

Imaginative Actuality
Learning in the Arts
during the Nonschool Hours

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It is easy to think that imagination begins where fact ends, yet we often find greatest evidence of the creative in objective reality. This is a report of empirical data on imagination at work in places and by people invisible to most of us and little evidenced in current discussions of education. It explores how young people and professional artists in economically disadvantaged communities make learning work in community-based organizations devoted to production and performance in the arts. First we review the general parameters of the broad research study from which learning in the arts emerged as of special interest. Next we consider findings related to all effective youth organizations, regardless of focus of activity.

Before we jump into just how the arts work in these environments, we need to learn something of the larger study which gave rise to the findings on art reported here.¹ This study was designed to allow anthropologists and policy analysts to understand effective learning sites that young people choose for themselves in their nonschool hours. By questioning local policymakers and collecting public documents, policy analysts learned much about the broad context of youth organizations and their support. Anthropologists spent time immersed, often over several years, in each site, following talk, work patterns, and interactions of youth members.

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Arts organizations turned out to offer funders and policymakers unique challenges and to provide fertile contexts for cognitive and linguistic development not available elsewhere for most adolescents. These findings came as a surprise seven years into a decade of this research on community organizations engaging young people in activities ranging from urban planning to poetry. The scholars carrying out this study were not arts educators or advocates, but social scientists working to understand learning and language development and organizational environments that enhance these for young people likely to be labeled "at-risk" in their schools.

"IT'S ALL IN WHAT THE PLACE IS LIKE"²

This comment comes from an adult leader of one of these environments. This simple idea contains the essence of what we learned: contexts of learning matter greatly. But what goes into creating and sustaining these?

When institutions of society become overburdened and unable to adapt to changes in patterns of human behavior, new institutions need to emerge. Today, the sweep of new advances in technology, communication, and enterprise has shifted radically the rhythms and structure of daily American life. While frequently overlooked, young people often are the ones who feel these changes most significantly. Traditional institutions of school, family, and church, assumed to take responsibility for the positive development of young people, can no longer meet the full needs of today's children and youth between the ages of 8 and 18. An "institutional gap" exists, and it affects our youth.

Highlighting this gap, the Carnegie Corporation's 1992 report, *A Matter of Time*, shows that young people spend only about 26% of their time in school, and of their nonschool hours, they have discretion over

² All language data reported here in quotation marks was recorded by a member of the research team by audiorecording equipment, transcribed, and, in many cases, entered into a data base for analysis by a concordance program.

about 40-50% of that time. When parents and teachers cannot be with youngsters throughout the day to ensure their positive socialization, youth have to look to other places for their learning. And it's the nature of the places to which they go on their own time and of their own volition that shapes their growth in skills, ideas, and confidence.

Creative youth-based nonschool organizations and enterprises that have sprung up in response to this "institutional gap" engage young people in productive activities during nonschool hours. Those fortunate enough to have such places in their neighborhood and choose to spend time there carry with them a sense of need, an awareness of pending danger for themselves and their friends, and often some inner sense that they have a knack for doing "something more." Such places vary in structure and mission and range from well-established national affiliations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, parks and recreation programs, to an array of youth-initiated and grass-roots endeavors. Such organizations find homes in renovated warehouses, performing arts centers, railway yard buildings, and abandoned stores on dying main streets.

Regardless of the buildings that house them or the particular focus they espouse, all of these organizations share a central guiding principle: they recognize young people as resources, not as problems. This means they value the talent and interests of young people as key players in the development of individuals and the group, as well as their larger communities. Rather than focus on prevention and detention for "at-risk" youth, these organizations urge creativity and invention with young people as competent risk-takers across a range of media and situations.

Making Learning Visible

But what actually takes place in these learning environments outside of schools to attract young people to sustained participation, performance and productions of high quality? It was this question that drew Shirley Brice Heath, linguistic anthropologist, and Milbrey

McLaughlin, public policy analyst, of Stanford University to begin in 1987 a decade-long study that would bring answers, surprises, and hosts of new questions. Exemplary sampling across the nation located 124 youth-based organizations that young people of economically disadvantaged communities saw as places where they wanted to spend time and found learning a challenging risk they enjoyed. In other words, these were places young people judged as effective, from their point of view. From Massachusetts to Hawaii, in urban and rural sites, as well as mid-sized cities (25,000-100,000), these young people frequently attended organizations whose activities centered in either athletic-academic groups, community service initiatives, or arts participation.

Figure 1. Three Types of Youth-Based Organizations

- **Athletic- Academic Focused**—Youth participate on sports teams that heavily integrate academic involvement on topics related to the sport being played.
- **Community- Service Centered**—Youth orient their activities toward specific ways of serving their communities—ecological, religious, economic.
- **Arts- Based**—Activities in the arts engage young people in a variety of media—visual, technical, musical, dramatic. All arts programs carry a strong component of community service, and many have since 1994 moved increasingly toward micro-enterprise in local neighborhoods.

Young scholars trained as anthropologists fanned out to record the everyday life of these organizations, collecting data through observing and noting events from the beginning of planning for a season through its final cycle of evaluations. In addition, these researchers made audiorecordings of adults and young members as they went about practice, critique sessions, and celebrations. In 1994, a sample of youth organization members responded to the National Education Longitudinal Survey [hereafter NELS], so that those in nonschool

activities could be compared on a host of features with a national sample of high school students. In addition, to further complement the research, the young anthropologists trained small teams of local young people to work as junior ethnographers. They audio-recorded everyday language both within and outside the organizations, interviewed local residents and youth not linked to youth-based organizations, and supervised other young people in their keeping of daily logs and journals.³

As the evidence accumulated, it became clear that the ethos of these organizations and their easy inclusion of young people in responsible roles make rich environments of challenge, practice, trial and error, and extraordinary expectations and achievements. An ethos that sees young people as resources cascades through organizational structure as well as moments of hilarious play and concentrated work. These groups, like many organizations in the adult world today, are less defined by their material surroundings than by their communications, linkages, and dynamism. Like start-up companies of the business world, their assets rest primarily in their people and not in buildings, grounds, and equipment.

