

Notes from the First International Teaching Artist Conference

For the first time in 35 years the end of August brought no class prep as a teacher and no teacher prep as a principal. What it did bring was a wonderful opportunity to expand our work beyond one school to many schools. I am now Executive Director of BAA's Center for Arts in Education.

One of the Center's signature programs is the National Teacher Artist Fellowship. We will give approximately 20 fellowships each year to teachers working in public art-focused high schools. The Center is assuming responsibility for this program from the Surdna Foundation in New York, which gave me a great chance to learn more about what the world says about teaching artists. Off I went to Oslo in August for the First International Teaching Artist Conference.

The global influence of this gathering included 125 delegates selected from 25 countries such as Tanzania, South Africa, Nigeria, Colombia, Singapore, Srilanka, Australia, England, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and the United States. The format of the three-day conference included master-classes in music, dance, theatre and visual arts and then a follow-up session to provide more academic context and content to that artistic experience. Interspersed throughout Day Two were a series of "Ted-like" presentations from various delegates. I was selected to do one of those.

The structure of the conference seemed refreshing with immersive experience and then the chance for reflection and learning about theoretical context. I also appreciated the size of the group where I hoped to get to know everyone, but three days moved much too fast.

Day One began by singing before our morning coffee had kicked in. This was theory in action—immediate engagement before information. I walked in to the auditorium of the beautiful Literature House (bookstore, café, and conference center) across from the Royal Palace to the sounds and sights of everyone learning a musical round. I was glad I had just participated in BAA's Artist-Teacher retreat so my left brain was warmed up.

Marit Ulvund, our Norwegian host, warmly greeted us and shared her excitement of actually meeting us in person after so many emails. Marit is the director of SEANSE, a research center at the University of Volda that focuses on arts and culture. Eric Booth, our other host, explained the structure for the conference. Eric has been a keynote contributor at our Summer Institute and Funding support came from Seanse, the University and individual registrations.

Teaching artists would engage us in their art form at our four main events. These sessions would then be followed by sessions to provide theoretical underpinnings for the experience. Eric suggested essential question for the three days: What are the disparities and similarities in experiences of teaching-artists from the different parts of the globe? Eric's hope for this conference was the emergence of informal

international networks of teaching artists, which he defined as: *People who make stuff you care about*. I decided to try on that definition and supplement with: Teaching artists don't teach *about* art but they draw people in to *make* art. It was exciting to be in a room full of people who actually MAKE art. I was ready.

Our group consisted of individuals from:

- 1) Arts institutions (who help people see/experience art—i.e. Symphonies, Theatres, Museums)
- 2) Community Arts organizations (using arts for social change)
- 3) Individual teaching artists (working in schools or community settings)
- 4) Academics from institutions of higher education
- 5) Public schools

I fit into a few categories: I am a public school educator and an academic since I teach a course at Harvard. I also represented our Center for Arts in Education, which most closely operates as a quasi-community arts organization.

Eric suggested that three strands of participants are often seen in competition with one another for funds, clients, gigs, etc. For the purposes of this conference, we would all blur and work together to better understand what any teaching artist hopes to accomplish and what tools s/he uses (pedagogy). Most important and often forgotten, what the teaching artist hopes to accomplish (assessment). We would

return to these themes and questions in structured and non-structured ways throughout our time together.

From this brief introduction we immediately began to get acquainted through a series of scaffolded get-to-know-you games. We began on the floor (in a rather tight space) moving and giving eye contact to say hello. We went from eye contact to saying hello with elbow contact, then knee contact, then hip and then into pairs where we introduced our names by telling the story of our name and then giving a gesture for our name. From pairs, to groups of four to groups of eight we taught one another our names and gestures. Then we were ready for a tableau that introduced the question of “What is a teaching artist?” Our responses were comical, complicated and complex. We debriefed in groups of 16 across language barriers and time. I imagined how much fun my BAA theatre students would have had watching us.

