

Inspiring the Imaginer in All of Us:
A Framework for a Sustainable Creative Practice

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About New Urban Arts

New Urban Arts is a creative and empowering arts community driven by the leadership of public high school students and emerging artists. Our goal is to encourage young people to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives. We believe that an active imagination is essential to the positive development of youth, and that innovative arts education can bring this practice to all young people.

Based in Providence, Rhode Island, New Urban Arts is in its ninth year and is housed in a 2,500 square foot multidisciplinary, storefront arts studio. Summer and after-school arts mentoring programs there explore the visual, performing, and literary arts. The organization has over 800 alumni, and 125 participants each year. For more information, visit www.newurbanarts.org.

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“New Urban Arts is a place where people come together to make art. That is what you see. What you do not see are the relationships they build with one another and with the studio as a space. It is a place that attracts amazing people that want to learn from one another and grow together.

As a high school student I was fortunate to have New Urban Arts as an outlet. It was a place where I went after school to write, paint, or draw. The possibilities were endless.

New Urban Arts became a second home, a family. To this day I am still very connected to the people I have met through New Urban Arts. They challenge and affect the way I live my life. They have become brothers and sisters to me.

I have learned from them that art can be used as a tool to connect and relate to others. I know they will continue to be a big part of my life as I grow.

One of my first workshops at New Urban Arts involved binding and making books. I eventually had the opportunity to work with other high school students to teach adults taking ESL classes to make books through a series of workshops. We worked together to create books that allowed them to weave their cultural experiences from their native countries with their experiences here. As a student trying to teach with a slight language barrier, it proved to be challenging but also very rewarding.

At the last workshop we taught, we asked the adult students to reflect

about the experience. We learned that we gave them a new way to express themselves, along with a new skill they can teach their children and friends. We gave them a new way to connect to people, which was unexpected and fulfilling. To have that experience at age 14 is amazing to me.

New Urban Arts is just that. It is a place where you connect with people and create magic. I have learned the great power of being able to share knowledge and what that gives a person. New Urban Arts facilitates learning in a way a lot of schools do not.

I did not realize how much New Urban Arts has become a part of my life until I graduated and went to college. I have learned more than I will ever know from just being there. I was surrounded by mentors and fellow students, like me, who were going through the same things I was experiencing at the time. I had a family who could relate to me and help me channel anything into my artwork. New Urban Arts was something stable, something I could always rely on.

When you walk into New Urban Arts, you will most likely see chaos.

Students, art supplies and loudness everywhere. It is beautiful. Everyone is feeding off each other’s energy. You grow, they grow, and the place grows together.”

- Ashley Paniagua
New Urban Arts Student, 2001-2005

The need for “imagers”

New Urban Arts founded ten years ago upon the core belief that every person is entitled to and will greatly benefit from the development of their imagination and creativity. This belief contrasts sharply to a society which sorts out youth into the few who are creative and the majority who are not.

The power of the arts, creativity, and the imagination has been articulated from numerous vantage points, and the view that the arts are intrinsically valuable is the most appealing to New Urban Arts. Quite simply, life is more rich and possible when it is full of creativity.

The arts activate a profound sense of who we are and who we might become. As Maxine Greene argues in Releasing the Imagination, “... to tap into the imagination... is to see beyond what the imager has called normal or “common-sensible” and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may

become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be, and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is.”¹

Greene’s *imager* presumably questions the status quo through this process, encouraging the type of thinking and engagement that is essential to a participatory democracy. Yet, there are limited opportunities for young people to develop their imagination. By not allowing people to define who they are and who they might become, then those with power and authority more easily predict and profit. A passive, isolated, and segregated citizenry is preserved; this citizenry is so susceptible that those who are trying to sell them goods and ideas can define their identities and needs.

School systems slow to change maintain this dynamic and fail to create

learning environments where the practice of imagination is possible. The role of the arts in inspiring creativity and imagination continues to diminish in school and community life, and when arts education is offered, it is hardly accessible to all kids – particularly those who are marginalized, silenced, or possess little financial resources. How will they have the opportunity to imagine and create a world that is different?

Efforts to counteract the declining presence of a creative arts education have had little impact. Today, the argument that the arts are instrumentally radical is now drowned out by more palatable arguments. For example, the arts play an instrumental role in helping students develop math and literacy skills, they prepare students as creative problem solvers for the 21st century workforce, or train them as entrepreneurial money-makers. Less prevalent today is that the arts are essential to social change, to social harmony and unrest, to shape a

¹ Maxine Greene, Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995) 19.

vibrant democracy.² One also assumes that the small number who participates in and benefits from a creative arts education roughly equals the number who later values it. With declining participation, efforts have been largely ineffective in shifting the balance toward a society that embraces *imagers*.

