

## COMMENTARIES

# Resources for Effectiveness: Collaborative Arts Partnerships in Schools

By Lee Ann Norman

## INTRODUCTION

Chicago, like many urban settings, offers incredible opportunities to immerse oneself in diverse cultures and traditions through art. The quantity and quality of its vast artistic choices are integral to the city's appeal and vibrant civic life. Chicago's rich history spans artistic disciplines including music, theater, visual art and performance, media, architecture and design. Forward thinking by several interest groups, and the feeling of possibility have helped solidify the city's reputation as one of the world's cultural leaders.

Despite its cosmopolitan nature and openness, Chicago has always been a city of tight-knit communities with distinct boundary lines and unwritten rules of membership. Such social constraints rooted in race, gender, and class bias create challenges for a number of Chicagoans who wish to access the wealth of cultural resources in the city, since many of those resources lie outside of their neighborhoods, forcing them to turn to alternative sources. Similarly, across the nation, informal arts programs fill gaps in neighborhoods, schools, and communities where cosmopolitan culture and excess, collide with poverty, want, discrimination, and invisibility. Teaching artists provide additional exposure to the arts through programs that affirm the value of cultures that are marginalized; recognize practices that lie outside of the mainstream; and embrace those from whom traditional cultural circles choose to distance themselves. Unfortunately, the need for community-based arts programming has grown even stronger, as funding for first-line, school-based arts programs continues to diminish. When it was once unusual *not* to have music or art instruction included as part of the school day, an omission of both is now the norm. As educators deliberate on how to provide

a well-rounded education for all, the idea of working more collaboratively with a *range* of arts education providers has become increasingly attractive.

Allowing outside organizations and individuals to gain access to institutions in a more evenhanded way and create long-term relationships that reinforce the idea of education as a community-centered effort is a little new for schools. Yet many are finding it is worth exploring, as the process of creating alliances and partnerships with other community organizations places schools in a different light and allows them to appear less intimidating and more approachable. In the past, schools have been able to operate as self-sufficient entities, but cost cutting has forced them to focus on the "core curriculum," and leave education that involves sports and leisure, or the arts and humanities to others. Arts organizations and teaching artists play an important role in realizing well-rounded educational strategies, and they are at the forefront of providing arts instruction in many classrooms. Now more than ever schools, teaching artists, and cultural workers must find common ground that allows them to share their practices. Through partnerships that draw on all of the resources within a geographic or cultural area, different kinds of knowledge and experience are shared, and communities are enriched by the exchange. Most would agree that this concept of partnership is feasible. When we consider what strategies are most effective in situations where issues tied to cultural representation and access in the arts reveal themselves, we are forced to re-prioritize our lines of inquiry away from process implementation and towards a re-examination of social relationships. Reflecting on this process through the case of the Multicultural Arts School provides valuable insight

into how arts partnerships can contribute to building a democratic learning community in which students, teachers, cultural workers, and artists are able to redefine their roles and obtain an alternative sense of community by expanding boundaries and definitions.

## CASE STUDY- MULTICULTURAL ARTS SCHOOL

### MAS Background and History

The Multicultural Arts School (MAS) began as a big, bold idea on May 13, 2001, when fourteen community residents of the Little Village neighborhood staged a nineteen-day hunger strike demanding the construction of a new neighborhood high school. School administrators had promised to begin construction on a new facility as an alternative to the existing failing neighborhood school, but the process had been delayed (the school board cited monetary constraints). After passionate commitment from parents, community advocates, educators, and students, the Little Village Lawndale High School campus opened its doors to approximately 400 ninth grade students in the fall of 2005.

The campus (comprised of four, autonomous small schools: the Multicultural Arts School, the World Language School, the School of Social Justice, and the Infiniti Math, Science, and Technology School) is located in the southwest Chicago neighborhood of Little Village (or South Lawndale), a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American community. To comply with desegregation laws, however, the school boundary lines extend into neighboring North Lawndale, a predominantly African American community. This has caused resentment in some residents, who felt that North Lawndale students should not be given any consideration for attendance since the actual fight for the

new high school was viewed as a Little Village community effort. MAS planning team members were keenly aware of the underlying tensions surrounding the school in both communities. They made a concerted effort to include the voices of teachers, artists, and community leaders from both the Black community in North Lawndale and activists dedicated to education reform from other neighborhoods, as well as similar voices from the Mexican and Mexican American communities in Little Village and other neighborhoods.