While numerous notions circulating today wrongly assume that young people only want to hang out and to have fun, youth in the organizations of this study emphasize the importance of “having something to do.” They crave experience and productivity. Essential to successful organizations—and in line with youth interests—is the offer by these organizations of more than just a safe place to go after school. Young people expect to play many different roles, help make rules, and to be able to take risks by trying something new, taking inspiration from unexpected sources, and creating new combinations of materials, ideas, and people.

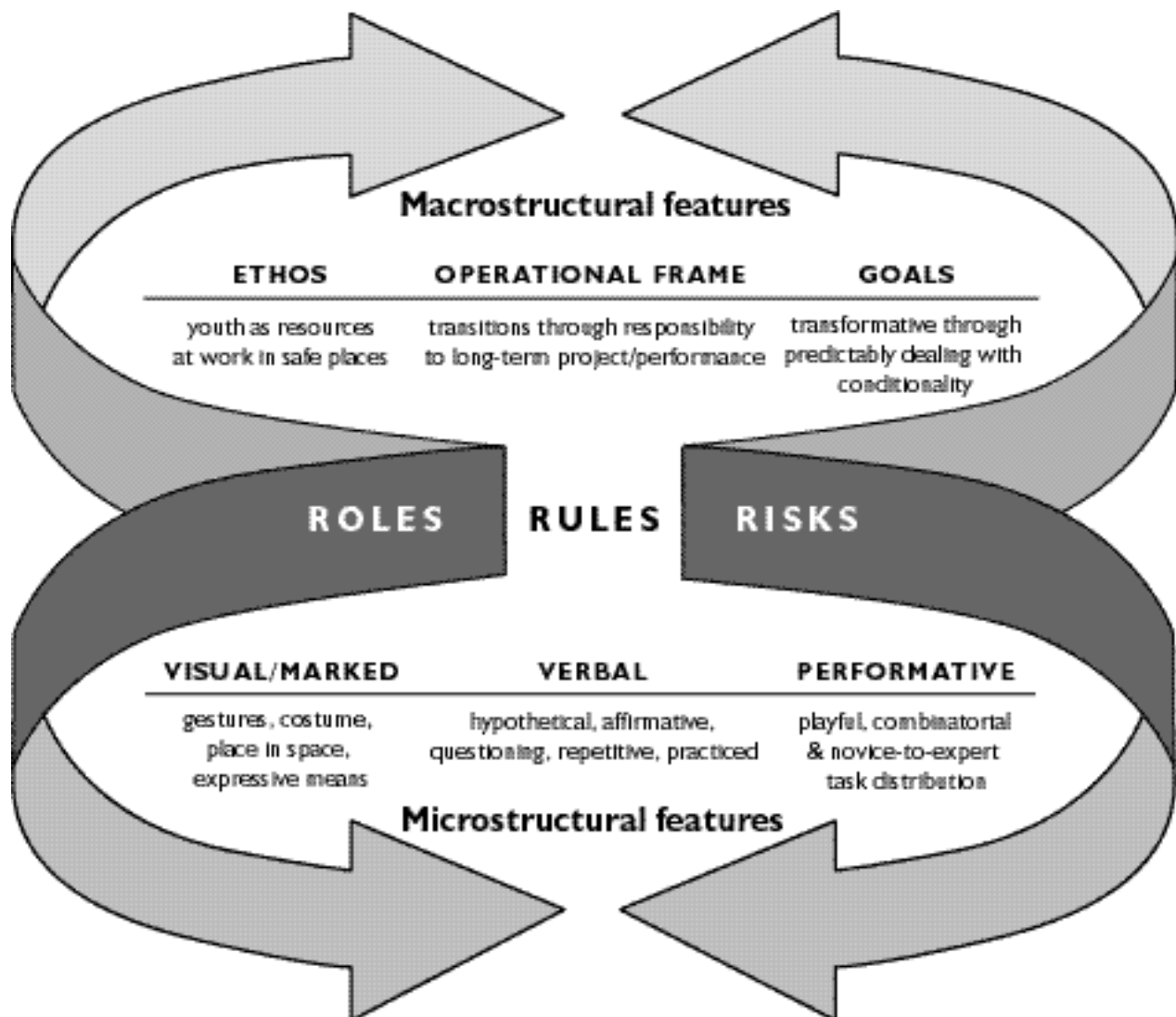
Roles, rules, and risks—a rewrite of the 3 R’s of the early twentieth-century ditty about schools—characterize the places where young people want to be. As shown in Figure #2, the macrostructure or overarching

organizational frame of these learning environments derives from the ethos that the diverse talents and energies young people bring to the organization to make it what it is and can be. Adult leaders freely admit that “if kids walk away from this place and stop wanting to come here and work, nothing we adults can do by ourselves will keep these doors open.” The operational frame distributes functions and roles throughout, and yet marked transitions link to growing responsibilities and commitment by each young person to long-term projects or performances of the group. Young people take part as board members, receptionists, junior coaches, clean-up crew, and celebration planners. The longer they stay in the organization, the more they get to do—the wider the arc of their responsibilities and roles. Group goals make clear the transformative effects of hard work, creative collaborative work and critique, and achievement in the face of skepticism about the abilities of young people from communities lacking in economic viability and professional role models.

