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TOWARD THE PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS WITH ARTISTS

“But, what do you mean by ‘purposeful engagement’?” That question followed me for the years that I was the Education Director for Young Audiences of New Jersey. If it was asked once, it was asked a hundred times a year. The question always came from reviewers who were asked to evaluate our artist programs in schools, and it was prompted by a query on our standard survey form: “Did the students demonstrate purposeful engagement?” When asked to restate the query in a more objective manner, we consistently returned to the original wording. I now wonder if, perhaps, even *we* didn’t know how to define “purposeful engagement.”

Many years later, I have been privileged to serve as the lead researcher in an evaluation of *Sound Learning*, a program that links school classrooms with professional musicians and a university school of music. As the evaluator of this program, I had to look for elements of that “purposeful engagement” that had seemed so elusive earlier in my career. Based on the work of the evaluation’s research team, this article is intended to define components of “purposeful engagement” as they occur within quality arts programs for schoolchildren. Much of this information is drawn from the full evaluation report of *Sound Learning*, submitted in partial fulfillment of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and available upon request from the author at: (*insert email address here.*)

From what our research team has learned through this evaluation, the “purposeful engagement” of students needs to be directly related to authentic experiences in the creation and “doing” of art and music. Simple responses such as answering yes/no questions, clapping along to the beat, or performing the most rudimentary of musical tasks (pressing a string on an instrument or banging aimlessly on a djembe) are not artistically authentic experiences that engage students in meaningful ways. More powerfully authentic are experiences that allow for

student deliberation of artistic choices, opportunities to enact those choices, careful deliberation of the results, and subsequent occasions for the refinement or modification of those choices.

Residency programs that enable students to act as co-artists, then, involve students in the artistic process by largely eliminating the distinctions between artist and student. When these characteristics of purposeful engagement are designed within the context of the residency program, then students, teachers and musicians alike are able to make similarly authentic connections to curricular areas beyond the immediate art form.

The sections that follow begin with a general description of *Sound Learning*, proceed to specific findings of our evaluation process, and conclude with implications for artists who seek to “purposefully engage” students in the process and product of artistry and musicianship.

About the *Sound Learning* Artist Residency Model

Sound Learning is a partnership among the Georgia State University School of Music’s Center for Educational Partnerships in Music (CEPM), the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, professional musicians in the Atlanta area, and schools in metropolitan Atlanta. *Sound Learning* is a curriculum-based music education partnership designed to enrich children’s music learning and advance the role of music in children’s development and interdisciplinary learning. The partnership is centered on research-based principles and best practices in music and arts education, interdisciplinary education, and partnership organization. *Sound Learning* is not an independently imposed curriculum. Rather, *Sound Learning* works organically within each school to enhance and enrich the work that teachers and children are already doing.

Each school participating in the *Sound Learning* partnership receives at least one residency with musicians from the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, other professional musicians, or

university student musicians. Each residency consists of four visits during the course of the school year. Musicians are chosen for their musical excellence and interest in school-based educational outreach. *Sound Learning* does not present assembly-style performances, although some schools present celebratory “concerts” at the conclusion of each year. *Sound Learning* programs take place in individual classrooms so that teachers, students, and musicians can interact and make music collectively. Each day of a musician’s residency typically consists of visits to four or five individual classrooms at the same grade level.

At the beginning of each school year, school teachers who will be working with the *Sound Learning* partnership participate in a professional development day with colleagues from other schools, the musicians who will be in residence, educational personnel from the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the GSU personnel who coordinate activities at each school and various guest presenters. The goal of the professional development day is to provide opportunities for philosophical focus, curricular planning, and program scheduling with all involved parties. Professional development continues through the year at the local level, both formal (follow-up presentations at faculty meetings, meetings with specific teachers working with *Sound Learning* at a certain grade level), and informal (brief meetings between visits to classrooms, extended email discussions, etc.). The model of arts integration employed by *Sound Learning* is one in which both academic and musical content are determined by the teachers and musicians as they work with each class or grade level. Musical and extra-musical academic concepts are addressed in a typical *Sound Learning* partnership.

Children participating in *Sound Learning* activities attend the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s annual concerts designed for young people. Many *Sound Learning* residencies begin the planning sequence with curricular goals related to these concerts and proceed to find

substantive relationships with other academic content. During the period studied for this report (2004 to 2006), seven elementary schools were involved in *Sound Learning* partnerships. Some schools participated with only two or three grade levels, while two schools participated with five grade levels. Musicians were typically partnered with all classes at one grade level in each school; multiple grade levels within a school required multiple musician residencies.

