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## The Power of Art to Develop Artists and Activists

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### Abstract

Many teens today feel as though they have limited opportunities to prove to society that they can make positive and meaningful contributions to their communities. They are presented with few opportunities to make important choices and decisions regarding their lives and communities and often have no mechanisms in their everyday lives to help them engage in meaningful ways in their communities (Youniss, Christmas-Best, Diversi, et al., 2002). In this article, we explore how Arts-UP, a summer art education program for urban teens, fosters self and social transformation by helping youth engage in their local community. Results demonstrate that Arts-UP participants see themselves as part of a larger community of artists, and also as active participants in their communities. We argue that programs like Arts-UP are imperative in creating not only future artists, but also future activists who will be critical thinkers and active, democratic citizens.

## **Introduction**

I think Arts-UP really helped me to focus on the fact that wherever you go, you are a part of a community, and it is your choice whether or not to plug into that community, and to invest yourself into it, for better or for worse. Arts-UP also helped me to realize that art is essential to communities, and despite the fact that making art sometimes seems superfluous or pointless, it's actually the exact opposite (2009).

Today's media often portray urban youth as disengaged, irresponsible, superficial and materialistic. They are associated with social problems like crime, violence, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy and are accused of being disengaged from their communities (Jacobs, Chin, & Shaver, 2005). These images suggest society holds little trust that teenagers will become healthy, productive, and valuable citizens, let alone activists in their communities. In our own work with urban youth, we each encountered a good number of adolescents who embodied these images of urban youth. Many of the adolescents we worked with demonstrated little or no connection to their communities—a world beyond their immediate school life, home life, or street life seemed unimaginable and/or irrelevant to many of them. In addition, most of our students expressed little confidence about their ability to create change, or even become involved in their communities. However, in spite of their lack of community engagement, these youth desired a sense of belonging and the opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their communities. They just did not know how to make this happen, and often saw no way out of the isolation that they felt.

Many teens today feel as though they have limited opportunities to prove to society that they can make positive and meaningful contributions to their communities. They are presented with few opportunities to make important choices and decisions regarding their lives and communities and often have no mechanisms in their everyday lives to help them engage in meaningful ways in their communities (Youniss, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, Silbereisen., 2002). In this chapter, we explore how Arts-UP, a summer art education program for urban teens, fosters self and social transformation by helping youth engage in their local community. Results demonstrate that Arts-UP participants see themselves as part of a larger community of artists, and also as active participants in their communities. We argue that programs like Arts-UP are imperative in creating not only future artists, but also future activists who will be critical thinkers and active, democratic citizens.

Arts-UP helped participants find paths out of the stereotypes society uses to define them by helping them find a way in—a way in to their community and to the culture(s) of which they are a part. It helped them become engaged with the people and places closest to them and develop a responsibility toward them. Like Beth, the participant whose quote begins this chapter, many participants began to recognize the ways in which they could invest in their

communities, as well as the ways in which art was integral to this investment. One of the most striking effects of the program was the way in which participants continued to work with and in their communities long after they have completed Arts-UP. It is this development as artists and activists that we explore here.

### **The Arts-UP Program: An Overview**

Arts-UP is a community based arts education program that brings together urban high school students, practicing artists, and non-profit community organizations. Through this collaboration, students create an art installation in a public outdoor space, as well as personal art pieces that represent issues significant to and for them. The program is designed to foster creative and aesthetic development, to develop an appreciation for cultural and environmental diversity and issues, and to create a sense of community among participants and the broader communities of which they are a part. Its mission is to foster the individual and collective creativity of young people and their communities through the intergenerational sharing of artistic and cultural knowledge and traditions, while preserving both cultural and environmental spaces and practices present in everyday life. Since 2002, Arts-UP has worked with 51 student artists and six different community partners. Prior community partners include the local zoo, an organic farm, a local environmental center, a local cultural and historical landmark, the national parks, and the local chapter of Keep America Beautiful. In its seven years of active programming, Arts-UP participants have created six major installations that are functionally utilized or visited annually by over 20,000 people. The program is focused on student ownership of all areas, and participants: 1) engage in research about social, cultural, and environmental topics; 2) explore artistic tools and techniques; 3) work with community partners and artists-in-residence to design and create site-specific works; 4) and work to market and publicize their work and events. Below, we provide an overview of one year's project to enable readers to understand the program and its processes.