Almost without exception, all these organizations have fragile grips on their future existence. Until the early 1990s, survival depended exclusively on grants, individual and corporate donors, and the rare endowment. But by 1994, young people in more and more organizations began to put their talents and energies to work to enlist civic groups, appropriate business clients, and social service agencies as clients. Tumbling teams become half-time entertainment for professional basketball games and neighborhood block parties; conservation groups hire out to build park benches and design signs identifying and describing local flora and fauna; drama groups provide workshops for juvenile detention centers. Funding contingencies provide just one of the ways young people meet all the unpredictables of their group. The norm is “be ready for anything”—canceled contracts, van breakdowns on a critical day, break-ins and robberies at the site, and the inevitable emotional and social issues that arise. Older youth bear special responsibilities to young members at times like these, and since most of these groups include students who may range in age from eight to eighteen,

³ For further explanation of the range of methods of data collection and analysis used in the study, see Heath & Langman, 1994; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994.

Figure 2. Macrostructural vs Microstructural Features



long-term and older members have to be strong role models for one another and for younger members.

Adults in these organizations do not expect the young just to face and solve problems. They ensure that members get lots of practice in looking ahead and figuring out just where problems might arise down the road. “Let’s think about what could happen” dominates considerations of these groups, especially as end of season, task completion, or openings of showings or performances draw near.

Microstructural, or daily interacted, features work through roles, rules, and risks, and show up in the behaviors of young members. These link in multiple ways to macro features, because all occur under a shared umbrella of understanding of “what this place (or group, or practice...) is about.” At the microstructural level, visual or marked aspects of membership include special gestures (greetings, congratulatory signals), specific costumes (shirts, caps, and jackets with logos), particular places within the space of the

Figure 3. Expectations of Youth in Effective Organizations

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- Individuals bring diverse talents, skills, knowledge, and networks vital to the life of the group.
 - Everyone has to be ready to pick up the slack, to play different roles, and to be a responsible critic of the group's work or performance.
 - A season means from start to finish, from plans and preparation to practice, performance, and evaluation.
 - Practice, practice, practice goes along with the need to keep asking, first of the self and then of others, "how's it going? What do you think?"
 - No one learns or does anything for just the individual; expect to pass what you know and can do on to others through teaching, mentoring, modeling, encouraging.
 - Adults and youth alike have to be prepared to suspend disbelief, deal with intense emotions, and explore vulnerabilities.
 - Everyone expects the unrelenting accountability that comes from authentic audiences, outsiders to the organization.
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organization, and high value on several means of expression (dance, visual arts, logos, etc.). Verbal interactions are marked by a heavy use of hypotheticals, affirmations, questions, specific names, playful routines, and wide range of both oral and written genres. Performative play and humor emphasize much of what goes on within the groups—special messages left on computers, unique drum roll for the perennially late young actor, and highly creative song lyrics.

These seemingly simple features of everyday life in these organizations translate into group expectations sitting within a climate of can-do, no matter what happens. While at first glance these features may make youth organizations sound harsh and full of stress-filled hours, they are instead high-quality and high-stakes learning environments that recognize the creative capacities of youth. Figure #3 provides a summary of the expectations that organizational leaders in these sites surround with a sense of safety and predictability for the young. Rules are not great in number, but they matter, and they sound like common sense; "pick up after yourself"; "nobody gets hurt here"; "remember this place works because we work."

The Surprise

As the research team worked in these organizations over the years and carried out more fine-grained

analysis—particularly of the language young people and their adult leaders used, environments of arts organizations emerged as somewhat different from those of groups engaged primarily in community service or sports. In addition, the young people who belonged to arts programs exhibited more of certain attitudes and behaviors than those attending organizations of other types.

Presented here are quotations from young people and adult leaders in these arts groups that capture the climate of expectation and work in these creative environments.

"It changes your perception of the world."

"You can say really important things in a piece of art."

"You center yourself and things pour out."

"When I'm actually doing my art, I feel like I'm in a different frame."

"We keep pushing the envelope of what we're doing."

Essential here is the combination of thinking, saying, and doing something important while being aware of the self and the group in these endeavors.⁴

⁴ For general discussion of contexts of arts organizations as rich linguistic and cognitive environments, see Heath, Soep, & Roach, 1998. For greater detail on how arts coaches (as well as sports coaches) in these effective youth organizations talked with young people, see Heath & Langman, 1994.

The language of youth arts organizations reveals that through planning and preparing the group projects to which individuals contribute, each member has available multiple opportunities to express ideas. Adult leaders start meetings early in the season with open challenges: “what kind of show do you want this year?” “we’ve got to figure out the program for this year—ideas, directions, special requests?” Adults remind youth members that there are some limits—budget, availability of performance or exhibition space, and the obligation to fill contracts already in place. Beyond these limits, imagination can take youth in the arts to almost any place or project they dream up. All that is needed—and adults are quick to remind young people of this—is young people’s willingness to work to make their ideas happen. When an organization committed primarily to the visual arts decides to add a play to the opening night of their gallery exhibition, the only boundaries come from limited time. Any work on a play has to take time away from producing their individual pieces and fulfilling contracts for group projects. Some version of “We give them room to fail as well as to succeed” comes up often in adult leaders’ talk about how they work with young people.

Questions and challenges fill not only initial group planning sessions, but follow-up in one-to-one and small-group interactions. The arts director of a theatre group asks performers to choose a leader and then to work in groups of three for half an hour to develop a scene from a piece of writing taken out of the journal of one member. The chosen leader of the three focuses the group on making a choice quickly and then guides talk toward scene development in the allotted time. A dance troupe struggles in the first week to decide on a theme, working in small groups to develop ideas and rationales to present to the other groups for selection. In all cases, young artists work against the immovable deadline of performance and product development, knowing that in the final analysis, their work will be judged by outside authentic audiences of friends and family, to be sure, but also clients, critics, and could-be fans and supporters convinced only by the merits of the work of art.

