

Through the Eyes of an Artist:
A Study of Teaching Artists Engaged in Educational Assessment¹

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Professional teaching artists offer unique perspectives on teaching and learning. Many schools throughout the country, through partnerships with community arts organizations, tap into the talent, experience, teaching skills, and creative processes of working professionals to enhance their arts education programs. One of the most powerful benefits artists offer is their capacity to recognize and nurture the potential of highly energetic, creative, and expressive students who may be under appreciated in school. They often notice positive abilities in students who are highly independent, curious, and rebellious, all qualities that can get students in trouble in the classroom and are rarely called for on tests. Some of these students blossom in the arts class, to the surprise of their teachers and peers. Classroom teachers frequently offer such comments as, “some of my most difficult students really shined in your class today” or “she shocked me. I can’t believe that she could concentrate and participate like that.” By fostering and articulating the positive artistic behaviors and talents of students, artists can enhance understanding and appreciation for artistic abilities and can raise expectations for students on the part of teachers and the students themselves.

Artists’ perspectives on student talent and potential have been studied through their participation in a systematic assessment process developed for the performing arts. The Talent

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Assessment Process in dance, music, and theater (D/M/T TAP) (ArtsConnection, 1994, 1997; Baum, Owen & Oreck, 1994; Oreck, Baum & Owen, 2003) is a multi-session, performance-based assessment process conducted by artists in collaboration with classroom teachers to assess the artistic performance and potential of all students in a class. Developed by ArtsConnection in New York City public schools through two US Department of Education Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education grants (ArtsConnection 1993;1996; Baum, Owen & Oreck, 1994), the process has now been replicated in other parts of the country with a range of student populations and teaching artists (Ohio Department of Education, 2001; Oreck, Baum & Owen, 2004, in press).

Collaboration among artists, classroom teachers, and other school specialists is central to D/M/T TAP and offers a model for bringing professional resources to student instruction and assessment. The artists' perspectives are shaped through current experience in their professional discipline as well as through their use of teaching methods authentic to their art forms. Such perspectives offer a level of expertise rarely available to schools. The self discipline, commitment, and passion that teaching artists must have to survive and pursue their dual careers can make them powerful role models for young people and important resources for teachers. In addition, the cultural background and first-hand knowledge of culturally and historically-based art forms can enhance the impact of the artist on students and raise cultural awareness throughout the entire school community.

While many artists routinely use techniques of performance-based assessment in their professional work, they rarely have the training or the time to apply those methods systematically and fairly in educational settings. They come to teaching for a variety of reasons, often with no formal pedagogical training. The creative, intuitive qualities they bring to teaching

and that they value and nurture in students may, in fact, be at odds with the type of testing and evaluation that is normally conducted in schools. Further, their desire to give all students a positive experience in a limited time often makes them disinclined to grade or test student learning. The process of training of artists is thus a major challenge to the development and administration of any type of formal arts assessment process.

This paper reports on a case study of six experienced professional teaching artists who have conducted D/M/T TAP in schools in New York and Ohio. The study examines how the artists' perspectives on students were shaped and how their own background and professional experiences have contributed to their approach to teaching and attitudes toward children and the arts. We will consider the artists' life experiences, their training as artists and as teachers, their attitudes toward children, teachers, and schools, and the choices that have led them to teach in public schools. The goal is both to improve the process of training artists to conduct systematic assessment and to investigate how the perspectives and methods of excellent teaching artists can be most effectively developed, adapted, and used to improve arts instruction and assessment in schools.

Methods

Intervention

D/M/T TAP is administered to intact classes by a team of two trained arts instructors over a five-class series. Training for artists consists of four day-long workshops followed by a complete administration of the assessment process during which they are observed and evaluated. Two arts instructors and a classroom teacher or specialist rate all of the students on a written checklist of eight (music), ten (dance), or four (theater) items. The curriculum for the five assessment sessions is designed by the teaching artist team using the framework developed for

the process. The framework defines the structure, groupings, and balance of various types of activities over the course of the five sessions. The specific activities presented by the facilitators come from their own teaching practice and are designed to allow each of the behavioral indicators to be assessed in every session. Regardless of the particular artistic style or technique employed, the classes are designed to reflect authentic practices in the art form and engage students in complex activities that involve problem solving, improvisation, cooperation, and the ability to take and use direction and feedback.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was designed to probe the experiences, motivations, and backgrounds of artists that help to shape what they offer to students, teachers and schools and to examine how their work in schools contributes to their overall artistic careers. The research questions and themes fell into three general categories – 1) personal background and experience, 2) teaching practices, and 3) attitudes toward children, teachers and schools. Specific questions and themes to be investigated included:

- (1) What aspects of the artists' lives, including their current and past artistic practice, cultural and ethnic background, parental influences, educational background, financial needs, has shaped their teaching, their approach to assessment and their attitudes toward children and talent?
- (2) What motivated the artists to teach, how did they learn to teach, and how do their professional experiences affect their pedagogy and approach to teaching?
- (3) How has participation in the assessment process affected the artists' teaching practice?