In times when our democracy is becoming more tenuous, a shift toward allowing us all to become *imagers* is fundamental to preserve our individual rights and liberties, as well as to enhance the quality of private and public life.

The selected few

The roots of declining participation or interest in the value of arts may not be a sole result of denied opportunity and access, though that is likely part of the problem. The more significant cause – one the arts and arts education communities may not want to embrace –

may be that most people might *not like* learning and participating in the arts the way that it is taught and valued today.

There are few models for teaching and learning the arts, which do not strike fear into the hearts and minds of the majority who do not see themselves innately as *imagers*.

First, toddlers scribble and color. They spin in circles with their arms stretched out. They sing to themselves out loud with conviction. They draw stick lines and fill in shapes with color. They make rainbows stretch over flat houses with red chimneys. They draw families holding hands while they stand in front yards.

In moments when young people become more aware of the world around them, of people who might judge them, these drawings, personal and risky by their nature, are lined up next to one another. Teachers and students compare and criticize, perhaps without intention, deciding who can draw more realistically.

In these moments, they decide who is creative and who is not. Played out over and over in classrooms throughout young people's education, most students learn that they are not artistic, not creative. They become the adults we all know, the ones who say, "I do not have an ounce of creativity in me. I cannot draw."

The select few who are creative are then often relegated to the fringe of school and community life where they work in relative isolation learning to master skills and techniques. This is the more prevalent form of arts education today, and it is built on a value system of creativity that centers on the individual.

But what if creativity is a social enterprise rather than an individual one? What if a person's creativity is not measured by whether an artwork reflects innate talent or genius based on prescribed values and expectations? (Who presumes to know what the next beautiful or masterful works will look like, nor what it will take to get there,

² Philip Kennicott, "William Safire and Art That's Good for You", *Washington Post*, 15 March 2006, p. C01.

anyway?)

What if creativity is measured by the extent to which the creative process and the work that results originate and are fueled by our relationships with one another? What if we need one another to feel and become creative more than we need the famed and celebrated? What if it is our interest in one another, and how we might live together more richly, that drives our interest in the arts?

If these are our values, then who becomes *imaginers* opens to those with the interest and ability to reach out to one another, to inspire and be inspired. *Imaginers* must learn to appreciate how different and varied expressions of self and perceptions of the world are each valid and worth considering. They must learn to seek out and engage others, and care about how relationships strengthen their creativity more than whether artwork reflects their individual power and strength. These *imaginers* learn that creativity is an enterprise undertaken

collectively for mutual benefit.

Making creativity possible for all

Models for teaching and learning in the arts must offer a way of learning and practicing creativity that the majority find rich and meaningful. For the past ten years, New Urban Arts has experimented with new aspirations for arts learning to expand who and how one makes space for creative thought and expression. The studio at New Urban Arts has been described as a “risky, edgy, sometimes enlightening and most times unpredictable place, in which everyone – young & a little younger; old and a little older – is accorded the same level of respect, compassion, regard; where it is assumed every *one* – teaching, being taught; learning, facilitating the learning – has something to give, contribute, express, challenge, create. I’m the lucky one: some of the mentors are my students; some of their mentees become my students. I am assured, at this point

in my lifetime, of learning and teaching, of guiding and being guided.”³

The culture that this observer describes first emerged through an experience with a student in our first year at New Urban Arts. This student came to the studio everyday but refused to participate in any of the creative workshops designed by the artists. After attending sessions for six months, she arrived at the studio one day and showed her mentors the sketchbook given to her at the beginning of the year. The artists were astounded. She had been doing every exercise at home, but had been afraid to show anyone throughout the year. She was afraid that her drawings looked awkward and unrealistic. She was afraid that the artists would tell her that she was not creative. Though the artists found this to be particularly tragic for this student, her experience made them reflect on students who would never

³ Rick Benjamin in his introduction to New Urban Arts’ chapbook, “Breathe,” an anthology of student poetry, 1998-2001.

consider stepping into the studio for fear of rejection.

This formative experience led to further questioning the role of the artist in the creative development of all students. How can the artist push students safely into unsafe spaces, spaces where they can overcome these fears? How does the artist unequivocally validate the expressions created by students so that they have the confidence and trust needed to willfully push themselves there? What does failure look and feel like when we try to circumvent this rejection? Are all marks, words, and movements important now? What does this mean for the spelling of words in poems, instruments out of tune in music, and lines out of proportion in drawing? What is the role of an arts foundation curriculum in this new space? What does the artist teach? Most importantly, how do we work toward answering these questions and ask new ones so that all kids have the chance to become

imagers?

An alternative for the relationship between artist and student emerged through experimentation largely driven by the needs and interests of students like the one described before. An artist who volunteered in our studio described this relationship when she wrote "... (it is) not bent around the myth of an "expert" ready to condescend to those beneath him/her, but instead (is) grounded on the premise that the flow of learning and teaching is multi-directional. These relationships foreground the fact that everyone has their own knowledges and literacies to contribute to one another, that each self is valid, and that we are all stronger as a community when we are working together."

