

## **Proposal for Participation in Workshop on PDC and Politics:**

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For many years I have been involved in the design of workshops and seminars to prepare artists who work with teachers in classrooms. Often this is done in the context of arts organizations that focus on how to create a partnership between artists and teachers. The goal of such partnership is to introduce students to works of art and help them understand artistic choice making, to build an alliance between the teacher and the artist in order to develop a new kind of teaching and learning, and to infuse more arts based learning into classrooms.

In order to answer the questions posed by the PDC Workshop leaders, I will focus on one particular arts workshop because it seems to introduce some of the dilemmas about this work, I think this workshop might open some of the “wicked problems” that face those of us who try to bring arts based learning into U.S. public schools.

What are some of those wicked problems?

1. Not all artists are able/willing to teach in a public school context. How do they decide if they can work there? What do they need to know to be effective arts educators?
2. Few artists have had any education in teaching what they know to others, except by their own educational experience. (Much arts education is hierarchical and repetitive training. And for many artists, school was not their most successful venue for learning, so they distrust teachers.)
3. While artists may have significant experience and training in their own artistic domain, they are often asked to teach in other domains, addressing works of art outside their expertise. How do they prepare to extend what they know about choice making into other domains?
4. Who are the “users” in this dynamic? Students? Teachers? Artists? Are they at times users, and at other times participants (When are they equal? Or is there always an inherent power structure?)

The workshops I am focusing on were part of a larger research project in an arts organization in Pittsburgh in the US. The aim of the research was to find ways to deepen the learning process in arts based learning for students, teachers and artists. Historically, the arts program as it existed worked in 3 parts:

- Artists (visual, dance, music, and drama) were selected and prepared to work in the program. They worked with artists in multiple domains to broaden their artistic knowledge and to think differently about how they approach works of art.
- Teachers attended a summer program where they worked with the artists focusing on a select group of works under study. Those works were the “texts” for the classroom in each art form. (It is important to note that the teachers were mostly classroom teachers, not arts specialists.)
- During the school year, the artists and teachers designed and carried out work in the classroom for students. Again, this work was focused on particular works that had been under study during the summer and were now available to students and teachers to experience.

The research project was a five year project, part of it aimed at understanding the most successful aspects of the work, clarifying the organizations mission, and looking at steps that might deepen practice. The workshops I am using as an example were particularly interested in finding new ways to introduce the practices and approach to arts education to potential teaching artists. The workshops were run in two parts. In November a two-day workshop was held with three artists (from dance, music, and visual arts) plus two administrators from the program (both of whom had been teaching artists in the past). In those two days we discussed the core concepts of the work the artists had been doing in order to come up with language that best explained the work and clarified key concepts. In between the first workshop and the second, emails went back and forth about questions, concerns, and possible language change. In December, we came back with refined language in order to prioritize the concepts and discuss how those concepts could be put into practice. Here is the language of those key concepts as refined by the participants:

**ATTENDING:** To pay close attention to a work of art over time, being receptive to details and aware of nuance, without immediately moving to interpretation.

**ACTIVE LEARNING:** To engage in arts based learning through effective use of body, mind, and emotion; to approach learning through multiple modalities.

**ART MAKING:** To conceptualize, design, and create art in response to challenges, problems, or a work of art.

**CONTEXTUALIZING:** To situate works of art in historical, cultural, political, and aesthetic traditions; to connect these frameworks to contemporary worldviews and concerns.

**INQUIRING:** To allow the curiosity and questions that arise as we investigate a work of art to guide learning.

**MAKING MEANING:** To synthesize new experiences and information into understanding; to build interpretations of a work of art in light of previous experiences, knowledge, and interactions with others.

**REFLECTING:** To look back on learning; to integrate what has been experienced into understanding and express that understanding to others.

We followed the first day in December with a “testing” session with a group of new artists. That day focused on one core concept (Inquiring). This was done to test our own understanding of the concept and to try to present it to a new group in a way that would make sense and develop into practice. Artists were asked to develop a “line of inquiry” around the aspects of the work of art under study. This line of inquiry would be a question that they held about the work and wanted to find an answer to as they worked with students and teachers.