Analysis.

Participants were interviewed in their homes, using the Seidman (1998) protocol of three separate one and one-half hour interviews. All interviews were videotaped and transcribed. The interviews were conducted by one researcher and viewed and coded by both researchers. The first author is the originator of the program being discussed; thus the interviews were conducted by the second author, who had not met the participants before the project, and who was not involved in the project in any way. Transcripts of all interviews were coded, with an open-coded classification system (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), using Nud•ist 6.0 (QSR, 2003) software.

Documents were reviewed, including the federal grant proposals and reports, papers presented at several national and international conferences, and published studies on the D/M/T TAP process. Teaching artists were also observed and videotaped during assessment and advanced instruction.

Sample.

Six teaching artists in dance (2), music (2) and theater (2) from New York City (3), and Cleveland, Ohio (3) took part in the study. The artists represent a range of artistic styles and techniques and of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These artists were among 50 artists chosen and trained to conduct D/M/T TAP based on an application and evaluation process. The six artists are highly experienced (10-25 years of teaching) and are considered “master” teaching artists by the arts in education organizations that employ them. They have each conducted the assessment process between 4 and 20 times. The six artists – Terry (African American dancer), Lenore (African American musician), Betty (African American musician), Julia (Caucasian dancer), Lisa (Caucasian actor/director) and Tony (Caucasian dancer) – are between 37 and 52 years of age. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Summary of Preliminary Results

Preliminary results of the study have revealed a number of common themes as well as extreme variation in the approaches, methods and background experiences of the teaching artists. A brief summary of themes follows.

\$ Passion for their art form and for teaching children.

The artists all drew parallels between their motivation for performing in their art form and their passion for teaching children. Childhood experiences and the struggles and difficulties they have endured and overcome are prominent in the descriptions of their performing and teaching work.

I have inner turmoil and those kinds of challenges, and that is the reason for the music.

Reason for me doing what I do. Reason for my love of children and my compassion for them in a different way. I identify with children who are lost, who are struggling, who have issues, you know, because I feel like that child is still in me, so vibrant in me. Betty

\$ Strong spiritual beliefs.

Four of the artists spoke of their creative process in spiritual terms and had certain rituals through which they received inspiration to create. Two of the three African-American women in the study practiced the Yoruba religion which supported and deepened their practice of African-based music and dance.

Having a spiritual foundation, for me, has come about not just through the church but through finding the roots behind my identity, or the roots behind my ancestry. I think that the drum or the dancing presented that self to me and had it not been for that, I probably would have either connected towards African ancestry or practices, or religion in a different way or a different method....I think that everyone moves with their art form

in spirit in some kind of way, and it's some kind of reflection of their inner creativity,
that's the way I look at worship as well. Terry

\$ Personal identification with the lives and situations of students.

The artists identified with students on many levels. The artists' uncertain financial situation, personal struggles they had faced and overcome, their identity as rebels or outsiders, and their artistic talent and perspectives, drew them to their students and vice versa.

I am on the other side of all of it. And that's why when I go and teach children especially children that are growing up in the same environment that I grew up in -- when I talk to them it's not lip service, they really hear me. Lenore

For the African-American teachers there is also a special cultural link they experience when working in schools that are predominantly African-American.

If I'm working with a group of all Black children, it's different, it's different because I'm Black, they're Black and we can move along with a different understanding and that's true....Its cultural familiarity that makes a Black child respond to me differently. Even just initially than they would a White person. Because I look like their aunt or their mom but they know I know. I think I can relate better. Betty

\$ The choice to be a teaching artist

The artists eschewed full time employment or certification as teachers and had declined opportunities for college professorships and other more secure jobs. While three of the six had held full time teaching jobs for short periods in the past, at this time in their careers they felt that such work would not allow them to adequately pursue their art. The life of a teaching artist gave them flexibility and freedom from the rigid schedule of the school semester. Though they lived with little financial security, large yearly fluctuations in income, and no employee benefits they didn't perceive themselves to be poor. They trusted that money would come when they needed it, and were able to maintain a lifestyle that was adequate to their needs.

