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Research Review

Third Space: When Learning Matters.

By Lauren M. Stevenson and Richard J. Deasy

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Creating a Space for Learning

Reviewed by
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Arts education advocates are learning to leverage the mounting evidence that quality arts programs can level the playing field for high-priority students. But *how*, exactly, do the arts contribute to the improvement of schools that serve economically, disadvantaged communities? This question is on the mind of many arts and school administrators, and it is precisely the question that *Third Space* aims to address.

A hybrid of scholarly theory and grassroots reality, this book toggles between macro and micro views of K–12 arts education. On the theory side, *Third Space* constructs its case on a solid foundation of prior research, supported by apt references to thought-leaders from within and beyond arts education. On the reality side, it paints a vivid portrait of students and teachers engaged in the “hard fun” of arts learning and instruction (48). While “third space” is

defined as the conceptual space connecting people and works of art (10), it could be argued that the book itself exists in a kind of third space—that bridging theory and practice.

About the Study

Geared toward influencing education decision-makers, *Third Space* is a qualitative study of 10 schools that have adopted an arts focus. Their motivations for doing so are as divergent as the schools themselves, which range from large urban to small rural schools, all serving high-priority student populations. The spectrum of programs includes both discrete and integrated arts instruction facilitated by classroom teachers, arts specialists, and Teaching Artists. Despite differences in geography, demographics, and specific focus among the programs profiled, the authors note that:

Each of the schools revealed to us that its success related to the seriousness with which students, teachers, and administrators embraced the arts as profound explorations and expressions of self, others, and the world—explorations and expressions that were deeply meaningful to students. (15)

Third Space proceeds to synthesize key emergent themes from across the case studies, supported by examples from the programs—in varying degrees of detail—throughout the book.

Defining the Third Space

The title of the book is borrowed from one of the schools profiled, where a Teaching Artist used the term *third space* to “capture the atmosphere in the classroom when she and her students create works of art, one in which students are deeply absorbed and able to take the risks demanded in a creative process” (10). The authors explain that the term originated in the arts as a way of describing the interactive space between a viewer (the first space) and a work of art (the second space), and that the term has found its way into contexts beyond the arts, as well. Even within *Third Space*, the term is used to describe an array of dynamic physical and conceptual environments generated while learning in and through the arts.

Student Learning

Three chapters of the book focus on how students think and learn in this third space, including explorations of identity, self-efficacy, engagement, collaboration, adaptive expertise, and ownership. A core contention is that the arts are effective because they “help to make learning matter to students” (17).

“Mattering” was the central concept that teachers, students, and school administrators expressed when they described the impact the arts had on student learning, and why arts learning experiences engaged students in different and more powerful ways that other school programs. Learning mattered to students, they said, and

students felt like they mattered in their schools. (17–18)

Supported by examples from the case study schools, the authors assert that students are motivated by not only the creative process, but also by the end product—the idea of contributing beyond themselves, through murals, book arts, and community performances and exhibitions.

The authors stress that the active role that students play in creating and responding to works of art builds a sense of agency, expertise, and ownership that can improve student success both within and beyond the school walls. In exemplary cases, Teaching Artists challenged students to *think about thinking*, to interpret works of art from multiple perspectives, and to articulate the reasons behind their artistic preferences and choices.

In addition to the benefits associated with individual student expression, the study identifies capacities engendered by students’ collaborative work, such as facilitating in brainstorming, evaluating alternatives, negotiating, and realizing a group performance. Another outcome of quality arts programs is the development of *adaptive expertise*, the process of building fundamental skills that serve as a springboard for students’ in-depth explorations and innovations within a given subject or medium. Students with adaptive *expertise* are better problem solvers because they are more capable of *letting go* or *holding lightly* to potential solutions as they work through challenges (45–46).

The authors also observe that arts participation demands ownership, which in turn demands responsibility on the part of the students. As one arts administrator put it, “When students have a real audience they are preparing for, they create a self-imposed set of high standards. They demand a high level of quality from each other and from themselves” (47). This self-

motivation and accountability, the book argues, makes the work more personally gratifying for the students than would external standards or rewards. These are the types of results that transcend the arts, and that education decision-makers should find particularly compelling in relationship to the big picture of student learning.

