

Democracy's  
EDUCATION  
PUBLIC WORK,  
CITIZENSHIP, &  
THE FUTURE *of*  
COLLEGES AND  
UNIVERSITIES

EDITED BY HARRY C. BOYTE

# Chapter 13

## Becoming a Civic Artist

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It was one of those classes that always had a long waiting list – in this case, a class packed with theater students who, for one reason or another, had given up on their dream of starring on Broadway. Here, students didn't have to hide their cultural identities, their feelings for their home communities, or their concerns about social justice. There was hope in this classroom, but also an undercurrent of shame about leaving the professional performing arts' dominant paradigm. This feeling was compounded by stress about student loans and the notoriously high unemployment rate among artists. Here's a skit we improvised:

*Prospective Arts Student:* Excuse me, are you an artist?

*Graduate 1:* I use the arts in the public school classes I teach helping middle school students learn to express themselves and understand the material from their other subjects in new ways. No, I'm not an artist.

*Prospective Arts Student:* Are you an artist?

*Graduate 2:* I use art to facilitate community dialogues, with the goal of encouraging civic participation and changing local policy. No, I'm not an artist.

*Prospective Arts Student:* Are you an artist?

*Graduate 3:* No, I use the arts to help people with spinal cord injuries find the will to go on. I'm not an artist.

*Prospective Arts Student:* What about you – are you an artist?

*Graduate 4:* Yes, I am! I have a Bachelor's of Fine Arts, and now I'm temping by day and bartending by night – waiting for my big break on Broadway or in Hollywood!! I'm an artist!

If livelihoods weren't enough for arts students to worry about, many are feeling the tremors of escalating social problems just beyond their hermetic training studios. These include stark income disparity, environmental degradation, mass incarceration (a nation inside), and immigration issues – for starters. Hope for a reasonable collective future for my generation depends on beginning to solve such problems, and a democratic approach to the arts has the potential to help us do that. Unfortunately, in traditional arts training programs across the country, there are typically no courses about the history of democratic arts or about the possibilities of the citizen artist; about the relationship of culture, power, and public policy; or about the ethical responsibilities of the nonprofit sector in a free-market economy.

The premise of this essay is that art, a devised expression of culture, is fundamental to individuals and communities becoming civic actors. Harry Boyte's essay argues that higher education has significant power to shape the civic identities and career plans of students. As it describes and analyzes a model curriculum for developing citizen artists, my essay explores the opportunities and obstacles for students in arts training programs to embrace a broader conception of what an artist is and the role artists can play in advancing the ideals of democracy.

### **A Curricular Model: The Appalshop Immersion**

One of the country's flagship community-based arts organizations is Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Started in 1969 as part Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the Office of Economic Opportunity seeded job-training programs in film for young people in a dozen communities with high rates of poverty. When the program was discontinued less than two years later, the young people at Appalshop, excited about the possibilities of telling the region's stories in the voices of the people who lived there, found the means to continue the work. They responded to the social and economic injustices around them through a full range of artistic forms, including the creation of scores of community-centered plays, the production of more than 200 documentary films, the creation of hundreds of community-initiated radio documentaries and music recordings, and the founding of leadership programs to stimulate citizen participation in social reform and policy change. Appalshop's full and part-time staff of 30, most of whom have multi-generational roots in the Appalachian region, see themselves as citizen artists.

In 2005, Artistic Director of Appalshop's Roadside Theater Dudley Cocke and New York University Professor Jan Cohen-Cruz developed a weeklong immersion in the theory and practice of community-based arts for the Scholars Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Taking place at Appalshop during New York University's spring break, the program was structured as an exchange between the Appalshop artists and Tisch students, faculty, and staff from departments including drama, musical theater, film, photography and imaging, and dramatic writing.

As part of the extensive preparation for the immersion, the Tisch contingent formulated inquiry questions for their hosts: "What is it like to be part of an intimate, creative environment so far from the mainstream of urban artistic activity? Can community-based work become too insular? How do people see Appalshop's place in the national arts community?"<sup>1</sup>

To answer these and many other questions, students, staff, and faculty engaged in an array of experiences: an intense 24-hour production period in collaboration with Appalshop artists and their community partners making an original play, short film, set of photographs, music recording, or radio documentary; touring coal mining operations and learning about the history of the tightly-packed coal camps where the miners lived; discussing Appalshop's documentary films with their makers; listening to and talking with Old Time musicians; appearing on Appalshop's 24/7 radio station that streams live on the internet and broadcasts to parts of five states; discussing the community arts field's history and national policy environment; eating

soup beans and cornbread; and square dancing with local people – young, old, and in-between – at the Cowan Creek Community Center. It was an exhausting and exhilarating week.

