Art Education and Community

Art Education and Community: How do community-based art projects contribute to the social and artistic development of adolescents at risk?

Different educational trends develop in different times. Post-modern views on the arts emphasize the interaction and connection between individual expression and social developments, with artworks examining and reflecting on issues such as the environment, community, society, and politics. Community-based art is any art created with the purpose of engaging a particular community into a larger dialogue with the goals of generating positive change. It is art created by artists and people whose lives directly inform the subject matter.

According to Cohen-Cruz (2005), the research field of community-based art addresses questions such as

- What do we mean by “community”?
- What is “art”?
- What is the role of the arts in community and community based art education?
- What impact do artists have on their community?

Community-based art examines the kinds of work engaged in by arts-oriented youth development organizations, such as community-based art education organizations and by artists working in communities. Community-based art examines the kinds of work engaged in by arts-oriented youth development organizations, such as community-based art education organizations and by artists working in communities. Through my research I have investigated and analyzed how and why the arts impact local community and community-based art education programs. I am also interested in how community-based art education programs can improve art skills, or alternatively, empower specific groups of young people. The significance and implications of
my study lies in its contributions to the field of education and educators who see that community involvement and creativity through art are key to a good learning environment.

If we start with the idea that art and culture can be found not only in museums and similar institutions, but also in the everyday lives of ordinary people, we are already closer to uncovering the true artistic and cultural resources that can be found in local communities. Using that assumption as part of my premise, I focus on involvement of a number of factors such as interaction within the community and development of business skills that contribute to the artistic development of adolescents as reviewed broadly in community and within society.

As an art education researcher, I begin my study by applying insights from Understanding Youth Development Principles and Practices to case studies and to my own research and practice. The overarching idea is to show how adolescent students can develop artistically from working with mural artists, like myself, on fundamental levels of planning, execution, and satisfaction of a project to completion using skills gained through experienced leadership within the setting of a positive community.

In this work I also intend to test and verify theories and purposes which will pertain specifically to this research with the Philadelphia Mural Art Program (PMA), which is a community-based youth development organization. I first review literature that addresses a philosophical framework for youth programs based on youth development theory and features of positive developmental settings while also examining the dynamics involved in implementing quality out-of-school time programs (Heath & Roach, 1999). I purposefully selected Philadelphia Mural Art Program as my research site as a best case because more than 1500 youth, ages nine through 18, participate in PMA community-based art education programs and
workshops every year (Philadelphia Mural Art Program, 2013). Murals provide a unique opportunity for young people to actively enhance their community while building healthy relationships with adult role models (Ogilvie, personal communication, 2013). In addition, PMA collaborates with a number of social service departments and programs throughout the City of Philadelphia. These partnerships strive to integrate art as the transforming power in the lives of both youth and adults.

The Philadelphia Mural Art Program was conceived and founded in June of 1984 by muralist, educator, and community activist Jane Golden. Golden (2002) recalls the essence of her activism: "Take a closer look at the Philadelphia Mural Art Program as a source because this community-based organization is local, dynamic in its relationship to the surrounding community, and rich in multidisciplinary content that can be translated into integrated curriculum" (p. 11). In the PMA mission statement, "The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program unites artists and communities through a collaborative process, rooted in the traditions of mural-making, to create art that transforms public spaces and individual lives" (Philadelphia Mural Art Program, 2013). All of these qualities shaped my beliefs about community-based work and led me to realize that arts curriculum must be open to allow the opportunity for each adolescent or young student to investigate, explore, and discover. This type of teaching and learning can occur through technical, training, through the study of mural art history, or through personal experience with the arts.

As the mission of PMA makes clear, creating public mural art is a tool for knowledge and community building, and its methodology and curriculum design has one of its goals that it will help schools and community based groups to participate and join together to execute their ideas.
Art Education and Community

By an act of chance, my first introduction to Jane Golden, Director of the Philadelphia Mural Art Program, at The National Conference on Mural Art held in Philadelphia in 2004, radically changed my way of looking at art — especially in how I could engage with students as part of a community. Jane Golden gave me a unique view of how I could bring together art, education and community events.

Literature Review

While examining the nature of Philadelphia Mural Art Program (PMA), I have reviewed literature that addresses adolescent development from a psychological point of view. This approach supports the notion of plasticity or resilience in development and the mutually positive effects that can occur between an individual and his or her environment.

