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Content in Context: Community Building Through Arts Education

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to share critical reflections on cultivating community partnerships through arts education. An analytical framework is provided regarding community building that supports the broader cultural and educational ecology of urban communities, and, simultaneously, inspires community learning opportunities for emerging arts educators. Analysis of the ArtsBridge program at UCLA's School of the Arts and Architecture (UCLA Arts) provides a palette to view how arts education can link creative learning to college preparation and community development. It is argued that quality, sequential, standards based instruction in arts education can benefit from understanding the larger contextual issues that support and/or limit student and teacher achievement. Clearly stated, increasing access to arts education requires attention be paid not only to content issues in arts education, but, also, to holistic approaches that address the contexts of diverse learning communities.

This research is informed by three years of participant observation with ArtsBridge partners from David Starr Jordan High School in Watts, Dorsey High School in South Los Angeles, Santa Monica High School, John Muir Middle School in South Los Angeles, George Washington Carver Middle School in the Central Avenue Jazz District, Millikan Middle School in Sherman Oaks, Worthington

Elementary School in Inglewood, and UCLA in Westwood. The core research methods include literature review, ethnography, open-ended interviews, and data analysis of video archives, and participant written reflections.

This paper is organized into four sections. The introduction presents a general background on community building through arts education. Then, a brief theoretical discussion frames the core values of community building through arts education. The third section, "Visualizing Community Partnerships in Arts Education," presents conceptual diagrams for envisioning and cultivating community partnerships around arts education. The fourth section, "Spheres of Change," analyzes the layers of personal, social, and institutional transformation inspired by participation. This section highlights participant reflections from the bridging process. Finally, summary conclusions are provided that revisit the central argument that contextual issues must be prioritized along with content goals in order to address access to arts education through community partnerships.

Dedicated arts education activists have advocated for the inclusion of arts education alongside all other curricular areas. Arguably, recent policy changes have begun to legitimize the presence of arts education within formal schooling. Visual and Performing Arts Standards recognized by the federal government set precedents for

state arts education standards, policy, and funding. This research is grounded in Los Angeles, California, where arts education efforts are enjoying a policy renaissance of sorts. The current state government has taken tangible steps to support arts education by providing ongoing per capita funding for school districts and a one-time funding influx for infrastructural support. Symbolic acts of support have recognized these policies. For example, March was recently recognized by the Governor of California as Arts Education Month. A California proclamation (2007) declares,

By investing in arts education in our K-12 schools, we improve not only our children's cognitive skills, but also give them new means to discover, explore and appreciate the beauty of the world around them...In support of the arts, California has budgeted hundreds of millions of dollars to needed programs for the benefit of our children. Through the efforts of federal, state and local governments, non-profit organizations and concerned individuals, we will ensure that every student will be exposed to the benefits of arts education.

Another substantive institutional change was seen in the University of California's admission requirements that now include completion of arts education study for UC preparedness. Specifically, a

one-unit year long course of study in dance, drama/theater, music, or visual art must be completed in addition to the other college admissions requirements. The University of California states its intention in the following way.

To provide a meaningful experience and breadth of knowledge of the arts so that students may apply their knowledge and experience to the creation of art and are better able to understand and appreciate artistic expression on the basis of that experience and knowledge.<sup>i</sup>

The University of California's requirement for a visual or performing arts course recognizes sequential study in a specific artistic discipline. However, many middle and high school students who are below grade level in other curricular areas are routinely denied the right to take an elective. Despite the Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) policy recognition, artistic study is still categorized by K-12 schools as an elective. This has obvious social justice ramifications when under performing students are denied access to art courses that increase their motivation to learn and enjoyment of learning.

Research has examined the benefits of integrating arts education into the study of other curricular areas, from science to language arts, to invigorate the general curriculum and make sure that children who are struggling in other content areas can benefit from creative learning

opportunities (Rabkin et. al. 2004, Stevenson et. al. 2005). At the international scale, reputable organizations like UNESCO assert that access to education is critical to eradicating extreme poverty, but a quality education should be both creative and fulfilling for students (UNESCO 2004, Shimshon-Santo 2006).

Not surprisingly, the recent Californian arts education policy mandate provides equal funding, but these “equal” resources are being distributed across an educational map that is marred by historical inequalities. As a result, despite the positive synergy around arts education research and policy, many children and teachers still do not have the opportunity to encounter their own unique creativities during the formal school day. Two recent studies have drawn attention to the fact that access remains a critical issue in K-12 arts education (Irvine Foundation 2005, SRI International 2007). *An Unfinished Canvas* (2007) found that the overwhelming majority of Californian schools do not provide access to instruction in all four genres (i.e., music, dance, drama, and art) and “students attending high poverty schools have less access to arts instruction than their peers in more affluent communities” (2007:4).

