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Community Arts Programs

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Community arts programs provide significant out-of-school learning opportunities to engage young people in their neighborhoods and communities of interest through collaborative, creative activities. In many cases, these programs exist in economically disadvantaged communities, focusing on youth not as “at risk” but as competent and creative members of a community. Community arts can be defined as collaborative, activist, arts-producing activities that engage groups of people, including artists and youth, who share a neighborhood or other common interest, in contributing to positive change in creative, artistic ways. In this entry, community arts programs are described in the context of out-of-school arts education and within the larger community arts field. Examples are provided to further illuminate these descriptions.

Overview of Community Arts Education

Arts education activities as out-of-school learning experiences for young people are quite common and include lessons in music, art, and dance—piano lessons, painting lessons, voice lessons, and ballet lessons. These lessons are offered in and through community centers, YMCAs, museums, dance companies, music stores, and private homes. They provide young people an opportunity to learn how to play an instrument, how to apply paint and manipulate clay using various techniques, and how to plié correctly. In some cases, these arts activities engage young people in a community of artists, such as participating in a band or orchestra, acting in a local theater production, or painting a mural with an artist. Community arts education, while based on these different arts techniques, is less about learning how to create and more about affecting positive change in a community through artistic production and participation. Community arts programs can be characterized as inclusive, process oriented, socially just, culturally relevant, liberating, participatory, often political, and uniquely creative.

Community arts programs engage young people as resources—creative, competent members of their communities—and not as problems. In the 1999 *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* research report, Shirley Brice Heath asserted, “Rather than focus on prevention and detention for “at-risk” youth, these organizations urge creativity and invention with young people as competent risk-takers across a range of media and situations” (p. 21). While some might consider community arts as art therapy, or not see the difference between community arts and the previously mentioned arts lessons and performances, the curriculum and pedagogy of community arts education programs uniquely maintains a focus on activism through collaboration.

Commenting on the relationship between community arts education and public schooling, Heath (1999) asserted through her research report that community arts programs (“arts out of school”) for youth successfully fill an “institutional gap” left by public education’s inability to “adapt to changes in patterns of human behavior” (p. 20). While public school education has become more and more co-opted by standardized assessments, arts and activism continue to be pushed out. As a result, out-of-school learning programs fill a greater need to educate for humanity by drawing on the strengths of youth. Jan Cohen-Cruz, a leader in community arts scholarship, has argued that community arts education fills an absence of liberation in public school education by focusing on activism, particularly in marginalized and underresourced communities. Youth involved in these kinds of out-of-school activities are involved in inclusive experiences that engage multigenerational groups of community members in collaborative arts-based programs that benefit their communities.

Foundation of Community Arts

At the heart of community arts programs are artists, activists, and young people committed to applying their skills, energy, and ideas toward creating asset-based community development activities that value people and places as full of potential. Maryo Gard Ewell (2002) described community arts as “employing creative and artistic means to further humankind’s search for a society that is meaningful and inclusive.” Scholars place community arts programs under the umbrella of arts service organizations, with a special emphasis on activism, interest in democracy, contribution to community development, and participation in local change.

The National Guild for Community Arts Education, an institutional membership organization supporting lifelong learning in the arts, asserts that as early as the beginning of the 19th century, urban settlement houses and neighborhood centers were providing access to out-of-school arts education opportunities in communities. According to Roberto Bedoya, the arts service organization movement (including community arts) began in the late 1970s through support from the National Endowment for the Arts; however, the essence of community arts has existed for many decades across the world, as community members have always come together through arts rituals and cultural activities to contribute to the betterment of their society.

Examples of Community Arts Programs

There are many examples of community arts programs in schools, neighborhoods, museums, and universities. The Community Arts Network, which was a program of Art in the Public Interest that promoted information exchange, research, and critical dialogue for community arts practitioners, described some of these examples on its website, portions of which have been archived. John Sullivan described a theater program in Houston based on Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” developed to address the contested issue of capital punishment through theater. Ashley Minner, a Native American community artist in Baltimore, Maryland, addressed the issue of intergenerational disconnect through comprehensive arts programming in her own community, including a collaborative mural and community garden developed by seniors and youth at the Baltimore American Indian Center.

In Richmond, California, residents of the Iron Triangle neighborhood addressed the question “Who defines the nature of a community?” Jordan Simmons described the Iron Triangle Legacy Project, which engaged neighborhood residents in retelling the story of their community, which has been discussed in the media mainly as a high-crime area, through film, festivals, paintings of community history, rap, and handicrafts, all focused on reclaiming the ownership of the story of their neighborhood.

In this entry, two examples are provided to highlight a cultural “community of interest” and a neighborhood community. The first example involved children enrolled in a summer program with the Somali Women and Children’s Alliance in Columbus, Ohio, working collaboratively with college art students from a nearby university. These two cultural groups came together to collaborate on the development of a traveling mural as a part of the Kids’ Guernica International Peace Mural Project, focusing on the issue of peace as it affected recent Somali immigrants in the city. Through a process of collaborative brainstorming, discussion, and sketches, the group created a series of scenes that the children described as happy places, including a park, library, pond, and playground. At its core, the project meant to engage these young Somali children and college artists in addressing the pressing issue of cultural conflict that was affecting Somalis in the city. In addition to the canvas mural, which was hung in the

space that housed the Somali Women and Children's Alliance, the two groups formed relationships with each other that were built through collaborative artmaking. This community arts program represents a temporary project that resulted in a permanent piece of art and changed perceptions of new collaborators.

The second example represents a more permanent community art program housed in a neighborhood. The Kennedy Heights Arts Center was created by local residents of the Kennedy Heights neighborhood around the year 2000. In addition to other arts programs developed at the center, a community arts program engaged young people and artists of this diverse community in exploring and affecting their shared neighborhood. Each summer, middle school-age youth collaborate with community artists to identify neighborhood assets they highlight through their participatory art. One summer, the youth and artists researched important histories in the neighborhood, creating a video about the old funeral home that now houses the arts center, a photo shoot of youth dressed and posed alongside the railroad tracks that ran through the neighborhood, and a three-dimensional tree acknowledging the abundance of large, old trees in the area. Another summer, the youth visited and had lunch with several local artists in their homes. The local artists willingly hosted these small groups of neighborhood children, fed them, and shared their studios and arts practices. Finally, another summer, the youth explored architecture of homes and businesses in the neighborhood and created a three-dimensional "map" of the community to portray their findings. This community arts program represents a long-term project that regularly results in artworks and performances as well as changed perceptions of their shared neighborhood community.

In each case, the ideas of the youth led to the development of the art or performance. The community artists acted as facilitators of a participatory process that intended to include the voices and ideas of each person involved. Therefore, community artists do not usually come to the process with an end result in mind. The vision often unfolds as the group collaborates, researches, and discusses pressing issues, resulting in arts products and performances that are collaboratively informed by the local issues facing the shared communities.

See also [Grassroots Organizing](#); [Participatory Culture](#); [Performing Arts and Out-of-School Learning](#); [Visual Arts](#); [Youth Activism and Social Movements](#)

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