community development, partnership development strategies, community research and reconnaissance, learning and teaching strategies, evaluation, funding and legal issues.
- Use an arts infused curriculum that emphasizes an active learner approach to training.
- Challenge students to confront their motivations for engaging in this difficult work.
- Challenge students to examine the assumptions and perceptions they carry about the communities they wish to work with.
- Use stories and cases histories to link students to the long and rich history of community art making and to amplify the issues being examined.
- Include individual and group involvement in program design, problem solving, decision making and art making.
- Provide a directory of human and documentary community arts resources.
- Develop a lasting support network among participants.

- Integrate the issues of race and class into the totality of the curriculum.