Understandably, access to arts education in K-12 schooling has a future impact on the ecology of the entire field of the arts as a whole. Ensuring access to arts education requires more than an

understanding of content issues and standards. A concern for content must be equally matched by an awareness and inclusion of the diversity of places where students live and learn. Relevant conceptual frameworks, deeper social commitments, and creative pedagogical strategies are needed that rigorously address contextual issues along with content innovations.

Compassionate community partnerships in arts education simultaneously provide constructive opportunities to address issues of content and context for student learning. ArtsBridge America is an example of one approach that links institutions of higher learning to K-12 schools and communities to support arts education. A broad network of 22 universities in the United States and Northern Ireland, ArtsBridge is committed to providing high quality arts education for youth in schools with little or no access to arts education opportunities. Grounded in colleges or universities, each program site interprets and implements this general mandate in its own unique way.

It is important to note that, while all ArtsBridge programs share common values and accountabilities, this article does not claim to represent the program as a whole. Instead, it reflects on how one site is interpreting the ArtsBridge mandate by focusing on community partnerships. The local framework used in Los Angeles at UCLA Arts is shared to inspire broader debate about strategies for arts educators

and arts education organizations to spark and sustain meaningful community partnerships that support full access to arts education.

## CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY

According to the Oxford American Dictionary, the function of a bridge is to “make a physical connection between two other things...[and] is intended to reconcile or form a connection between two things.” However, ArtsBridge connections can go beyond this dualistic notion to include multiple cultural resources in disparate settings. Movement across a bridge can, and should, move both ways. A community partnership approach to arts education sparks networks of intricate bridges that allow participants to better realize their common goals. These connections form pathways for knowing and sharing social, cultural, and material capital through community building that supports personal, social, and institutional change.

Interestingly, the bridge metaphor has been prominent in postcolonial feminism (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981, Anzaldua and Keating 2002). Anzaldua believed that in bridging communities we have the opportunity to confront monocultural constructs and become able to see the larger truths of the world more accurately.

Living between cultures results in ‘seeing’ double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the



perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's center, you glimpse the sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were encultured to see it (Anzaldua 2002: 549).

Seeing within and beyond our own cultural constructs spawns what Anzaldua called *Nepantla* awareness, which allows people to better negotiate the borders they must cross in our everyday lives. The act of translating between cultures and places, as well as recognizing the importance of the arts to social change, has an elaborate history that cannot be fully explored within the limitations of this article. It is, however, important to note that postcolonial and feminist critics have long recognized that the ways in which culture is taught or rendered invisible is a political issue (Debois 1926, Fanon 1967, Harding 1987, hooks 2003, Senghor 1970, Smith 1999, Spivak 1993). Culturally relevant curriculum and culturally diverse arts expressions and institutions are vital to creating a new society that values diverse epistemologies and experiences.

However, while diversity enhances learning, we have inherited a historical legacy of oppression and misunderstanding between urban and suburban educators, teachers, and schools (Bell 2004, Tatum

2003). How can individuals and groups from different contexts work well together as a respectful community? According to Malidoma Patrice Somé (1993), it is the act of identifying and taking action around a common purpose that is central to empowered community building. For Somé, an enduring commitment to shared values forges the ties that bind a community together. This vision goes beyond partnerships as a limited contractual agreement and distinguishes community building from merely working together temporarily. bell hooks (2000) sees community as an aspect of social love that is crucial to human development. Paulo Freire (1998) also notes the importance of caring and mutual respect as central to a humanizing pedagogy. Valenzuela (1997) argues that an ethics of caring must supplant the current deficit-based thinking that plagues inner city schooling. Taken together, these debates suggest that learning communities can be created when participants take an asset-based approach to link their core purposes to meaningful social action guided by mutual respect, love, and caring.

The process of identifying shared purposes and building relationships is an important aspect of arts education that is not often discussed with the same rigor as content specific goals and/or the desire for greater resources – both financial and otherwise. However, the philosophical tenets suggested above fit well with the ArtsBridge

program's overall mandate. Conceptually, community learning that addresses major social issues harmonizes well with the University of California's outreach goals as instituted through the Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnerships (SAPEP) framework.<sup>ii</sup>

Apparently, consensus is forming that outreach is an important mandate for public universities that should be accountable to the state's diverse publics. Arts education community partnerships impact K-12 student learning and institutional change, support teacher professional development, while also enhancing the quality of scholarship and education at the university level. This mutualist, or *win-win*, approach to civic engagement through arts education is expressed in the UCLA Arts ArtsBridge mission.