Artistic development within the context of youth programs involving art involves not only artistic development but development of an individual. Skills through craft participation gained in the arts help students to understand that they can improve in other consequential activities and that their heightened skill can give satisfaction to themselves and to others. Research supports the role of the arts in assisting the development of academic skills, including basic and advanced literacy, both verbally and with numbers. Well-crafted arts experiences will produce positive social and academic effects.

In support of an integrative approach to artistic learning, Burton (1998) offered her interpretation of what aestheticism is and how it can best be nurtured with artistic development. Aesthetics are approached not so much as a body of knowledge, but rather as a domain of experience, and it is from this distinction that Burton builds her argument. The distinction lies at the heart of what an aesthetic judgment is and the cognitive affective operations that take place.
Art Education and Community

during aesthetic judgments themselves. Burton (1998) suggested that aesthetics are not a discrete element of arts education, but rather is a central element of artistic development itself. In this regard aesthetics is not so much learning categories for defining good and bad art, but rather is a “dimension of experience which lies at interface of the active work of the imagination and the active work of shaping concrete materials into visual images” (p. 44). The aesthetic domain is the experience of the imagination, taking its cues from the sensory affective world, interacting with and playing itself out through the materials with which the artist him or herself engages. In this respect, an aesthetic judgment is the mental activity that facilitates the relationship between the products of the imagination and the material world.

According to Burton (1998), imagination is a crucial element in everyday perceptions of the world. “To arrive at meaning at all, in the everyday sense, we must project our thoughts beyond appearances, to imagine the non-present” (p. 46). Moreover, sensory experiences are the roots from which imagination and indeed complex knowledge grows. It is from our senses, from our body, that knowledge of our world first springs forth, and concomitantly, it is initially in response to and out of affective experiences that we respond to and create art. It is also at the intersection of inner ideas and outer images where, “meaning and value cohere” (p. 47). Some adolescent may have trouble expressing themselves verbally yet while developing their art the mind interprets ideas for others to appreciate and come to their own interpretation. Burton (1998) also maintained that “all artists have their origins in highly sensory-dynamic responses distilled from an interaction of inner ideas playing imaginatively with qualities of paint” (p. 50).

Burton (1998) also pointed that one’s capacity to continue to be responsive at the sensory dynamic level is what allows an artist to deepen in complexity and ability to create a world of
Art Education and Community

images that is one's own (p. 51). The ability for the art educator to encourage and bring out these complexities within a student is a major goal for both the student and the educator. In this respect it is through the making and practice of art itself that one engages in aesthetic judgments. This philosophy brings up the issue of how aesthetics ought to be brought into the classroom. If aesthetics are so linked to individual meaning construction about one’s world then this should be considered a crucial element in how aesthetics should be brought to young people. It is less about learning categories and facts about the aesthetic body of knowledge be a "banking approach" but more about linking ideas and questions to the individual artistic concerns and worlds of the individual students. More concern and care ought to be given to how dialogues with students unfold. In Burton's view, and I concur with her teaching and writing as it is a logical approach in education thus bringing out the best in the student as he or she develops. They should “encompass provocations to stimulate an interplay between sensory responses and the imagination and between meaning and value” (p. 55). By evaluating their own work the student will become enabled to see and further develop their ideas and perspective. In conclusion, aesthetics are not judging good and bad paintings, but is a way of understanding, what has been nurtured and developed through the practice of art itself. Moreover, if aesthetic understanding is stimulated and sustained, it can inform day-to-day judgments about things in life that we value (p. 60).

Arts Programs and underserved youth

Historically, we can trace the origins of the city of Philadelphia graffiti cleanup in 1984 from a campaign promise by then elect Mayor W. Wilson Goode, Sr. In an effort to rid the city of the unsightly graffiti he made a point during his campaign that he would raise an all-out effort
to clean up the city of Philadelphia. The ongoing solution evolved into The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. As this program, particularly its emphasis on youth development and empowerment through the arts, clearly resonates with my own pedagogy and approach to teaching and learning, I necessarily place more emphasis on the perspective of its founders.

The program has given a great example to other cities and the world. Because of their worldwide exposure, questions concerning The Mural Art Program are constantly being asked of Jane Golden and the program workers. Hopes that a major convention may again bring the world together to further the development of such a creative idea will probably become a reality and mainstay for sharing not only exposure to individuals in the art world, but also offer a culmination of disciplines including education and service to the community at large. As long as there is a need for people to express and improve themselves there will be a need for such programs. An amazing phenomenal program much is to be gained from examining the workings of this mural art program. As I advocate here, it is a true example of creative, communal, artistic learning for the entire planet. The world is calling.