The Evaluation Process

The questions that guided this evaluation were derived from the goals of the *Sound Learning*, chiefly the enhancement of music learning and development through a research-informed collaboration exemplifying educational and artistic excellence. The research team focused on several questions; this article highlights two of them as they relate to the “purposeful engagement” students: 1) Is there evidence of student learning?; and 2) Is there evidence of teacher and/or musician change with regard to pedagogy and/or musicianship?

The major sources of data included portfolios containing student work and teacher reflection journals; videotapes of all classroom visits; interviews with teachers, students, musicians, and administrators; multiple observations of classroom visits; and student scores on standardized tests.

What We Learned about Artist Residency Programs

The findings involving *Sound Learning* were limited to a specific program in a specific place with specific people involved. But, some of the findings may be helpful in defining elements of artist residency programs that are successful in engaging students in substantive, authentically artistic experiences. Our findings centered upon two broad themes as described in

the next sections of this article. First, students must make music and art rather than simply observe others make music and art. Second, the work of the residency artist(s) and students must be related to other elements of the classroom experience – including the active participation of the classroom teacher. We were further able to identify some rather simple ways these two themes could be enacted so that the impact of the artist residency could be maximized and the “purposeful engagement” of students could be realized.

“Making Art” Needs to Be the Core Experience for Students

From this evaluation of *Sound Learning*, it seems that arts residency programs work most effectively when active art making is the core experience in all aspects and with all participants. This was most evident through the children’s music making during the classroom visits of musicians, whether they were actively performing, improvising, composing, or listening to music. Students were less engaged when the visiting musicians made all of the music and students merely observed.

Group singing seemed to be the single most effective musical activity for focusing attention and sustaining student participation levels. Singing appeared to be the one activity where every student in a class could simultaneously participate as musicians. Members of the research team were unable to identify a single instance of off-task student behavior during group singing.

Not surprisingly, then, the students who demonstrated understanding, whether musical or extra-musical, were those who participated in music-making during *Sound Learning* activities. There appears to be a positive relationship between the strength of student learning (as

documented in portfolio documents, teacher reports, and observable behaviors) and the inclusion of arts-making experiences as part of artist residency programs.

The Content of the Artist Residency Must Connect to The Life of the Classroom

Another finding was that, in addition to the art-making experiences of students, the involvement of the adult participants *as artists* was critical to the success of the residency. When *Sound Learning* was most effective at promoting student engagement and learning, the school's music teacher and the classroom teachers were also actively involved in the music making process. We found that those classroom teachers who participated as music-makers during *Sound Learning* visits were the very teachers who found it most easy to relate the musical content to the academic content of their curriculum. In these instances, the curriculum connections were not forced, but emerged naturally and easily. These connections were often made aloud as teachers, musicians and students conversed during the classroom visits. These sessions were not scripted; a script would have halted the spontaneous interchange of ideas and artistry.

Contrary to the fears of many arts educators about the integrity of the arts when curriculum is integrated, our review of teacher/student portfolio documents and classroom observations led us to conclude that artist residency programs appear to be most effective when all adult participants identify the artistic objectives as primary with other academic objectives as secondary. *Sound Learning* is designed as a model of arts integration incorporating both musical and non-musical academic content. When participating in the *Sound Learning* activities we reviewed, students did not appear to make distinctions between music and other academic

content areas. They seemed to view learning as a non-compartmentalized, wholly integrated process.

Where student learning was documented in their portfolios, it was often through essays and constructed response reflection sheets. The teachers in one school created a reflection sheet that prompted students to complete sentences, many beginning with “I wondered,” “I want to know,” “I learned” and “I hope.” Questionnaires that seek this type of information from students can have a profound impact on the content of subsequent visits in a residency. For instance, the following statements indicated that student learning and inquiry had been engendered during the *Sound Learning* visit(s) that had just occurred:

- I wondered whether the slide on the trombone had ever come off. (Mollie)
- I wondered what that wet stuff was coming out of the trombone. (Xavier D.)
- I want to know if CDE is a scale, then why isn't CEG a scale? (Colin M.)
- I learned that it is possible to take something complicated and make it seem simple. (Lexi S.)
- I learned that ABA form could have subsections in each section. (Renee H.)
- When you're in a symphony, how much time do they give you to learn a new song? (Charlotte B.)
- When we go to the symphony I hope we hear music as good as it has been in our classroom. (Kendall L.)
- I learned that dances have a lot of the same sections or subsections so that the dancers don't have to learn too many steps. (Sophia T.)