We believe that creativity is pivotal to the development of inspired learners and active community members. The purpose for connecting inner city schools, and their neighborhood community arts centers, to the university is twofold: 1) to energize the creative, educational, and life opportunities of students and teachers in inner city neighborhoods, and 2) to provide meaningful opportunities for university students and faculty to link their work in higher education to creatively rigorous, socially relevant, community work. ArtsBridge supports the creative and

intellectual growth of K-12 students and educators, and, simultaneously, prepares students in UCLA's School of Arts and Architecture to become capable, innovative, and engaged artists and educators.<sup>iii</sup>

A community partnership focus connects students and classroom teachers to creative learning experiences facilitated by art teachers, but also recognizes that participants exist within larger social systems that impact the life opportunities of individuals. Obviously, classrooms are nestled within schools that are important to neighborhoods positioned within the broader cityscape. In much the same way, individuals belong to classrooms, but also to households, neighborhoods, and communities. No individual arts educator, school, or program can fully address the totality of these factors in child development. Cultural critic bell hooks explains that "children are born into a world surrounded by the possibility of communities ... Communities sustain life – not nuclear families ... and certainly not the rugged individual" (2000: 129). Taking a community partnership approach ignites the possibility of bridging universities to schools and also to local and city wide cultural resources that share the desire to support urban youth and families.

Community learning takes place not only within the formal arts education classroom, but is also enriched through the everyday

intersections of people, knowledge, and places. As a result, the significance of identity and place in community building efforts merits attention. In Los Angeles, crossing the city reveals the politics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender through a myriad of everyday details responding to labor markets, public transportation, housing and environmental design, after-school activities, and household structures. A greater awareness of the diversity of human lives in the city is a *Napantla* outcome of moving through the city across the structure provided by ArtsBridge.

The University of California, Los Angeles is located in a vibrant global city that was once called *Nuestra Senora de la Reina de Los Angeles*. Even though she is named after royalty, Los Angeles is also city of disparities that are reflected in our schools. Specifically, UCLA Arts ArtsBridge has become a vehicle for connection and sharing between the university, K-12 schools, non-profit arts and community development organizations, school districts, and a handful of private businesses. The tangible activities I pursue include group facilitation for structural change, arts residencies, public performances, exhibitions, workshops, shadowing days, professional development, recruitment and retention efforts.

In ethnographic research, the quality of a researcher's analysis is tied to his or her ability to acknowledge and account for his own

experiences, perspectives, and possible biases while listening well to participants. Feminist research aims to ask questions and take action that will improve the lives of women and girls (Harding 1987). I am similarly committed to inquiry and analysis that informs social action that benefits youth, teachers, and artists in urban schools and communities.

Knowledge is informed by formal schooling as well as lived experiences. It is fair to say that my own intellectual and practical approach to this research is influenced by my past experiences. I have performed and learned from experience as a dancer/choreographer, art teacher, parent, community arts director, arts activist, scholar, and professor. These different responsibilities exposed me to perspectives that allow me to see arts education in broad strokes. I now view community building in arts education in relation to the cultural ecology of a city and region. The following section visually articulates the larger ecology that I hope to support through arts education community partnerships.

## VISUALIZING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Human beings have long used images to transmit and share ideas. Howard Gardner's (1999) recognized work on learning modalities reinforces that there are multiple ways to illustrate,

communicate, and understand concepts. I have found that schematic models and Venn diagrams are useful symbolic guides to decipher or explain social relations and commitments between individuals and groups.

Certainly, generic or simplistic models can also risk decontextualizing the complexity of real world forces and relationships in time and space. While abstract models cannot adequately grasp the nuances of all opportunities and obstacles in specific settings, they can serve as a focusing tool to illustrate broader spatial relations. These images were developed to render visible the macro-level relationships within and among community clusters. The visual aids supports Anzaldua's argument presented earlier that she terms "glimpsing the sea," or the larger intercultural context, that surrounds our personal realities (2002:549). When implementing changes to arts education program design, two figures were used to help participants visualize our common priorities and clarify possible relationships between us.

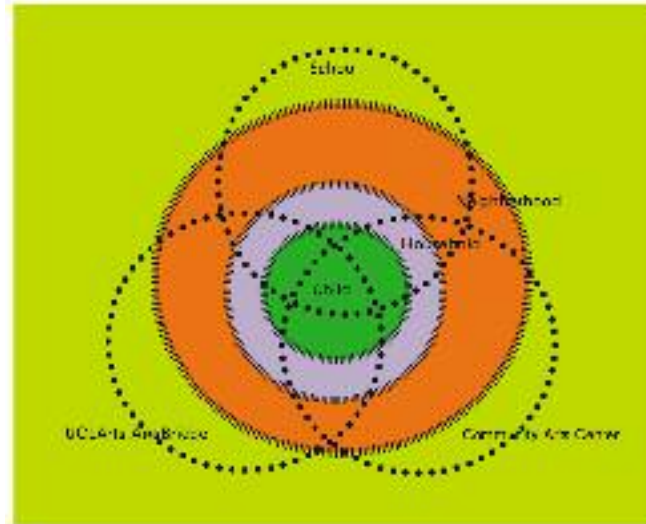


Fig. 1 ArtsBridge Community Partnerships

The first image, *ArtsBridge Community Partnerships* (Fig. 1), depicts the priorities and relationships within a specific place-based partnership site, or cluster. Three aspects of the image are worthy of discussion. First, the common focus is child-centered. Secondly, the child, or student, is not seen in isolation but as a part of a household and neighborhood. Importantly, the center of common attention is *not* an individual program per se. ArtsBridge, for example, is not the focus of the circle. It is one set of participants in a broader web of spatial relations. The programs, whether a school, a university, a non-profit organization, or business, exist only in as much as they work in concert to support the core focus of child, household, and community development. The image suggests common accountabilities among the different participants, but it also presents opportunities for inquiry and



action. For example, how can ArtsBridge best support schools and community arts centers in specific neighborhoods? How might community arts centers connect to their local schools and the university? How can schools ally themselves with ArtsBridge and community arts centers to enhance their arts education programs?

