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AAD 510 Arts Learning Policy and Practice
Final Synthesis Essay
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I have broken my essay down into seven questions, which represent my primary areas of learning this term in Arts Learning Policy and Practice. These do not necessarily correlate with the weekly content areas of the class curriculum, but instead, are major lines of inquiry that I returned to again and again throughout the term.

1. What are schools for?

Having never studied the U.S. education system, or more precisely, the sociology of education, learning about different theories of what school is really for was revelatory to me. Is the main role of schooling to establish a baseline of education for all citizens in this country? Is it intended to be a social leveler by giving all the same access to opportunities for self-betterment? Is it to introduce to individuals, at a young, impressionable age, the idea of social hierarchy? Or, most crudely, is it a form of babysitting? Before this class, I accepted the U.S. education system at face value. I emerged with the understanding that education serves all of these purposes, and more, and teachers, administrators, policymakers, and arts organizations—not to mention parents and the children themselves—have differing vested interests in the purpose of school. Essentially, everyone has their own agenda. A question central to all of the readings was, whose responsibility is arts education, in particular? I appreciated viewing this question through the lens of school culture and three different (though by no means discrete) approaches to curriculum: transmission, transaction, and transformation.

2. What is art for?

This class dealt with issues of valuing art and aesthetics more than I would have imagined, and I enjoyed the chance to think about these issues as they relate to arts learning. The readings introduced a broad array of evidence for the utility of art, and these can be translated into arguments for carving out a permanent spot for arts in education. Some of the ways to group benefits of arts education include: making non-art subjects more dynamic for students (through arts integration); 21st century skills; studio habits of mind; and social capital building/social protection. In the future, if I feel like I must defend the necessity of the arts, I am now able to pull from a big stack of theories and evidence, and can position the arts in a multitude of different ways, depending on my audience. The best way to position the arts may be to demonstrate that they serve multiple purposes, and therefore are indispensable. I never would have thought about art in this calculating a manner before, but now I just see it as a matter of practicality.

3. What kinds of art are given the limelight in arts education?

With regards to arts organizations' roles in arts learning, each organization has their own niche and art style/discipline to bring to arts learners. When arts organizations partner with schools, is it the responsibility of the school to present a range of arts learning opportunities that do not favor those that could be considered exclusionary to children of color, or of lower socioeconomic status? I would say, yes. This issue also overlaps with the question of arts education for audience development. As arts learning opportunities for school kids continue to fall more under the domain of arts organizations (as money is siphoned away from providing schools with dedicated arts specialists, and arts organization partnerships with schools become more prominent), there is a risk that some

art forms get ignored. It's too big an issue to explore in-depth here, but one that gives me pause, and one that I will consider as I progress in my career and perhaps have a chance to provide arts learning opportunities through an arts organization myself.

4. How much of a voice should the kids have?

I consider this question both with regard to community youth organizations during out of school time, and in schools. The most successful youth-based organizations actively engage the youth in decision-making and in self- and peer-critique. Additionally, encouraging the youth to become invested in their own communities by cultivating in them a sense of civic responsibility is key, as is viewing the teens as resources, not as problems. Why does it seem like these considerations are not prioritized within the school system? How can schools enlist students as co-creators of their own experience? It goes back to my first question: what are schools for? After pondering this idea this term, I feel more committed than ever to empowering young people by including them in decisions about what and how they learn (assuming I am given this chance in my future career in an arts organization).

5. What kind of power does the "amateur" have?

This is related to the above, but here, I am concerned with teachers or leaders as "amateurs." Many community youth-based organizations find success in recruiting teachers and leaders from the community. Although these individuals may not have the credentials that formally trained schoolteachers or arts organization administrators have, their ability to teach and inspire comes from their stake in the development and advancement of the children whom they serve. This calls to mind the idea of the community scholars in the field of folklore. The idea of the contributions an "amateur" can make to an art scene is relevant in discussions of participatory culture, as well (as in the pro-am movement, or DIY). I think

there will come a time—perhaps sooner than we think—when the distinction between expert and amateur will be nearly obsolete. This shift, spurred by the democratizing nature of the Internet, has all kinds of ramifications for traditional cultural institutions, such as schools and arts organizations. I am excited to see what kinds of models of collectives and crowd sourcing continue to develop within my lifetime. One thing is certain: this shift cannot be stopped, and the idea of cultural “gatekeepers” will also continue to evolve.

6. What is the key to developing strong partnerships between schools and arts organizations/teaching artists?

Teaching artists and classroom teachers each have their own contributions to bring to the classroom, and the sooner both parties can acknowledge this and see one another as teammates, the more rich, comprehensive, and higher quality their lessons stand to be. It seems that communication between the two parties is absolutely essential to a strong partnership, and it is preferable if the two can design a curriculum together, agreeing on common educational goals. Additionally, it is clear from the readings that more training opportunities are needed for teaching artists. I hope that, if I work in a leadership position for an arts organization that provides arts learning opportunities in schools through the use of teaching artists, I am able to leverage training opportunities for these professionals.

7. Why evaluate?

I found the week we spent on evaluation in the class perhaps the most useful of all. In schools, evaluation of student learning is mandated, and is often carried out with standardized testing. Though no such tests would capture the effect of arts learning (although such evaluation has been attempted), evaluation is still crucial in demonstrating the effect, and therefore worth, of the arts learning opportunity. I understand now that

evaluation must be built into program planning, and not simply tacked on at the completion of the program or curriculum. Especially useful to me was seeing the multiple methods of evaluation that Art Corps uses for assessment of their teaching program. The advantages of evaluation are threefold: they justify the program to stakeholders (funders, schools, etc.); they offer program planners insight into ways to improve the program the next time around; and they ensure that the needs of the participant (and often, the mission of the organization) remain central to the program's efforts. Essentially, evaluation ensures that a program never goes too far off course. I enjoy how systematic evaluation is. Evaluation has the power to demystify the impact of the arts, and I think that is a good thing, especially when it comes to justification for the arts in schools.

In conclusion, one of the most important areas of skill development for me this term is my improved ability to systematically assess, synthesize, and summarize many sources and areas of content, like I have done for this paper. In the past, it has been a struggle for me to remain focused on a particular topic when I write. In writing the weekly blog posts for this class, I was able to pick out themes from each week's readings and comment on them with astuteness, while maintaining some level of cohesion between all of my points. This skill will undoubtedly serve me next year, as I conduct, and write up, my terminal research.