In 2009, Arts-UP partnered with a local organization associated with Keep America Beautiful to help students understand water conservation issues in their community. During their time in the program, students would design and create unique rain barrels with custom spray stencils and screen prints. The program coordinators brought in two nationally known printmakers to work with students on the rain barrels and on personal pieces of art. Artists-in-residence for the program are chosen carefully and serve as role models for participants—as both artists and activists. They must be highly skilled professional artists who are committed to working with young people to help them understand how to utilize their artistic and creative talents in the aims of social justice.

The artists-in-residence, local partners, and program coordinators worked together to develop an intensive three-week integrated curriculum focused on developing: 1) an understanding of

water conservation issues; 2) connections with people and organizations in their community; 3) printmaking techniques and ability; and 4) entrepreneurial skills for marketing their artwork. Students visited a local water treatment plant, met with community and government officials, worked individually and collectively to design and create pieces of art, and held several events to showcase their work. At the end of the program, students had created 50 artistically designed rain barrels that were auctioned at multiple public events. They raised over \$5,000.00 to assist the city's Greenprint initiatives to conserve water and further educate the community on water conservation issues—for example the group offered free public workshops on how to build rain barrels for home use.



Figure 1: Art in the Rain—Rain Barrels to Benefit the Greenprint Initiative

Each year's project is different and not every project raises money for a community organization. However, each project does work to meet the needs of that year's community partner. Students learn about ways they can get involved, why they should become involved, and what the results of their involvement can be. They work with talented artists-in-residence to develop their artistic abilities, and each year they design and produce a variety of personal and collective pieces of art that they display at a community event. This type of curriculum works to engage urban youth in meaningful ways with organizations and individuals in their communities, and they are able to develop content knowledge and skills they often cannot acquire in traditional classrooms. Through this curriculum, and the interactions it supports, participants are able to develop as both artists and activists.

### **Mining Mountains of Data: Methodological Overview**

This empirical study draws on several years of data collection from the Arts-UP program, including participant observations, program evaluation surveys, multiple interviews with participants, electronic responses to journal prompts, student work and other artifacts about and from the program, and surveys of program alumni. Initial coding of the qualitative data utilized program goals as an *a priori* guide for understanding and situating the analysis, while emergent coding allowed us to identify ideas that came directly from the data. A thematic approach to data analysis allowed us to move beyond the codes and think more abstractly about the data and what we were seeing. Member checking provided us with a way to insure our analyses of the data were on track and served as a means to increase accurate representation of participants and their worlds. Both of us also used journaling as a way for us to reflect upon and monitor our own subjectivity regarding the research. Through the use of participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, we obtained a wealth of data, providing us with the ability to create rich, thick description about the experiences of these students and this program. The use of multiple data collection methods, member checking, monitoring of subjectivity, prolonged observation, and the use of rich, thick description all augment the validity of this research.

In the following analysis sections, we provide examples and exemplars from the data to demonstrate how Arts-UP provides participants with ways to engage in a socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking, and transformation through their art making (Graham, 2009). The analysis presented below draws on a holistic view of the data and while specific quotes or observations are utilized, they are provided as exemplars of the overarching themes in the data.

### **Finding a Way Out**

As we explored the data, the link between artist and activist emerged, along with the ways in which this link was supported by and developed through participation in Arts-UP. We eventually began to see how the act of becoming involved allowed participants to learn about self and social transformation and how this transformation could lead to viable connections within their communities. Students engaged in self-reflection, critical thinking, and transformative work, and as a result they were able to find ways out of the stereotypes and isolation they often felt by finding ways in as active participants in their communities.

### ***Practicing Self-reflection***

Students engaged in self-reflection throughout the course of each year's project. Through journaling, personal artmaking, and engagement with texts, students were able to recognize and reflect on issues that were important to them (Hobson, 2001). For example, in 2004

participants worked with an artist to make six foot fused glass butterflies for a historic conservatory that was being renovated. Students used the idea of metamorphosis to consider the ‘birth’ of the butterflies they would create, and also to imagine the renovation or rebirth of the conservatory itself, with the butterflies as part of its new form.



Figure 2: Butterflies Float in the Air of the Renovated Conservatory

Using Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as a tool for discussion, students were asked to consider the idea of transformation in their journals and in their production of personal artwork. Several students created artwork that empowered them to say things visually that they found difficult to say with words. Cory, a fifteen-year old girl at the time, crafted a sculpture of plaster hands bloodied and arranged on a stark white sheet to illustrate her abusive relationship with her father, who she felt could not accept her homosexuality. In her journal, she wrote an artist statement about how her work was a commentary on the overall negative stigma associated with homosexuality and her desire to transform her personal situation with her family.