*Relationships Between ArtsBridge Clusters* (Fig. 2) illustrates how the specific site clusters can contribute to each other by sparking relationships, sharing knowledge, arts education strategies, relevant curriculum, and other cultural resources across the city. This visual idea has been implemented in numerous ways that make sense for each specific cluster, from directing a local artist at a community art center to a high school who needs arts specialists, exhibiting K-12 student work at a local community art center, and one school learning from another school's administrative strategies to institute arts education. On the larger scale, the program institutionalizes the idea of sharing strategies through an annual symposium at UCLA where ArtsBridge Scholars, youth, parents, teachers, school administrators, and educational directors of community art centers present their innovative approaches to arts education. The symposium invites, and helps prepare, program participants to present curricula, student outcomes, teaching strategies, and project designs to each other. The gathering is also attended by faculty and students from the fields of

the arts, education, urban planning, social work, and community development. Even state officials have shown an interest in the discussions, as Representative Karen Bass, California Assembly Majority Leader, addressed the group, as a result of her recognizing the connections among education, art, and policy to serve children navigating the foster care system.

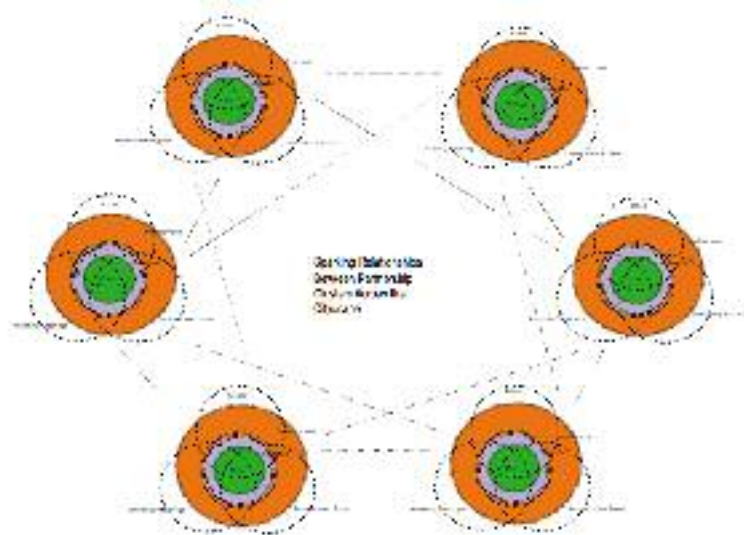


Fig 2 Relationships Among ArtsBridge Clusters

The two visual images presented were inspired by discussions with participants and other colleagues in community arts and popular education. Figure 1 was developed in response to a teacher who wanted a clear guide of priorities. Specifically, she wondered whether the ArtsBridge Scholars or the K-12 students were the top priority for the collaboration.

Figure 2 was first inspired by a conversation with the esteemed Mexican muralist and popular educator Checo Valdez during a Viva! Project gathering. Through regional gatherings and community based research, The Viva! Project ties our Los Angeles efforts to community artists and popular educators in Panama, Mexico, Canada, and Nicaragua. Valdez sketched out a circular ring of collaboration in contrast to what he called the “Pulpo del Imperio,” or the “Imperial Octopus.” An octopus is driven by one head with many arms that obey the main command center. In contrast, our image has multiple centers that can lead and influence change. Figure 2 is also a response to commentary by Oscar Neal, a community leader and small business owner, who described our collaborations as “connecting the dots.” He first expressed this term during a group conversation over plates of fried catfish, red beans and rice at his local restaurant in Watts, California, whose culinary motto is “Fine Food for Fine People.” He believed that connecting the dots was important to address educational opportunity. He explains,

I moved to Watts in 1944. At that particular time I grew up in a community that had a lot of pride...Basically, everything was in my community. I had professional football players. I had Olympic champions, and Rhodes Scholars. It is interesting, when you start, if I look around

the circle here we are beginning to connect the dots.

Maybe two years from now, a year from now, you'll look back and you will see how we have been able to connect the dots. It is very important to understand that we all have an obligation and a duty to give back...and in doing that we fulfill some of the things of our life ambition.

In sum, developing and sharing visual images helped us synthesize and articulate common priorities voiced in community discussions and became a tool to imagine and spark new connections developed within and between partnership clusters.