Plans in these organizations come from and with young people rather than for them. At the minute-to-minute level, this means that young people get lots of practice in developing future scenarios, explaining ideas, arguing for a particular tactic, and articulating strategies.⁵ They talk about “what if?” “what about...?” “could we try this?” “let’s try....” They throw out imaginative situations for others in the group to consider: “in that part, if Maria moves to the side and the spot is on her, the drummers step back, then Antonio can come on from the dark side of the stage before lights go back up.” They pepper their sentences with “could,” “will,” “can,”—asserting possibility. They preface suggestions with subject-verb phrases that attribute responsibility to their own mental work: “I wonder,” “I came up with this crazy idea...,” “I see this going some other way.”

Such talk can slip past the casual listener as nothing special. However, in arts organizations, the frequency of “what if?” questions, modal verbs (such as could), and mental state verbs (such as believe, plan), as well as complexity of hypothetical proposals, amounts to lots of practice. Young members talk and talk in their planning, during practice, around critique. This abundance and intensity of practice for these types of language uses is rarely available to them in any other setting.

The institutional gap noted at the outset of this paper means that older children and adolescents have relatively few occasions to work in a sustained way to plan and carry out a project with an adult or guiding expert. Junior ethnographers working with the research team recorded patterns of ordinary language

⁵ The art of planning and the care that must go into different phases and types of plans receives almost no direct instruction in formal educational institutions. Yet since 1991 the world of business has given increased attention to “the art of the long view” (Schwartz, 1991). Notions such as “unintended consequences” and the “long shadow of small decisions” have become commonplace within frameworks for successful personal and organizational existence, as a result of the tightening of the webs of connection (Mulgan, 1997). The small but very real world of youth organizations offers a laboratory for using and exploring the kinds of language and thinking that make these concepts familiar to students.

interactions of young people in their nonschool hours outside youth-based organizations. The findings revealed that for students who did not attend organized nonschool activities and were not extensively involved in extracurricular activities at school, each week offered them at best only 15-20 minutes of interaction with adults in sustained conversation (defined here as at least 7 minutes in duration) on a single topic that included planning.⁶ The youth not involved in nonschool activities received almost no practice in talking through future plans, developing ideas for execution, or assessing next steps from a current situation.

Whereas family members and neighbors in earlier years worked shoulder to shoulder with the young, whether in the kitchen, garden, local boat harbor, or porch addition, current job demands—for adults and young people—make unlikely these extended periods of joint work at a relaxed pace. Leisure hours, when they occur, go to bodily exercise, spectator sports, travel, or chores piled up because of long working hours, illness, or crises. Young people across all socioeconomic classes have almost no time with adults to hear and use forms of language critical for academic performance and personal maturation. Decision-making, thinking ahead, and building strategies make up most of what adults have to do in their everyday lives. But facility in these does not come easily. Most certainly, the linguistic competence necessary to talk oneself through tough situations cannot develop without hearing such language modeled.

Young people in arts-based organizations gain practice in thinking and talking as adults. They play important roles in their organizations; they have control over centering themselves and working for group excellence in achievement. Their joint work

with adults and peers rides on conversations that test and develop ideas, explicate processes, and build scenarios of the future.

They get to play across a scale of adapted voices, strategic planning, and thoughtful listening.

“I find my inspiration from other performers.”

“We give a lot of advice to each other.”

“It comes down to taking the time to listen to the other person—just giving it a chance and trying it out.”

These comments from youth members in arts-based community organizations refer to critique—a process that takes place primarily during the practice and evaluation phases of the cycle of each season of arts production or performance. Critique, the reciprocal give-and-take learning of assessing work to improve the outcome, occurs daily in youth-based organizations (Soep, 1996). Professional artists, as well as older youth members, give younger artists specific feedback about techniques to be practiced and developed, and they ask questions to help them focus the meaning of their work. The high risk embedded in the performances and exhibitions of these organizations creates an atmosphere in which students know how to solicit support, challenge themselves and others, and share work and resources whenever possible. Critique, as an improvisational and reciprocal process, amplifies practice gained during project planning in using hypothetical statements (“if you put this color on today, then can it dry enough by Friday to start the next color?”).

In addition to the risk of sharing work with peers, the constant anticipation of a critical audience infuses life at these organizations with an orientation toward the uncertainty of public reaction. Young people have to face the possibility that something can “go wrong,” or viewers will not “get the point.” These fears motivate perpetual self-monitoring of process and refinement of product. Risk also operates at the level of the organization and its survival through the contingencies of an uneven climate of financial and popular support. Through their many roles at effective arts sites, youth participate actively in efforts to guarantee that the organization will continue

⁶ These findings echo those of Csikszentimihalyi & Larson, 1984 and numerous other scholars who have shown that as older children move into the teenage years, they spend less time with family and more with peers. Key, of course, to the time spent talking with family members is content of that talk; see Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992.

not only for them, but for their younger counterparts as well. Far from a liability, this confluence of risk heightens learning at effective youth-based arts organization. While public rhetoric laments the fate of “at-risk youth,” our research reveals how youth depend on certain kinds of risk for development. Rather than live at its mercy, youth in arts organizations use the predictability of risks in the arts to intensify the quality of their interactions, products, and performances.

As the group moves through its work toward meeting deadline, they give one another advice as well as work with the professional artists that instruct and guide in their organizations. They look, listen, take notes, compare pieces or scenes, and critique. They ask others to think about their work in specific ways: “does this work here?” “what’s not right here—something’s bothering me.” The answers of others model good material for similar internal questions and answers of the self; the poet learns to ask herself, “What is it I really want to say?” She also frames answers to herself on the basis of those she has heard in critique sessions. Males and females alike report the critique sessions as highly important to enable them to know how to raise and address serious questions and how to reframe queries to help young artists see in their work something they cannot see on their own.

