The Universal Elements of Teaching Artistry:
Take-Aways from the World's First International Teaching Artist Conference

By Eric Booth

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In late August 2012, 130 eager individuals gathered for three days in Oslo, Norway, for the World's First International Teaching Artist Conference. Representatives came from 23 countries, some with a clear sense professional identity as a "teaching artist," others with mere curiosity about the term, all with a mix of experience and uncertainty about the hybrid way art and education combine and live in different cultures around the world. The delegations from the U.S. and Norway were larger than those from other nations, understandably, as the host country and the nation with the most developed history of teaching artistry. Perhaps we had the most to learn.

Over three long days of structured activities and informal dialogue with new colleagues from other countries on every break, we could feel the learning as it happened—fast and fascinating. The learning was much more intense than a typical professional conference; many said they had never experienced anything quite like it. We came away with a sense that something significant had just happened; we were somehow changed. Various individuals promised to write about the impact on them and their practice, and some blogs and reports are already surfacing. Several countries are organizing proposals for a second international conference, probably in 2014.

As the conference co-leader and co-designer, I offer this essay as my first reflection. One key question drove me to create the conference with Marit Ulvund of Norway's SEANSE. I posed the question to the participants at the opening: **What are the core elements of teaching artistry as it appears in its various expressions and uses in cultures around the world?** David Bohm, the great 20th Century physicist said, "Any time you see seeming polarities, look for the greater truth that contains them both." I knew that the large embrace of teaching artistry would hold a variety of different practices and understandings, and I knew that some of its expressions would seem opposed to other practices—would we discover greater truths that all practices contained? There is no universally accepted definition of teaching artistry, but I offer this one as the simplest one that captures what most stakeholders understand by the term. First, teaching artistry is neither instruction "about art," nor training artists for professional careers in the arts, but embraces many other learning goals for the widest possible range of participants. *A teaching artist is an active artist who chooses to also develop the skills of teaching in order to activate a variety of learning experiences that that are catalyzed by artistic engagement.*

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

First, a little context about the conference itself. It was sponsored by SEANSE, a Norwegian arts learning center at Volda University, with funds awarded by a Norwegian government grant. Marit Ulvund, the Director of SEANSE, and I were the conference designers and leaders. The conference was part of a major commitment on the part of the

Norwegian government to bring teaching artistry to Norway. This long-term national project includes a training course for a cohort of twenty Norwegian artists who are pioneers in studying teaching artistry in their country and around the world. The cohort spent a week in New York City observing teaching artist practice in many different settings and talking to experienced leaders. This group of established artists who are also emergent teaching artists are currently leading experiments in Norway that build on their existing education practices to learn more about ways teaching artists can deepen the connections between arts organizations and schools. They all participated fully in the conference.

Our conference met for three days in Oslo's House of Literature, a welcoming multi-purpose building with a handful of meeting spaces, and a ground floor café that was always packed with Norwegian writers and other visitors. The 130 participants paid their own expenses to be at the conference, and some said they came to learn out about teaching artistry more than to share their expertise. Perhaps the most dramatic impact came for those who arrived feeling they didn't really know anything about teaching artistry. Every one I spoke with at the end reported discovering they were already involved in work that naturally fits in the embrace of teaching artistry—they had just not known the term or the fact that it was a worldwide phenomenon. We had many more applicants than our limited space afforded, so we had had to turn away many who applied, making a selection to gather a geographically and artistically diverse and balanced group of participants.

The basic structure of the conference contained three kinds of formal activities (surrounded by rich informal social meeting time over meals and evenings, and a reception one evening):

- **Four major cultural explorations.** Each comprised of a 75-minute participatory experience led by a teaching artist from Tanzania, the U.S., Norway and Colombia, matched with an hourlong unpacking of that experience to share its cultural context, its aspirations, and its lineage, by someone from that culture who could provide an authoritative overview.

- **Keynote addresses** by me, Gigi Antoni (CEO of Big Thought in Dallas TX), Anna Cutler (Director of Learning at the Tate Museums, London), Brad Haseman (Assistant Dean Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia) and Johannes Johner (one of Norway's foremost actors and pioneer teaching artist).

- **TED-talk-like participant presentations**. Twenty-six of our colleagues presented succinct introductions to key aspects of the teaching artistry in their work.

Since this three-day swirl of input, I have been reflecting on my notes and memories in an attempt to answer that initial key question. Rather than report on each of the major presentations in a comprehensive way, this essay cuts to the chase of answering the focal question I proposed at the beginning of the conference.

