

An arts education augury: Thoughts on new research and the state of the field

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To paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield, arts education “don’t get no respect.” In the orbit of the arts, those who teach are assumed to be lesser talents. And in the world of education, the arts hold a second or third class status. They are not understood as fundamentally cognitive; they are not tested; schools are not held accountable for teaching them; their association with good careers is suspect; and arts skills are not considered essential to functioning in society.

But there is interesting evidence that the zeitgeist is shifting ever so slightly. No Child Left Behind, which turned the trend toward high stakes testing into a stampede, punished failing schools without providing serious help, and pushed the arts further toward the margins in schools, seems to have reached its limit. It is likely that it will be deeply amended or eliminated in the next Congress. The President-elect made a commitment to arts education in schools during the campaign and also promised to establish an Artists Corps – a national service and/or jobs and recovery initiative that would place artists in schools and communities across the nation. And there is increasing recognition – in business and other sectors – that the 21st century demands far more complex intellectual capacities than did the 19th or 20th. The shifting context suggests the likelihood of new opportunities for teaching artists, new interest in what they have to offer, new concerns about their capacities, and new controversies about their roles.

In December two events were indicative of this shift in the zeitgeist for arts education: Americans for the Arts, which has been inching its way toward a more serious engagement with arts education for some time, hosted a webinar, “The Qualities of Quality: Excellence in Arts Education and How to Achieve It,” a report on research (commissioned by the Wallace Foundation) by Steve Seidel, director of Harvard Project Zero. And ArtsJournal.com hosted a five-day “Debate on Arts Education” that featured no less than seventeen bloggers and drew a larger audience than any blogathon in the site’s history, some 10,000 people. The springboard for the debate was the RAND Corporation report, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy* (also commissioned by Wallace). It makes a case that arts education is fundamental to a robust cultural system and the key to assuring audiences for the arts in the future.

In the larger scheme of things, these were minor events, but they indicate new interest and, yes, respect for arts education...at least within the arts’ orbit. I want to take this opportunity to begin our conversation about the Teaching Artist Research Project by reflecting on what they say about the state of the field, the context in which teaching artists are thinking and working. I offer summaries of both below, some thoughts about the ways they align and misalign, and some questions that they suggest to me. Please post your own thoughts or responses to get this conversation under way.

(I know several of you attended the webinar – certainly Steve was there! -- and that at least two of our members were among the bloggers on ArtsJournal.com. If missed the debate, or if you'd rather go to the source yourself, it is archived at <http://www.artsjournal.com/artsted/>. If you missed the webinar, this link will take you to a PowerPoint posted from an earlier presentation of Steve's research: <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/nasaanews/B-QualitiesOfQuality.pdf> .)

The Qualities of Quality

Steve Seidel is among the most thoughtful researchers in the field of arts education, and the center he leads, Project Zero at Harvard, has been a source of deep understanding of the relationship of the arts to learning for many years. This summary is drawn from my notes, the executive summary (attached) and a pdf about the study posted at <http://www.espartsed.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/pz-qofq-executive-summary.pdf> by the Arts Education Partnership.

Through a literature review, 200 interviews, and site studies of exemplary programs, the study asked three fundamental questions:

- How do arts educators define high quality arts teaching and learning?
- What markers of excellence do they identify and look for in arts teaching and learning?
- How do the foundational decisions of a program and its daily operations affect the quality of teaching and learning?

They concluded that quality is principally about what is going on “in the room” where teaching and learning is happening – the transactions between teachers, artists, and students, the thinking, the art making and projects, the mistakes, and the culture of the place. It is generally a consequence of educators' passionate commitment to their values as educators and citizens, and to fundamental issues of identity and meaning that shape their goals for students.

