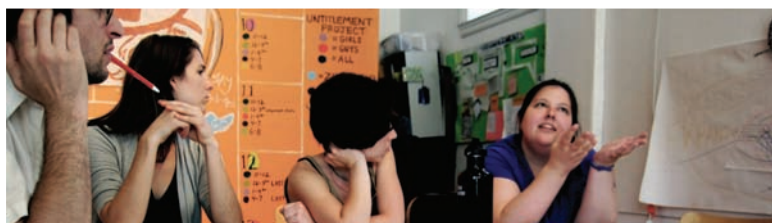




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I Wish I Had a Place Like This When I Was Growing Up: New Urban Arts and the Cultivation of Creative Practice

By Peter Hocking

NEW URBAN ARTS

New Urban Arts' primary teachers. Since I had served as New Urban Arts' first board president, the invitation was poignant, for it allowed me to return to the program in a profoundly different capacity. Rather than focusing on the vagaries

I. You may not notice it when you first enter New Urban Arts' studio, but just above your head and to the right of the door, stenciled in dusty orange paint—resembling more the detritus of an abandoned art project than creed—are the core principles of the studio: *risk, leadership, inclusion, connection, voice*. They are flanked, on one side, by a white wall that serves alternatively as a gallery space and site of art making and, on the other, by a neatly presented collection of a dozen black and white student portraits, created annually by a photography mentor. In the space of less than ten feet, the studio tells a story. Walking into the space invites more stories and, importantly, encourages participation in the crafting of the *next* story.

In 2007, ten years after New Urban Arts first opened its studio in Providence, Rhode Island, across from three of the city's largest high schools, I was fortunate to be invited to serve as one of two Artist Mentor Fellows. The position is adapted from the idea of the *pedagogista*, developed in the *Reggio Emilia* schools in Italy, and is explicitly tasked with attending to the learning and success of the Art Mentors,

of governance and fundraising, being a Fellow allowed me to see how a series of questions and ideas had grown into a thriving *community of practice*.

Making the experience intellectually richer for me, concurrent to becoming a Fellow I was hired to build Rhode Island School of Design's (RISD) Office of Public Engagement. This dual assignment speaks to our mission and what it may become, since schools like RISD are tethered to histories of service to industrial capitalism. Regardless of the efforts of individuals or even departments to create critical discourse, institutions tend to reproduce such histories even as they strive to establish a contemporary *raison d'être*. Still, a primary institutional commitment to preparing designers and artists for markets only attends to one facet of their lives and poorly prepares them to work in the world more broadly or to engage in public problem solving. In contrast, community arts programs, in part because they operate in cultural margins, can focus on multiple uses of the arts for mediating and intervening in critical human issues. By connecting the lived experience of those attending its

programs with the practice of art making, New Urban Arts is able to prepare urban youth, as well as college student mentors, for reparative roles in their communities—as artists, to be sure, but also as educators, activists, and participants in broader coalitions engaged in community problem solving.

Happily, this dual assignment opens up new ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and public mission. If nothing else, working simultaneously in these institutions has provided counterpoint to my thinking about the arts and, perhaps more importantly, how we can see engagement with the arts—or, more widely, with creative practice—as a critical dimension to human development and social change. While New Urban Arts embraces an open and learner-centered approach to building a lifetime creative practice, RISD has a structured core curriculum and a discipline-based pedagogy. As someone who received an undergraduate education at RISD and helped establish the New Urban Arts' principles in reaction to that experience, performing my jobs in alignment with the expectations of these divergent curricula and code-switching between their philosophical assumptions challenged, affirmed, and advanced my pedagogical assumptions about creative education in significant ways.

I do not like to prove things through the negative, but countless times while writing this essay, my words have drifted toward a critique of my own creative education. I should not be surprised. Since New Urban Arts opened its first studio I have heard countless adult peers express a common yearning when visiting: *I wish I had a place like this when I was growing up.*

My impulse to compare New Urban Arts' pedagogy with my own art school

experience, which in this essay really is shorthand for my experience with disciplinary- and standards-based teaching, is underscored when Art Mentors, many of whom fill their days studying art or design at local colleges, share a comparison of their own. As I will describe later, it is common in reflective conversations to hear these emerging practitioners speak of their aspirations and expectations of art school and lament that they needed to leave school to have the conversations that provide a foundation for their practice. Turning this negative to a positive, they celebrate New Urban Arts as a site of deep learning and personal transformation in their education.

