



Cross-Sector Partnerships and the Role of the Arts in Policy and Systems Change

By Erik Takeshita and Anusha Venkataraman

A Session Report from the April 2009 Meeting of the Community Arts Convening and Research Project

In April of 2009, 27 participants from the arts, community development, education and other diverse sectors around the country met at California State Monterey Bay as part of the Community Arts Convening and Research Project to discuss “Cross-Sector Partnership and the Role of the Arts in Policy and Systems Change.”

The session was created in response to the concern that community arts practitioners sometimes address only the symptoms of structural inequities and often do not deal with the underlying root causes. While it's true that self-empowerment, personal expression and development of community cohesion are important elements of positive social change, these elements gain momentum and strength when linked to strategic policy development. While artists and the arts have assets to offer cross-sector partnerships, such as vision (being able to see that which does not yet exist), resourcefulness (doing more with less) and (of course) creativity, they are not always integrated as partners in broader policy and systems change work. Framing questions posed by the session organizers focused on what it would take for artists and the arts to develop cross-sector partnerships to affect policy and systems change. These questions include:

- What opportunities are there for the community artist to connect across sectors with activists, organizers and others who are looking to make systemic change?
- How would our work in the arts change if we were more conscious and deliberate about connecting with those trying to shift power on a political or institutional level?
- How do we position/frame artists and the arts (and the various assets they bring to the table) as potentially powerful partners in community and systems change efforts?

The following six “framing metaphors” summarize key themes, concepts and ideas that arose from the conversation: 1) Setting the Table; 2) Seeding; 3) Being Part of a Relay-race Team; 4) Mapping; 5) Widening the Circle; and 6) Translating and Building Bridges. These are neither neat nor universally applicable, but, as one participant noted, there is value in “wrestling with the box—creating principles just to throw them out.” These metaphors represent that wrestling, reaching and grasping of the group that convened

in Monterey in April, and we hope they model the notion that the process can often be as valuable as the end product.

Setting the Table

Systemic change begins at home. That is, in order to begin work across sectors, disciplines, generations and cultures, we must first deeply understand our own sectors and their histories. This process must begin with an honest assessment: Where are we now? What have our successes and challenges been and how have practitioners grappled with challenging issues in the past? Based on this reflection, practitioners can identify ways to increase the impact of their work. This process is not easy; beyond the difficulty of honest reflection and assessment, it may involve very deliberate changes to the way we conduct our work.

For example, during our gathering we discussed the field of community arts and the idea that we may need to expand the notion of the artist and creativity. Some pointed out that the simple act of being an artist, or seeing oneself as an artist, can be a source of power. Additionally, by loosening the concept of creativity, as well as what defines an “artist,” we can instantaneously expand the field—and make more places at the table. Jordan Simmons, artistic director of the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in Richmond, Calif., asserted: “Building the field is about building individuals who feel strong, who are able to come out of themselves, and then go back.”

Participants also noted that change often happens over generations, and is not always immediately apparent. Change is propelled by constant education, activation, and re-energization of the ideas, relationships, and practices that are sustained over time. For the arts to have any meaningful impact in cross-sector partnerships, it must start with this kind of sustained inward focus and reflection.

Seeding

Based on this reflection about the arts as a field, its history and what assets it brings to the table, artists need to recognize the different roles they can play to best help bring about and sustain systematic change. One role the arts often play is helping to “seed” change. One of the core competencies of the artist and other “creatives” is the ability to see and articulate that which does not yet exist – in the words of Robert Kennedy, the ability to “dream things that never were and ask why not?”

This seeding of aspiration is a key contribution that the arts can uniquely provide to systems change and cross-sector work. In many instances an artist’s involvement does not end with seeding, and artists are instrumental in transforming the vision into a reality – “harvesting” that which they have sown.

Running the Relay

In other situations, however, artists can only effectuate a certain degree of change and need to enlist a wider set of cross-sector partners with tools different than their own. In this scenario, an artist may be responsible for working on one piece of a larger task and then handing it off to others or, alternatively, taking up things that others have begun.

While artists may be involved in the policy and systems change from beginning to end, it is important to recognize that artists do not need to become planners, organizers or policymakers. Instead, they can think of their roles as a members of relay team, doing their part and strategically “handing off” the baton to other cross-sector partners at various points in the process.

Mapping

To be an effective part of a relay team, artists must understand who their teammates are and when to “hand-off” the baton (as well as who their competitors and detractors are). To help understand this complex network of relationships, the group agreed that mapping can be a powerful tool: Mapping power dynamics, decision-making processes and other community assets can help artists interested in policy and systems change work to identify potential partners, pitfalls and critical timing decisions.

It can also help artists, cultural producers and arts educators to identify gaps in our own practice and the partners that can help compensate for these limitations. As Vickie Vértiz from the Center for Art and Public Life at California College of the Arts articulated: Finding agreement with partners on step-by-step processes not only helps you and your community partners figure out what step you’re on; it can also help “build trust in the community.”