Our first master class was with a teaching artist from Tanzania-- Grace Gachocha. Using a technique that she calls Theatre in Development Process, Grace helped us become an African village and identify a community problem we wanted to solve. We were then to use our theatre skills to introduce the problem to the rest of the villagers/participants. Given time constraints, we had to shrink a process that can take weeks and months into a mere hour.

Our group went through the steps of defining our problem: contaminated water. Our improvisational skits encouraged our community to weigh in on possible solutions. During our early

deliberations, Grace reminded us that in Tanzania, music and dance are key to successful problem solving. She also steered us away from giving our own solutions and urged us to use our improvisations as a mirror that could reflect the issues with which we were grappling. The point of the activity was to set up the community to engage in problem solving. We, the actors, were the vehicle to create engagement that then allowed the villagers to both “buy-in” to acknowledging the problem and eventually arrive at consensus about solutions.

Following our work, Richard Ndunguru, a lecturer from the University of Dar es Salaam provided more context and examples of the effectiveness of Theatre in Development Process. He takes his university students into rural communities as researchers. From a careful observation process the student artists begin to define community issues and, with the help of the villagers, prioritize needs.

Richard described how different this is from the approach of many foreign aid organizations. He gave an example of an American organization that brought white mosquito nets to a village suffering from malaria. After a few weeks the nets all but disappeared and the aid organization couldn't understand what had happened to the nets and why the villagers refused to use them. It turned out that the nets were only big enough to cover one person and the villagers suspected this was the Americans way of creating family planning. In addition, these nets were the same color as the shrouds that people are buried in so the villagers saw an invitation for everyone to die. Only through

observation, dialogue and improvisational theatre work did these cultural differences emerge. Eventually, the theatre artists *embedded* in the village were able to send the message back to the organization that if they used blue nets, and wider ones, the villagers would be happy to use them.

Richard gave many other examples of how through theatre problems could be unpacked and then eventually solved. His example of the Tuseme Project (Talking Together) was another powerful illustration of how a culture of silence about violence to women and girls has prevented communities from confronting the high incidence of rape. Through theatre, young people can now say “I was raped” without fear of reprisals, but this took many years of working carefully in communities to change cultural attitudes and protect young people who lived in fear. Theatre in Development Process held a mirror up for the villagers so that, little by little, communities began to acknowledge destructive patterns of behavior and individuals acknowledged that change was imperative.

From this powerful session, we changed gears and entered the world of aesthetic education with NYC based Hilary Easton, a choreographer and dancer. Using the language of Maxine Greene (and Lincoln Center Institute for Aesthetic Education) we learned how to talk about teaching *TO* a work of art as opposed to *ABOUT* a work of art. Our challenge was to create our own “Split Sides” piece, based on Merce Cunningham’s signature piece “Split Sides”. Again, first we had the experience ourselves. Hillary split us into Group A

and B and took us through a series of activities to create movement phrases and eventually our own pieces.

First, we moved using only lines and angles. Next, we added curves to our repertoire. Then Hilary added a new variable: tempo and different genres of music. Later, we experimented with use of space (high, low) and the possibilities of solo or group work. We played with connecting closely or not at all with one another. We experimented with how to set our choreography as a piece with a beginning, middle and end. Then, using the same format as “Split Sides” we metaphorically rolled the dice to determine a) order of choreography, b) order of music, c) choice of costumes, d) lighting plot, e) set design. We did not use costumes, lighting or sets in our experience. After our own mini-performance and debrief with the audience, we watched a film of the actual Cunningham piece and compared the experience of those professional dancers to our own. Suddenly, we were experiencing aesthetic education.

