



AUDIENCE & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2018

THE PARADIGM SHIFTING POWER OF AUDIENCE BUILDING/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We are often told how important it is to adopt a new perspective when trying to address chronic challenges or identify unexplored opportunities. But shifting our perspective in a meaningful way is not easy. For that reason, it is exciting that the focus on audience building and community engagement in the arts has generated shifts in perspective that may usher in new ways of thinking about and addressing persistent sector issues including relevance, sustainability and diversity.

By studying the initiatives undertaken by numerous performing arts organizations in the areas of audience building/community engagement, we observed some consistent perspective shifts as organizations, artists and communities embraced what were often new approaches to the work.

SHIFT TO SYSTEMIC THINKING

It has become clear that this work is best served by long-term, whole organization commitment and ongoing integration of engagement practices into organizational goals and strategies. Work happening in one department or around one performance does not demonstrate the same kind of impact that initiatives involving whole organizations, ongoing partnerships and a commitment to relationships over time are able to achieve.

We saw that what often start as marketing, education or outreach initiatives evolve into more fundamental commitments to mission and expressions of the artist or institution's relevance in the community. Innovation Labs

participants, for example, were encouraged in establishing their change initiatives to explore the *'value proposition of the organization to its community'*.

Through this work, organizations begin to see themselves as part of larger systems within their communities – not just as part of a local arts community but also as key providers of community spaces, facilitators of creativity and conveners of conversations. The work becomes much more systemic as artists and organizations start to work across sectors and disciplines, as parts of larger social and cultural systems.

SHIFT FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO RELATIONAL

While several programs and projects began with a premise of increasing audience size and related earned revenue, undertaking the work itself quickly moved the intention from one of creating market demand to one of building sustained and significant relationships. As one forum participant stated, 'the future is networks not organizations'.

SHIFT FROM PERFORMANCE TO PROCESS

It is generally understood that a basic premise of the performing arts is connecting audiences/community members with the outputs of artists' creative processes (ie dance, music, theatre and other performances). Through engagement initiatives this connection extends from a focus solely on performance to a broader engagement in which artists and arts organizations act as conduits for audiences/community members to understand and access artistic processes and experiences, both as observers and as participants.

SHIFT FROM SCARCITY TO ABUNDANCE

The initial focus of much of this work was connected to the supply & demand equation and embedded in a scarcity mindset. Through that lens, arts providers were trying to reconcile the perspective that the supply of performing arts exceeded the demand for it and that opportunities were scarce. Uncovering the interest within their communities and connecting with new sectors and new partners opened doors to a broader perspective, new resources and opportunities that gave way to an abundance mindset in which the full range of work can find support through a network of resources and opportunities.

SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY

As organizations have become more deeply committed to authentic engagement, the way that they think about and define community has changed. Community is neither static nor discrete. Artists and organizations doing work with communities move away from thinking solely about audience and market segments and toward thinking about evolving and overlapping networks in which the organizations and the artists themselves are often an integrated part. Rather than a hub and spoke model with the arts organization at the center reaching out to a series of discrete 'communities', we imagine a complex of inter-related networks within which arts organizations potentially act as a connector or meeting point.

The understanding of community is also linked to considerations of diversity, equity and inclusion. An organization or artist cannot effectively engage a community without investing in knowing, understanding and respecting

the communities within which it seeks to connect. Those who are most successful are often those who exhibit cultural humility, acknowledging what they do not know and approaching the work with curiosity. Being able to articulate, define, and examine assumptions helps organizations to come to a more authentic connection to community.

RATHER THAN A HUB AND SPOKE MODEL WITH THE ARTS ORGANIZATION AT THE CENTER REACHING OUT TO A SERIES OF DISCRETE 'COMMUNITIES', WE IMAGINE A COMPLEX OF INTER-RELATED NETWORKS WITHIN WHICH ARTS ORGANIZATIONS POTENTIALLY ACT AS A CONNECTOR OR MEETING POINT.

SHIFT FROM TELLING TO LISTENING

Arts organizations have traditionally been the gatekeepers of cultural and creative expression, controlling the narrative and nature of the programming in and for their communities. The reason that these communities often feel excluded from the programming is because they are. Even when the stories of others are included in the programming, there has often been an imbalance of power in which the organization takes ownership of their voice in the process of presenting it. Organizations and artists involved in authentic engagement recognize this and shift from controlling or owning the narrative to enabling and sharing the stories of the community.

Related to this shift from telling to listening is a similar shift from expecting community members to come to arts spaces for arts experiences to recognizing that arts programming must extend into community and public spaces where community members can encounter it and adapt it to their own needs and interests. This does not negate the value of arts spaces in our communities – they should be inviting and welcoming and should serve as places where people can engage with art, with each other and with stories, issues and ideas that are meaningful.

It is important to note that while audience building/community engagement practices have effected considerable paradigm shifts for many artists, arts leaders and arts organizations, there are those who have been committed to this work, have established relationships with their communities and have understood and worked with the ‘new’ perspectives mentioned here for many years already. These organizations, often smaller in budget size and rooted in communities of color, LGBTQ communities or communities of individuals with disabilities, are not always valued for their specific expertise and have had little access to resources for the work. There is naturally a tension between these community-engaged and under-resourced organizations and the better-resourced established arts and cultural organizations who lack community engagement expertise but often are awarded funding to do the very work that community-based and connected organizations are already doing.

PROJECT PROFILE



Photo Credit: @tonyhitchcock

QUESTIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

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- What is an artist/arts organization’s relevance to and value in our communities?
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- How do we strengthen and develop the lives of those in our community?
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- What do we have in abundance? How can we share, use and renew our collective resources?
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- Can we move away from being organizationally-focused and measuring value by budget size to being network-focused and measuring value by relationships and relevance?
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- How do we honor & support work that community connected organizations have been doing for years while also encouraging a broader paradigm shift in the sector?

Holly Bass|360 – Race: Talc & Ash Tailgate Party

Choreographer Holly Bass uses the ritual and culture of sporting events to generate a sense of familiarity, create excitement and lower the barriers of engagement for an audience unfamiliar with modern dance. The performance of *Race: Talc & Ash*, a movement duet piece about gentrification, race and class in Washington, DC, is preceded by a tailgate party and features super fans and live commentators to engage the audience in the performance.

Check out *Race: Talc & Ash Tailgate Party* in Dance/USA's [Audience Engagement Cookbook](#)

Learn more about Holly Bass|360 at the company's website [\(↗\)](#)

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has worked with five re-granting partners to support the exploration and implementation of new ideas in audience building and community engagement. Since 2001, the foundation has supported almost 60 rounds of funding in nine different funding programs. These programs, in addition to the foundation’s own *Building Demand for the Arts*, include Dance/USA’s *Engaging Dance Audiences*, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters’ *Creative Campus* and later *Building Bridges*, National Performance Network’s *Performance Residency Fund* (now *Artistic Engagement Fund*) and *Community Fund*, Theatre Communication Group’s *Future Audiences* and later *Audience (R)Evolution* and EmcArts’ *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*.

Through these programs, more than 300 projects have been supported involving more than 220 performing arts presenters, producers, universities and service organizations in thirty-five states and DC. The total financial investment in this work exceeds \$42 Million.

This series of articles shares the learning from this body of work and recognizes the considerable contributions of the foundation’s grantmaking partners and the commitment and creativity of the artists and organizations who have continued to advance audience building and community engagement through initiatives undertaken with the support of these granting programs.