Arts and Literacy

While the previous chapters primarily looked at student learning within the arts, one chapter explores the kind of learning that takes place when the arts are integrated with another subject—in this case language arts.

Students in classes that integrated the arts and language arts learned an art form while developing literacy and communication skills, including an increased desire and ability to comprehend often complex texts—their plot, themes, and characters—and to express orally and in writing thoughtful interpretations of the texts. (52)

This chapter contains the book's most detailed and powerful description of a successful partnership between a Teaching Artist and a school. Called the "Dream Keepers" project, this program "engaged students in multiple arts experiences, including poetry, music, theater, and visual art" as they grappled with the concepts of dreams and immigration through the multidisciplinary medium of puppetry (53).

For the authors, this particular experience exemplified many of the critical success factors supporting literacy development through the arts: personal student entry points, active participation, individual expression, and community engagement through performance. By starting with the

students' authentic personal stories, they feel that their individual lives are valued—an all too uncommon experience in school. "And because they are valued and appreciated, there is a greater willingness to put substantially more effort into the process of communicating orally and in writing" (55). This personal interest and effort led students to develop more sophisticated knowledge, skill, and expression in working with language.

Overall, *Third Space* makes its case for the arts in literacy very effectively, although it occasionally reveals blind spots. For example, it implies that "readers' theater" is a term used only by the teachers at one high school (59) when, in fact, Readers' Theater is a common teaching tool employed by educators across all grade levels and subjects—even in medical schools—throughout the United States and beyond. Minor point, but perhaps indicative of the need for the arts education community to become conversant in the methods employed in other subject areas, especially when describing integrated instruction for a general education audience.

Another inconsistent moment arises at the conclusion of the chapter, when two particular schools are briefly cited for their positive impact on reading and writing, but with no further explanation of why, leaving the reader feeling somewhat empty-handed. Despite these minor bumps, the depth, quality, and implications of the "Dream Keepers" profile are what will continue to resonate with readers.

Teacher Learning

Teacher professional development was also an explicit goal in many of the arts programs, and the researchers observed the importance of teachers embracing what it really means to engage with the arts.

To unleash the potential of the arts to create a strong environment for learning in their classrooms, teachers needed to have a deep understanding of the nature of work in the arts. Without this understanding, they were unlikely to take the students' artwork seriously in all its dimensions—to grasp the intellectual and emotional processes it engaged and the meanings it expressed. (66)

This chapter offers the most fuel for the work of Teaching Artists, who played a critical role in the programs by partnering with classroom teachers to co-develop and implement integrated units.

Partnerships with these teaching artists were an important and often crucial catalyst for creating new dynamics in the schools. ... They modeled for classroom teachers respect for the struggle of the students to reveal themselves in their works and also how to encourage and help students master the processes of the relevant form to enable them to more fully realize the goals of the integrated lesson. (67)

Through their partnerships with Teaching Artists, participating teachers improved their capacity to:

- Support and encourage youth in creating original works by giving them the space and permission to express themselves;
- Elicit and recognize previously hidden student stories, skills, and perspectives;
- Believe that all students can learn;
- Feel successful and fulfilled in their teaching;
- Foster students' "integrated understanding of how the world works" (75);

- Take risks in charting new personal and emotional territory with their students;
- Build more meaningful relationships with their colleagues, arts specialists, and artists;
- Participate alongside their students as a learner, and apply this new knowledge as an educator; and
- Relinquish control of the classroom and collaborate on the students' terms, not just their own.

It is critical to note that none of these capacities would be considered useful only within an arts context. Rather, these learnings represent knowledge, strategies, and perspectives that can inform a teacher's entire practice.

Community Building

The study asserts that the arts can create—and even repair—a sense of community both within and beyond schools. Just as the arts reveal students' hidden capacities to teachers, public displays of student artwork can dispel a community's misperceptions about its youth. The effect can be self-reinforcing, as in the case where a Teaching Artist finds that, "as negative perceptions of the school are encountered ... there is potential for creating new sets of positive relationships and cohesion among students and faculty" (99).