One young artist who moved on successfully to architecture school reflected on the youth-based arts organization that he had helped establish when he was in the eighth grade. “The place enabled me to put together a capable portfolio,” he said, “to get accepted at a good institution, to make sure I had the tools to look at something and crit it by myself and say ‘is that good enough? what’s good and what’s bad about it?’”

Learning to monitor internally as well as to give advice to others builds from the group planning that begins each season throughout the full run of the cycle of work from start to finish. Reflecting back on a gallery show, workshop, dance recital, or cut for a compact disc at the end of the season allows long-term assessment. Members ask not just how the event went, but how they worked together, where and how is it that a particular

“snag” happened, and whether better planning could have avoided the embarrassment it brought the group.

The influences of participation in the arts on language show up in the dramatic increase in syntactic complexity, hypothetical reasoning, and questioning approaches taken up by young people within four-to-six weeks of their entry into the arts organization. During this period of time, they will move from planning and preparation into intensive practice and pending deadline. Initial data analysis from the approximately 750,000 words transcribed from arts-based youth organizations (from the full corpus of one million and a half words for all youth-based organizations in the study) shows the following generalized patterns for arts groups:

- a five-fold increase in use of if-then statements, scenario building following by what if questions, and how about prompts
- more than a two-fold increase in use of mental state verbs (consider, understand, etc.)
- a doubling in the number of modal verbs (could, might, etc.)

These linguistic skills enable planning, demonstrate young people’s ability to show they are thinking, and also help them have the language to work together with firm resolution and a respectful manner. Perhaps most important, these uses of particular structures get internalized, as hundreds of pages of journals devoted to ways their work as artists come up for them during the day when they are in other parts of their lives attest. Young artists report hearing a melody on the radio, seeing a billboard design, or witnessing a fight on the subway; all the while, they report that they can be thinking about transforming these moments into their own art.

Strategy-building is the best way of capturing the sum total of all the talk about planning, preparing, and “using your head.” Figure #4 summarizes some of these through examples of how language works in the arts. This figure shows how young people develop the

Figure 4. Strategies for Learners

- **theory-building and predicting**—“what do you think will happen if...?” “we could think of this in three dimensional terms, couldn’t we?”
- **translating and transforming**—“think about your favorite rap group—how do they use metaphors?”
- **creating analogies**—“okay, so what’s this? I mean can you tell me how what I’m doing is getting at something else” (demonstrating a short sequence of movements that suggests a furtive stranger)
- **reflecting and projecting**—“write about how you think you did today and don’t forget to put down your ideas for the dance program—we gotta get this thing settled.”
- **demonstrating, explaining, negotiating**—“hold it right there. Do that again, Tracy. Now what did you see, Rad?” [he explains] “Is that right, Tracy, is that how you did it? Tell him.”
- **displaying (trial and error) and assessing**—“don’t forget this performance is only six weeks off and those kids in the Parks program (the audience for the program) can be plenty mean; they’re squirmy.”

language uses to move them beyond using simply their own experiences or opinions as basis of argumentative or declarative discourse. The highly frequent oral exchanges between youth and older peers and adults around problem posing and hypothetical reasons lead these youth in arts organizations to consider multiple ways of doing and being in their artistic work and beyond.

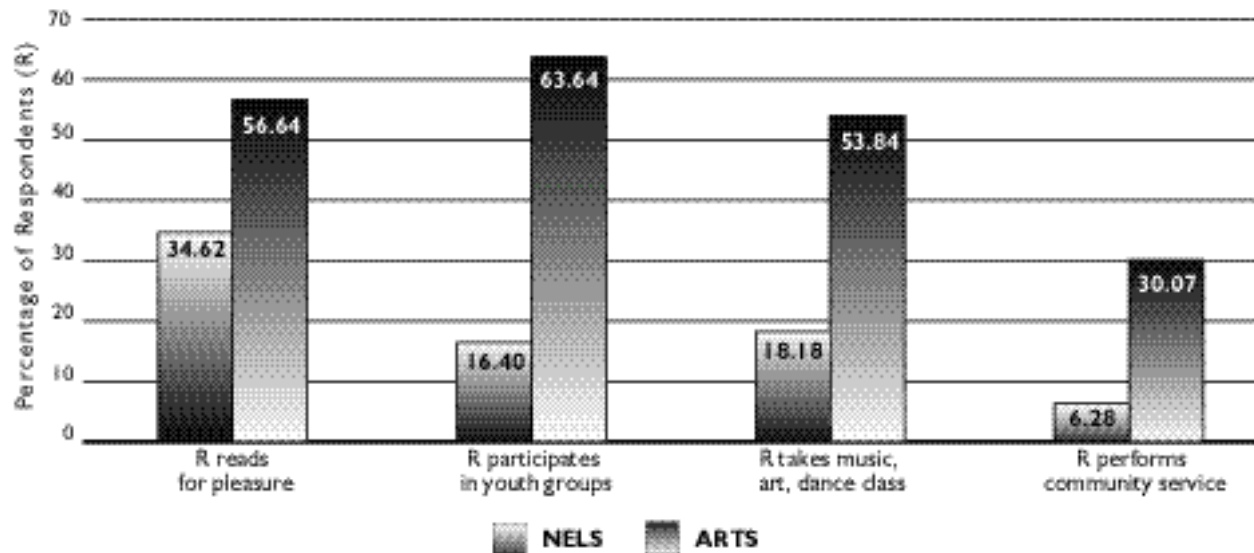
When we realize that students in theatre-based organizations of our research had in each practice session approximately six times as many opportunities to speak more than one sentence as they might have in their English and Social Studies classrooms, it is no surprise that certain linguistic uses appear to become habit.⁷ Evidence suggests that they reinforced these habits elsewhere. Figure #5 compares young people in arts organization of our study with students surveyed in NELS. This figure shows that youth in the

arts-based organizations of our study use their discretionary time to build not only their language skills—through reading and interacting in groups with a focused activity, but also their specific talents in the arts through classes—either within school or outside.