New Urban Arts is an independent, non-profit agency that provides arts programming for adolescents, almost all of whom are enrolled in Providence's public high schools. Three core programs join in shaping New Urban Arts' pedagogy: Arts Mentoring, the Summer Arts Inquiry, and the Studio Team Advisory Board (STAB). While these programs operate independently, a significant number of students, mentors, and staff participate in all three, and their co-location in the studio serves to establish and reinforce forms of learning that encourage the development of artistic practice, critical thinking, and leadership.

Best known for its core academic year program, Art Mentoring, New Urban Arts began developing the model in its first year, when four college students gathered a dozen high school students to collaboratively plan what would become the organization. Art Mentoring does not follow a traditional classroom model, but rather clusters art mentors with a variety of skills in an open studio for two sessions every afternoon. Youth align themselves

with activities and Mentors according to their (often quixotic) interests and needs. While Mentors may begin a program year advertising their expertise in one area, the flow of the studio may quickly have them advising creative work beyond their original expectations. Intriguingly, New Urban Arts does not claim to teach art in the most obvious sense. Instead, it sees its mission as building “a vital community that empowers young people to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives.” In service to this mission, it is perhaps not surprising that in alignment with Art Mentors, the studio also hosts Study Buddies, mentors who assist learners with academic subjects, enabling the active notion that “creative practice” can be a vital concept in the pursuit of physics as well as art.

An example of this cross-disciplinary pollination is evident in work created by a student several summers ago. During an inquiry on contemplative practice, the student created a memorial that recognized the labor of road crew workers. Using narrative interviewing techniques and memoir, she was able to tie the labor she witnessed in her family with that of workers she met during her research. The resulting piece not only recognized labor that is often overlooked and belittled, but it also invited the workers she interviewed to understand what she was doing in the studio. While ultimately a small gesture, it speaks to the ways that New Urban Arts’ practice seeks to connect those systematically excluded from the city’s arts-driven economic development strategies with the arts as full participants. If such work does not create quick change in the lives of residents excluded from full participation in city life, it takes steps to prepare new leaders with broader and

more equitable perspectives.

The Summer Arts Inquiry brings together a group of 15-20 high schools students for six weeks each summer. It runs four days a week for four hours, and provides students with a stipend—which reinforces the program’s seriousness and, operating as a paid internship does for youth from affluent communities, also attends to the economic imperatives in the learner’s lives. Organized around broad themes, such as *cartography*, *ritual*, *correspondence*, and *encounter*, learners explore a concept through a variety of lenses. Field trips, meetings with artists engaged with the theme, group projects, and self-directed art-making all serve to develop the inquisitive, critical, and epistemic capacity of learners in ways that allow for learning to happen collaboratively and individually.

The Inquiry also engages students directly in the world in transformational ways. In July, during a visit by twenty-five youth from a New York City college access program, youth in both programs collaboratively developed a community intervention to make visible and remind city residents of the Haiti earthquake near its six-month anniversary. The public intervention unfolded in Providence’s transportation hub, Kennedy Plaza, insuring that residents from a broad range of backgrounds would be invited into dialogue. Through direct conversation with people on the streets as well as the creation and dissemination of temporary stickers—made with wide, low-adhesive painter’s tape and marked with messages about Haiti’s current condition—students were able to prompt discourse that had immediate as well as an echoing effect. A lingering “sticker” placed about a faucet in the studio, like those placed more publicly, that asks “Does Haiti Have This?”

stands as a prompt to consciousness and conscience.

The Studio Team Advisory Board (STAB) gathers students in a regular conversation focused on the continuation of core programs, the development of new initiatives, problem-solving, relationship building, and, although these terms are not routinely used, evaluation and pedagogical innovation. While learners join STAB out of an impulse to serve (and perhaps from the gratification of being perceived as a leader in the studio), New Urban Arts has committed resources to this initiative because of its commitment to keep youth voices at the center of its planning and development. While STAB does not have the same governance role as the Board of Directors, the Board will consult with and defer to STAB on many program matters. Indeed, beyond its day-to-day functions of keeping the studio both lively and safe, STAB serves as a center of organizational planning that is grounded in the experience of youth.

