

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2013

GIA Arts Education Pre-Conference - Common Core Standards



Good Morning

"And the beat goes on....."

Blogging live from a conference is fraught with dangers. Unlike my regular weekly blog, which I can write, then re-write, then ponder, then dig deeper into some point, then re-write yet again - blogging from a conference is much more shooting from the hip. A long day of meetings - the endless parade of speakers and talking heads, and then evening receptions and late at night there you are writing a blog entry; trying to be complete and fair and balanced. And you are tired. Still, there is something about trying to relay and report thinking near to when it happens that is challenging and rewarding.

Few things on our collective agenda are more important, long range, then the re-establishment (or in some cases, the *initiale* establishment) of curriculum based, sequential arts education taught to standards and assessment, by trained arts professionals for K-12 students in all schools in the country. Not only is that goal critical to us in the development of new audiences, supporters, donors and champions, it is critical to the country to produce independent, creative, fully educated citizens who will populate our workforce and underpin our democracy.

Yet that Holy Grail continues to defy out best attempts to make it a reality. We are encouraged by the widespread support for what we intuitively understand to be of enormous value, and for the myriad inroads and advancements we make each year - and at the same time, discouraged by the spiral of forever cycling back to the beginning of the march towards making it happen - never quite overcoming the challenges of funding, politics, scheduling and all the other hurdles we must overcome to put arts in the schools. Hell, we don't even get invited to half the tables at which decisions that affect us are made.

The latest star to which we are encouraged to hitch our wagons is the [Common Core State Standards](#) (CCSS) which is the current educational reform movement du jour - largely, no doubt, a backlash to the mindless testing and narrowing of focus brought about by No Child Left Behind. I don't mean to make light of this effort. CCSS seeks to establish a single set of standards for teaching competency in English Language Arts and Math in each of the states that adopt the standards (and - impressively - so far, 45 have). The good news is that the standards center around each student having the higher learning skills to process information and relate it to the world - as opposed to simple rote memory. And the creators of the Core Standards seem fully committed to the inclusion of the arts as one of the ways to teach to the new standards. Indeed, one of the principal architects, David Coleman, now President of the College Board argues forcefully that the Arts are well suited to the kinds of studies the CCSS promotes to provide deep and rich learning experiences. There are, to be sure, real opportunities for the arts to embed ourselves into the structure of education to an extent heretofore denied us.

The Standards prescribe what should taught, but not how or when. As the CCSS is rolling out across the country, it is now presumably the job of the arts supporters (and that would be "us") to catch that train and work to make sure that - as a matter of policy - the arts are used to teach to the new standards. In this light, we join the darling of the Silicon Valley Corporate set - *Science* - which is also, like the arts, a "means" to teaching Language Arts and Math. And there may well be some real opportunities to partner with the science business lobby in joint, mutually beneficial, efforts. Opportunities long hidden.

Note that there is a completely separate ongoing movement that deals with [Standards and Assessment for the Arts](#) as a core subject itself. And those efforts may end up as local bars for teaching, and they too may move towards a national roll out on the state level.

Note too that CCSS is but one educational reform of the past decade and indeed but one currently shaping the matrix. We are still dealing with STEM and STEAM, and Title I is still the law of the land. Getting arts education into the schools in the way we want is a battle we must simultaneously fight on multiple levels. It is both a political battle (and there are no shortages of arts education enemies and detractors), and a practical battle (questions of funding, teaching training, scheduling, curriculum integration, testing and more bedevil school boards, superintendents, teachers, artists, and parents -- all of which must be addressed before we get down to the most important person in the whole scheme - the student.)

We have been fighting these battles - with some success, but in many cases very limited success, for decades now. Our lack of success has largely to do with how complex and daunting a task fighting the battles is - given our limited resources of time, money, leadership and power.

It was suggested at the GIA PreConference on CCSS that one of the biggest opportunities for the arts lies in the provision of Professional Development and training for teachers, and there has already been significant investment in mapping possible Common Core Arts Curriculum thinking; that what we ought to do is work with local school districts to help train teachers how to include the arts as part of the content of teaching to the new standards. And clearly, we ought to do that. Once again, the problem is that to do all that kind of work is time consuming, costs money, and needs qualified people to do it. We are short on all three. Can funders help? One would think so. Will they? That remains unknown.