Daily story circles were the glue that held all the activity together. They were facilitated using a particular methodology that Roadside Theater has developed for creating new plays and holding community dialogues. The concept of a story circle is inspired by traditional Appalachian and Scotch-Irish storytelling, as well as practices used in community organizing and popular education, both of which were prominent in the U.S. civil rights movement to which Appalshop owes a debt for its start. Roadside Theater's methodology has strict guidelines meant to give equal value to each individual's personal story and to deepen the collective story of the circle.

The Appalshop Immersion exposed students, faculty, and staff to principles for effective community work: those with the most direct experience of a problem must lead the design and implementation of the solution; the necessity of constant attention to including all parts of the community; that sustainability depends on a transparent and iterative critical discourse to build and sharpen each participant and the group. It was emphasized that these principles rested on the fundamental concept of cultural equity: that all people everywhere have the right to inherit and develop their intellectual, emotional, material, and spiritual traditions. We all learned that The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27, Section 1) affirms this principle: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."<sup>2</sup> It was our pledge of allegiance.

The most powerful aspect of the immersion for students was their experience of how community-based art reinforces their own cultural identity, something the Tisch training program was intent on stripping them of so they could be marketable in the mass popular culture. As one student confessed to all of us, "I put this pressure on myself when I'm at school to reject my community and my home. When I have the chance to write about it, I think, oh, it's not good enough for this class."<sup>3</sup> Another student elaborated: "Everyone thinks identity is an individual thing, and if you're not blazing your own path, tearing down traditions and creating something new, then it's not worthwhile. Even people who have influences try to like, claim it as their own. It's this shameful thing to be a part of something, especially at Tisch. It's nice to see artists who are just naturally following in the tradition and in others' footsteps."<sup>4</sup>

During the Immersion, Tisch students, who are typically pitted against each other vying for limited parts in main stage productions or a few slots in a talent agent showcase, rejoiced in having their peers as collaborators instead of competitors. Hierarchies dissolved as students, staff, and faculty worked together on equal footing. As one Tisch staff member admitted in the closing reflection circle: "It's been an amazing surprise to work with each of you students in story circles and projects, and just being in the van together. I have so much respect for all of you, and I'm going to take that back with me."<sup>5</sup>

The program was mutually beneficial for Appalshop participants. In addition to financially compensating the practitioners for their teaching, the exchange proved invigorating – as one

Appalshop founder shared: “When you’re hosting visitors, you see your community through their eyes, and, for me, that was part of what happened this week. In an organization we can take each other and our work for granted, and this was a way to reconnect.”<sup>6</sup>

The weeklong Appalshop Immersion modeled a balance of three elements important to becoming a citizen artist: community engagement; training in both aesthetics and community organizing; and scholarship about the history, animating ideas, and policy and economic environments of the community-based arts field. This triangulation for an exemplar curriculum was endorsed by Imagining America’s 2008 national research study, “The Curriculum Project: Culture and Community Development in Higher Education.” The study was based on 28 in-depth interviews and 231 online survey responses. It valorized the hands-on community engagement that the Immersion represented, noting “that there is no substitute for placing one’s body, mind, and spirit in the crucible of community work.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Becoming a Citizen Artist: Obstacles and Opportunities**

A narrow conception of what it means to be an artist dominates the culture of arts departments, where many faculty are trained to believe in the imperative of individual genius, and therefore have little interest in the citizen artist’s high regard for amateur expression – for what folklorist Alan Lomax called the inherent genius of every cultural community.<sup>8</sup> In Harry Boyte’s phrase, such arts departments need to transition from the cult of the expert to a community of experts. This pronounced bias for the individual expert reinforces major inequities in the professional arts industry, where the majority of arts funding goes to institutions focusing on the elite Western European canon and serving audiences that are predominantly white and wealthy.<sup>9</sup>

While each year’s Appalshop Immersion had a profound impact on the visiting students, staff, and faculty, it had no effect on the structure of New York University. For Tisch School of the Arts, the program was regarded as extracurricular, offered no credits for students, and was only financially possible because of investments by the Scholars Program and a private foundation interested in the intersection of art and social justice.