The youth who participate in these programs arrive with a diversity of experience and perspective. While Providence is small, with an estimated population of 175,000 including 26,000 school-aged youth, the city's youth face some of the hardest challenges of contemporary American life. In framing its learning community, New Urban Arts' web site shares bracing public statistics: "Over 40% of students in the Providence public schools live in poverty. Only 24% of Providence residents age 25 and over have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and 68% of families in Providence have an income below \$50,000. Only one public high school in the city has an average combined SAT score above 825." Through its own record keeping, New

Urban Arts creates a vivid picture of the cultural perspectives that converge in its studio: "Students represent 13 different high schools, and 28% are African-American, 28% Latino, 22% Caucasian, 14% Southeast Asian, 3% Caribbean, and 5% bi-racial. Our student body equally represents ages between 14 and 18. 5% of our students identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Questioning." Similarly intriguing is the community of Artist Mentors. Generally understood to be "emerging artists," mostly between the ages of 18 and 40, Artist Mentors can be students from one of the city's six colleges, local artists, or former high school learners who have returned in a new role.

These participants and initiatives serve to create a foundation for a vibrant and intentional *community of practice*—a space in which participants are known, feel safe, and understand that their voice, affinities, and questions are respected and heard. Learners are invited into art traditions and helped to develop the necessary creative and critical skills to succeed in achieving personal goals, regardless of whether those goals are aesthetic, social, or related to another sphere of human experience. In this way, the program enables young people to see creativity as a holistic dimension of their life and as a means, one among many, for creating meaning.

II.

Some years after I finished college, in fact after I started to teach college students, I was introduced to Ben Shahn's pivotal essays given at Harvard in the 1950s and collected in the volume *The Shape of Content*. Through these essays, I began to articulate questions based in my own experience about the nature and

purpose of creative education and about the ways creative practice can serve to engage our most pressing social issues. While his concerns about the place of the arts in the University still seem prescient—perhaps best exemplified by his question regarding what we might have lost if Goya, after an early critical success, had been granted a Guggenheim and then scored a quiet, stable professorship at a small liberal arts college—he did not exactly provide me with the synthesis I craved. Not until I encountered Maxine Greene’s *Releasing the Imagination* did I begin to connect the role of critical pedagogy with creative practice. It was Greene who first helped me see the necessity of the arts as a democratic undertaking and not only as the province of art school kids like me. Simply stated, Greene introduced me not to more pedagogy about artistic skills or technique, with which I was well and vexingly acquainted, but rather to the idea that the skills of imagination, developed especially through engagement with the arts, are key to social change. Quite plainly, no matter if we come from financial poverty or the spiritual poverty sometimes rampant in affluent communities, we only reproduce the life we know unless we are able to imagine a different way of living and a different role for art.

While Greene articulated this possibility for me, it was actually a student who led me to Greene. Tyler Denmead had come to Brown University as a pre-med student. On a visit to Brown during his first year, his girlfriend, Kate, who is now his wife, saw a poster for a mentoring program at the Center for Public Service, of which I was the director. Reminding Tyler of his high-school mentoring, Kate suggested that he become a mentor while at Brown. By year’s end Tyler had com-

pleted a mentoring cycle and become the program’s student leader.

Over a subsequent summer, Tyler apprenticed with a young chef in Brittany, where he learned more than cooking. The local, intuitive, and dynamic approach to food also invited self-reflection about the nature of creativity in Tyler’s own life. After this experience, thinking about creativity took an increasingly large place within his intellectual imagination and would lead to a life transition. Even before his time abroad, Tyler was questioning the effectiveness of the mentoring program he was leading in a public school. He could see ways the system categorized children—setting them up for future success or failure or, as happened to him, as creative or not creative. He could see that rather than helping young learners, the mentoring process seemed to have a deeper moral effect on college students. He wondered aloud, and sometimes loudly, why such programs could not be more reciprocal, and he named the problem vexing many such programs: that they are designed to provide more resources to already privileged learners, while locking under-resourced learners into the political discourse of the “inevitable problems” facing urban youth.

