

A New Framework for Understanding the Teaching Artist Field

Eric Booth, February 2015

Like some uncontainable amoeboid mass, the field of teaching artistry is hard to describe. That doesn't mean we haven't tried. We have come steadily closer to a definition which helps to describe the field. Here is my latest definition, which clay has had so many hands pushing and pulling it a little here and there over two decades, and most everyone nowadays is willing to accept this version as good enough—not perfect but not troubling either, so let's start here.

The Definition

A teaching artist is a practicing artist who develops the skills, curiosities, and habits of mind of an educator, in order to achieve a wide variety of learning goals in, through, and about the arts, with a wide variety of learners.

The Term

Given that less-than-catchy but not-objectionable banner, let's look next at the term itself. Thirty-six years ago when I began as a teaching artist, there were many terms used for artists who worked as educators. Those terms attracted the iron filings of programs and practitioners to their names: artists-in-residence, community artists, artist practitioners, artist-teachers, citizen artists and more. Those terms made the field seem more separate than it actually was, since the same individuals slipped between titles and did the same work while wearing different hats. In the U.S. there is now general acceptance of the term "teaching artist" as the main one for the field. There are others in use, but few people are offended anymore when the term teaching artist is used to describe them.

In the growing *worldwide* teaching artist field the semantic issue is more extreme, but there seems to be a truce that allows everyone to use any term they like, and "teaching artist" is slowly gaining familiarity around the world. The first and second International Teaching Artist Conferences have gathering delegates from some 28 countries that use different terms. So, it is a "good enough" term to quiet the opposition that needlessly arose around semantics for so many years, and kept the field weaker than it really is. I will rarely engage in a semantic fight anymore; there is no gain for anyone.

New Framework

And now we get to a new framework for the field. This field has been hard to define, although some have tried to create frameworks by employer type, by location of work and by type of project. While these made some sense, they didn't really help anything, because they didn't illuminate much about the work. Who cares that some TA work happens in schools, some in arts buildings, and some in community settings? There is such a jumble of different kinds of work that unfold in each setting that the geography doesn't tell us much.

In the last four years, I have been proposing a new framework for understanding what teaching artists do. It has found a lot of agreement, which is startling for

someone who is used to protracted debates about our field. It has also proven useful to many, as a way to refine teaching artist training, to help TAs themselves advance their careers, to help illuminate inchoate partnerships that have never been tapped, and to clarify for those outside our field how widespread, effective, and relied upon teaching artists are. This purpose thread framework is used to structure the national/international training institutes at Lincoln Center Education.

I find that the most helpful framework for understanding the current field is to look at the different *purposes* for which teaching artists are employed. When I asked myself what were the primary purpose of TA work, I found six, plus one additional one that is a little different but helpful to name. I call them *purpose threads*.

Before I introduce them, let me make clear that the purposes are never entirely discrete in practice; they naturally overlap. In each purpose thread, a working TA prioritizes one goal, but we know that others will be incidentally (and valuably) accomplished. For example, in engaging people artistically to make a community more livable (the thread called Community Quality of Life), a teaching artist is very likely to create artworks. So, a work of art is involved (quite possibly in all threads), but the main priority that guides her/his decision making is about community life.

The value of thinking about purpose threads is that they prompt the questions: “What is *most important* for me to aim for this work?” and “What would I want to have assessed about the impact of this work?” This guiding focus helps us be most effective in achieving our goals, in the proliferation of teaching artistry practice. Distinguishing the variety of ways in which teaching artists are valuable is a more accurate representation of the way teaching artistry is growing in the world.

The Six (plus one) Purpose Threads of the Teaching Artist Field

<u>Name of thread</u>	<u>Primary purpose of the work</u>
Work of art.	To enhance the encounter with art works.
Art skills development.	To deepen the development of art-making skills.
Arts integration.	To catalyze the learning of non-arts content.
Community quality of life.	To increase the livability of communities.
Social/personal development.	To develop personal or social capacities.
Other instrumental goals.	To achieve non-arts goals important to institutions.
+ Digital.	To activate personal artistry in digital media.

Here is a brief discussion of each thread, with examples of programs that use TAs to achieve that goal.

Work of art. This is the goal of “outreach” in many arts organizations: to introduce, excite, interest people in their art offerings. TAs accomplish this goal in many ways, in many settings. It is the central work of Lincoln Center Education (where the term

“teaching artist” was born), and it has been the mainstay of Young Audiences, the largest and oldest network using teaching artists in the U.S. It was the instinct of Leonard Bernstein in his Young People’s Concerts, and is the goal of Visual Thinking Strategies, so widely adopted in the museum world. TAs often have participants create works of art as a tool in this process, and seeing works of art is common too, and what unifies all the practices is that they seek to deepen personal connections with works of art. If you were to assess the TAs work in this thread, you would seek to assess the quality of engagement with the art.