This choice of opportunities for what may be called “extra practice” goes along with the intensive authentic language practice young people receive in their arts groups. There students had nine times as many opportunities to write original text materials (not dictated notes) as their classroom counterparts. Also of particular note is the fact that adult leaders in arts groups issue in the early weeks of a season twenty-six questions per hour to members of the group and precede these by the name of either the individual, a small group (e.g. “Tony’s group”), or the full group. As noted above, these are not questions to which the adult already knows the answer, but queries that prompt ideas, plans, and reactions: “Okay, Ramona, you’re too quiet; what are you thinking?” Early in the season, such questions go most frequently to oldtimers among the group, but within a few weeks, every member can expect to be pulled into the talk necessary for planning and preparing before the group enters the heavy-duty practice or production phase of the season.

⁷ This analysis was done by pulling sections of 3000 running lines from the language corpus of theatre groups of approximately 15 young members and comparing these with reports on classroom language drawn from dissertation and published book appendices. It is important to note that most classrooms have more than 15 students, and since many reports of classroom language do not indicate the total number of students, this comparison is rough at best. English and Social Studies were chosen as subjects, since these are classes most often dedicated to discussion of texts and events, as is practice for drama. See, for example, Tannock, 1998.

Figure 5. Leisure Time Activities



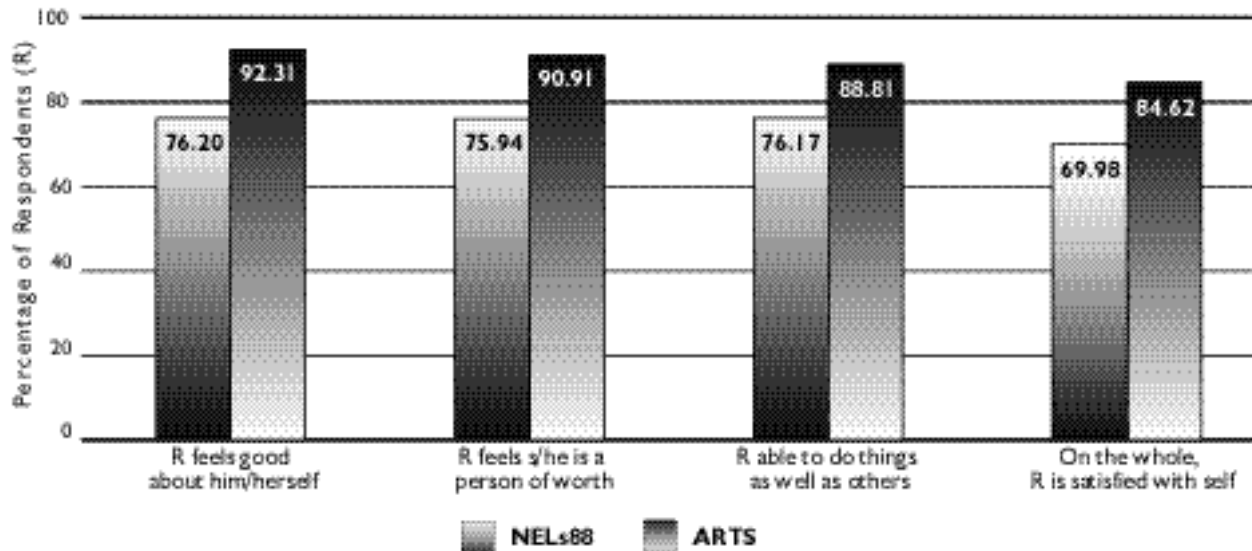
Effective arts-based youth organizations place strong emphasis on communication skills of many types and across an array of contexts and situations. Their adult leaders expect the youth to be able to engage in conversation in highly serious, reflective ways, and these leaders or drama or writing coaches make clear that young people should expect the same of all adults around the organization: “If she [a new professional artist] is not giving you the time you need, go talk to her, tell what you think’s wrong with the piece, and ask her advice. She’ll talk to you—you may not want to hear what she says, but then have a conversation. It’s OK to disagree with her!” For groups involved in seeking clients, such skills that form the basis of confidence and ease in talking with adult professionals can make the difference between losing or landing a contract.

Involvement in the arts demands fluency and facility with varieties of oral performances, literacies, and media projections. Through the multiple roles suggested here, youth have to produce numerous types of writing as well as oral performances of organizational genres. These genres, ranging from invitations and schedules to satires, book jackets, and vignettes, reveal the daily activities at arts-based youth organiza-

tions as fundamentally intertextual. Young people can and do learn to talk through a set of plans and remain willing to go back to drafts to make their work better. But they also do much writing that is first-draft information-only: key terms, times of rehearsals, names of shows currently at local galleries, dates of future events, etc. Contrary to most situations they have faced as students, they also must write as a group: scripts for their own plays, press releases, program content, and thank-you letters to funders. They listen to adults’ reports of events in civic affairs or at the state level that may affect them, and they often draft responses on public issues that may affect them, such as curfews that could eliminate late-night practices or rehearsals.

Through their involvement in effective youth-based arts organizations, young people cultivate talents and dispositions they bring into their voluntary association with such high-demand high-risk places. Once there, the intensity of these groups builds and sustains a host of skills and capacities rooted in their personal recognition of themselves as competent, creative, and productive individuals. Figure #6 indicates the extent of what may be called their “self-esteem” as compared with the students surveyed in NELS. This figure is especially

Figure 6. Perception of Self



significant when we compare the factors of home atmosphere for NELS students and those in arts organizations. The latter were about twice as likely as the NELS students to be undergoing situations that often contribute to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, such as frequent moves, parent losing or starting a job, parental relationship change, or going on or off welfare. Arts organization students often talked and wrote in their journals about how their art enabled them to express pent-up feelings but also to get some distance by observing closely and taking the time to think and to listen.