## SPHERES OF TRANSFORMATION

The ArtsBridge motto is "Transforming Lives, Changing Worlds." One might ask, "How exactly are lives changed, and where does change take place?" While the latter section discusses conceptual frameworks for collaboration, this section analyzes two spheres of transformation resulting from the partnerships and draws from critical reflections by participants. Transformations within the contexts of university, K-12 schools, or community art centers, were expressed as both personal and institutional changes. Changes in the everyday lives of individuals, households, and neighborhoods altered participants' personal self-visions (e.g., one's history, identity, life goals and

opportunities) and awareness of broader contexts for learning in the city.

The first sphere of change is within the academy, or university setting, where the program administrative headquarters is based. Acting Chancellor, Norman Abrams, describes UCLA's mission as achieving "excellence in education, research and service." He understands that the ultimate goals of advancing knowledge should realize the aim of "address[ing] contemporary issues and improve[ing] the quality of life in our city, region, state and world."<sup>iv</sup>

Intellectual excellence is enriched by diversity and requires cultivating mutual connections to peoples, places, knowledge, and creativities. Community learning, sometimes referred to as service learning, is a useful strategy for designing curriculum and producing research that is enriched by civic engagement. ArtsBridge teacher preparation at UCLA Arts is guided through academic community learning courses that include critical reflection and analysis of pedagogy, arts education, urban schooling, and community development. This curriculum helps emerging arts teachers become capable of teaching in their individual art form, while also grappling with larger social issues in schooling and urban cultural development.

Community learning opportunities allowed university art students to envision new roles for artists in society and to imagine

their own professional goals after graduation. In addition, civic engagement through arts education helped ArtsBridge Scholars identify new roles for artists in the public sphere. Erin Jacobs, designer and ArtsBridge Scholar explains,

It wasn't until college that I realized that dedicating my time and talent has the potential to make a real difference in the lives of many. There is nothing more important than enriching the lives of youth and making them understand how important each and every one of them are.

Guadalupe Rodriguez, ArtsBridge Scholar and visual artist, felt that arts education was a career choice that would help her realize a lifelong dream to help children. Upon graduation she continued on to pursue graduate studies in arts education. Rodriguez explains,

Coming from Mexico to the United States was a very hard step for my family to overcome. I had no idea what awaited me on the other side, but one thing that I knew was that this new world was going to change our way of living...[Attending] the University of California, Los Angeles, has become not only a memory of the struggles to come to the United States, but, most importantly, the ArtsBridge program has allowed me to make one of my dreams a reality, which is to teach and help our

children...For the first time in my college years I feel that there is someone who is there to help me and guide me...[It has] made me realize the importance and power we represent to ourselves and soon to younger children. Now its time for me to prepare and be ready to come out to the world.

Maeven McGovern, an ArtsBridge Scholar in spoken word, found that teaching allowed her to value her work as an artist in society. She writes:

I think that art for art's sake is wonderful and important. However, the type of art I need to create is fueled by life, society, people, and the world as it exists today. I think artists have the talent and opportunity to reframe the way an individual is viewed...Considering the way today's education boxes people in, I think that is very important.

Cynthia Wennstrom, ArtsBridge Scholar and painter, explains:

I gained new skills that are important to utilizing towards a greater good...The research done for my lesson planning opened the doors for gaining knowledge about artists and ways of working in the art form...My identity as a 'student' has been flipped, and I can say that I've had no ordinary

college experience...I want to teach in the future, and I want to inspire young people.

The ArtsBridge community-learning coursework challenged students intellectually in unique ways, and allowed them to apply theoretical studies to practice in urban schooling. Some ArtsBridge Scholars found that teaching in challenging circumstances reaffirmed their desire to teach in urban schools and contributed to their own self-confidence and commitment to social justice. Gisella Ferreira writes,

I now understand the serious need for arts in the schools and how difficult it can be to work in the schools. I feel even more confident about my abilities as a teaching artist as I worked in difficult circumstances...I realized that I have a very special and important role as an artist in the community and that I should keep teaching. This program has been one of the hardest projects I have ever been involved in, but it has also been one of the most educational and inspiring works I have ever done.

For Iliana Phirippidis, a cultural studies student in World Arts and Cultures, she gained cultural understanding from teaching at Jordan High School. She writes,

[ArtsBridge] is the most important program I have been involved in my four years at UCLA. It has given me the



most valuable skills for my future goals, and has challenged me more than any other class...I learned invaluable knowledge about LAUSD, [and] how schools within it function (or don't function). I also got to know a part of the city I never would have known and came to appreciate it as well...I can talk about cultural identity all day, but I have discovered that I was welcomed into a culture very different from my own and that I was able to share in the joys and struggles of this particular school's culture.