As an indication of student engagement in the artistic and/or academic work of the residency, some teachers asked their students to contribute free responses in the form of essays,

often addressing the question of what was learned in that day's *Sound Learning* visit. This quote reflects understanding of the concept of "patterns" as presented in preparation for the upcoming child-centered concerts of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra:

Patterns are important in our everyday life. We use them every day. Architects use them to design buildings and floor patterns. Musicians and composers use number and letter patterns to compose music. Professional dancers use them to keep the rhythm and beat when teaching dances. When normal kids like me do math problems we use number patterns to make solving the problems easier.

Patterns can be used in many ways. (Collisha C.)

Students frequently indicated that they connected musical content to other academic content in ways that were easily described:

In *Sound Learning* class we have learned many things. We've learned different beats and patterns and different sounds. We've stepped in *Sound Learning* and played music! In *Sound Learning* we learned how music is also math. We learned that math relates to music because when you're counting beats and patterns it's like your counting numbers. Boys and girls love *Sound Learning* because you can learn and still have fun at the same time. Another thing that we learned is that if you can use your body as an instrument or make your own.

Sound Learning is a fun place where you learn and have fun. (Maya R.)

Student learning could be seen in responses when students correctly employed musical terminology. This example was by a third grader involved in a music composition and recording project:

A lot of things make good music, like the beat, the lyrics, or just the voice make people like the songs. There are all kinds of music – rap, jazz, rb, country or classic. A lot of those genres make good music. As you know a lot of people love music for example me or my sister. You can even make your own music on the computer just listen, create, and record. That’s another thing that makes good music. You can also make a file for music on the computer, then download music on the file. The things I want to have on our music is the beat, lyrics, a good title, and creativity. Those were things about what makes good music. (Victoria)

When students were prompted to write substantive comments related to the content of *Sound Learning*, they contributed information that reflected their engagement, learning and understanding. Likewise, some of the most substantive comments from classroom teachers related how the residency had prompted changes in their teaching:

- I was very uncomfortable at first with incorporating music into my teaching methods. Since I do not have a musical background, I was not quite sure how to help my students create a high-quality musical piece that would demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum. I realized that in order to cultivate my teaching skills I have to continue to grow by experimenting with new teaching techniques and research those techniques in which I am not comfortable. This is something that I tell my students to do on a daily basis that will help them become a better student and yet I was not taking my own advice.
- I witnessed myself growing as a teacher when I found myself experimenting with alternate ways of teaching. I was more proud of myself when a lesson

went well because after teaching for five years I had yet again tried something different. I realized that in order to be an effective teacher I have to keep reinventing my methods in order for all children to be effective learners.

Stepping out of your comfort zone is always challenging, however especially rewarding when you see the successful efforts.

- The SL project has afforded me the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of my students, their talents, idiosyncrasies, how they learn best, and the discovery of natural leaders in my class. The most profound discovery about my students made through this project is how talented they are, and if honed, their behavior problems go away. Through this project I learned that some of my students who I did not think were leaders proved to be dynamic leaders in their groups.
- This process has been just that ... a process. Quality teaching is much the same. It is a process and progress takes time to show. Teaching is also a collaborative effort between students and teachers. Teachers need to allow students the chance to create quality work and think outside the box. They also need to trust that students will produce. Basically, I have found that the relationship between students and teachers should be a partnership. Materials and activities should not be watered down simply because you are working with children. If you raise the bar, they will meet the challenge.

The teachers involved in *Sound Learning* were also asked to include information within their portfolios about how student learning and overall academic engagement was affected by *Sound Learning*. The following quotations are drawn from the comments of these teachers:

- Because of our work relating music to the human body, my students did extremely well on body system-related questions of the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, but also mastered the way in which music is created and produced.
- I believe that SL has benefited the third grade students tremendously this year. Through their journal responses, it is clear that the students were excited about creating digital music. There was a clear plan of action from the beginning of the year, which garnered enthusiasm for the project. The students and the teachers were able to see the progress that was being made with each step of the project and the excitement carried through from start to finish.
- Students typically do their best writing when they write about personal experiences. It is clear through their journal responses that the children felt ownership for this project. Often, teachers find that encouraging students to engage in journal writing is difficult. Our students, however, used descriptive language and clear details to describe the process of making digital music. Because this was a personal experience for them, the students were able to pour their feelings into their writing.
- It has been noted that our students are using more rhymes in their writing. We started the project with lessons on rhyme schemes, and the students have had opportunities to write poems that follow different patterns.