I could make a lot of money being a school teacher.....But I would not be happy because I would feel like a bird in a cage, so I wouldn't be happy, and that would translate to the children. I would resent being there because I like the freedom of a workshop. Betty

Money is a motivation for teaching mentioned by all of the artists.

I have to eat. I would prefer to not have to teach all the time not because I don't like it because I truly love teaching. I get a great joy out of teaching but because I have to teach I don't have as much time to create so I am always having to find a week where I can sit and let God talk to me and let the music come out. So I teach because I have to eat
Lenore

They are not, however, unaware of the precariousness of their situation.

My future is very much not taken care of, and [at] some point it's going to come crashing home how dreadfully irresponsible I've been on that sort of financial plane....Our work is very physical, and that's getting hard. I'm really aware of how much older I am than the classroom teachers.
Lisa

\$ Personality characteristics – risk taking.

The kinds of artistic risks and creative impulses they follow reveals personality characteristics such as flexibility and tolerance of risk that helps shape their approach to teaching.

I can't be self-conscious as a teacher. I can't be questioning what I look like, whether this is – good – it has to be completely out there. I have to put myself out and throw myself. I have to do whatever needs to be done to get the idea across. I have to focus – I have to do whatever has to be done. It's commitment. So to commit – and it's that risk-taking element– so that became clear as soon as I started teaching.
Julia

My greatest asset as an artist is that I am willing to take risks. I'm willing to try new things, I'm willing to be different from everybody else and I think that's what makes me very successful as an artist and have people come and see. My greatest asset as a teacher, I think is patience. I'm very patient with whoever I'm teaching whether young or old. Another aspect is that I approach my teaching from a basis of love. Unconditional love and so there's nothing you can do that will stop me from wanting you to achieve your best. Nothing.
Lenore

\$ The interrelationship of teaching and performing/creating art.

All of the artists expressed the opinion that their professional work feeds their teaching in many ways and visa versa. As Lisa puts it, “when you teach what you do you become better at it.”

On the one hand, it seems, the teacher dominates, and that’s partly financial. On the other hand, it seems that the artist is never not there. So the artist is always in the teacher, so my perspective as a teacher, I think, is an artistic one.... My dancing changed for the better, and became richer when I began teaching. Julia

Teaching can take a toll, however.

I realized that this is something I was supposed to be doing. My challenge is that because use my voice as my main teaching tool and it is also my instrument, that’s become an issue for me. Betty

§ Teaching background and pedagogy.

All of the artists had attended college, but several had not graduated, for financial or personal reasons. Only two of the artists had attended formal classes in pedagogy in their art form. The others learned to teach in less formal ways, through their own arts instruction and through observing master teachers and mentors. Before learning D/M/T TAP, all had received some pedagogical training (concerning classroom management, curriculum design, and other related topics) through arts-in-education organizations and arts council programs. Their approach tends to be intuitive, however, and in the case of this experienced group it has been shaped and honed over many years.

I didn't learn how to teach, I just teach and I watch people. I'm a reader and so I watch people and I see what they need, what they need to hear and what they need to feel. Even if it's hard for them to hear I put it out there because that's the only way they're going to grow. And so I sit and I listen. Like tonight I'm doing a workshop. It starts at 6:00 I will show up at 5:15 and I'll sit and watch all the people that are setting up and I'll watch all the children as they come in. And I'll get a feel for everybody and everything and so this evening by the time I start to teach I'll know what that community needs to hear. Lenore

\$ Views of Children and Talent

Interviews abounded with discussion of specific children the artists had taught in the assessment and advanced instructional program. They were highly aware of the talents of the students, concerned about how these talented children would fare after the grant was over, and concerned about the difficulties students faced in their home lives.