Widening the Circle

This trust is critical to policy and systems change work because despite appearances, policy is not abstract – policy is made by people. As Karen Mack of LA Commons asserted, it is important to realize that “We can make policy without making Policy.” For example, small-*p* policy can encompass things such as job descriptions, vision statements and other documents that define the work people do and how they do it. This is heartening because it points out that policy change can begin with personal connections. Personalizing policy in this way means that by knowing people’s self-interest and the community’s interest, we can simultaneously build trust and have an incredible impact on policy and systems change. Furthermore, this approach allows for the creation and development of transformational relationships—relationships that get at the core of our being—and helps build foundations for social change and policy change alike. To widen the circle of impact, we need only start with one person.

It is important to understand when this process needs to be formalized. On the second day of the session, the group used the work of one of the participants, Amy Horst of the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisc. as a case study. For the past several years, she has been facilitating the process of creating public artworks for sidewalks, streets and

other public spaces. She has enjoyed considerable success by intentionally bringing together artists, politicians and public servants to make such projects possible. This network of relationships has resulted in significant support for these initiatives within the Kohler Arts Center, the city of Sheboygan and the wider community.

During the session, the group discussed whether her process—which has worked quite well thus far—should be formalized in order to outlast individual relationships. While this is an important question for all community partnerships, determining the point at which this “formalization” should happen—and how—depends on the particular circumstances. If creating more formal Policies will “widen the circle” and impact more people without sacrificing core values, then perhaps that is the way to go. However, we must be aware of what we are not willing to compromise on, which may lead to the decision to choose not to grow or not to create Policies that set our relational policies in stone.

Translating and Building Bridges

As demonstrated in the Kohler Arts Center example in Sheboygan, coalition building is one of the most crucial parts of bringing about policy change. One important lesson is that successful coalitions are often built on past “failures.” That is, while a particular coalition may not be successful in bringing about its intended result, if done well, it can still create new modes of interaction, build trust and create new relationships between those who do not often have a chance to work together and establish shared experience and interests.

This kind of “practice,” even if not successful at first, can grow into shared values and pave the way for future coalitions and working relationships. It is critical, however, to be intentional about this process: What are the steps that will strengthen and build trust? What are you willing to compromise on, and what is “off-limits”? And perhaps most challenging: what are we willing to agree to disagree on?

To wrestle with these challenging questions and to successfully work with partners from differing sectors, fields, communities, backgrounds and experiences, it is sometimes necessary to create a “common language” that makes sense to all involved. This language allows one to articulate core values and can become part of the overall political strategy.

However, many participants cautioned against giving in to the pressure to become an expert in something new in order to simply be a part of the conversation. Instead we need to develop the role of the “translator”: unique individuals able to simultaneously span worlds, fields and, sometimes, divergent interests. “Translators” are, at times, part of intermediary organizations that support our work and enable practitioners to focus on what they do best and not lose their identity in the process. Other times it is necessary for practitioners to do this work themselves, requiring even greater clarity and discipline.

It is important to ensure that these translators do not morph into the “gatekeepers” that limit access to knowledge and resources. Instead, these translators must serve as “bridge-builders” connecting disparate sectors and ultimately helping to mark out a path of direct access such that others are eventually able to navigate access independently. This approach brings up the question of institutional representation for communities without access to transparent institutions: How can we build bridges and train translators that maintain equal access to infrastructures of power?

To Be Continued....

As can be seen from this conversation, there is not a clear and linear path and, alas, the two days in Monterey needed to come to a close. As the group parted ways, heading back across North America, there was consensus on several key issues and ideas. First, cross-sector work is necessary and critical to achieving policy and systems change. We need information and technical skills from a variety of sectors to find adaptive solutions to the complex challenges we face in the early 21st century.

Second, while there may not be a defined course or an “Idiot’s Guide” to cross-sector partnerships, the key themes and ideas that emerged from the convening remain valuable:

Setting the Table: For the arts to be good partners in cross-sector work, we need to build on the success of the past, and know our strengths as well as our limitations;

Seeding: The arts has a unique role and responsibility to imagine, articulate and work towards the realization of “that which does not yet exist;”

Running the Relay: There are times, however, when the arts would be more effective by being part of a relay team working together to affect policy and systems change;

Mapping: Mapping processes, power and potential partners is a great tool for helping artists determine to whom, when and how they need to “hand off” policy and systems change work;

Widening the Circle: It is clear that the arts cannot effect policy and systems change on its own and will need to develop transformational relationships with a variety of partners from different sectors and disciplines;

Translating and Building Bridges: To effectively build the coalitions needed to achieve policy and systems change, the arts will need the help of translators that can help establish trust and build bridges.

Those in attendance agreed to take these key themes and ideas and work them into their on-going practice as they seek to realize policy and systems change in their communities through their artistic practice.

This session on Cross-Sector Partnerships and the Role of Arts in Policy and Systems Change was convened by Karen Mack, Caron Atlas, Kathie deNobriga and Erik Takeshita as part of the Maryland Institute College of Art Community Arts Convening Research project in April 2009 at California State University, Monterey Bay.

This essay is part of the Community Arts Convening & Research Project, 2009-10, funded by a Nathan Cummings Foundation grant to the Maryland Institute College of Art. The project's Editorial Board includes Stephani Woodson, Arizona State University; Amalia Mesa-Bains, California State University Monterey Bay; Paul Teruel, Columbia College Chicago; Marina Gutierrez, Cooper Union; Jan Cohen-Cruz, Imagining America; Ken Krafchek, Maryland Institute College of Art; Lori Hager, University of Oregon; and Sonia BasSheva Mañjon, Wesleyan University.

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