Quality arts education often serves multiple purposes that tend to cluster around broadly shared goals:

- Broad dispositions and skills (including creative thinking)
- Artistic skills and techniques
- Aesthetic awareness
- Promote inquiry
- Student expression and voice
- Connect to community, civic, and social issues
- Develop as individuals

Of course, outside factors influence what goes on in the room. Steve represented these as two concentric circles surrounding “the room.” The first is occupied by the administrators and managers of the schools and programs that house the “rooms”. These are people who may visit the room from time to time and who have responsibility for what happens in their rooms, but who probably are not deeply involved in the day to day work inside them. They are likely to hire the educators, establish broad programmatic goals and policies, and manage the culture of the larger institution. The outer circle is occupied by policymakers – system administrators, funders, policy makers. These folks are *rarely* in the room, but their decisions frame much of what is

possible and impossible there. They are the ones, ultimately, who are responsible for the pervasive scarcity that haunts the whole field, makes quality even more challenging, and makes evaluating the quality of particular programs and strategies so difficult. Obviously these three elements can be aligned or misaligned, and like most complex systems they are frequently out of alignment.

Seidel looked for indicators of quality through what he called four “lenses”. These strike me as particularly significant, and I want to point out that what may be most fundamental about them is that *they place the student and art making at the center of quality arts education*. (Incidentally, this is consistent with Steve’s earlier research on the early childhood education system in Reggio Emilia, Italy.) This perspective on students is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing educational notion that students are empty vessels to be filled with knowledge so that they can become thinkers. Rather, they suggest that students are

- already thinking and exploring meaningful questions in their lives,
- that they come to arts learning with prior knowledge and understanding that can be developed,
- that they are capable of doing challenging tasks,
- that they respond to being treated with respect by their teachers,
- and that they respond positively to an environment that is student-friendly and aesthetically pleasing.

This list begins with the idea that the art students make in these programs engages and matters to *them*. It is not the artistic equivalent of “kill and drill” – though playing scales or learning color theory are highly likely to *matter* to students who are engaged enough to want to make their work well. Here is Steve’s list of lenses:

- Student learning: the tasks and projects students do, the character of their engagement in those tasks, emotional openness and honesty in the student-teacher relationship, experimentation, ownership.
- Teaching: models of artistic inquiry; teacher participation in the learning experience; work to make material relevant and connected to prior knowledge; flexibility, transparency, and intention.
- Community dynamics: respect and trust, belief in student capacities, open communication, collaboration, relations among students.
- Environment: the physical space for learning, its function and aesthetic; the centrality of the arts; sufficient time for authentic artistic work.

The high quality programs they viewed through these lenses were the products of enormously dedicated practitioners. Steve reported that they found that achieving and sustaining quality depended on the following factors:

- Personal, passionate, and persistent drive by practitioners, supported by others outside the room.
- Who teaches?
- Where?
- What’s taught and how?
- How is learning assessed.

Steve stressed the particular importance of this last factor: Quality programs invest in dialogue and reflection on the issue of developing and sustaining quality – they are constantly reviewing the quality of their work. Consistent thinking, talking, and worrying about quality is essential to its achievement.

The Debate on Arts Education

While ninety minutes with Steve Seidel was not nearly enough time to fully understand his study, five days of posts on ArtsJournal.com by seventeen bloggers and many commentators sometimes seemed like more than enough. From the start it was clear that “arts education” means very different things to people, in large part because it *is many different things*. It occurs in school and after school, in classrooms, living rooms, and all manner of community sites from jails to churches. It encompasses all of the media and disciplines, classical, folk, and informal traditions, and all of the new and morphing disciplines as well. It serves pre-professionals, professionals, amateurs, and general students. It includes diverse pedagogies – including various skills-based, comprehensive or discipline-based, and integrated instructional strategies. Its goals include fundamental skills and principles in the art forms, preparing young artists for careers, social and emotional development, improving student achievement across the curriculum or in particular subjects, and higher order thinking skills – from creativity to critical thinking. So it should be no surprise that the debate seemed more like a tower of Babel than a discussion, a problem that was amplified by the limits of the Web as a tool for thoughtful discourse. Nonetheless, the debate was a pretty good proxy for the state of the field – filled with a sense of potential and promise, meaning, and passion – and also big, messy, confused, and undisciplined.