The Generative Capacity of The Arts:

Group awareness of how their collective talents can add to the larger community comes along with individual confidence and building of expertise. As one adult leader put it, “It starts with kids and then the adults come in”; this claim refers to the various roles that youth groups play for community enhancement—educationally, aesthetically, and economically. Within their own groups, they play roles as mentors for younger members; but when these organizations mount exhibitions, produce plays or musical concerts, or

develop videos, their educational roles reach beyond their own organization. Within their own space or sometimes in rented gallery space, young visual artists mingle and talk with visitors. Most dramatic productions are followed by conversations between young actors and audience members; the same is true for showings of videos made by media arts groups. Adults from their communities come to see what they have done, sometimes out of initial curiosity, for such events may be culturally unfamiliar to them, but more often out of a sense that this young person is doing something they themselves cannot do. This sense of unfamiliarity can deepen pride in parents, who often report never having had such opportunities themselves or never knowing that their child had such talents.⁸

It is difficult to calculate just how much in the way of education, entertainment, counseling, and community

⁸ Our research did not involve collection of data from parents. Young people, however, often talked in interviews and general conversation within the arts groups about who would attend special events and why. Adult leaders also reported to us the broad enthusiasm parents and community friends of the young people had for seeing just what the group was doing. Several types of data suggest that parents of young people in these arts organizations had high aspirations for their children and also attended their school events.

Figure 7. Youth Development With the Arts

- **Marketing Model**—Youth reflect artistry through an array of products and services that they can sell in their neighborhoods. In so doing, they recognize local resources and possibilities for social entrepreneurship and community development.
- **Tagging Model**—Young artists see themselves as responsible and in instructive positions that build upon their creative artistic and communicative skills to develop similar skills in their younger cohorts.
- **Positioning Model**—Youth participate in apprentice and intern programs that give them time to shadow others holding positions in a range of types of creative and artistic enterprises.
- **Line Up Model**—Youth advance into mainstream secondary and post-secondary institutions while also pursuing further enhancement of artistic talents for vocational or avocational development.

service young people in arts organizations contribute annually. However, across the arts groups of our study, we provide these rough averages, which have to be interpreted with an awareness that groups in rural areas and mid-sized towns could not provide as many occasions because of lack of transport. In addition, some of the groups we studied manage to book more than 300 performances during the school year in their state. The figures given here are averages of actual counts of types of activities each hour for one day a week and one weekend day from a sampling of young people in these organizations between 1994 and 1997.

- 800 hours, or 20 weeks, annually of teaching for younger peers
- 164 hours annually of positive public entertainment suitable for families and young children
- 296 hours annually of counseling and mentoring with their younger peers
- 380 hours annually of free public service in media production, performance, and community development

A key outcome for youth engaged with the arts is not just academic development, but also work opportunity—the chance for youth to apply skills, techniques, and habits of mind through employment in arts and/or community-related fields. Figure #7 summarizes the major ways in which youth arts

organizations enabled authentic work opportunities that extended learning for students.

In all these models, individuals had to put to work not only what are classically considered academic skills, but also interpersonal, judgmental, and communicational abilities. In addition, they had to have a level of technical competence that matched the task at hand. Especially high-stakes learning environments center for an increasing number of arts organizations around social entrepreneurship efforts placing the arts at the center of personal and neighborhood-based economic development. Producing graphics for local businesses, obtaining paid contracts for a performance series, opening a theater in an underserved area, setting up a micro-enterprise incubator for arts-related shops and projects—these exemplify how the arts at youth-based organizations draw on and strengthen local human capital and aesthetic resources.⁹ Hence, the positive learning environments of these groups hold significant value not only in developing youth (in terms of the cognitive, linguistic, and social capacities cultivated in young people involved in these organizations) but also in youth in

⁹ A documentary video and accompanying resource guide, *ArtShow*, [available late 1999] illustrate four youth-based organizations, two rural and two urban, devoted to the arts. The two urban sites include a strong focus on economic opportunities that build the local community socially and culturally and enable the arts organization to pay young artists for their work.

development (when the activities of these organizations serve as vehicle for young people to participate in social enterprise and community reshaping). Learning occurs in the arts first at the individual level and then at that of the larger community.

Artistic work often generates enterprise development and inspires entrepreneurial projects and planning. The process of re-creating old buildings, old ideas, forgotten traditions and connections becomes recreational, and leisure time and play then become the work of joy, dedication, commitment, and involvement. Further or advanced learning, these youth show us, need not be distant from one's community and local needs; its generative potential works most effectively as on-going habits of mind and connections between institutional resources and personal needs. Learning and working that enhance individual merits can generate community benefit and incentive; community initiatives, in turn, enable individuals to remain close to family and neighborhood as resourceful assets.

It is a given at the end of the 1990s that most 16-19 year-olds work during some part of the year, many at fast-food establishments or in low-skill, low-wage jobs with little in the way of cognitive and linguistic demands.¹⁰ Youth-based arts organizations often employ their young members, providing them not just with a job directed by adults, but with work that they have part in envisioning and initiating at the organization. The arts enable young people to develop independence—in thinking, creating, pursuing economic and social goals, and building their futures. Recent reports such as SCANS 2000 (see www.scans.jhu.edu/arts.html) link arts education directly with economic realities, asserting that young people who learn the rigors of planning and production in the arts will be valuable employees in the idea-

driven workplace of the future.¹¹ Furthermore, young people who have worked in the arts know how to strive for excellence and challenge themselves and their arts groups to improve, knowing that an audience or “customer” will be the ultimate judge of their work. Through an array of genres and communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal), young people who have worked in the arts know how to create and perform, perceive and analyze, and understand cultural and historical concepts through an approach that integrates individual parts to a larger whole.