Where, though, do interested parties begin— if they are eager to answer that call? One place to start is with the insider perspective, a local voice well acquainted with the inner workings and day-to-day carrying out of the Program’s mission. The Director of the Art Education in the Philadelphia Mural Art Program, Kathleen Olgivie, kindly met with me to talk about just such basic insights. Olgivie (2013) claims that using mural art and art education to encourage teachers to develop integrated curriculum addresses the concern of some teachers and students. To elaborate on this, Olgivie (2013) breaks down the programs for youth within The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program quite directly:
In all of the classes, they [the students] will be learning about the history of murals so there is reading involved and lessons involved with that. Along with the reading and writing they have to do research about whatever community meeting has gathered and design a work that they have researched regarding a design or concept. You have to rely on your personal or group's creativity, but you have to do research on the neighborhood or the person they said is the “hero” of the community. Research might entail interviewing someone; so someone has to write down what the words are that the people are sharing. Then there is math through the “gridding” process. There is a physical math that has to be done to make that transfer from the design to the wall. So academics tie in strongly with the art.

As Ogilvie’s explanations points out, the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program emphasizes a multi-or interdisciplinary approach to learning. Their educational curriculum is publicized online and in the PMA brochure that describes projects called Big Picture; Big Picture, Advanced Program; Mural Corps; Art Works; and Mural Art Scope. All these programs are designed for elementary school and teenage students that are sensitive to the population across which they will be distributed; each lesson fits the continuum of development appropriate for the individuals engaged at various stages of the process of self-identity and community understanding, as will be explored below.

Big Picture is a year-long mural training and art education program. It is divided into four sessions, beginning in October and ending during the following August. The first three sessions occur during the after school hours three times a week. During the summer session, students participate five days a week on various mural projects, including large-scale mural
projects with professional a muralist. Olgivie (2013) explains in more detail not only the skills conveyed but the importance of the methods used:

The *Big Picture* Program is available for students ages 10 through 18. The goal with this group is to teach civic engagement in the community; how to investigate the community and how to ask questions and interview people. The student is exposed to practical management such as how to start and end a meeting, involvement in public speaking presenting design presentations. They learn how to get around the city through public transportation. So, it's a lot about getting them familiar with the city and job skills. The art is a huge part, but in my mind it is the method that we go about to give students job skills. They learn art skills and mural history but through the process there are job skills and concrete stepping stones they learn along the way. And the older students become mentors to the younger students and guide them through the process.

What is particularly noteworthy about this program is that classes are designed to help students become creative thinkers and to better prepare them for the work force, critical thinking, and teamwork. Students investigate their communities, developing interviewing and presentation skills.

The Artworks program provides workshops year round and mural training and art education opportunities for chronically truant youth. These workshops draw on the working of the Mural Arts program and utilize the experience and talent of Mural Arts instructors and artists. This program is usually designated by the courts in lieu of public service. Olgivie explains this component in this way:
The Art Works Program is a five-day program with a two-day dedication to art. Here we focus on the art skills and the team building skills along with other social development. On the other three days, the student receives academic assistance. All of these other perks are a major part of the program. These are students who are mandated to the program. This is not a volunteer program for these students, it is a little different.

This program engages students in the study of Philadelphia murals. Students learn about muralists' contributions to the arts, the movement's history, and about the social and political impact of murals. The Philadelphia Mural Art Program has brought about a transformation in Philadelphia by not only becoming historical but also becoming a mechanism to reach out to students in real-life situations.

My internship experience in PMA has encompassed all of the many assets and goals that such a program has to meet.

Mural Corps is an arts education program designed to engage high school youth aged 14 to 18 in the mural making process. It is an innovative youth development program that builds job readiness skills by focusing on teamwork, communication, self-discipline, and critical thinking. Students participate in the Mural Corps after extended exposure to prior arts education programs such as Big Picture. Olgivie (2012) sums up the program:

The Mural Corps is voluntary and advanced. Students in this program have been exposed to the program on an average of seven years and they meet two days a week. Part of the goal for the program is academic assistance so, if needed, the students get tutors. We take them to visit universities and colleges to get familiar with the concept of
going to college. For some of the kids it is not even a possibility in their mind to go to school. We make sure they have assistance in filling out financial aid forms and other paper work. As a result, we have been able to get them in higher academic achieving schools like CHAD (the name of the secondary school). I believe CHAD stands for City High School for Arts and Design. We have a number of participants from our program in CHAD and Moore College of Arts; another advanced teenage programs.