Emerging from these experiences, New Urban Arts was not created from a sense of altruism. Rather it emerged from an awareness on the part of Tyler and me, high school student participants, donors, staff, Art Mentors, and others that a new kind of creative, cultural and pedagogical space is needed, a space where learners—whether high school students, staff or Mentors—are able to pursue creative work outside the boundaries of preconceptions about them. Paraphrasing one student, school is a place where youth are told that

they can pass or fail, but New Urban Arts provides a space in which the most valuable learning might emerge from failure. This shift in perspective allows students to build critical frameworks for reassessing their experience and reorienting their navigation of school.

III.

In September 2009, New Urban Arts convened its first reunion of artist mentors. The group was eager to discuss both their experience with the program and how they were continuing to learn to situate their art practice in the world. Deep into the reunion one of them observed that New Urban Arts had *saved* his education. He explained that, throughout his time at RISD, he sought out a conversation that proved unavailable on campus. When he discovered New Urban Arts, he was finally able to begin articulating the practice that suited him—a practice that is relational, that is concerned with communicating directly with people who live in proximity to where the art is being made, that improves the quality of life in the neighborhood in which the work is being created, and, importantly, that challenges the notion of authorship as a concept of singular creation.

Though what he said came as no surprise, the vigor of the murmurs and nods around the circle forced me to reassess what was being communicated. As others spoke to this point, I realized that, as a RISD alumnus, I was reflexively nodding with deep understanding. The conversation highlighted the ways that we were yearning not for yet another prescriptive determination of what it means to be an artist or designer in the tradition of the industrialized, Modernist art and design economy, but a broader inquiry into how

creative people might situate themselves in a rapidly transforming world. It was clear that the sense of connectedness and meaning that these mentors experienced at New Urban Arts was not something they had encountered in other places. New Urban Arts allowed them to understand creative practice as something that can engage a plurality of participants and facilitators who enable a reciprocal and dialogical learning process.

This conversation helped me recognize what enables this learning community to form: safety to take risks, presence to the totality of those who inhabit the space, and a deep ownership of the value of the place. It also allowed me to see the ways emerging artists—including high school learners—are concerned with questions of freedom and relationship. Resisting the notion that their expressive and creative lives must be connected to the process of buying and selling, New Urban Arts provides an antidote to the idea that art must inherently have monetary value. Furthermore, the conversation reminded me that this awareness enables participants to see art as a mode of social change—engaging creative practice as expressive, persuasive, and exhortatory voice.

The following recollections further illustrate the complexity of experience that is enabled within the space of New Urban Arts.

During one of my first return visits to the studio, a young woman walked up to me and asked directly, “What does *whitey* want?” The question is plain, off-putting, vital, and complicated. It is the kind of question that is a test. Intuitively I knew I had to answer quickly. “Power,” I replied flatly before flashing a wry smile. There was a pause as we locked gazes. She smiled broadly and shook her head. “That’s what

Tyler said, too. I think everyone wants power.” I laughed. “I think you’re right.” It was the

beginning of an on-going dialogue.

As a middle-aged white man, I am not accustomed to being asked this kind of question, and certainly young women of color are not invited often (or, more frankly, permitted) to ask middle-aged white men about race and power. While my own preference may be to enter the complex discourse of race with less incendiary descriptors, the exchange communicates much about the relative safety of the space—and the kind of risk-taking inquiry it encourages. I have come to realize over time that the test implied by her question was four-fold. She was testing language by using a term she knew could be seen as an epithet but could also, through its use, be seen as an invitation to solidarity. She was testing my agility as a potential member of a community of importance to her. And she was testing limits in an attempt to find her adult voice. I was also her “control subject”; my response, perhaps, would confirm that the suppositions of our conversation about race and racism were shared beyond the studio walls.

