

Why Teaching Artists?

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Teaching artists can support a wide range of positive outcomes for youth. They span professional worlds, expose youth to real disciplinary practices, and can build the capacity of educators they partner with. In this resource, we explore the role of the teaching artist.

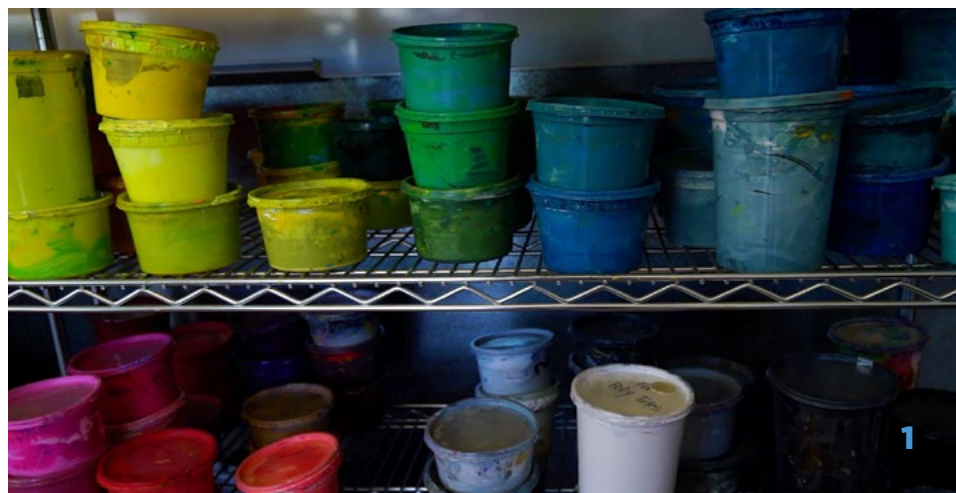
What's the Issue?

Youth-serving community arts organizations work to provide ambitious programs for youth that are fundamentally arts-based. And in providing these experiences, often these organizations rely on teaching artists to support the design and facilitation of these programs. This is an intentional move when they could also select arts educators for this role. This choice presents challenges and opportunities for these organizations as well as for the teaching artists.

While different organizations may define a teaching artist in different ways, in general, we might define the role in this way, "A teaching artist is a practicing professional artist with the complementary skills, curiosities and sensibilities of an educator, who can effectively engage a wide range of people in learning experiences in, through, and about the arts." (Booth, 2010, p. 2). In this way, a teaching artist might be considered first for their arts background and practice.

In this resource, we explore the role of teaching artists and why youth organizations may wish to utilize teaching artists. In particular, we will highlight the fact that teaching artists provide connections to social networks and communities of artists that can

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support youth participation in pathways. In addition, teaching artists provide specific expertise in art, media and craft. Finally, teaching artists can help inform and contribute to new programs by using their own projects and practice to create ways to authentically engage youth.



What Does it Look Like?

In choosing to work with teaching artists, we can learn from the rationale of youth organizations. Here, we provide two brief examples from the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT), and DreamYard. Located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, WMCAT is a youth organization that aims to create social and economic progress in people's lives and community through visual arts and tech engagement, workforce development and social enterprises. DreamYard is youth organization in the Bronx, New York that builds opportunity and pathways for teens and families through the arts. Both organizations prioritize teaching artists to carry out the educational work of the organization for slightly different reasons.

What it Looks Like at WMCAT

One reason that WMCAT leverages teaching artists for their programmatic work is that the teaching artists give their programs added credibility. Having youth work with a teaching artist communicates to them that they will be working with someone who has a deep knowledge of a particular artistic medium. For example, with a mural project that WMCAT was initiating, the project class was facilitated by a local artist who was fairly well-known in Grand Rapids. This mural project was under the stewardship of this local artist and WMCAT feels that this is a strength for the program because his involvement sells the professional quality of the program. It not only makes sense to have a mural project run by a muralist, but run by one who is well respected for his mural work in the community.

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For WMCAT, selecting teaching artists instead of general arts educators, is an intentional move beyond what it conveys with respect to the quality of a program. Teaching artists bring with them their own body of work and their own professional practice of being an artist. WMCAT supports these artists to share their world with the youth so they not only understand the craft of a particular kind of art making, but also the ways in which that art making encompass one's professional world.

And this professional world helps new programs develop since they can be developed around a teaching artists' work. For instance, a photography program can be richly

facilitated when there is a photographer as the teaching artist. The teaching artists' professional world also enables them to connect the work in the program with partners in the community. Whether this is a non-profit in the community, like a cat shelter, or a workplace that the teaching artist is connected with, the professional world of the teaching artist becomes a big part of the educational domain.