Several persistent and striking themes emerged:

1. **Advocacy and a case for arts education:** The need for effective advocacy came quickly to center stage and was never offstage. Arts ed advocates have been rolling a big rock uphill for many years, and there was a general consensus that we needed to make a new kind of case for arts education if we expect greater success in the future. Echoing Einstein’s definition of insanity, one post cautioned that repeating the old strategies would result in the same frustrations. Another suggested that arts advocates behaved like a “special interest group,” implying that a successful strategy would focus on the value of the arts, not the needs of arts education. There was a real consensus that not much else will matter without more effective advocacy, and much agreement that it will require both allies and a core message that *matters* to education policymakers. The leading candidate for that core message appeared to be “creativity”. Some speculated that business, which has largely set the terms of debate in education around its workforce needs, was increasingly interested in creativity, while others expressed a tragic sense of American “antipathy” for the arts that could leave arts education permanently “on the margins.”
2. **Is something wrong with arts education?** : There was a good deal of speculation that the low status of arts education is, to some measure, a result of flaws in its practice, not

just the prejudices of education policymakers and the inadequacy of its advocates. The most serious indictments of arts education seemed to come from those who were closest to the classrooms and other venues in which instruction is delivered. Arts education is not tied to “the fundamental well being of our children and their development as human beings,” according to one program manager. Most of the diagnoses suggested that the general approach to arts instruction is outdated and often irrelevant to diverse students in a digital world. Some cited a need to expand arts curriculum to include forms (traditional and cutting edge) that are largely excluded from the curriculum. Others were less concerned about curriculum and more about the *experience* of learning in the arts, arguing that too much instruction fails to powerfully engage many students. (And here, Steve’s study seems particularly to the point.) This perspective parallels similar criticisms of instruction in other subjects – science, math, literature, history – that fail to engage students with questions that *matter to them*. It urges that arts education find a better balance between the products/producers of art and the processes of art making that challenge and enable student voices and deepen student understanding of the world. Some suggested that such an approach would also tend to *integrate* the arts across the curriculum. Some even suggested that there is so much baggage attached to the “Arts” that we should consider dropping the word altogether in favor of a “creativity across the curriculum” strategy. One state arts ed official looked forward to an educational system that “is organized around compelling knowledge and skills that cut across traditional subjects.”

3. **Creativity:** In addition to the notion that creativity may be a strategic message for arts education advocacy, there was considerable discussion that it is ultimately the most significant *outcome* of arts education. There were those who doubted that we could demonstrate a causal relationship between arts learning and creativity, and those who were skeptical that the field really understands *how* to cultivate creativity (as opposed to simply teaching the art forms). Others worried that a focus on creativity was likely to diminish the value of the arts disciplines themselves. But there was freshness to the discussion that the vital purpose of learning in the arts is to develop creative capacities – and a sense that it is an approach that is far more exciting for learners than art as a conventional subject with content to be absorbed and mastered. Seidel found broad commitment to creativity as one of the goals of quality arts education programs, but he also emphasized that it was cultivated through attention to the art making itself.
4. **Equity, access, and quality:** Those most familiar with arts education in K-12 schools were very clear that the distribution of arts education is powerfully linked to wealth and poverty. Elite private schools teach the arts; impoverished public schools don’t very much, amounting to what one comment called “arts education apartheid.” These observations were tempered by concerns that about the quality of instruction as access and equity are extended, leading inevitably to rhetorical calls for “equity and excellence”. For me, one comment stood out above the others on this issue. It linked a standard for excellence in arts education to a standard for excellence in education generally, and offered a strategy that could connect advocacy for arts education with allies across the curriculum: “Who gets to do original work – whether that is in history, in science, in mathematics – or in music, visual arts, or dance? In fact, the equity issue of this generation is “who has the opportunity to incubate, pursue, refine and share new knowledge/visions/ or interpretations? So a major way in which arts education might

come in from the margins is to begin to talk – not amongst ourselves – but widely and as active agents – about how educators champion young people’s need (right?) to learn how to generate new ideas, works and views.” If we think that a fundamental goal of education is to prepare students to make the culture of their time, then creating original work seems utterly fundamental to that. Arts educators may well be on the leading edge when it comes to valuing original work by students, but the best math, science, history, and language teachers care deeply about it as well, and this could be the basis for new alliances for real change in education.