Most of the kids from this gifted and talented program that we taught in go to junior high schools that do not have any theater. And the parents have said, "How can my kid go on with this?" And we tried to make a connection with a children's theater in town. Things like public transportation. Parents at home with jobs and five other kids. So they can't take the subway with them. And can't afford to take the subway with them. It's frustrating. Lisa

There was shooting (in my neighborhood) so I started playing my drum on the front porch the day I moved in to change the energy on the block and so because I was playing my drums the children came. I would teach them how to play drums and then later I got a couple of old computers and we did em ourselves and I had a first floor empty bedroom and I turned it into a recording studio for the kids in the neighborhood, especially the young men to give them something to do because it's like it is around here, there's nothing to do. Lenore

\$ Unique curricular approaches

One of the most powerful aspects of the artists' work with students is that they tend to develop their own curriculum. While they may use material from other sources and certainly use established techniques and curriculum, they have the freedom and skills to shape their own classes. The freshness and flexibility of their approach appears to be one of the aspects of their teaching that is most appealing to students.

I write all of the music that I use with the childrenI didn't want to use the traditional children's music, I wanted the children to be excited, and have to hear different things to be motivated to want to sing this music and so I said, let me write it, let me write a funky tune, let me write South African tunes, let's do a jazz suite and all that. Betty

\$ Effect of the assessment process on the artists' teaching.

None of the artists had previously conducted systematic talent assessment but all were initially interested and excited about participating. All said it helped them to look at children and their talents differently. They said that the experience had helped them define and articulate characteristics they observed in their students and to be more aware of all of the students in the class.

I learned a lot and it developed my eye in my assessing abilities even through auditioning. How do you see a room full of people and really make the best choices? So it honed my assessment skills and it also honed my skill to also create lessons so I could see what I want to see. There are students who are beautiful technically, they can do the exercises, but they are not creative. And some are creative, like wow, but they can't do choreography-they can't count or they can't stay in a line but they're wonderfully creative. So I learned a lot about that and I really can see kind of a whole person much more quickly than I could before. Tony

The TAP assessment process has helped me in my entire teaching and pedagogical style and perspective because it gives me a different foundation on how to think and observe and view and assess the children initially and their progress in the program, in whatever program I'm doing. Betty

Because I started it (DTAP) so early in my teaching career, I feel that it has formed me as a teacher a great deal. And because it has focused on the children, my learning how to teach was about learning how to read children. I can't imagine how I would be teaching without this process having guided me and caused me to think carefully about what's important and having this notion of ongoing assessment. Julia

Discussion

The preliminary analysis reveals a number of intriguing and complex issues concerning the role of professional artists in schools. These are individuals who have chosen to follow their own path, to explore and express their own vision of the world. They have made significant sacrifices to develop their talents and pursue an unpredictable career. Their teaching appears to be motivated by a combination a deep caring for children and financial need. A sense of mission, following a spiritual path imbues both teaching and art.

These six, highly experienced, master teachers have, to a great extent, invented themselves as teachers. They love to teach but have chosen to do so outside of the structure of the school system. They have learned the craft of teaching from a variety of sources including formal education courses, but have designed their curricula and methods based primarily on their own experience both in the classroom and the studio. In sharing their art with children they have found ways to create deep connections in short periods of time and to shape their curriculum to fit the needs of various populations, settings and program objectives. As outsiders in schools they bring a fresh eye to student assessment but face the obstacles of unfamiliarity with the students and the need to constantly adjust to each classroom and teacher.

Artists working in schools are increasingly being asked to work with classroom teachers in professional and curriculum development, to define specific learning objectives for students, connect to state and national standards, and assess student achievement and aptitude. The experienced artists in this study have worked in many such comprehensive arts education programs yet none of the six had conducted systematic, performance-based assessment in an educational setting before using D/M/T TAP. The training and administration of the process appears to have made a significant impact on their teaching practice beyond the assessment itself. Given the challenge faced by visiting teaching artists who often work with more than a hundred students in a day, this process appears to offer a successful model for individualized student assessment.

Analyses are continuing to explore the ramifications of the experiences and perspectives of these artists on future preparation and training to conduct D/M/T TAP and other forms of educational assessment. Even highly experienced teaching artists need training and supervision to effectively apply their artistic skills and approaches to assessment. Arts-in-education

organizations, state and local arts councils, and cultural institutions around the country are currently engaged in promising approaches to the professional development of artists to improve instruction and prepare artists to participate in comprehensive educational programs that include student assessment (ArtsConnection, 1993; 1996; Fowler, 1996; Remer, 1996) . We hope this study can contribute to greater understanding of a range of issues concerning the preparation and support of teaching artists. It is important to tap artists' gifts without losing the individual perspectives and approaches that make them a unique and powerful resource to students and schools.

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