To be sure, not everyone is fully convinced the role of the arts in the CCSS is necessarily a good thing. [Some suggest](#) it once again marginalizes the arts as it relates them to predetermined and preconceived notions of expression - and thus it may deny or bar artistic expressions of dance, music or other performance in favor of using those expressions as means to study and express (in writing) the lessons learned. Others complain that the standards will demand of the arts something impossible for them to deliver given the current framework for arts education. For some people, adding yet one more arrow to our quiver is of little value so long as we remain without a bow to shoot any of those arrows.

The second half of the GIA Common Core PreConference centered on the politics, policy and advocacy efforts necessary to move forward on all the arts education fronts.

Richard Kessler discussed how our focus on practice - on programs, rather than policy - has limited our reach and success in getting arts education in the schools. One example of the cost of that approach is the STEM paradigm. We weren't at that table when it was created, and so we have, ever since, played catch up in trying to move STEM to STEAM. We need to both recognize where the tables at which we need to be seated are at *before* decisions are made, and we need to figure out how to wrangle invitations to those tables. Richard suggested that "*but for*" David Coleman inserting the arts into the fabric of the content envisioned for the CCSS in an architectural way, CCSS might not be much of an opportunity at all for us. I agree it may be folly to count on the David Colemans being there so fortuitously. (And if Mr. Coleman really wants to help the arts, might I humbly suggest that in his new position as President of the [College Board](#) he makes sure knowledge of, and some experience with, the arts is one of the requirements for passing SAT tests that determine college aspiring students of their future admission to the college of their choice.)

One of the problems we face in the advocacy arena is that our own best potential advocates and lobbyists - our cultural institutions - especially the larger ones with powerful Boards - are principally interested in their own self-interest. They save their efforts to feather their own nests. That's completely understandable, but not helpful to the sector as a whole, and certainly not helpful to furthering arts education K-12 efforts.

My own opinion is that powerful Board members of major cultural institutions are first and foremost interested in spending their political chips on access that benefits their own *personal business* interests, and only after that expenditure are they interested next in pushing the interests of the arts organization with which they are affiliated. There is little to no room left to push for sector wide advantages, and that includes arts education.

The question is what might funders do that will influence and impact how we organize and leverage whatever clout we may have in the arts to efforts - life arts education - that benefit all of us. That is a very difficult question politically, and gets made, if at all, on an individual, case by case, basis. What else can funders do to enable arts organizations and arts administrators to engage in effective policy work?

The remainder of the afternoon included a number of entreaties urging the funding community to get involved, and stay involved, in helping to promote advocacy for arts education, at all levels. Good advice we have heard before - but again where is the time, money, expertise and leadership to carry it forward.

I heard two excellent pieces of advice that everyone should take to heart:

1. **Joe Landon**, Executive Director of the [California Alliance for Arts Education](#), advised funders in the audience that if they really wanted to have an impact they should look for and listen carefully to people who truly understand how things work and get done on a local level for suggestions to how to successfully move forward. That is sage advice.
2. **Laura Zucker**, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Arts Commission advised funders to consider that advocacy efforts and organizations are not your grantees, but your *partners*.

There are ten thousand plus school districts in America. Maybe as many as a hundred thousand schools. Almost all of them are guided by local decision making - decentralized, subject to local politics. As vast as the nonprofit arts are, with our tentacles into virtually every community in America, we are not yet organized enough, nor equipped with the necessary time, money and other resources, to truly effectively lobby across that mass. The rich districts and schools are more likely to have arts offerings. My fear with the Common Core, for a variety of reasons, is that it will once again fall victim to the result of “haves” and “have-nots”. Big problem for us and for the country. But that is not a reason not to support and try, as vigorously as we can, to embrace the CCSS and do what we can to insure the arts are part of the content that is part of the curriculum in the CCSS approach. There are victories for us to win here. Lots of them. And building on those victories is the way we move forward.

But we need to remember this is not the “*Open Sesame*” answer to all the challenges. Just another step. Another arrow. Be nice if someone would buy us a bow so we can start shooting some of these arrows.

Like Sisyphus we keep pushing the arts education rock up the hill. Always pushing.

Don't Quit
Barry