5. **What to do?:** Despite the prevailing constraints and damage to arts education over the last decades, there is a sense that there are real and new strengths to build on. What are they? One post argued that the best work today has grown from the bottom up – from artists, teachers, schools working together classroom by classroom, partnership by partnership suggesting that the most important policy work would be to enable partnerships with great flexibility rather than imposing a “meta-structure” from above. But another criticized this as a strategy for establishing a few more isolated “pockets of excellence.” Another pointed to serious efforts in several cities to “innovate traditional arts education delivery systems so that they can provide coordinated, scalable, sustainable, relevant, high quality experiences for whole cities of children throughout their lifetime... In some cases, these initiatives are challenging traditional notions of who in our community could legitimately teach the arts, when and to what end.” An argument to focus on after-school as the venue with the most promise (or least resistance?) was dismissed by others because schools are the only venue that offers a chance to make quality arts education accessible to all students on an equitable basis, despite the challenges and the history of failure. One brave soul ventured that there were four areas of action that seemed most vital today: 1) policy work at local, state, and federal levels; 2) improve, define, and understand quality; 3) advocacy, including grassroots organizing, and coalition building; 4) expanded data gathering.

One and one is....

There were resonances between the debate and the Seidel study, but the debate was rarely attentive to what goes on “in the room.” For all of the concern expressed about quality by the debaters, there was little discussion about what quality is or how you get it. When it came to the question of “what should be done?” the ideas were mostly about what needs to happen *outside* the room. “Better professional development,” sustained funding, research, and broad advocacy are clearly necessary, but they tell us nothing about the content of the professional development or how to best spend the money to have an impact *inside the* room, where teaching artists work.

Seidel said a few words at the top of his talk about the development of fine arts standards across the country in the 80s and 90s – work that was largely done “outside the room”. That was, he said, a strategy for improving quality, but he did not mention the standards again in the balance of his presentation, suggesting that the comment may have been a diplomatic gesture as much as anything. Likewise, the debaters barely referred to the fine arts standards. It was not so much that the standards were criticized as they were ignored, as if they are now less than relevant to the challenge of advancing and improving arts education. This certainly mirrors my experience with teaching artists, who, when they speak of the standards often do so between gritted teeth,

rarely reporting that they use the standards to help guide their teaching. (Instead, artists and teachers tend to back map to the standards to reassure school administrators that they are covering the required material.)

But there was much discussion of what I'm beginning to think of as "the new standards." These cut across content and subject areas, and they are not unique or exclusive to the arts by any means. I believe they have more meaning for the challenges we face in schools and in educating young people in this new century, though. Those that were most prominently mentioned were cultivating creativity, developing the whole child, and enabling children to do original work. These strike me as quite consistent with Seidel's findings.

Teaching artists were the subtext of much of that was written in the debate. They are very much at the center of both the "islands of excellence" and the "systemic innovations." Though the debaters generally shied away from speculating about the new policy environment, one post introduced the emerging Music National Service Initiative, there were multiple references to Obama's promised Artists Corps, and a grassroots organizer for a "National Campaign to Hire Artists in Schools" added his five cents toward the end of the debate. Clearly there are new initiatives and energy afoot, and they seem to all point in the direction of teaching artists as a vital resource for arts education and as drivers of innovation in the field. But the debate did not address the difficult practical questions of how to develop the resource, how to best deploy it in schools and communities, or how arts specialists and teaching artists can work together to improve schools.

The two events prompted several questions that I think have serious implications for TARP, and I'm interested in your responses to them. (Naturally, I'd be delighted if you choose to raise additional questions or thoughts.) Let the conversation begin!

1. Does your experience tell you that creativity is really among the broad dispositions and skills that are goals of arts education? How can we tell that it is cultivated in high quality arts education? Does this value conflict with the traditions of rigor and discipline in arts education?
2. How important is original work to the best arts education you are familiar with? And why is it important?
3. What do you think explains the absence of the codified content and skills standards from either Seidel's study or the debate?
4. Do Seidel's ideas about the student at the center of quality arts education resonate with your own experience?
5. When you think about the standards that really matter to you, what is at the top of the list?