The Big Impact of Small Elements

In order to elicit the types of engagement and learning evidenced in *Sound Learning*, the visiting musicians exhibited positive changes in their pedagogical practices as the residencies progressed. Specifically, elements that facilitated student engagement included:

- the invitation for students to become co-musicians during the classroom visits;
- the musicians' voluntary verbal and physical interaction (proximity) with students;
- a limited number of musical concepts explained and experienced in multiple ways;
- verbal feedback that was evaluative (specific and content-filled) rather than judgmental (good or bad);
- instructional language that was centered on what students could do rather than what the visiting musicians could do;
- age-appropriate humor, poems, and stories integrated within the lesson;
- interesting musical material (fast tempos, familiar melodies, exciting rhythmic elements, dynamic contrasts);
- the repetition of specific musical examples within single lessons or across multiple classroom visits; but, the repetition was only successful when musicians explained the rationale for why the repetition was occurring and what students were to notice during the subsequent hearing.

The observed activities of the visiting musicians resulted in particularly interesting data. In the lessons our research team determined to be exemplary, the visiting musicians constructed musically- and academically-authentic student-centered activities directly related to student knowledge and skills. Exemplary lessons were notably characterized by a *lack* of lecture and brief musical excerpts and a *preponderance* of activities that promoted depth of student

understanding. Student understanding was promoted through listening to sustained musical performance and responding to instructional techniques that were customized for each particular group of students. Feedback to students was noteworthy during these exemplary lessons. In these instances, visiting musicians provided specific feedback to students rather than simple non-evaluative statements such as “good job!,” “yes,” or “thank you.” Verbal feedback that appeared to engage students was content-specific and promoted further conversation.

Our observations also indicated that artist residency programs are most effective when the arts teachers in schools are involved in the planning of the residency, even though their schedules may not often permit attendance. Music teachers in the most successful *Sound Learning* residencies became recognized as leaders in their own school, viewed the residency program as a support to the ongoing music education program of the school, and became primary supporters of *Sound Learning* within their schools. We found that the support of the school music teacher was more critical to the level of student engagement and achievement of musical/artistic goals than the support of either the school principal or the classroom teachers.

Implications for the Practice of Artists in Residence

At present, the *Sound Learning* program involves the resources, efforts, musicianship, and pedagogical skills of a large number of people in addition to the students it serves. The strength of *Sound Learning* is that it is not a “program” at all. Rather, *Sound Learning* is better described as a set of philosophical tenets that guide the process by which students come to make music. Were *Sound Learning* a more traditional program, the focus would be on pedagogical processes and musical outcomes. Yes, *Sound Learning* is about both process and product, but those are malleable components to be uniquely defined by the time, place, and people involved

in each of *Sound Learning's* many forms. What does not change is the philosophy – the belief that children come to understand music when authentically engaged with music. In the case of *Sound Learning*, engagement is enabled through the pairing of expert musicians with children. *Sound Learning* seeks to provide supports for this process by ensuring that teachers are intimately involved as the musical and other conceptual content begins to take shape.

And, so, the “purposeful engagement” of students with artists that once seemed so elusive may not be quite so difficult to identify. When viewed collectively, our findings point toward a simple element of effective collaborations . . . the equal involvement of all participants within the collaboration. Allowing students to make art while involving teachers and in the artistic process helps ensure that the residency program has an impact long after the final visit has concluded. When purposefully engaged in the processes of making music and art, students become agents in their own creativity, artistry, and learning. This becomes possible when artists, teachers and students work collaboratively to create conditions wherein students can function as artists, think as artists, solve problems as artists, and perform as artists.

As described in the opening of this article, it was difficult to answer the question “Did the students demonstrate purposeful engagement?” Why? We were asking the wrong question. In the case of artist residency programs, “engagement” is not something students or artists can achieve alone. Engagement is an outcome of the collaborative process when students work *with artists, as artists*.