As the opening skit playfully illustrated, the prospect for finding work as a citizen artist is better than the prospect for those in the professional arts industry; however, the talent and training of citizen artists is still woefully under-deployed. As Goldbard noted in the Curriculum Project report: “In other regions of the world, public entities are the major sponsors of community cultural development work: throughout Europe, for instance, municipalities and neighborhoods employ community arts officers whose task it is to plan and coordinate program offerings for that area. In the developing world, educational and aid agencies employ community artists to engage people in envisioning and directing local community development efforts, or to take part in public campaigns such as health promotion.”<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the grassroots arts and humanities field itself is in a deep crisis. As Dudley Cocke documents in his 2011 essay, “The Unreported Arts Recession of 1997,” community-based arts

and public humanities institutions of any significant scale are in danger of becoming extinct.<sup>11</sup> The Immersion and The Curriculum Project study confirmed that such organizations are critical to advancing higher education's capacity to train a generation of citizen artists. This issue is a major concern for the organization where I work, *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, a national consortium of more than 100 colleges working at the nexus of publicly engaged scholarship and the arts, humanities, and design.

Harry Boyte emphatically states in his essay, "Today, across the political spectrum, Americans feel powerless to navigate the changes and challenges of our time, from climate change to school reform, from immigration to joblessness and growing poverty." Community-based arts and the public humanities offer a store of resources to empower individuals and communities to be agents of change. Transforming the paradigm of professional arts training programs to prepare citizen artists is an exciting direction for reinventing citizenship as public work.

### **Bio**

Jamie Haft is assistant director of *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, where she is organizing its Presidents' Council and creating programs that bridge higher education and grassroots arts and cultural organizations. She recently conceptualized and produced a documentary web series on student activism, and published in the peer-reviewed journal *Public* and in a national collection of trend papers commissioned by Americans for the Arts. Haft received a M.S. from Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and a B.F.A. from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

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<sup>1</sup> Questions from NYU students participating in the March 2006 Appalshop Immersion, provided by Appalshop to the author.

<sup>2</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accessed November 27, 2013 at

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr>.

<sup>3</sup> Quotes from the March 2006 Appalshop Immersion with NYU, transcribed by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Arlene Goldbard, "The Curriculum Project Report: Culture and Community Development in Higher Education (*Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, 2008), p. 18, accessed December 2, 2013 at <http://imaginingamerica.org/fg-item/the-curriculum-project-report-culture-and-community-development-in-higher-education/?parent=442>.

<sup>8</sup> See Alan Lomax, "An Appeal for Cultural Equity" (1972), accessed December 5, 2013 at

[http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/ce\\_ace\\_appeal.php](http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/ce_ace_appeal.php).

<sup>9</sup> Holly Sidford, "Fusing Arts, Culture, and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy" (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2011), p.1, accessed November 27, 2013 at [http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing\\_Arts\\_Culture\\_Social\\_Change.pdf](http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing_Arts_Culture_Social_Change.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 7, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Dudley Cocke, "The Unreported Arts Recession of 1997" in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2011), and accessed November 27, 2013 at <http://roadside.org/asset/unreported-arts-recession-1997>.

# About the Book

**Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities** is about reinventing citizenship as public work.

**From the Editor's Introduction:**

“The fate of higher education and the larger democracy itself is inextricably tied to the way those of us in higher education understand citizenship, practice civic education, and convey our purposes to the larger society. If we are to navigate successfully the tsunami of changes sweeping over the institutions and society and to claim our own story rather than having it defined by vested interests with more narrow ends in mind, we will have to revisit conventional ideas of citizenship and liberal education. We need to move beyond narrow views of citizenship as voting and voluntarism, and reinvent citizenship as *public work*, work that explicitly and intentionally prepares our students (and ourselves) to be builders of the democracy, not simply helpers, voters, analysts, informers, or critics of democracy.

This means putting *education for work with public qualities* at the center of teaching, learning, and research, for the sake of ourselves as educators, for our students, and for the democracy.”