

# **A Call for Excellence in Community Cultural Development Curriculum in Higher Education**

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## **A Singular Moment of Opportunity**

We are three writers, practitioners, teachers, theorists and critics of community cultural development practice. “Community cultural development” (also called “community arts,” “community-based arts,” “community engagement through the arts,” “arts-based community development” and “art and social change”) describes a range of initiatives undertaken by artists in collaboration with other community members to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building capacity and contributing to social change. We’ve come together because we recognize a unique moment of opportunity in our field of practice. Four circumstances have converged to produce this opportunity:

- A critical mass of analytic writing and documentation has accrued, bringing new attention to cultural development theories and practices that have been gathering force over the last four decades;
- In the past ten years, universities across the U.S. have created dozens of individual courses, certificates and degree programs in community cultural development. (Communityarts.net lists 32 degree programs and 31 non-degree programs with relevance to community cultural development);
- Unprecedented numbers of students are matriculating in these programs, creating an unusual opportunity to affect the field by affecting their education; and
- More and more, social justice activists are collaborating with artists and cultural workers to bring cultural awareness into their efforts, understanding that culture is an essential foundation for community development and social change. At the same time, artists are increasingly seeking intersectoral partnerships for their work.

Together, we three have aggregate experience of community arts amounting to nearly a century. We’ve chosen to work together on this project because we believe our complementary skills and experience uniquely prepare us to address community cultural development’s distinctive educational needs. Each of us has a depth of field experience, with a strong track record in community-based arts, community engagement and social change organizing. Dudley has long occupied a bridging role through his writing and speaking from an artist’s point of view, bringing the news of diverse American communities to policymakers and resource providers; Jan is also strongly grounded in academic culture and practice; and Arlene is recognized as an expert in both organizational development and cultural policy as they pertain to the field.

## **Common Concerns and Needs**

Over the last year or so, each of us has been in even closer contact with the higher education aspect of the community cultural development field. Dudley and Jan have collaborated in community arts projects involving New York University, as well as Dillard, Xavier and Tulane universities, working intensively with students, faculty, artists and community organizers. Arlene has offered talks, classes and workshops at many colleges in support of her new book, *New*

*Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, using these opportunities to confer with many of those involved in newly developing programs.

What we've seen is a growing academic presence for community cultural development, but one with cross-cutting shortcomings and overarching needs:

**Balancing disciplinary training and community work.** Faculty members report great difficulty in balancing the need for students to have hands-on experience beyond the classroom with coursework that imparts training in arts techniques. Often, the departments that house these new programs are committed to a style of aesthetic training shaped for the student seeking a mainstream professional life in the arts; some resist acknowledging the equal need for training in community engagement methods and approaches. Even for faculty members who have long and deep community engagement experience, trying to find room for this work in the curriculum can be like trying to pour new wine into old bottles that are already filled to the brim.

**Curricular inadequacies.** Many of the new programs take a piecemeal approach to community cultural development education, largely shaped by pre-existing departmental requirements and the particular strengths of the faculty members whose enthusiasm and commitment has brought these programs into being. Field experience may be emphasized in one place, coursework in another, but the two are seldom fully integrated. Many faculty members lack an appropriate depth of community engagement experience to guide students into a deep and effective practice in the service of social justice.

It appears that many of the existing programs do not provide adequate grounding in the larger cultural and social context for the work, such as required courses in cultural policy, social psychology, applied ethics, theory of social change or organizational behavior. Indeed, as focus differs from program to program, there is no consensus as to what constellation of courses would provide adequate grounding. Although the idea of moving across departmental lines to bring together diverse content and modes of learning is often appealing, even universities that have the needed range of courses typically find it difficult to break out of specialized "silos."

**A larger context of meaning.** As presently constituted, university programs often elide questions of deeper meaning, overlooking their motivating power in students' lives. Indeed, many students find their way to this work through their search for meaning. Sometimes that search is grounded in a formal spiritual tradition: Islam's *zakah* and Judaism's *tzedakah* both imply charity and restorative justice; a core concept of Judaism is *tikkun olam* (repairing the world); the tenets of Christian liberation theology entwine justice and mercy; and three elements of Buddhism's eightfold path focus on right speech, action, and livelihood.

Others find meaning in a humanist context. For some, it may be environmental action grounded in reverence for the earth; for others, it may be working with elders or other groups out of the conviction that their marginalization diminishes everyone. Students are frequently delighted to discover that in community cultural development work, they can conjoin their passion for the arts with other powerful callings. In this spirit, community cultural development offers them experiences of deep listening, open-hearted collaboration, and action for social healing which are, in effect, non-specific forms of spiritual practice. As the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nat Hanh has pointed out, "There are many groups of young people who are strongly motivated by the desire for social action, but because they don't know how to take good care of themselves, they don't know how to live and work with harmony among themselves, they give up the struggle after some time."

**Community-campus relationships.** Based on our informal survey of the field, most existing university programs are challenged to some degree in finding truly equitable and effective ways of

working with community partners, so that different types of knowledge are valued and both students and community group members feel their collaborations are useful and satisfying. While in recent years colleges have broadened their use of service learning and other forms of campus-community collaboration, many have not fully incorporated community cultural development's informing values of pluralism, participation and equity. As a result, community work is often superficial, and doesn't offer students the opportunity to have a real social justice impact.