The school's design concepts are based in critical pedagogy, multicultural education, inquiry-based instruction, performance-based assessment, critical literacy, and arts integration. According to the school concept paper, MAS embraces a philosophy that supports the understanding of different cultures so that concepts relating to them are taught in ways that honor people of different cultural backgrounds. Members of the school planning team believed culture, in this sense, would become much more than a shared way of doing or being; here, culture might also exist as relationships and lived experiences. Realizing this idea would be critical to addressing issues between the black and brown communities who would soon be learning together in this space. MAS administration and staff felt the arts would be the perfect tool through which such a feat could be accomplished.

### The MAS Partnership Model

In an effort to create a seamless arts delivery system that would align with its mission, vision, and values, MAS pursued two basic kinds of arts relationships: individual and organizational. While hoping to focus most organizational energies in one place, administrators felt it was important to address the diverse needs, experiences, desires, and abilities of all students. Collaborations undertaken with peer (smaller) institutions and organizations seemed like a logical outgrowth of the primary institutional partnership.

The classroom model called for all teachers to participate in two arts-integrated units per year. Teachers had the

choice of working with an in-house certified arts specialist in music or visual art who would collaborate with them to create an integrated unit, or hiring professional teaching artists to collaborate on a unit(s) with them as part of the Residency program. Ideally, artists participating in the Residency program would work with a class for a minimum of ten weeks, but if teachers wished to have shorter projects and use multiple artists, that could also be arranged.

Project collaborators would meet to brainstorm ideas, plan the curriculum, and design the lesson plans as well as assign tasks and other responsibilities as needed. Teachers and teaching artists used the Arts Integration Handbook (created by author) as a planning guide. The book contained resources such as lesson plan templates; a list of sample project ideas; advice for embarking upon a successful collaboration; a summary of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory; suggested learning adaptations and responsive teaching strategies; basic roles and responsibilities for teachers and artists; documentation suggestions; and the Illinois State Fine Arts Standards. Teaching artists would have a formal introduction to the school as well as be invited for informal observations in classrooms well before the projects actually began. Once the arts-integrated unit began however, artists were expected to teach an introductory lesson that demonstrated their art form, gave the students some context for their experience and art practice, as well as their interest and role in the unit. Classroom teachers felt this preparation and type of introduction was important so that on days when the artists were not on campus, they and students could assume responsibility for the lesson's artistic content.

In contrast, where the classroom relationships with teaching artists focused on arts integration, the organizational relationships focused primarily on arts enhancement and exposure. Much of this was accomplished through after school arts learning experiences like a visual art club, play production, and dance classes. Some traditional cultural institutions did conduct a limited number of classroom collabo-

rations and interventions through a weekly studio, in which MAS students worked on a focused artistic project each academic semester. In these cases, the arts educators who worked in classrooms took on more of an expert role and did not engage deeply in collaborative planning with a non-arts subject teacher. These organizational relationships treated the art as a stand-alone subject or special project. Faculty and graduate students from SAIC delivered most of these interactions when classroom teachers were not able to be there. For the studio projects, students were able to self-select into an arts area in which they had interest or more experience; the arts integrated lessons as part of the regular curriculum did not offer this range of freedom and focus, since all students in a class were required to complete the specific project and lesson.

In addition to its relationships with traditional cultural institutions (like the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the primary institutional relationship) and various community-based organizations, MAS also established relationships with arts presenters to create different kinds of cultural events that were open to the entire campus.

### Study Background and Process

By observing and participating in the process of creating project-based, arts integrated learning units at the Multicultural Arts School, the need for an analysis of their planning process, the participants' roles and expectations, and the implications of this model of partnership became apparent. The collective background and history of the participants along with their individual past experiences and present realities lead them to move in a direction that aimed to challenge notions of traditional partnership practice.

The analysis was conducted over a nine-month period between September 2005 and June 2006 during which a team was assembled to create a framework and structure for these in-school collaborative relationships, test them, and refine them. Study participants were asked six questions around issues involved with the implementation of a

successful collaboration, by responding at the beginning and at the end of the project; once in writing and once in person. Observation activities included informal conversations with classroom teachers and teaching artists in the *Embedded in Stories* arts integrated unit, MAS and SAIC faculty and staff liaisons, and reflection via reasoning and analogy by comparisons to similar school based arts partnership programs.