That both this student and I can inhabit the studio with our different levels of cultural privilege and work collaboratively to construct meaning about a topic as volatile as race speaks to the ethic of safety that students, staff, and mentors have established. Beyond her learning, she was attending to my learning, too. She was communicating an expectation of reciprocity and respect and was assessing my ability to engage with real issues. Knowingly or not, she was also “training” for the outside world and her future in it. Finally, she was issuing an initiatory warning that the

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discourse around race at New Urban Arts is not neutral, naïve, one-directional, or without

hard edges. My preferences about racial language aside, there is no denying the realness of her question and the insistence with which it informed her thinking at the time.

Another testing of our commitment to reciprocity and respect occurred several weeks into my fellowship, when a scheduling conflict required me to shift one of my expected days in the studio. Given the fluid nature of my calendar and what I perceived to be my fluid role in the studio, I thought nothing of calling in and alerting the staff to my absence. But the next day, I found in my mailbox a small likeness of myself rendered in modeling putty and scorched at the edges. My absence had been noticed and one student noted her ire by burning me in effigy. My colleagues’ delight about this incident registered that this was an important step in my acculturation to the studio, though I was doubtful. After all, I had barely met this student, only had fleeting conversations with her, and could not imagine why my absence would matter. Still, the next time I met her I thanked her for the artwork and assured her that I placed a photo of it where I would see it often. She shrugged at my gesture, making sure that I read her indifference. The reference to the effigy, however, became shorthand for reminding me, each time extraneous commitments conspired to shift my schedule, that my commitment was not to tasks or a time-table. It was about *presence*.

Though I do not mean, in these examples, to obscure the role of educators at New Urban Arts, I do want to highlight the reciprocity of student-teacher rela-

tions, where all members of the community, especially youth, play complex roles. This complexity may obscure at times the direction in which the current of our ideas, initiatives, and explorations flow. Sometime this learning stays true to the “arts” and engages fully a range of art-making traditions and forms. More importantly and perhaps more radically, learners and mentors—sometimes from drastically different places of cultural privilege—share knowledge and resources, often unflinchingly, in relation to difficult topics and life experiences, such as institutionalized racism or difficulties navigating sexual or gender identity. Incidents like the ones above expanded my sensitivity and deepened my understanding of ways *contemporary* youth discourse about race, class, gender, and power is taking shape. It would be an overstatement to claim that such incidents were transformational for me, but they have shaped my understanding of how a new generation is wrestling with these questions. Sharing these young people’s world, I am well aware that their openness and commitment to discourses about equity and justice at New Urban Arts are initiatory and transformational.

A final example which may serve to stitch together these ideas is being piloted as I write. *The Untitlement Project*, a six-week investigation of the role of gender, race, class, and privilege in the lives of high school students, was started this summer to address active concerns in the studio. Last year, a group of boys new to the program made frequent off-hand and insensitive comments which students, mentors and staff alike construed as misogynistic and homophobic. Though immediate, sensitive, and effective interventions were made quickly, concerns about the moment

lingered. Conversations about what to do occurred in many quarters and were synthesized by studio leaders. Funding was developed to enable 16 students to spend the summer investigating, understanding, and developing action plans for making New Urban Arts, and the students’ practices, more explicitly informed about and engaged with these issues. Beyond individual student learning, the most concrete outcome of this initiative is new programming that will invite new students into the studio in ways that more explicitly introduce and provide support for a culture of inclusion, equity, and safety.

IV.

As I consider again the place of creative practice in my life, I am struck by my renewed frustration with learning environments that instrumentalize learners as the means for an agenda outside their self-interest. Art programs, both in colleges and youth programs, often justify their existence through an economic lens—as a means of securing employment in an out-of-control economy or through a vague argument that the arts are a form of economic development. In both cases, creativity is seen as a means to a narrow (dead)end and not as an important human activity in itself. The teaching of art is now cast in terms of specific skills—too often these days concerned with a student’s facility with a suite of digital tools. New Urban Arts reminds me that the arts can be taught as a means of preparing vital social actors to constructively engage whatever issues confront them.