Following young people over the course of our ten years of research reveals that most of the young who have left high school still remain linked to their former youth-based organization in one way or another, while they pursue multilinear paths of further learning. They have, for the most part, not chosen to exit from their communities, but to remain in some cases, to work with other young and to build resources in enterprise development. They tend to attend one or more local institutions of higher education and supplement this work with extra courses through their jobs, churches, neighborhood centers, or unions. Community colleges, technical arts schools, and private business colleges attract these young for specific purposes they develop and pursue. These varied trajectories reveal how working in and through aesthetic projects builds academic involvement which, in turn, connects to avenues of employment.

What does all of this cost?

To read these descriptions of life within highly effective arts organizations that are youth-based has to raise the issue of cost. Next steps with regard to young people come most frequently these days in terms of cost-benefit analyses directed toward solving the

¹⁰ For extensive documentation of such work for young people, see Newman, 1999 and other publications of the Russell Sage Foundation that illustrate the extent to which adolescents need to work to provide what they feel they themselves need and to contribute to their families.

¹¹ Numerous popular books on business-corporate and entrepreneurial-make this point. What is striking are the parallels between the recommendations of these works and the everyday events of effective youth-based organizations. For further comparison on these issues, see Heath, forthcoming.

problems youth present: what will it take to deter criminal activity, stop teen pregnancy, reduce dropouts and truancy? Such analyses can come in multiple ways, and most sound sensationalist and exaggerated to the layperson.

If we attempt to offer a cost-benefit analysis of the arts programs we have studied, we can do so in ways similar to the process by which school districts calculate per-pupil costs. But the truth is that these figures from organization to organization make little sense, because some groups engage young people daily, while others can do so only a few days a week. Some serve a dozen young people, while others work with 60-100. However, that said, the rough figures across all the types of arts groups add up to about \$1000 per individual student per year, if the organization either owns the building or has a heavily subsidized rent and does not have to maintain the building from their budget. For those who pay either mortgages or market-value rent and must maintain the building, costs per student often run closer to \$2000 per individual student.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

A wise young student in an arts program recently observed: in prose you try to tell everything that happened; in poetry you leave out things on purpose so that you can tell the truth.¹³ It has not been possible here—even in prose—to portray all that goes on in the learning that happens through participation in the arts

¹² We reject the types of calculations based on young people as problems or likely criminals. Such projections, especially for youth “at-risk,” assume such young people “go bad.” Therefore it is necessary to look ahead to the total costs of youth services, court costs and related personnel expenditures (probation officers, social workers, etc), imprisonment costs, as well as teen pregnancy figures. Such a tactic leads to wild comparisons, generally in pursuit of convincing taxpayers they will “save” money on “these kids” if they help support designated causes. It is not uncommon for media reports to claim that “problem teenagers” may well be on a path that could cost “the public” \$36,000-\$100,000 annually per youth. These ways of calculating fit into the current societal yearning to blame and to control young people, even when hard statistical facts will not support such claims as “increased youth violence”; for extensive examination of these points, see Males 1996, 1999.

¹³ This nugget of wisdom was passed on to Heath from Arnold April, Executive Director of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education.

within youth organizations; neither is it possible to render in poetry the truth of its fullness.

Community organizations that work effectively with youth successfully fill the “institutional gap” by providing young people with substantial learning and practice opportunities with adult professionals and older youth who serve as teachers and models. Such organizations create ample supplies, instruction, and structured exploration time for young people to know and to develop their talents as producers, spectators, and evaluators in one or more of the arts. This, in turn, enables young artists to develop the motivation, skills, and habits of mind necessary not only to contribute to solo and group projects while holding high standards of achievement for themselves and others, but also to sustain focus through sufficient practice to reach peak levels of proficiency and pride in being a member of a community-building organization.

Effective youth arts organizations build strong pro-civic and pro-social values in young people, enhancing opportunities for youth to reshape the climate of their neighborhoods through local family entertainment, socialization for younger children, public service work, and promotion of the arts in their communities.

With each passing year, American parents have put increasing effort into seeing that athletic team membership, participation in museum programs, and involvement in service learning are liberally reflected on college and employment applications. There is widespread agreement that the values and priorities of young people can be discerned in the ways they have organized their nonschool hours. If we ask employers what matters most in their choice of new employees, they respond “experience” and explain that for students and recent graduates, how they have chosen to spend their discretionary time tells much about what kind of employee they will be.

The ability to collaborate, stick to pursuits, show discipline, be expressive, and sustain challenging team memberships transfers well to the multiple demands of the information-based projects and performances that mark American corporations and small-business

entrepreneurships. The quality of family and civic life and the sustenance of religious organizations depend on individuals' abilities to balance personal freedom and interdependence, listening and responding, obligation and exploration. No one can deny the value of practice and opportunity for cultivating these abilities and the merits of experience in drama, dance, music, and the visual and media arts in community-based organizations.

Such organizations, fashioned and sustained largely by youth and professional artists, should be acknowledged for their ability to expand, complement, and activate the learning provided by schools and families. These groups help fill the institutional gap. Needed most to multiply these organizations is broad recognition of the importance of experience with the roles and risks of the arts for all children, not just those from affluent families with high aspirations for their offspring. Widespread demonstration of successful organizations must also take place, along with professional development opportunities in which adults and older youth examine processes of organizational learning and new avenues of funding nonprofits. Research and evaluation will have to accompany all these moves to help us be wise as we chart the future.

In essence, both facts and imagination should guide us. If they do, it is just possible that what we learn and do will suggest new explanations of ways to achieve full individual and societal competence. The American poet, Wallace Stevens, once remarked "In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination." What goes on through the arts for young people in highly effective learning environments of community organizations is just this kind of actuality. Consciousness is called for.

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