## Parameters

These cross-cutting weaknesses in existing community cultural development higher education programs suggest some of the required elements of curricular excellence:

**Integration of theory and practice.** Excellence requires a balance of community engagement, training in both aesthetics and community organizing, and scholarship focusing on the field's history and animating ideas, as well as the economic and policy environments for it. Inspired by Rev. James Lawson, a hero of the 1960s civil rights movement, our language reflects that justice must be governed by an emphasis on caring, or love. Or, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., put it, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." As depicted in the following diagram, an integrated curriculum will be most meaningful and effective if all three elements constantly interact, receiving equal emphasis in the service of this inspiring goal:



**Recognition of multiple types of knowledge.** Training for community arts work can't take place within the university as ivory tower. More than in many other fields of learning, community cultural development educators must seek and value non-academic learning to complement, enrich and complete coursework, collaborating with practicing community artists and community organizers in ways that acknowledge their essential equality with on-campus instructors.

**Cultivation of social entrepreneurship skills.** Excellent community cultural development practice requires several types of skill: the ability to effectively read complex social landscapes and situations, personal flexibility, and developed abilities to improvise, reflect, respond and self-correct. Cultivating such skills calls on faculty to transcend conventional educational approaches that treat the professor as an expert and the student as a client, rather than as co-participants in an iterative process of study, action and reflection. In essence, form follows function in community arts education, requiring training to employ the same methods as effective practice.

## Useful Interventions

We believe that several types of strategic intervention would greatly benefit the developing field at this formative moment. University leaders in community cultural development need more knowledge of history, theory and practice, and more opportunities for dialogue, collaboration and

higher-level training (*i.e.*, training the trainers). The particular interventions that will be most needed and welcomed will emerge from our dialogue with educators, students and practitioners; the ideas listed below are intended to suggest possible approaches.

**Model Curriculum Project.** Curricula will differ from institution to institution because many schools and departments are still discipline-specific, have access to varying levels of resources, or educate students for particular career aims, such as working in prison reform or child development. But to be effective, all must integrate training, scholarship and community engagement, as described above. Because the most effective training would combine doing and reflection, courses could not be seen as distinct modules, but rather as a sequence of interrelated activities propelling each student toward a degree.

The design of a model curriculum project would begin with a survey of existing programs here and abroad, underpinned by conversations with students, faculty, administration and leaders of collaborating community organizations. The resulting report and proposal would yield a set of standards to be circulated in draft throughout the field and discussed at the conference described in the next section. Ideally, resources would be secured to assist university programs in improving their own curricula in line with the project's guidance, for example, by underwriting expert consultation to guide them.

**Community Cultural Development Conferences.** We see several ways this initiative could work: as a series of intensive conversations focused by topic, as regional gatherings and as a major national convening. In regional terms, some sections of the U.S. have clusters of developing programs. For instance, at Philadelphia's Temple University, a core curriculum is being developed for the Cross-Disciplinary Arts in Community Program at Tyler School of Art, eventually leading to a degree program; Moore College of Art, the University of the Arts and Drexel University have added one or two community arts courses with an eye toward building gradually. Bringing key faculty, administrators and students together with community-based practitioners and visiting experts could stimulate the learning dialogue needed to optimize these programs. Similarly, relevant programs are developing at Columbia College Chicago, the Chicago Art Institute and the University of Illinois at Chicago, and in other regional clusters. Similarly, educators and practitioners from disparate regions may benefit from coming together for reflection and planning around specific topics, such as community cultural development and neighborhood revitalization.

Nationally, an opportunity exists similar to a 1988 initiative in museum practice, when the Rockefeller Foundation focused its considerable influence on intercultural relations and multicultural development. Its Arts and Humanities Division cosponsored two major conferences with the Smithsonian Institution on "The Poetics and Politics of Representation," highlighting museum practices in exhibiting non-European cultures. *Exhibiting Cultures*, the 1991 Smithsonian Institution Press volume that emerged from these gatherings, is still considered one of the most influential texts, widely used in museum-education and curatorial-training programs. It has increased the cultural sensitivity of museum practice and legitimated important voices that have influenced the field. A national conference that brought together community artists, faculty members, administrators, students and community activists could similarly generate a consensus on best practices in training, conceivably formalized in a similar volume of essays.

**Community Cultural Development Institute.** We also see at least two ways to instigate this intervention. To start with, a traveling institute might be best: equipping experienced practitioners and teachers with model curriculum materials, then bringing them to a series of colleges currently planning, initiating or piloting such programs. On each campus, institute trainers could work with

local faculty, administrators, students, artists and collaborating community organizations to devise model action research projects, enabling deep learning through simultaneous study and action. Tailored to the needs of each institution, the model might be a single intensive period of hands-on work (e.g., a month's residency by institute trainers with provision for follow-up consultation), or a series of visits (e.g., shorter on-site periods at the beginning, middle and end of the school year, with provision for check-ins between visits).

In the longer term, an ongoing institute could provide teachers and practitioners with a place to take courses, engage in projects, conduct research and consider critical questions for the field in a timely manner. As both a think tank and a home for continuing professional education, such an institute would be a tremendous asset to a field poised to realize its full potential.

## **Next Steps**

There is no shortage of ideas and enthusiasm in this evolving field. But as in all periods of rapid development, without the right kind of support, what could be a promising direction may wind up as a dead end, with creative and democratic impulses co-opted toward status quo ends.

We are prepared to invest a great deal of care and energy in strategic interventions like those sketched above. We are seeking a wise partner to house these efforts, helping to bring resources and attention to an opportunity ripe for the picking. As we envisage it, the ideal partner would be a center or institute, perhaps with academic affiliation, but willing and able to work equitably with many types of collaborators.

We are eager to talk. Please contact us: [arlene@arlenegoldbard.com](mailto:arlene@arlenegoldbard.com), [jcohenr@syr.edu](mailto:jcohenr@syr.edu), [roadsidetheater@verizon.net](mailto:roadsidetheater@verizon.net).