As principle investigator, I acted as a participant and observer throughout the process. My role included serving as project director for the Artist Residencies and Community Partners program, prospecting for external arts partners, conducting teacher and teaching artists orientation and professional development, financial management and contractual oversight, and proposal writing. I also acted as a teaching assistant for the English Department's arts activities related to the project. Additionally, I participated in some planning and reflection meetings for the Multicultural Arts School (MAS) and School of the Art Institute (SAIC) institutional partnership.

### Embedded in Stories

Once preliminary negotiation, planning, and consensus was reached by Arts Integration committee members and the larger school faculty and staff, MAS decided to test their partnership model through a 12-week unit, *Embedded in Stories*, based in English and Reading class curriculum (all freshman students were required to take both of these courses). Students used personal writings and reflections from assigned readings to create original artwork in the visual, performing, literary, and media arts. With the help of teaching artists in each area, students explored themes of personal identity, community, and culture. Both parties understood that in order to achieve success for themselves and the students within a project of such a large scale, the role of the artist and the teacher needed to be fluid. Both groups would have to learn new knowledge and skill along with students, while also being able to function as teacher, mentor, motivator, and art critic. Based on budget-

ary and time constraints, collaborators knew there would be limitations to their time commitments at MAS, but setting personal limits was a struggle for teaching artists who worked on the 12-week project. Teaching artists were attracted to the school's mission and educational concepts, but found the project itself overwhelming. Nonetheless, this was not a deterrent for participating in the project.

Teaching artists enjoyed the idea of working with young people and sharing their art forms with new audiences. "I think initially, I just felt really good about brainstorming (with the English and Reading teachers) about how an arts-integration model could work..." one teaching artist said. "... But then I think I agreed to help them implement it because it seemed like a cool opportunity to take some of these things that roll around in my head about what kids need to be successful and the importance of art in schools (and test them out)," he continued.

Teaching artists were also interested in creating opportunities that increase the likelihood of success for students who normally have difficulty in traditional classroom settings. A teaching artist specializing in media reflected upon his own schooling experiences and concluded that if he had been able to use art to learn other academic content, he may have been more successful. All teaching artists admired and respected the skills of the classroom teachers and felt that their own teaching would likely improve as a result of working with MAS.

MAS teachers and teaching artists ended up working on the 12-week project without direct support from SAIC; they revealed that they never felt like they were on equal footing with SAIC partners in this endeavor of creating a collaborative program model. They felt SAIC representatives seemed to possess a theoretical understanding of the challenges students faced such as living in a gangland area or coming to MAS to repeat freshman year as a result of failing at other underperforming schools, but lacked a practical viewpoint that would help students succeed in the classroom and beyond. Additionally, some MAS teachers perceived a discon-

nection between SAIC's assumption in their students' potential and capacity to learn challenging academic concepts and create compelling artwork. Since they were intimidated by the perception of power associated with SAIC's name recognition and reputation, none of the teachers or teaching artists voiced the above concerns with the SAIC representatives. Instead, they shut them out of the *Embedded in Stories* project completely. With this gap in dialogue and collaboration, this arts community suffered and missed a potentially rich and lasting experience.

### Reflexivity In the Work

Seed funding that allowed the school to have outside support for meeting their goals was limited to the first year of the project. Collaborators, staff, and institutional partners knew that in order to be successful, MAS needed to figure out a way to continue the collaborations into the future for themselves.

A participant researcher affects outcomes through methodology and design, and automatically brings bias to the subject. Focusing too much on the personal details of the principle investigator detracts from the quality of the research; however, self-reflexivity can be a valuable tool to strengthen the quality of the study by allowing a reader to determine the validity of the findings. By being aware of our biases and the narratives that we construct about our lives, our work, and our environment, we may be better able to analyze shifting power dynamics (Ristock and Pennell, 1996).

While working on this project, I relied primarily on my previous experiences of establishing partnerships.. I expected to see a partnership model develop at MAS that would reflect what I had gleaned about organizational behavior from my studies, various models from different jobs, and personal beliefs about successful working environments. As a result, my interview questions tended to probe more deeply into areas that I felt were critical for partnership success. To counter this tendency, I gave study participants the opportunity to share their own views on operational structures and best practices

through open-ended questioning and asking suggestions for improvement. I believe that my original assumptions about helpful structures and protocols were accurate; however, based on my understanding of organizational behavior, I am not convinced that a traditional structure is appropriate for arts partnerships between large cultural institutions and schools or community-based organizations. These relationships require that collaborators not only acknowledge the inherent power imbalances in arts delivery and instruction (especially in communities of color which are often under resourced) but also create infrastructure that can negotiate the imbalances in a way that provides mutual benefits to all.