### **1. How participatory was the problem setting or problem definition in a PD project?**

The problem of how to clarify language was identified by the executive director of the organization and the administrator responsible for organizing the

summer teacher workshop. The problem of how to bring on board new teaching artists and deepen the work of existing teaching artists was a need perceived both by administrators and artists themselves.

On the first day in November, where the aim was to identify and clarify language, there was an open and free nomination of important terms to include. But since several of the artists had worked in the program for a number of years, the language was also part of their shared experience in the arts and in teaching the arts. While this built on knowledge developed over time, it also meant that many aspects of the vocabulary were being used without being questioned. We tried to problematize that.

### **How did participatory designers arrange for the users to be able to contribute to choices?**

In the first instance, the discussion was open, and we put as many concepts on the table as possible. When we got to the work of honing terms and ranking concepts, we worked in separate artist and administrator groups. The aim there was to allow the artists to be able to make choices without reference to the “power” of the administrators. This also allowed us to compare our response to certain words and concepts. For example, administrators favored the inclusion of “contextualizing,” as something that teachers in the program found important. Artists wanted to relegate this concept, as they felt that it was a less important activity to their work, and it sometimes encroached on their limited time in the classroom. All agreed that this was a possible way to empower the teachers, as the task of contextualizing was one that teachers often willingly took on. However, it introduces the question of why teachers were not involved in this process.

### **Which methods were used and how successful were those methods?**

The groups began with big sheets of paper, and clustered, then re-clustered the concepts in order to see how they related to each other. Later we put the concepts into an order of importance, trying to keep the relationships between the concepts clear. Some concepts were dropped. Generally this worked well because it became clear that some concepts were so integral to others that they could be incorporated or eliminated. The fact that the two groups came up with somewhat different solutions led to a good discussion of why there were differences and negotiations on how to resolve the differences.

### **How did the users participate in the design solution, what Schön calls ‘design move’, selecting particular choices (while excluding others)?**

In the workshop for new artists, the visual artist led them through a series of activities designed to look at the choices made by the artist who had made the work of art under study. For most of the day, they were looking at and examining the choices of the artist (one layer), and the choices of the teaching artist in opening the work of art (second layer). Only at the end of the day did they then participate in an analysis of the design choices of that day’s experience and an analysis of the concepts from the previous day’s work.

**How can we understand the interrelationships between choices? How did decisions that were taken before the project (e.g. its institutional framing, temporal structures, available technologies, commitments and aims) shape the design space? Which of the design choices evoked or precluded alternative solutions, enabled a promising new choice? How participatory were the important decisions, those that opened up and closed many choices.**

This question, for me gets at the heart of another set of “wicked problems. All of these variables—institutional framing, temporal structures, etc.—seem to me to pinpoint where, in arts education, we are being thwarted from moving forward. More and more U.S. public schools are being regimented and the choices open to artists, teachers, and students are narrowing. Space in schools for any kind of arts learning, arts based education, or creative thought is narrowing. At the same time, funding is decreasing and arts organizations are struggling to survive. Their capacity to do the kind of thinking we did in this research project is

Those difficulties may be blocking us from thinking about how we might come up with alternative strategies and approaches.

**How participatory is the design result in the sense of increasing the ‘power to’ of users? Can users recognize their influence on the design result?**

Again I am confronting the question of who are the users? For the original group of artists, I think their ‘power to’ was greatly enhanced by the experience, and they knew they had influenced the design result. For the second group of artists, the new artists, the result is less clear. They would be asked to incorporate the concepts into their work with teachers. Before they did that, they would follow another artist through a classroom experience, observing and talking to them about the key concepts. From the standpoint of the administrators, the capacity of this group of users to recognize their influence on the design result is, in many ways, the long-term test of the effectiveness of the process.

And, as I suggest above, neither teachers nor students were in the room during the process. Since ‘power to’ is key to what the program wants to afford teachers, this is very important.