Involvement in collaborative mural art education programs such as Big Picture, Advanced Program, Mural Corps, Art Works; and Mural Art Scope, all community based art education programs—are designed for teenage students. As is clear even in these brief overview descriptions provided above, the Philadelphia Mural Art Program and their curriculum and pedagogy present an opportunity for the student involved to continue to work with student peers and educators. Within such a structured program the student is able to develop individual skills based on the influence of experienced individuals that will lay a foundation for goals that are not necessarily part of a traditional academic scheme.

What is particularly remarkable about this learning scheme is that the program is overseen by adults involved in the program, but they follow through is entirely student defined in order to develop leadership skills. It also provides an opportunity for the youth to take complete ownership of the creation of an indoor mural in preparation for further development. Students are responsible for the entire mural making process, including all administrative and creative tasks. These include site selection, leading community meetings, and designing and implementing the mural. Ogilvie (2012) concluded her introductory description of these programs reflecting on the overall scope of the reason for the program:
Art Education and Community

So there are a lot of different workshops with different schools that we work with to get the students physically in. It is more than just the art components…it is getting involved in their lives and helping them take steps in different directions they are interested in and making them aware of possibilities they may not have considered. We’re opening up possibilities for them.

I would like to cite an example of the Mural Program I was involved in to illustrate these principles at work. This particular program was done at the McKinley Elementary School in North Philadelphia. Previous to the Mural Arts Program’s involvement the school basically looked like a prison yard and more. Neighborhood influences and dangers that can go along with such environments were exhibited. In 2001 Jane Golden and Shari Hersh were inspired to transform McKinley and met with the principal, Deborah Borges-Carrera, the teachers, and the students. Shortly afterwards 350 students ranging from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade became involved in the challenge of transforming the small school into an entirely different situation.

A playground landscape architect/early childhood educator, Anna Forrester, along with 14 high school students from the Mural Corps section of the program braved summer heat and picked up their paintbrushes to begin the transformation. Working with the artist Jennie Shanker the teens from the Corps also became involved with metalwork and adorned the school with steel flowers. Each teenager created a flower from start to finish, which included drawing, cutting, bending, and welding the steel.

Today the schoolyard/playground has outdoor classrooms for both math and science. Areas have certain classroom settings to help inspire reading and thinking. There is a map of the United States, and one wall exhibits the alphabet from A to Z with English and Spanish words for
each letter of the alphabet. Landscaping with grass and several trees add to the outdoor atmosphere. Fallon (2004) captures the power of creative thinking and planning. Writing about this kind of arts-based transformation, Fallon (2004) offers us this compelling view:

- Today the school has big and beautiful – and educational – murals. And best of all, it's flanked by two outdoor ‘classrooms’ – one for mathematics and science, the other for humanities. At first glance, these ‘classrooms’ look like sculpture gardens at a museum of modern art. But take a closer look. (Figure 1) Each piece, from the pine and maple trees planted to illustrate the differences between evergreen and deciduous to the Globe that students can write on to play geography games, is designed for teaching and learning. There are quiet spaces for reading, picnic tables for group discussion, a butterfly attracting bush, clustered clocks for younger students to practice telling time and for older students to comprehend time zones, a mural to explain the revolution of the planets, and even an alphabet-odometer for generating words (p. 22).

As one walks into the school today you sense the atmosphere of safety and education is attested to both by the building inside and, in particular, by the settings outside.

- My goal here has been to introduce, through this snapshot, how the growth of the individual situated in relation to community undertakings can lead to healthy accomplishments, contributing to the wider good of a community. One concluding example underscores this point. Fallon (2004) points out in the same article, “Education in Wonderland,” that the William McKinley Elementary School had a former geographic landscape characterized by the debris of urban poverty including discarded remnants from the drug trade. Fallon praises the accomplishments of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program in working against such odds,
underscoring its positive contributions here, so consistent with its overall mission: “Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it” (p. 22).

Ultimately, I see my destination and vision as an investigation into relevant education theory and practice as shown by my research into how organized artistic programs can shape and contribute by informing local educational venues and government; at the same time, I also advocate for how community art educators can continue to deepen our work and better design and assess programs in which we are involved. My overall goal is to research how to best serve our adolescent populations’ development into healthy, caring adults and human beings who have rich artistic and cultural experiences as individual active members of their communities and society at large.
Figure 1. McKinley Elementary School Students studying in the new PMA painted garden
Bibliography