Additionally, I felt a deep connection to the philosophical underpinnings of the school. I had spent time as a school music teacher and often was unable to find the modes of support needed to provide my students with the best instruction. And, often, I felt that my beliefs about teaching and learning were in conflict with those of my school. I was excited about the opportunity to not only participate in the project but also analyze it and reflect upon it, since I wanted to see it become an innovative teaching and learning practice.

## ANALYSIS

In this case, MAS administrators conducted thorough research on art schools and university arts programs in Chicago, community and cultural organizations in the neighborhood as well as researched the general arts landscape of the city. They were strategic in their approach in choosing initial collaborators, and identifying key people at prospective institutions and organizations with whom to develop relationships. Relationship sustainability was a challenge because little consideration was given to differing organizational cultures and educational philosophies and how these would help or hinder forward movement in collaborative endeavors until *after* partnerships had been entered into. For example, MAS allowed teachers a great deal of freedom in decision making regarding curriculum planning and management,

while SAIC was more comfortable implementing formal organizational and management practices. "Because it is such a big organization, they seem to be quite structured and complex," one MAS staff member noted. "However, it is not my perception that this stifles creativity or freedom when it really matters," she concluded. "I really don't know much about that (MAS's organizational culture)," an SAIC representative admitted. "It seems fairly unilateral; teachers seem to have a good amount of autonomy." Still, when asked about each partner's understanding of the other's organizational culture, most felt confident that they understood it.

Conversations about the value of other types of assets (like community-organizing knowledge, relationship and trust building) that schools and smaller community-based organizations may have were rare in this case. As a result, most problems between MAS and SAIC occurred when one side assumed that the assets they brought to the partnership were not being respected. As "art experts," the School of the Art Institute representatives found it was much more difficult to create a sense of trust and belief among the MAS community, in the sense that they were committed to the partnership for the long-term, therefore lessening their impact and presence. MAS' other organizational collaborators and teaching artists often commented about feeling an impenetrable distance from SAIC. Many felt they could not use SAIC as a resource for their own professional development during the *Embedded in Stories* project because of the philosophical conflict with SAIC's student engagement philosophy. "I think...that it is becoming evident that our (SAIC) organizational culture...is evasive and purposely unavailable (to MAS)," another SAIC representative and alumnus concluded after feeling disappointment that the School did not participate in *Embedded in Stories*. As the faculty liaison for MAS, she also thought many professors that were approached about working with MAS in the endeavor showed a lack of commitment while some MAS teachers let opportunities pass by not following through.

Factors such as trust and follow

through were easier to cultivate in the relationships the classroom teachers developed with each other and teaching artists. Classroom teachers brought with them a rich network of artists on whom they could rely for expertise, advice, and assistance. Equally, the partnership between MAS and SAIC had elements indicating that collaborators would be able to move beyond traditional hierarchical methods of ascribing value, and assigning roles and responsibilities and work in a more equitable fashion. Unfortunately, negotiations always seemed to stagnate in the planning phases for lack of clearly defined goals, unified commitment levels, or adequate resources. It always remained unclear about what exactly MAS and SAIC would do together that they could not do alone, making it difficult for SAIC and the Museum to justify diverting more resources to help sustain the project and integrate it into larger institutional life.

## Power and Possibilities for Resistance

Critical education comes out of a philosophy that looks to examine the impact of race, class, and gender bias on lived experience by believing it is important for self-actualization and empowerment. Being aware of how people use discourses to shift responsibility and place the burden of improvement and change on marginalized communities helps expose structural inequalities in art, education, and cultural representation. MAS administrators planned to integrate the arts throughout the fabric of academic and social life at the school in a deliberate way. Since the school was rooted in social justice, finding collaborators with similar educational philosophies was important. Considering different types of knowledge from multiple sources increases equity in relationships whereas institutional capacity and financial resource cannot.