Skills development. This is a new kid on the block, and the kid is still a little controversial. Some people are not so sure that the strict ballet mistress who focuses exclusively on technique should be considered a teaching artist. Let’s accept some gray area to acknowledge that many experienced teaching artists teach the skills of their discipline, but they add something bigger, more expansive that deepens the development of that learner. We are only now embracing the fact that teaching artistry has something powerful to bring to the development of artists. In the NY Philharmonic School Partnership Program, they teach kids to play recorder, but in the context of learning so much more, exciting the relevance of what they learn. Marwen in Chicago nurtures extraordinary young visual artists, and changes their lives in the process. . If you were to assess the TAs work in this thread, you would seek to assess the motivation of the learner, the speed with which skills and individual voice develops, the investment in the art form and connections made within and outside of it by the learner.

Arts integration. This is the largest experiment happening in U.S. arts education. Its gamble is that by bringing arts learning together with learning other material both will advance further and deeper than they would on their own. This can be a hard balancing act in partnership, so that the arts component doesn’t become a handmaiden to the more urgent and tested material of the other subject—a way to pep up a boring curriculum; and conversely so that the subject matter is not an legitimizing excuse to do a cool art project. Usually the TA is the lead in this partnership, and must show discipline to ensure the balance, amid a school setting that cares much less about the arts and with partners who usually back away from the arts component. There are hundreds of programs and experiments of this kind across the nation, and go by many names including STEM to STEAM, arts project based learning, arts-rich and arts-infused curriculum. The network of Leonard Bernstein Center’s Artful Learning schools work deeply in this thread, as do many charter schools, and the national programs of Young Audiences and The Kennedy Center work this thread. Fine programs like Symphony Space Education, Lincoln Center Education schools, xxxxxxxx
If you were to assess the TAs work in this thread, you would seek to assess the learning in both the art and the other subject area. For example in a theater and history project, you might assess what students have learned about writing effective scenes, as well as their grasp of the historical material they were dramatizing.

Community quality of life. This has been the domain of “community artists,” a deep and proud tradition, vibrant around the world, in which artists serve community needs. From Theater for Social Development across Africa, to mural projects in every major city in the world, to Creative Placemaking projects in the U.S., a broad definition of art is dedicated to a broad inclusion of participants. There are programs with especially deep traditions in the U.S., like Appalshop and Cornerstone Theater Company. If you were to assess the TA’s work in this thread, you would seek to assess the impact on community members, how their attitudes and perhaps their behaviors have changed.

Social development. This is the fastest-growing thread. Teaching artists work with social service organization partners to achieve social goals. This is the thread of El Sistema around the world, which seeks to redirect the lives of young people in poverty through intensive, long-term youth orchestra engagement. This thread contains the work of creative aging, the fastest growing sector of the TA field, and many prison and juvenile detention arts programs, and of Carnegie Hall’s Lullaby project that seeks to strengthen bonds and health outcomes of single teenage mothers and their babies. If you were to assess the TA’s work in this thread, you would seek to assess the development of the desired social outcomes, from reduced medications and improved morale in senior centers, to reduced recidivism rates, to reduced gang and crime involvement and high school graduation for El Sistema kids.

Other instrumental goals. I know this is a terrible title for this thread, but the range of experimentation is so broad, I don’t know how else to hold it. This thread finds TAs applying their skills to attain goals that other institutions hold. They work with businesses to increase innovation (Second City corporate division), to build teamwork, to develop leadership. They work with doctors in training to sharpen diagnostic accuracy and build patient empathy. They work with planning commissions to bring creative vitality to urban planning. This thread is growing unpredictably, as organizations discover ways that creative engagement can help them achieve their objectives. The TA field has not much investigated this thread yet, and because the employment opportunities are so scattered, it does not speak well about the practices or learning. If you were to assess the TA’s work in this thread, you would focus on the goals of the project and find out if they are being attained.

+ Digital. This isn’t really a thread but it should be. For all the activity in the electronic/digital realm, what teaching artists know and can do is painfully absent—what is the distinctive quality of engagement TAs can bring to internet connections? TA work appears in digital media in electronic portfolios, in searches and communications, in workshops, but the power of teaching artistry has not yet found its footing through the internet, so I identify it as a possible thread because I believe there is a world of opportunity. Such work does appear, as in the Global Exchange of Carnegie Hall, and in online creative projects that appear from individual artists, but this thread still lives in the future.

There is the new framework of the field of teaching artistry—six threads plus one. I invite you to use it in whatever way makes sense for you. It has enabled previously estranged organizations to have conversations as colleagues. It has prompted fresh interest in assessing teaching artist impact. It makes clearer to those outside the arts what teaching artists can do. It makes clear to teaching artists themselves that they are part of a big field, with many kinds of expertise, and that their particular area of expertise is just one among many.