I would not like to be my father, abusive and drunk. So here is my

story...When she (Cory) woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, she found herself changed in her bed into a monstrous vermin. She was lying on her side which was all bruised, when she opened her eyes a little she saw her girlfriend bleeding, lying unconscious-broken nose, whose breath became so shallow, she could barely hang on. Her bloody hands staining the white sheets as they laid there like her girlfriend, before her eyes.

Cory also used this piece as a concrete visual and written symbol to her grandmother to tell her that she was a lesbian, knowing her grandmother would view her work at the exhibition. She was able to use tools, like journaling and personal artmaking, to reflect on how issues she experienced personally related to broader social and cultural issues, and how she might use this reflection to create change—either for her personally, or for society.

Her artwork served as a powerful vehicle for communication, personal and political, in her life. Many students, like Cory, reflected on personal and political issues in their journals and artmaking. By reflecting on issues that were important to them, many said they were able to “find strength” within the healing powers of artistic expression. This strength allowed them to take personal and artistic risks in their work and in their lives. When we followed up with Cory the following year, she told us how she was inspired by experiences in the Arts-UP program to focus her research for her International Baccalaureate program in high school on the impact of gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists and their impact on society, and to become active in school groups for homosexual students, something she felt she had not been able to do prior to her participation in Arts-UP.

### ***Practicing Critical Thinking***

Through inquiry and artmaking related to each project, students were able to practice skills related to critical thinking, such as interpretation and analysis about social, cultural and environmental issues that are prevalent in their local and larger communities. Developing these skills resulted in their ability to engage in self-regulatory judgment that allows them to explore and defend their own positions, consider alternative positions, and potentially make conceptual changes to their own thinking.

In 2006, Arts-UP participants spent two weeks at an environmental education center where they created a ceramic cairn to serve as a communal landmark. Participants engaged in multiple modes of inquiry throughout the project. They conducted research on habitat destruction, wetland restoration, and cultural history related to natural and human made landmarks. These investigations led to several art production assignments designed to ignite critical thinking about the role of humans in relation to nature, the ways humans have created monuments to people, places or things that are important to them, and how they could use their art as a vehicle for communicating important messages. Three years after completing the program, Anna, a sophomore college art student, explained in a follow-up survey how she began to reevaluate and interpret her ideas about the natural world as a result of her experience in Arts-UP.

I can remember one morning, on an early hike along the trails, as we were walking, [a program coordinator] pointed out something very small on the trail- a snail, or a little

bug of some sort, and told us all to be careful not to step on it. To go out of our way to avoid hurting the smallest of smalls. And for some reason, that instance really stuck with me—if I can't even justify stepping on one little creature in the middle of the forest, while there are hundreds just like it in that same forest, how can I justify deforestation? How can I justify going out of my way in order not to harm that little snail, but not go out of my way to care for those humans around me that are hurting? I think it was just a series of small incidents like that which translated into so many ideas I have about life, and people, and the environment.

Anna was able to interpret and analyze the events she experienced, connect them to other related issues, make changes to her thinking (and her actions) and engage in self-regulatory judgment that moved her to find ways to defend her positions about compassion for others and for the environment.

Like Anna, other Arts-UP students demonstrated how they became more critically aware of issues they faced in their everyday lives. For example, in 2003, participants worked with a Native American artist on an organic farm who raises food for homeless shelters in the area. Every morning students participated in meditation and other activities to remind them of their connection to the physical earth. They did physical labor on the farm that included planting, weeding, harvesting, and shoveling manure. This work, along with their on-site artmaking, caused several participants to think about their ideas and actions in relationship to the environment. In their interviews from 2003, participants discussed the tangible effects the experience at the farm had on them, such as learning ways they could compost at home or could avoid polluting water and soil in their neighborhoods. Some students spoke of how they began to consider where their food comes from, how much energy it takes to produce and transport food, ways they take for granted the fresh foods they have available to them, and how people living in poverty may have less access to organic produce. However, we wondered if their interpretation of these experiences and ideas would translate into their ability to critically analyze environmental issues in the future. When we asked Cash, a 16 year old student with a Mohawk and combat boots, to articulate those things about his experiences in Arts-UP that affected his life beyond the program, he explained:

Well, like at the farm, there weren't any ashtrays because we were in the woods, and I didn't want to flick my cigarette butt, and have an animal eat it . . . but around home there's ashtrays...in the city. But days after we got back, I was still thinking about it, not flicking it in the street...and it dawned on me that I don't really even think about it anymore...now I actually carry around a little pouch to put them in.