One of the underlying learning opportunities in the ArtsBridge experience had to do with crossing space in order to get to know the city better. ArtsBridge Scholars who were raised in inner city spaces, or shared common cultural experiences with the K-12 students, often expressed a welcome relief to finally apply their learning and skills to environments that felt familiar. At other times, the social and economic dissonance between UCLA students and participants was challenging. However, more often than not, borders were crossed, misconceptions retired, and new geographical insights replaced outmoded misconceptions.

Joyce Lin, photojournalist and ArtsBridge Scholar, reflected on the geographical lessons she acquired from moving between

Westwood and South Los Angeles to teach photography at Muir Middle School. What she describes as the geographical “journey” of teaching with ArtsBridge enhanced her vision of the city. Lin was warned by her dorm-mates that it was “dangerous” to go to teach art in South Los Angeles. I learned this when she shyly brought it to my attention during office hours. I responded to her worries by asking whether any of her housemates had been to South Los Angeles. She admitted, “probably not.” We agreed that she would try teaching at her partner school, but that if she was uncomfortable she had the freedom to stop at any time. Without a car, she took on the challenge of traversing the city on her bicycle to teach photography to middle school students. Overcoming her initial reservations by gaining a new geographic awareness of the city became her greatest reward from ArtsBridge participation. She explains,

The greatest experience for me has definitely been going out *to* the schools. It is a pretty awesome journey going from here [Westwood] over there [South LA] and seeing how the landscape changes and how the demographics change...It is really fun to watch [the students] go out and get excited about the camera, because I am really into photography, and so, seeing people learning it is really really exciting for me.

A second sphere of change takes place within K-12 schools and local community art centers. Dr. Butler, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Small Learning Community Coordinator at Dorsey High School explains that the ArtsBridge collaboration “stirred things up” at her campus. Facilitated meetings among teachers, administrators, and ArtsBridge program staff sparked the development of a small learning community in the arts and humanities for the upcoming academic year.

Teachers noted students’ increased motivation to learn as a result of the partnership. Akeba Jackson-Greene, English and Drama Teacher at Dorsey High School, believes that “connecting the dots” has a tangible impact on student motivation to learn. She explains,

[We are] building bridges and helping the students see that partnership is a real world connection. When you connect with the community and other stake holders who have some type of investment in our youth that shows them that ‘OK, if I succeed here then I can succeed out there.’ It makes the dream seem reachable [and] attainable.

Joy Downing, Dance and Physical Education teacher at Dorsey High School, found that collaboration with ArtsBridge increased her students’ motivation for academic and creative achievement.

The population [at Dorsey] is mainly African American and Latino so they don't get exposure from outside unless they get opportunities to come to campuses such as UCLA...Students can feel written off in certain low income areas. But, when they see that people are investing their time, their energy, [and] their money...it helps them see that 'You know what? If people are putting this much into me then I must be somebody, and I can do this'...When they see professors and UCLA students coming into the classroom and saying 'I am willing to come here' it also helps them to see that they are important and they can do it...They are just as talented, intelligent, and worthy of being somewhere.

Motivating student achievement, and reinforcing their potential, is a substantive gain from connecting the dots, especially when seen in relation to the lack of faith in educational opportunity felt by many low income residents. Tatiana Johnson, ArtsBridge Scholar, dancer, and spoken word artist found that students who don't have role models of participation in university education can be unprepared to even imagine gaining a higher education. She argues,

ArtsBridge gives the kids another option and opportunity out there for them that they may have not thought about otherwise. Our presence is really important being there. Hopefully, to be a positive role model and someone who is there to love them and believe in them because that is what they need the most ...They had an assembly trying to inspire them to go to college, and afterwards I asked, "How many of you are even thinking about it?" *Nobody* raised their hand...I said, "Come on! None of you guys are even *thinking* about going?" One boy raised his hand and said, "Why should I? I am stupid. Why would I think about going to college." That is when I realized why I wanted to teach *those* kids. Not just because I want to show them this art that I am passionate about but because I wanted them to know that somebody believes in them and is there to give them that love and inspiration.

Mathew Love, an incoming freshman at UCLA, who graduated from Dorsey High School and participated in Arts Bridge, describes his arts education experience as pivotal to becoming a mature young man ready for college. Mr. Love, who plans on pursuing a business degree, gained life skills in the dramatic arts that helped him express himself and cope with the larger context of his life. He explains,

I wouldn't say that I am a cliché, but I haven't had the easiest life. I don't know why I would just keep to myself. But when I got into Ms. Jackson's class, she would do this 'emotions' [acting exercise]. At first, I was like 'Man, I'm not with this.' Then, I would feel a certain way and I would just let it out. It feels good to just be able to express yourself. Before I would just be hush-hush. Growing up I would be hush-hush. That led to beating people up and becoming a bad kid. She [Ms. Greene] knows how I am now. When you express yourself. You don't have that bottled up in you. Even though it had to do with my family. When I let it go I could just tell somebody. It was like [He exhales deeply] I don't have to *hit* someone to let it go I am just *telling* you. That is how drama has been.