What it Looks Like at DreamYard

DreamYard relies on teaching artists because of what they can directly offer students as well as how they can be conduits for partnerships. One fundamental way that DreamYard utilizes teaching artists to both run programs as well as partner with teachers in partner schools. For example, in the Art Center that DreamYard manages and maintains, a teaching artist can run an educational program in their medium either alone or with a high school aged intern. This may also convey quality and credibility similar to what WMCAT mentioned, in that a practicing artist is the one facilitating the program.

In addition, teaching artists can be key for partnerships. For example, teaching artists work with some of DreamYard's partner schools. In this case, a teaching artist can work collaboratively with a classroom teacher. The teaching artist can co-plan a lesson or lesson sequence as well as co-teach the class with the teacher. In the spirit of arts integration, DreamYard is leveraging the arts expertise of the teaching artist and the educational expertise of the teacher to come together for an integrated learning experience. In doing so, both teaching artist and teacher are co-learning about their own educational practice.

It is worth mentioning that DreamYard takes seriously the professional development and supports that they provide for their teaching artists. While they try to hire teaching artists that have some background in education, they also intentionally try to find out where they can build capacity in their teaching artists. In general, DreamYard has staff people that oversee the teaching artists and provide professional learning supports for them. These are directors in separate art forms as well as a Director of Digital Learning that can provide this support. For the teaching artists that work in the schools, the intentional partnering with teachers provides them with ongoing learning experiences. In addition, the teaching artists take advantage of professional development that is provided for both them and the teachers, for instance, around restorative justice. And finally, the DreamYard team connects the teaching artists with the building guidance counselors so that if some issues emerge with the students in the classroom, the teaching artist has an additional resource to go to in order to find productive ways to support the students.

Guiding Questions

As you consider the potential place of teaching artists in your organization, you can ask yourself:

- What other organizations use teaching artists in my community?
- How can teaching artists further our organization's goals?
- What professional development needs might teaching artists have in our community?
- What motivations do teaching artists have in our community to continue their work?
- What are the arts domains we focus on (or wish to focus on) which could be supported by teaching artists?

What Does it Lead to?

There several benefits that can accrue based on utilizing teaching artists in youth organizations.

- **Youth access to diverse networks.** First, the aforementioned goals of utilizing teaching artists can support youth participation in pathways for deepening learning and interests (see the our brief on [educator capacity to support youth pathways](#)). By acknowledging the professional worlds that teaching artists bring with them to a youth organization, there are opportunities to model and connect youth participants to people and practices consequential to the work of an artist in the community.
- **Authentic arts-based learning.** By acknowledging the expertise and professional practice of artists, programs can gain recognition for providing authentic arts-based learning experiences. Like other content areas and disciplines, a deep knowledge of an artistic practice can help teaching artists support deeper learning and engagement for the youth participants. This is particularly important when we consider the learning trajectories of our youth and how they begin to see themselves as someone who can competently engage in an artistic practice.
- **Multidisciplinary learning.** Teaching artists have been noted to be critical to the success of some models of inter-disciplinary learning within schools (Burnaford et al., 2007). As some teaching artists act as service providers for schools, their artistic perspective can be crucial in furthering the integration of art with other content area learning experiences. This is especially important as youth organizations consider ways to partner with schools. Teaching artists can be a bridge between the learning that is valued within the school and the learning that is valued in the community arts organization.

Tensions and Challenges

While this resource has acknowledged strengths in relying on teaching artists in youth organizations, there are some tensions and challenges to make clear. First, teaching artists often lack the necessary educational experience to design and facilitate educational programs effectively when they are hired. As mentioned in the DreamYard example, teaching artists may need additional support, whether it is to carry out a program, teach a class or work collaboratively with a teacher. Because of this, youth organizations may need to invest in professional development for their teaching artists, whether that is an internal program of professional learning or an external program. A related challenge to this is the fact that it is difficult to find specific professional development for teaching artists in many of our communities.

In addition, another tension is that when teaching artists serve as direct service providers to schools, they may induce anxiety from teachers who may feel that teaching artists are an inexpensive way of replacing in-school arts programs and teacher, or that a teaching artist will deliver a particular program that is not supportive of other work happening in the school and then disappear (Booth, 2010). While this

challenge can be mitigated over time through the trust and relationships that are established through partnerships, it can certainly be a consideration in the beginning of a partnership.

In some cases, it is not easy to find willing teaching artists. WMCAT noted that in a city that is the size of Grand Rapids, there is not as much 'teaching artistry' as the bigger cities. They noted that they need to reach out to the local school of art and design in order to attract more teaching artists.

Related to finding teaching artists, one other challenge is the nature of scheduling that comes with teaching artists. By this, we mean that the work of teaching artists is often part-time and during the afterschool time. The extent to which a youth organization can find teaching artists who are willing and able to work consistently during those times can also be a challenge. When teaching artists are not able to have somewhat consistent relationships with an organization, this impacts their ability to develop deeper connections with youth and be effective mentors. Ideally, organizations can find ways to have more consistent and ongoing relationships to the teaching artists that are involved in their youth programs.