In these examples, students were able to critically investigate their surroundings through personal and collective inquiry and analyze their ideas and experiences related to social, cultural, and environmental issues. Many students began to practice more self-regulatory judgment, like changing their concepts of environmental protection and putting into place alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

## **Finding Ways In**

### ***Developing as Artists and Activists***

As a result of their engagement in reflection and critical thinking, students began to develop the capacity to challenge and ultimately transform the ways they perceived their roles as artists and activists. In this section, we highlight how youth in the Arts-UP program found ways in to their communities by utilizing their artistic and critical thinking skills.

### *Practicing Transformation: Finding Ways in to Their Communities*

Because we learned so much about the areas where we'd be creating the work for—going on tours...spending lots of time there, sketching out the architecture or the grounds, becoming knowledgeable about what it was we were creating for, meeting all of the people involved—it really helped connect us to the community even before we began building the project.

Each year, guest speakers like park rangers, curators, CEOs of major corporations, food bank workers, and city planners and engineers worked with participants to explore the work and needs of partner organizations. Speakers also discussed how to apply for volunteer opportunities, paid apprenticeships, jobs, and where to find opportunities to make public art. Each year, we hear from Arts-UP participants who go on to work for organizations they partnered with in the program or with other community organizations. For example, two students from the 2003 program, Leon and Miya, volunteered at the organic farm throughout the summer after their participation in Arts-UP. They planted, weeded, and harvested, divided produce for community shares, and transported food to local homeless shelters. According to them, this work allowed them to “stay connected” and provided them with a way to “continue to give,” something they found very fulfilling.

In another example, students from 2007 designed a space with functional seating made from disassembled bicycle parts along the hiking and biking trail in the national park. They lived for two weeks in a nearby hostel so they could ride donated bikes to the site to create artwork for the space. At one point they visited an urban bicycle co-op to learn about the ways

bicycles serve as energy efficient modes of transportation and how they could be deconstructed for alternative functions.



Figure 3: Recycled Bicycle Parts Find New Lives as Tables and Chairs in a National Park

Three of that year's participants, Ben, Cody, and Jerome, became the artist's apprentices after the program ended and continued to create art using recycled materials. Ben began using his bicycle as his sole means for transportation, continuing with this practice when he went to college the next year. In 2009, Jerome began to promote his latest initiative with a handmade business card—the start-up of a bike co-op to recycle, trade, sell, or gift bicycles for those in the community.

Other participants, like Kate in 2005, spoke with us and with other Arts-UP participants about her work with organizations like Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass. She explained to us that young people were "the future and the hope" of organizations like these and that "if we work hard enough we can change the world.". The Arts-UP participants showcased in this section began to explore the ways in which their experiences could serve as catalysts for becoming more proactive in their communities—they were discovering ways in—to their communities and to a life as artists and activists.

## Helping Others Find a Way Out

### *Using Their Skills as Artists and Activists*

Another theme that emerged from the data demonstrates the ongoing impact of the program—where participants have become involved in community projects to help others find a way out. In this section we present the experiences of one participant who we use as an exemplar for the many participants who have shared ongoing stories of work in their communities.

Vince was a humble, shy student when he started the Arts-UP program in 2002. While he was a competent artist, he was hesitant to take risks with his work, and kept most of his interests and ideas in a small sketchbook he kept to himself. During his two years of participation in Arts-UP, Vince developed both personally and professionally. In a follow-up interview, he described his views about Arts-UP.

Arts-UP gave me the guts to approach art in new ways... This program has encouraged me to jump on challenges. Not only do I say yes to art challenges, but I find myself saying yes to all sorts of opportunities. I used to be afraid of opportunities, so worried I would fail that I'd just let them go. Now, I grab a hold of opportunities, and get scared later. But scared or not, I still jump in.

Through his participation in Arts-UP, Vince not only found guts, he found his voice. After his participation in 2002 and 2003, Vince continued to use his skills in the community and he moved on to inspire other voices by using or encouraging art in the service of community and justice.

Most recently, Vince became involved with Project R.I.S.E. (Realizing Individual Strength through Education), an organization dedicated to the education of homeless individuals in the community. He began his relationship with Project R.I.S.E. as a tutor at a local homeless shelter, where he had the opportunity to design and teach four “Learning to Read with Art” literacy workshops to homeless children between the ages of six and thirteen.