However, Mr. Love also identifies a quality that goes beyond creative expression in preparing him personally for college. He became motivated to do his best, because the teachers around him showed authentic caring and concern for his well being. Mr. Love argues,

Caring goes a long way. There were times when my parents, I didn't think they cared. When you have somebody who is not related to you care it gives you enthusiasm like, 'Wow! They have nothing to do with me

but they give a care.' So it means a lot to me. It makes me want to not go this way and go the straight way. It makes me want to make this decision and not make that decision because they took enough time to care for me I am going to take enough time to make them proud of me.

In addition to motivating students to pursue higher education, the arts partnerships also inspired young people who might not ordinarily excel in a formal educational setting to become successful in a creative career. Ms. Downing found that connecting students' talents to professional arts opportunities impacted the development of satisfying careers. She elucidates,

Sometimes we don't allow [students] to express who they really are and [develop] their talents...I have seen students go on to do great things in the arts who may not have gone on to college. But, they get connected through dance, and their talents, and have dreams. They come back and inspire others. You know, kids come from all kinds of challenging situations but the arts gives them an opportunity to see that they are somebody and that they can be creators.

Bill Branscomb, classroom teacher at Jordan High School, enjoyed seeing new characteristics of his students as they

showed creativity and motivation in art class. Mr. Branscomb, fondly called Mr. B by his students, felt that learning design skills opened new horizons for student learning. During an interview with high school students, he comments,

Branscomb: Creativity really seems to flow from you guys.

I see some things I never suspected were inside of you...I always knew that you had a good imagination...This could be something you might like to do for the rest of your life.

Ashley: This could be a job...Some of these children might like to make their living in photography or something.

Branscomb: Without doing this you might not have ever known this stuff existed.

Ashley: I know I wouldn't.

Branscomb enjoyed seeing the creativity and imagination his students had demonstrated and reported increased student motivation to learn. "They really look forward to this [design class]. I wish they were this excited about my geometry classes!" he exclaimed.

Branscomb encouraged the students to apply the same motivation they had for design to their overall studies. "I hope that the tenacity you exhibit here [in art class] goes on throughout your tenure here".



Other teachers struggled with how to expose their students to a world that was larger than their own local neighborhoods or the media they observed. Miss White, a classroom teacher at Jordan High School argued that ArtsBridge helped her achieve her goal of connecting students to new people, places, and ideas. She sees the lack of arts education in her school as a setback for student learning.

Our kids are being neglected. It was hard for me when I went on to a university out of the school that I went to. Even though they exposed me to a lot of things, there is so much more out there. If we could just get that information out to our kids and let them know it's ok to come out of your box. It's a big problem where we are in Watts. It's a big problem of the kids leaving the box, leaving the comfort zone, and wanting to learn something other than what they are learning in their little community. We need it. We need it so bad.

Miss White also believed that this "need" for new learning opportunities was satisfied by providing a creative education. She explains,

There is no dance without mathematics. There is no music without mathematics. There is not music without history. There is no dance without history. There is a science to the

body and how you move. Everything that has to do with the arts is an education issue...It doesn't matter how you learn, the arts attacks every aspect of it.

Connections inside the classroom were also linked to new experiences outside of the classroom. Following a semester of design studies at Jordan High School, three students were offered the opportunity to participate in UCLA's Summer Design Institute. These students had been introduced to design with ArtsBridge Scholars Erin Jacobs and Audrey Ma who partnered with classroom teacher, Billie Branscomb. Summer studies were orchestrated to give the high school students life experience in a university arts setting while increasing their knowledge of design. Initial orientation meetings were held at Jordan High School; afterwards, we gathered the students and their families at the Watts Towers Arts Center (WTAC) to meet each other and be introduced to Rogelio Acevedo, the WTAC Education Coordinator. He offered a tour of the international cultural landmark nestled within the residential Watts neighborhood. The families commented that, while the towers dominated the local skyline, they had never actually been inside to view Simon Rodia's creation. One impressed father compared the stature of the site to that of Mexico's well-known ruins of Teotihuacán. Finally, the youth came to the UCLA campus to learn how to make films and create video games.

After the institute I interviewed the students about their experiences. The following is an excerpt from our discussions.

David: My name is David, and I am sixteen years old and I am going into the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I chose game design because I have always been interested in video games and how they are made. And I just got tired of people saying I could not do something.

Amy: Did you learn anything new about yourself other than your computer skills?

Fernando: I didn't know I could do this, and I almost gave up twice. But, I said, "No, I came here to learn. I am not here to give up, or I could have stayed at home." I finished my game and I am proud of what I have.

Sonia: I learned that I never knew I could get so nervous under pressure and around strangers. I never knew I could be so shy. I learned that it doesn't really matter what it is that you are doing, if you have done it before or if you have not done it before. If you apply yourself, you

really try, and once in a while ask for help, you can get anything done.