When created from honest, and mainly compassionate places, the arts reveal who we are, how we aspire to relate to one another, and how we see the world. It becomes a starting point for questions and conversations to share

feelings, experiences, histories, and cultures. It provides a way for students and teachers to know one another.

Acknowledging that our studio is located in a studio in an impoverished urban community, we also turned to Paulo Freire to ground these relationships, this practice, in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This pedagogy seeks to empower disenfranchised peoples to become active participants in their development as engaged and critical citizens.

When artists and youth partner in our studio through a pedagogy of teaching and learning simultaneously, without presumption about what is more or less valid, then artists and youth meet each other where they both are. They help each other use the arts to discover a place that is more informed and inspired. This process differs greatly from the teacher who transmits knowledge to the student in a mechanical process, which Freire describes as the "banking system

of education.”

We set out to encourage artists not to prescribe technical tasks that have right or wrong approaches, thus asserting power and reinforcing the passivity of the student-subject. Instead, we encouraged the artist and student to pose questions and creative solutions to one another, which might equally proceed in a number of directions.

We also learned that artists and students cannot abdicate what they already know, and the generosity of spirit and knowledge must flow both ways. Through this process, the artist and student become active learners who can begin to define and take responsibility for their education, communities, and futures.

As this model emerged, the taxonomy of the “artist” and the “student” began to break down. Is it mentor and mentee? Artist and apprentice? To begin to approximate the relationship, New Urban Arts employs

“artist mentor” and “mentee.” However, we recognize that these linear terms fail us, given the circular nature of the relationship between the two. When the model works well, both become the “artist mentor” and the “mentee.” This relationship supports and challenges the artist mentor, as much as it does the mentee. Both must take risks as teachers and learners, as creative thinkers and makers. As bell hooks writes, “When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process.”⁴

A sustainable creative practice

When the arts are a social enterprise, then what are artists working toward? Are they aspiring toward new

⁴ bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: The Education of Freedom, (New York: Routledge, 1994) 14.

forms of representation? Beauty? Stronger personal connections? Political upheaval? What are they making and how do they make it together?

The artist mentor and mentee at New Urban Arts are proceeding in a number of directions, hopefully toward newly possible, yet unknown places. What interests New Urban Arts is that they proceed, that they practice, and practice together continuously.

While a creative *process* describes the ongoing exploration and refinement of a work of art, or a body of work, New Urban Arts defines a creative *practice* as the way one fulfills the need to be artistically curious and imaginative. The definition is meant to be accessible and loose, open to further interpretation and definition. By its nature, a definition for a creative practice must be as varied and different as those practicing. If we had our druthers, this would be everybody. The definition must also be so open that it can evolve for each person.

The fulfillment from this practice stems less from becoming more proficient, which can breed a confidence that reinforces habitual attachment to specific skills, rather than embarking in new directions. The fulfillment stems from a deeper awareness and acceptance of where one is now, as well as a yearning for knowing more.

This practice implies that the artist mentor and mentee are in a constant state of changing and becoming; of growing and learning; of new influences and disregarding the old. As a result, each stage in the development of a creative practice is provisional.

The trajectory of its development is also multi-directional. Each person might progress or regress, or choose intentional paths or take accidental ones. For this reason, the question is not so much about how to advance, but how to sustain this process of becoming. This is what we mean by a *sustainable creative practice*.

The goal of this practice contrasts with the static aspirations of arts learning today – marked by proficiency of skills⁵ – which suggests a static end goal, a finish line of achievement. While these aspirations might be fine for the needs of schools and school systems, they are not lofty enough for the aim of educating young people, particularly in poor communities.

The idea of endlessly creating work, feeling unsure, uncertain, and unsettled, asking questions without arriving at too many answers, is a lonely endeavor. This is not a process that one can reasonably be expected to sustain without one another. This reinforces the relationship-centric view of teaching and learning the arts. Artist mentors and mentees need one another, and sustaining this practice depends on the strength of the relationship between the two. Since relationships are multi-layered and

⁵ See <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards.cfm>.

numerous, a broad network of support and participation, a community, allows one to be more deeply engaged in this practice. If one draws on diverse sources of inspiration and connects with creative people across disciplines, we also believe that this community, this practice, will be stronger. The more one is accepting of different ways of participating creatively in this community, then the more one can be pushed and challenged in new and positive directions.⁶

A common language for this practice

A practice that is relationship-based requires a framework and a common language so that artists in a network can support one another. For the past two years, New Urban Arts has turned to staff, volunteers, artist mentors, and students to define a framework and

⁶ This valuable connection between community and multi- or inter- disciplinary artistic practices seems to be emerging concurrently with the trend of younger artists blurring the lines between artistic disciplines.