One hallmark of aesthetic education places the work of art as central to the experience. The goal is perceptual insight and the fostering of a *transaction* between the work of art and the viewer. Wow! We had just done that. Through an immersive activity we choreographed and learned a dance. Then, we engaged in a dialogue with one another and our audience about the piece and our performances. Finally, we studied another work of art (the actual “Split Side” dance) to deepen our understanding of an art form. We left the experience better knowing the work through our own physical work and then our

academic explorations. It was seamless and brilliant. We also experienced multiple ways of understanding the work of art ourselves. We hope we gave that same experience to our audience. They were very generous and said we had done a fabulous job.

To further intensify our learning experience, we had another session on aesthetic education with Sarah Johnson from the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall. Sarah reminded us:

Key principles of teaching artistry

1. Personal relevant connections with arts and artist
2. Engagement before information
3. An assumption of competence
4. Artistic process at the center
5. Experiential learning
6. Fun and playful
7. Time for reflection

All of these components had been present in the theatre and dance classes we had just taken. I considered all of the great teachers with whom I have worked, and realized they all were practicing the best of aesthetic education. Maxine Greene would be proud. So often we assume young people know nothing and have no prior knowledge or connection with a concept or skill we are about to teach. Great teachers, however, strive to discover the prior knowledge and competence that their students already bring to a task. When we tease out students' questions and ideas for a few minutes before launching

into an activity or lecture, we are always pleased to learn that, indeed, our students have strong opinions and ideas on which we can build. Consider the iconic film that the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics did over a decade ago. Filmmakers interviewed Harvard graduates about their prior knowledge of the earth's and sun's rotations. The graduates (inaccurate) assumptions spurred new curriculum efforts to teach physics and basic science, as well as research into the science of learning. Again, good classrooms are usually places where these seven elements are all present. One can certainly substitute the word *arts* and *artist* with *math* and *mathematician* or *history* and *historian*.

On Day Two we immersed ourselves in making “pictorial movements” with artist Marit Moltu who works with fabric and wool. I felt right at home and wished I could have brought home 60 balls of wool. Wool and sheep are part of Norway's cultural heritage just as sheep are part of BAA's playful history. Ask yourself what sound BAA makes and you will surmise why the sheep and the ram are our mascots. Also, in the early 1900s wool was delivered to our now school building for curing before being shipped elsewhere.

For this session we would suspend belief and create a picture and a dialogue with thread. Marit took us out to the great lawn of the Royal Palace. In the dew-laden grass all 125 of us lined up and began working with our balls of wool with two participants in the center. We looped, winded and crossed our threads. We created a flowing picture of interconnected threads with varying degrees of tension. We made a

wave. We struggled with energy and inertia. We trusted one another as we played with shapes and movement and even giggled over the silliness of the activity sometimes. However, our giggles never erupted into full scale insurrection. We didn't dare disobey Marit. The commitment and seriousness of purpose with which she approached our collective work overwhelmed any urges to act out. The pictures do speak a thousand words. (see attached)

Again, in the words of Maxine Greene, we were creating a work of art that was an inexhaustible resource for learning. We allowed our imaginations to be free in order to relate and connect to others. We did that with wool thread which was quite an experience. No right or wrong existed in our movements, although Marit had patterns we did have to follow. , If a thread broke, she ran into the center to tie a knot). Marit didn't know we would make a wave, which brought back the words of Ken Robinson, "if you are not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original." We certainly came up with original shapes. Although Marit gives the same directions every time to every group, the movements are never the same.

Our host, Marit Ulvund followed this workshop with theoretical explanations for the experience we had just had. We watched films about how Norwegian school children embraced a similar activity. The many different interpretations of pictorial movements were provocative. So were all of the ways the Norwegian language expresses the English phrase "ball of wool."

Marit Ulvund reminded us that schools focused on the arts view themselves as works in progress. These schools allow their students to seek and explore possibilities, and regard mistakes as generative. We could see that joy and exploration in the documentary films of school children and our own experiences were equally playful as a group of 125. Fun does not have to mean devoid of learning.