I also interviewed Sonia's father, German Balonas, regarding his daughter's design studies. He argued that participation was important to preparing his daughter for college. Balonas comments,

I am happy that Sonia came here to UCLA [to the Summer Design Institute]. In the beginning she did not want to come because she did not know anybody. But now that she came to the class, she was so excited, especially when she was doing the video. I am happy, because now she has an experience of working with a university, and, to me, education is the number one thing that I would like to give to them...I would like to see more kids to have the opportunity to come to these kinds of programs. That would be the only way for them to succeed in life. They come to school, but you don't have too many opportunities.

Dr. Marvin Avila, Assistant Principal at David Starr Jordan High School, affirmed that the partnership benefited his students and teachers. He writes, "The [ArtsBridge Scholars] play a major role in enhancing the atmosphere of the school and of their neighborhood by showing pride

in its artistic value.”

These participant reflections emphasize teaching as an act of caring, fulfillment, and worldiness. Paulo Freire, the late Brazilian educator, equated gaining literacy with better understanding the world. Misconceptions about people in different parts of the city and region construct roadblocks and prevent opportunities for meaningful learning and short circuit community collaborations. Personal prejudices undergird the construction and maintenance of racist and sexist institutions that limit educational opportunity (Tatum 2003). The process of confronting and critiquing personal prejudice, as well as institutionalized racism, sexism, and xenophobia, underlies the ArtsBridge community building process.

Dr. Martin Avila, Assistant Principal of Jordan High School, mentioned the issue of media misrepresentation of the inner city at one of our first planning meetings. He expressed his frustrations at the lack of positive stories told in the media about local youth. Together, we decided that accurate self-representation should be one of the partnership goals.

During the first year of partnership, a short video about young artists was produced with the help of Jaynie Rabb and Lisa Campbell.<sup>v</sup> The video clips and DVD were used to publicize youth experiences and creative work. The videos were shown to

students and faculty at the school sites and also at UCLA. Community partners were invited to freely duplicate the materials for their own use to show to their colleagues and friends. During the second year of partnership at Jordan High School, a non-profit organization called the Media Aid Center created a high quality editing bay at the school and now provides ongoing instruction in camera, video, and editing.<sup>vi</sup> In the fall, the Watts Towers Art Center will be offering the school a new design teacher, and ArtsBridge will provide teaching artists in design and visual art. Together, the different partners have leveraged our cultural resources to support learning opportunities for students and teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Community partnerships in arts education can generate a sense of common purpose and community within an eclectic group of partners that bridge academic and informal learning while affirming participants' diverse knowledge and identities. The mandate of community partnerships pushes the boundaries of arts education beyond the realm of mere standards-based arts instruction to also include better understanding and support of the broader contexts of people's lives as learners and creators.

Mutual partnerships in arts education require the ability to see our specific curricular goals within the broader micro-contexts of peoples' lives and the larger macro- cultural ecology of the city. Artists, students, educators, families, and community members can all play a role in supporting educational opportunities that flourish in urban settings. The attention and resources of public and private institutions, as well as households and neighborhoods, are required to invigorate student learning and collaborate with teachers and artists in low income neighborhoods. Restoring creativity to schooling must emphasize content standards, but, also, strengthen the resources of local communities while opening links to city-wide and regional cultural and educational opportunities.

At its best, the creative process has the potential to help people move beyond their regimented lives to experience learning in new ways. ArtsBridge asks participants to see within and beyond their neighborhood blocks, or cubicle walls, to view each other as interconnected, as residents in a common city with different strengths and obstacles, but also with shared responsibilities and purposes. This view instigates a change of mindset that allows arts educators to see *all* youth as *our* youth -- children who will grow up to construct and/or destruct the future world. Equally important is the ability to make and keep commitments to support the higher aims of teachers,

households, and non-profit organizations in inner city spaces.

Community partnerships in arts education provide meaningful opportunities for transformation of the academy, public schooling, the creative process, and our everyday lives. This study suggests that arts education partnerships can spark opportunities to revitalize learning by linking content to contexts as well as connecting the disparate edges of the city to better see and understand itself.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The F requirement description in the University of California a-g guide is viewable at <http://www.ucop.edu/a-gguide/ag/a-g/vpa.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> See the Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnerships Accountability Framework issued from the University of California's Office of the President (2005).

<sup>iii</sup> UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture ArtsBridge web site. [www.arts.ucla.edu/artsbridge](http://www.arts.ucla.edu/artsbridge).

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<sup>iv</sup> For the Chancellor's full message to the public, see [www.ucla.edu](http://www.ucla.edu) (July 2007).

<sup>v</sup> Ms. Rabb served as an ArtsBridge Teaching Assistant, and Ms. Campbell served as a York University International Intern during Spring 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> Mr. Martin Cheeseborough is responsible for this achievement and runs the organization that believes in building bridges through communications. The media art center can be reached at <http://www.mediaaidcenter.org/>.