Project R.I.S.E. is probably where my art and community activism mix the most. For example, when I put together lessons... I intertwined art making and interpreting with story writing and interpreting. This was a huge confidence booster to students who were not fluent in English, or had limited exposure to printed material. They were no longer intimidated by reading, because the process was bi-lingual: English and Art. Even if the words do not make sense, the student still has an opportunity to contribute and most especially- learn from the artwork of other peers. Art became a language that connected those who had trouble connecting before. Where words may have presented

barriers between ages, genders, and cultures- pictures built bridges. Art, in essence, can offer a language of the silent.

Vince, like so many former Arts-UP participants, found a way to see himself as part of the collective potential of his community. He found a way to help others find their voices in hopes that they too could find ways out of oppressive situations.

While Vince's story is a compelling one, he is only one of many Arts-UP participants who continue to work for change in their community. In a follow-up survey, many program alumni reported that after their participation in Arts-UP, they began to seek out more opportunities to use their creative skills in their communities. For example, Beth began volunteering with the Salvation Army to make Hope Totes for the Haven of Rest. Anna became the volunteer arts director at a nursing home on her college campus. Rhea volunteered at a therapeutic equestrian center for youth with developmental disabilities. Noble became the volunteer graphic designer for Kuddle Buddies Foundation, an organization that supports research for children with pediatric cancer. He describes his role as "the perfect opportunity for me to use my talents to help others without expecting anything out of it. I'm not doing this for fame or riches but, rather doing it to make differences (P13, 2009). These students all cite Arts-UP as giving them the "confidence" and the "knowledge" to engage in these ways. As Beth said in the opening quote, Arts-UP helped them see themselves as part of their community and the ways in which they could contribute to it.

### **Discussion: Arts-UP and Beyond**

I think Arts-UP nurtures the idea that it's healthy and rewarding and not as difficult as one might imagine to be able to be a strong, vibrant and living part of a community. Somewhere along the line, teens realize that they're no longer categorized as this faction of hoodlums living within their community. And they weren't spending their time flipping burgers at McDonalds or playing video games or stealing stuff from the mall- they were researching their city, exploring it, seeing it with new eyes, and then creating a new vision of it for everyone else to see. (P10, 2009)

When students enter the Arts-UP program, they represent a diverse group of urban teenagers and young adults who are different in many ways: culturally, racially, religiously, sexually, educationally, and socio-economically. Yet, they are similar in that they believe they have limited potential and limited opportunities to create significant changes in their lives, personally and collectively and they believe most adults perceive them as self-absorbed and disinterested. They are similar in that they do not know how to find their way out of the stereotypes that write them off as apathetic, narcissistic, and disengaged. They are similar in

that they do not know how to find their way into the local communities of which they are a part.

Several adults who have worked with the Arts-UP program validated the ways in which participants' perceptions about their limited roles and opportunities in society are rooted in some truth. Ed, program director at the environmental education center, spoke about societal stereotypes in an interview.

[People think] they're all punks. Don't give them a chance. They'll take a look at them and see a Mohawk or a ripped t-shirt and automatically they're a bad kid and they don't want anything to do with them and that sucks. And it's an unfortunate stereotype. You know that group you had out there...I can see that happening to each of them. And after you get to know them, there's no reason for it. They're all great kids.

Like Ed, many adults who worked with Arts-UP participants came to recognize the value of youth and their potential to make positive contributions to their organizations and to their communities. This involvement fostered the students' growth as artists and activists, and worked to dispel the myths and misconceptions about their positions in society—for participants and for their communities. Dave, the resident artist from 2007, expressed the ways his involvement with the program changed his views of youth participants:

These kids surprised me. They are bright, ambitious, upbeat. They were more engaged than my college art students, and are far more willing to take risks in their work and jump on new challenges. I even hired two of the kids to be my assistants after the program ended. These kids just need a chance to do something cool. (Dave, 2007 Artist)

While Arts-Up does help participants “do something cool,” it also does more than this. Arts-UP helps young people make cognitive, emotional, and social connections to their communities through the vehicle of art.

Youth in Arts-UP found opportunities to put into practice ways of reflecting and thinking critically about issues of social importance, opportunities to develop confidence as youth artists and activists, and opportunities to connect with their community. Through these opportunities, participants began to recognize their potential to take more active roles in transforming their own futures and the future of their communities. They developed new modes of social awareness that led to new avenues for social activism, both during their participation in the program and well after it was completed. Through their involvement,

many participants came to the revelation that they not only have a way out, but they ARE the way in. And perhaps even more profoundly, they discovered they ability to help others find their way out as well.

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