The final workshop was with Fundacion Batuta from Colombia which was founded in 1991 with the help of the Venezuela government and based on El Sistema principles. Since their work has grown, Batuta has also used Hetland and Winner's Studio Habits of Mind as their framework. I was proud of that given that much of the research for Studio Habits of Mind emerged from BAA.

In this workshop we watched the Maestro (the conductor), Juan Felipe Molano, work with a group of young Norwegian beginning music students, teaching artists and us, the audience. We didn't need convincing to agree that music has transformative powers, or that group music learning has a social value, or that music can bring healing and resilience to communities, or that music can increase academic achievement and a stronger sense of self.

The maestro began teaching the students, teaching us in the audience, and using his three teaching artists who were playing with the children in the orchestra. I loved watching the interplay between the work with the students and the teaching artists and then how even we, the audience, could contribute to the growing expertise of the

young musicians. The Maestro asked if we could suggest a different way for the young musicians to enter so that they claimed the stage with clear seriousness of purpose. After we tossed out a few ideas, he grabbed one and asked the orchestra to re-enter implementing that suggestion. This back and forth went on for some time during the rehearsal so that all of us were on our toes listening to the music while thinking about how to make the performance better. When the time came for the performance our involvement in the rehearsal had given us a vested interest in the musicians' success.

After the concert, Juan Antonio Cuellar talked more about the connection to the Studio Habits of Mind. The original habits (and the book) emerged from work in visual arts classrooms, but Cuellar had adapted them successfully to the music classroom and the orchestra. He shared with us his subtle but significant changes. He discussed how music (and many other performing arts) work in real time temporally and also involve sound and ensemble or collective work. The tweaks to the eight Studio Habits, (put link in) at least to my mind, weren't major, but rather fascinating. I found myself nodding vigorously to everything he said. I also agreed with the emphasis given to performance. Both Cuellar and Molano underscored that the performing arts must have an audience, and actual performances. Rehearsals should always lead up to some kind of public performance. Authentic audience feedback in real time is critical to musicians' growth.

The last session of the conference readied me for my return home. Brad Haseman from Australia's University of Brisbane and Johannes Joner from Norway helped us reflect on our three days together. We were asked to consider what assumptions about teaching (artist) work we were willing to reconsider or let go, and what ideas we wanted to keep working on. We did free writing in response to those questions. I was immediately drawn to the fact that I hadn't thought consciously about Maxine Greene's work for a long time. I promised myself to re-read *Blue Guitar*. I also cemented the idea that I wanted to continue to think about leadership development and the role of artists in that work. Having just been immersed in BAA's own Artist-Teacher Retreat, I realized again that I want to always include artist-teachers in the work of school leadership and reform.

So, thank you Norway and SEANSE, Eric and Marit for including me in this amazing group and way of working. I loved how the entire conference was both active and reflective and that kids were at the center everywhere. I loved that it was multinational and that the purpose was not right-wrong answers but rather explorations of how we can do our work better. Without ever stating it aloud, we came to consensus on our definition for teaching artists.

Each presentation and workshop was embodied the key principles of teaching artistry mentioned earlier:

1. Personal relevant connections with arts and artist
2. Engagement before information
3. An assumption of competence

4. Artistic process and practice at the center
5. Experiential learning
6. Fun and playful
7. Time for reflection

An Ibsen Festival added to my experience as well as seeing “Wild Duck” by an Australian company. We were given time before/after the intense three days to see the Vigeland sculptors in the park and the Munch paintings in the National Gallery. Being up close to “The Scream” by Munch was thrilling as well as standing in front of the sculptural feat “The Angry Boy”.

Norway is a standout because of the people, and the commitment to arts and culture and wellness. The Norwegians I met deeply value their country and its resources. They believe that happiness and human connection along with living wages are rights for all people. I thank them for a terrific exploration. I know that I will continue to share with others and have only begun to reflect on the experiences of this wonderful conference.