Artistic collaboration also built new bonds among students. Students learned cooperation, interdependence, and good citizenship through sustained collaboration, capacities that carry over into other arenas of school and life (106). Across the case studies, teachers, artists, administrators, and school board members valued the arts as an asset in cultivating empathy, tolerance, cultural identity, and imagination among students. High school students reported learning to see things—including their

peers—from new perspectives, and that this expanded perspective carried over into life after high school.

The study also found that the arts help generate parent involvement in schools, through both direct volunteer opportunities and indirect parent “traffic.” In fact, one school holds its parent group meetings just before or after student performances in order to encourage attendance at the meetings by those already coming for the student shows (114). Some schools reported that family arts events created a safe entry point into their children’s school community for non-English speaking parents. These examples of increased parent engagement helped complete the circle of community involvement and pride that grow from—and often sustain—strong arts programs.

Conclusion

The value of *Third Space* lies in its ability to interweave theory and practice, creating a concise but thorough view of how arts education can—and does—work in American schools. The fact that several of the profiled schools, like many arts education “all stars,” achieved these outcomes through federal grants raises the question of whether it is possible to realize this type of learning *without* substantial outside funding. While not addressed in *Third Space*, this question will surely be on the minds of its readers.

Whatever the funding source, in the best cases, student expression is at the core of this work; catalyzed by collaborative teams of classroom teachers, arts specialists, and Teaching Artists, all of whom are celebrated and supported by a broad network of school and community stakeholders. As asserted in the book,

The power of a vision to transform a school lies in whether it truly engages those in the school and in the com-

munity in ways they find meaningful and rewarding. Ultimately, the vision must grow out of and perpetuate a sense of shared purpose and community. This vision must inspire and support teaching and learning that matters to students and teachers; otherwise, it will simply generate a new set of rules and regulations to be enforced rather than embraced. (13–15)

Third Space reinforces the idea that the ultimate goals of arts learning are, indeed, the ultimate goals of *all* learning—a fundamental understanding that education decision-makers will undoubtedly internalize, and ideally act upon, after reading this important book.

Works Cited

Stevenson, Lauren M., and Richard J. Deasy. *Third Space: When Learning Matters*. Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership, 2005. For more information, visit <http://www.aep-arts.org/ThirdSpacehome.htm>.

Research in the Works: Update on Teaching Artist Study

Nick Rabkin and Dana Powell

As introduced in our last issue, the Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College Chicago and EmcArts are developing a new research project focused on Teaching Artists. Our intent is to provide our readers with an insider’s perspective on how research comes together as we track the progress of this unprecedented study.

Planning for the project was funded, in part, by Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC), an organization dedicated to advancing the interests of individual artists. The research is predicated on the belief that understanding the work of

Teaching Artists—and the conditions and systems that shape it—is a prerequisite for imagining policies that can engage and support the full potential of Teaching Artists in their communities, and society in general.

The original research prospectus described four possible lenses through which the Teaching Artist experience might be captured: Definition and Identity, Markets and Demand, Standards of Practice, and Professionalization. This prospectus was disseminated to 2,500 arts education stakeholders—from Teaching Artists to directors of state arts agencies—and invited their responses to the prospectus via an online survey. The feedback of the nearly 500 respondents is being used to inform the research lenses. For example, the survey revealed that Teaching Artists are more concerned with the sustainability of their work in the field—stable employment, living wages, and benefits—than they are with professionalization, per se. The responses also indicate that the definition and identity of Teaching Artists is intimately bound up with the standards, values, and practices that they bring to their work.

As a result of the survey, the researchers have refined the focus onto three themes: 1) Identity and Definition remains important, with an exploration of Teaching Artists' standards and values; 2) Markets and Demand will investigate the place of Teaching Artists within the larger systems of the arts and education; and 3) Sustainability will explore policies and strategies that effectively recognize and support the deep value of Teaching Artists' contributions.

Armed with these updated lenses and the confirmation of broad stakeholder interest, the research team is developing funding proposals for the research, with a target of launching the study in Summer 2006.

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