Maxine Greene was prescient in her understanding that we see discipline- and standards-based learning as pedagogical methods increasingly intent upon casting young people as “human resources” in an

economy beyond their control. While the arts are not special in this case (indeed all education has been corporatized and aimed at recasting *citizens* as *human resources*) the arts contain within them a key to social transformation. Greene proposes that we embrace the imaginative power of the arts as a means of turning over current educational policy. If we begin with the presumption that every learner is, in his or her full humanity, an imaginative and creative being, we move quite quickly to the necessity of also acknowledging that every young person can be a center of self-determination and decision-making. It is not solely idealism that enables New Urban Arts to remain so deeply inspired by Greene's ideas; the practice of these ideas produces results.

Juxtaposing my own art education with New Urban Arts' pedagogy is a bit of a false comparison, based partly upon recrimination and regret. However, when my feelings about New Urban Arts are confirmed in the casual comments and intentional reflections of those who know the program, I am heartened to remember that sometimes desire reveals deeper truth and leads us to action. The desire that crafted New Urban Arts was informed and fueled by a rage about the inadequacy of educational systems purported to be the best. The desire that sustains and advances New Urban Arts is grounded in the rich aspiration and hope of those who inhabit and care for the space. It is fueled by the knowledge that communities of practice can exist, if not inside bureaucratic systems of education, then in their neighborhood.

As *The Untitlement Project* demonstrates, New Urban Arts remains open to acknowledging that change is often fueled by insult, anger, and the recognition that

power is being abused. Importantly, its community of practice is able to effectively channel the passion and anger that may accompany righteous action, insuring that such concerns and emotion can be generative and not tragically reproduce the same abuses they purport to address. My arts education was largely in service to reproducing a fragmented and discordant culture by aligning me with particular systems and rules. New Urban Arts invites learners to imagine a different world and equips them with the skills to begin making it.

Many who learn about New Urban Arts urge it to grow or to reproduce itself. The organization struggles with these questions and is currently working to develop the means to teach what it knows to those who would like to adapt the organization's learning. Importantly, New Urban Arts understands that an organization's development requires the same self-directed care as an individual's learning. The process of developing a vital organization is messy, plastic, and contextual, needing to assess, redirect, and commit to its trajectory on a regular basis. The kind of community, practice, and pedagogy that one can find when visiting New Urban Arts is not somehow "out there" for us to uncover, master, and claim. We can learn from New Urban Arts, but we cannot replicate it. Creating this kind of space and social change process is a local project and requires a commitment to our own desire, to the cultivation of individual and collective imagination, and an understanding of the soil in which it will grow. It calls us to consider how we all might be transformed, regardless of our location in the teaching and learning equation, and how our actions as educators enable a new generation to take leadership in our

communities with the tools to transform systems of injustice.

While we can cultivate the reciprocity of the learning process and acknowledge the leadership youth can take within progressive education programs, we cannot believe that youth can create such programs without the commitment and labor of teachers and other adult leaders. If we, as educators, truly care whether our students develop the habits and skills of freedom and self-determination—indeed if we care about our own freedom and agency—we must be prepared to make spaces, like New Urban Arts, in which young people can cultivate the ability to imagine a different and better world. For much of human history it has been the *making* of such sites— physically, intellectually, relationally, personally, and situationally—in response to human

needs and questions that enables the kind of social change that acknowledges and enables the sanctity and dignity of us all. New Urban Arts teaches us that the making of aesthetic experience, the making of meaning, the making of social change, the making of progressive sites of teaching and learning, and the making of justice need not be fragmented or disjointed activities. They can be the same thing.

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Underground Railroads: Performance and Community at the Underground Railroad Theater's Youth Program

By Maggie Moore Abdow

This article is based on an interview with Maggie Moore Abdow, director of the Underground Railroad Theater's Youth Program (Cambridge MA) since 2004, and her summary of that exchange. The interview (11/3/2009) was conducted by Saul Slapikoff, member of Radical Teacher's editorial group and former board member of URT. The theater was founded in Oberlin, Ohio. Its name honors the fact that Oberlin was one of the last stops on the Midwestern Branch of the Underground

Railroad. Active for some 30 years, URT has a history of outreach to underserved families, with shows for young audiences, families, and adults performed across the United States and internationally. Its Community and Education Program functions through performance and rigorous community and education programming. (The cluster editors)

Collaboration is never easy, and all the more so when it aims to bring