create a common language. This can provide a strong foundation upon which

the strong, trusting, and necessary relationships can be built. This process

led to the following rubric:

	Create	Collaborate	Document & Reflect	Engage
	<i>Create: To produce through artistic or imaginative effort.</i>	<i>Collaborate: To work together in the process of creating work.</i>	<i>Document and Reflect: To make one's learning, process, and progression visible with evidence.</i>	<i>Engage: To strengthen communities by expanding access to creative participation.</i>
Introductory Practice	Become interested in how creative projects allow you to investigate emotions and ideas, and introduce yourself to new tools, materials, and disciplines.	Work with a mentor to participate in creative projects of his or her design.	Keep a journal, blog, or sketchbook, and participate in discussions with others about creative projects.	Present creative projects to one's close circle of support.
Emerging Practice	Grow a knowledge base of exercises to facilitate your creative process, and create a body of work.	Work with a mentor and modify his or her creative projects to best suit your interests and needs.	Research and source others and their projects, affirm authorship, acknowledge progression, and articulate completion of work.	Develop multiple and ongoing strategies to share the process and products to new audiences.
Established Practice	Find meaning and enjoyment in your practice, and express an authentic style and voice.	Work with like-minded people on creative projects, and make contributions to their design and implementation.	Update regularly a statement that describes your creative practice, and preserve, edit, and present work.	Form a relationship with a mentee(s) and support them and be inspired through the development of their practice.
Sustainable Practice	Evolve in new creative directions, self-initiate on creative projects, and experiment with tools, materials, and disciplines.	Convene artists within and across disciplines and create new projects in partnership.	Question and openly discuss one's practice. Disseminate information about this practice to invite suggestions from others, and offer suggestions to those who seek it.	Address the structural inequities that limit access and participation in a creative arts education

The four different domains: a) create, b) collaborate, c) document and reflect, and d) engage are equally important, illustrating that the individual process of creating new work takes on the same importance as creating work with others. Teaching and empowering others to discover their practice is equally important to an artist in developing their own. Or better yet, they are indistinguishable. Rather than considering these enterprises separately, each one feeds off the other. It also reflects a more honest representation of how an individual makes work, which is constantly influenced by the voices and ideas, and the people, that surround artists. The process and product embody the relationships. The relationships embody the process and product.

The four developmental stages of a sustainable creative practice: a) introductory, b) emerging, c) established, and d) sustainable, are meant to be fluid. The progression toward a sustainable

practice, might pause, restart, or regress toward an introductory practice. Also, the conception of what a sustainable practice will most likely expand throughout this progression – making it feel off in the distance.

The list of indicators is not intended to determine that those who have an introductory practice are less developed than those with a sustainable practice. Indeed, it is for the artist mentors and mentees to use so that they can become more active agents of learning, to assess where they are and where they might go next. It is likely that they will also feel they are in multiple stages at one time, or feel a new sense of priority for different domains at different times. As learners engage and use this rubric, we hope that they refine and expand the indicators to best suit the development of their practice.

A Maturing Field?

The cornerstone of numerous

reform efforts in education has been student-centered learning. The arts provide a natural tool for young people to explore questions and ideas most relevant to them, and to facilitate strong relationships between teachers and students. It is ironic that the arts are often less than an essential part of these reform efforts.

For the past ten years, there have been numerous leaders shaping similar after-school programs whose ambitions have been to change how we teach and learn in this country, and how we value creativity. They have chosen the after-school arena because this space affords the flexibility to experiment, and the ability to attract and engage bright minds and creative spirits in new ways. It also allows educational programs to think beyond who is qualified and who is not to participate.

This field is now starting to mature, and in the process, is groping for clarity about its work and impact. One

example is the trend toward defining “teaching artists.” The intent of defining this role appears aimed at lending the field more credibility. Karen Erickson, writing in the Teaching Artist Journal (Vol. 1 #3), argues that a teaching artist needs to “be an accomplished artist in their field.” As is often correlated with this view, she defines teaching as the “transfer of knowledge to others.”

The openness and experimentation that has brought this field to this point must be retained as it continues to push forward. The notion of who teaching artists can be must include those who exist outside the professional class. The fact that this field has been emergent, inclusive of people without certification, is in large part what allows compelling work, new ideas, and relationships not possible in other spaces to be possible.

Within diverse or poor communities, dynamics of power must change and established notions of

professionalism can undermine this effort. Organizations within diverse or poor communities where organizations, like New Urban Arts, must continue to nurture and embrace teaching artists of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities – and pay careful respect for art forms, practices, existing knowledge and assets within communities that are not in the professional class. Rather than distinguishing who is more or less qualified to teach, to lead, the more essential question is: how can we all be ready to lead, to work together and expand who and how one participates in a creative life?