Most research around collaborative learning environments focuses on the implementation of collaboration, and less attention is given to how power dynamics affect the process. Given that "power plays" cannot exist without agreement and collusion, smaller organizations like MAS will find it valuable

to examine the impact of resistance on their educational philosophy and community engagement strategies. Power is embedded in relationships (that suggest to us patterns of behavior and protocol). Throughout the planning process, it was important for MAS administrators to elevate traditionally marginalized voices (such as youth, the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities) by encouraging them to resist dominant hegemonies designed to keep their cultures, ideals, and hopes at the periphery of the program. Instead of promoting structures that reinforced the idea of one person's (or institution's) ideas as more valuable than others, MAS hoped to encourage all members of their community to contribute to its well being, growth and development. MAS wanted the people who were involved to believe in their capacity to add value to the community. This was no small task, and many collaborators found it difficult to resist following the traditional power structures. These conflicts were most noticeable in the relationship between MAS and SAIC and the Museum.

MAS functions in a larger system that has been progressively moving away from a centralized governance model to one that respects a school community's ability to choose a curricular path that works best. . It made sense to choose a structure that put more decision-making power into the hands of teachers and students. MAS and SAIC had representatives in place in both organizations, but never actually defined specific roles that would make this relationship part of the larger institutional structure and programs. This would be important for SAIC, a traditional institution with an intricate organizational structure. At the time, this was deemed necessary for creating a positive, democratically oriented working environment.

To date, there is no formal agreement that secures this relationship; and only recently has a faculty member received additional compensation for her work with the partnership. Since the relationship did not penetrate SAIC's infrastructure, this partnership remained a self-contained opportunity for people who have discovered it and find it of interest. This also severely

limited any contact SAIC had (and continues to have) with MAS' other organizational partners and individual teaching artists. Increased contact among all partners may have allowed everyone to avoid common pitfalls of collaboration like resource and project duplication, limited ability for implementing large scale or campus wide projects, and reduced professional development for teachers and artists on both sides.

### SUMMARY

Sharing artistic endeavors with others helps youth and adults experience positive public affirmation and recognition. This can be a significant experience for people who see little value in their lives, and have received messages from society which end up in reinforcing anonymity and failure (Weitz, 1996). Formal instruction in the arts, integrated with core-subject instruction shows students that knowledge is transferable and applicable to multiple situations. Long-term, creative, and collaborative relationships between schools and arts organizations and institutions allow artists and educators to follow the benefits of arts activities on students' development over time. When partnerships involve classroom teachers, professional teaching artists, community members, and cultural and educational institutions, learning outcomes can improve, and the experience can become more pronounced for everyone involved.

More than 75% of MAS students successfully completed a project in the *Embedded In Stories* arts integrated unit. The entire community (comprised of students, teachers, SAIC and family, and partners) celebrated with an open-house with exhibition and performance to view student work. Despite setbacks and challenges along the way, this project proved that knowledge could come from less traditional sources and still produce positive learning outcomes.

Partnerships are dynamic entities that must have some structural consistency. However, the structure needs to only serve as the framework for modifying the scope of the project as time goes on. In school-based settings, most collaborations follow the path of strategic

alliance<sup>1</sup>, as schools are most likely to seek out partners to fill in gaps where they lack resource or expertise. This leaves room to challenge traditional notions of how we learn, what students need in order to be successful, and what structures are necessary for consistency and success. . Our educational settings are diverse and complex places that lack continuity across them for a variety of reasons, but allowing an outside entity to become part of the school community through partnership is a process that requires time, patience, vision, and a willingness to resist the status quo in ways that open up access to resources and experiences for all.

Although we may have become better informed about our choice of partners and the way in which we assess and evaluate them, we must continue to consider the effects of those relationships on our educational environments. Whether our partners are transient or long-term, it is important to consider how their presence in our work spaces influences future learning inside and outside of the classroom.

**Lee Ann Norman** is an educator, interdisciplinary artist, and cultural worker who is interested in the ways artistic practice, race and ethnicity, class, and culture collide. She frequently plans and presents arts programs with organizations and incubators in and around Chicago, as well as facilitates, lectures, and presents on nonprofit arts management issues and community cultural development. Ms. Norman serves as a board member to Insight Arts, a Chicago-based contemporary arts organization dedicated to increasing access to cultural work that supports progressive social change; she received the Bachelor of Music Education degree from Michigan State University and the Master of Arts Management degree from Columbia College Chicago.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Strategic alliances can occur in a number of ways, such as joint programming (in which organizations work to share resources or to create new products or programs), or as administrative consolidation (through which collaborators work specifically to share human capital) (LiPiana & Hayes 2003).

## REFERENCES

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