DAY ONE POLARITIES

To set up my theory of the universal elements of teaching artistry, I will describe the first two Cultural Explorations of the conference that we experienced on Day One. They presented such stark contrasts, they serve in a "David Bohm way" to invite us to look for the greater truths of teaching artistry that contained them both. [I hope the reader can get a sense of the seeming opposites these workshops presented, each exemplary in its own way, illuminating the different cultural needs and norms, the range of purposes that teaching artistry has grown to address.] After describing these two first-day experiences, I will offer my sense of the 13 elements common to teaching artistry everywhere. The wealth of other experiences throughout the conference fell somewhere along the continuum between these first day extremes.

My opening keynote presentation raised the key questions of the conference. To begin the answering process with authentic teaching artist approaches (rather than "talking about" theories), I got all participants up on their feet immediately to explore these key issues in creative action. After a speedy get-to-know-you warmup exercise, I devised small group tableaux challenges that forced immediate discussions of the key issues of teaching artistry. We unpacked the inherent ideas and understandings that sprang to the surface in the process of solving the challenges I gave each group, and they captured their concurrence in frozen sculptural form using their bodies to create the tableaux. What did this mixed group of strangers have to say about: The relationship between a teaching artist and learners? What goes on in the mind of a teaching artist in planning? The relationship between the artist and the teacher in a TA? The ways the artistry in the TA and the learners connect? Essential questions like that!—in the first minutes of the conference. Every small group found a complex metaphoric way to express with their bodies some initial agreements across the wide expanse of the globe.

Then, in our first Cultural Exploration, teaching artist Grace Gachocha from Tanzania led a volunteer group of 14 participants (while the rest of us observed) through a condensed exercise that typified ways she might work with a rural Tanzanian village in a Theatre for Social Development process. Grace distilled the project a teaching artist would lead over months to help the village decide how it wanted to change and determine the best processes to accomplish that change. Grace had the volunteers imagine some of the challenges "their village" might face. She gave us a sense of how a teaching artist facilitates this community change process by having the participants discuss challenges and decide on one (for the purposes of this demonstration) to address. She then had the group create an entertaining playlet that distilled and presented the essence of the problem (they decided on contaminated drinking water), as if we in the audience were the other villagers. She described how theater activities would then be used over time to explore alternatives to the problematic situation.

Then Richard Ndunguru from the University of Dar Es Salaam (in Tanzania's largest city) laid out how a teaching artist investing in Theatre for Social Development works. He began, "The teaching artist moves into the village for a year…" He described the usual stages of that year's work, which includes a sequence of: 1) several months of listening, everyone getting to know the teaching artist, and the teaching artist getting to

know the village life and the villagers; 2) then a period of community dialogue facilitated by the teaching artist to help the community identify the problematic issues in the village and which ones they might like to change; 3) then the use of theater to help the villagers imagine alternatives, playing out scenes about the problems and various alternatives and solutions (the part Grace's activity had illuminated); 4) then the teaching artist guides a process of community decision making about the elements it wants to change and what processes they will use, including connection to government officials who can provide resources; and 5) finally the teaching artist helps the village select a Task Force among the villagers who will hold the government accountable for providing promised support, and who follow the progress of the process of change to completion. Richard gave us examples of how well-intentioned developmental help offered by outside NGOs often fails, unless a theater process for social development is employed, so the villagers themselves can choose the problem and solution, and "own" the process to completion. In the afternoon of that first day, New York City dance teaching artist Hilary Easton led us through an aesthetic education series of activities to focus upon the dance *Split Sides* by Merce Cunningham. The primary goal of aesthetic education practice is to enhance the richness of people's encounter with works of art. So, Hilary's sequence of activities had 16 participants follow a carefully scaffolded sequence of movement explorations, working first individually and then in small groups, exploring a set of movement ideas that are central to the dance, first lines and angles, then adding curves, and then movement through space including level changes. The steps of the activities built to increasingly complex movement sequences which prepared participants to enter into a fuller experience of the filmed of part of the dance we watched as a culmination of our participatory practice. Hilary even included a preparation for the "chance" element of the dance Cunningham used, wherein elements of each performance (costumes, lights, dance segments) were determined by a roll of the dice at the beginning; Hilary had the participants roll dice to determine the order of the presentations and the musical accompaniment for each group.

Then Sarah Johnson, Director of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, unpacked the context and elements of Hilary's approach. The goal of the sequence of activities was to deepen the encounter with a challenging masterwork of art, Cunningham's *Split Sides*. The steps the participants were led through were intricately and effectively designed to experientially guide participants through "enabling constraints" that allowed their creative inquiry to authentically parallel the choreographer's. (Enabling constraints are carefully presented challenges that limit the scope of creative work to specific decision-making areas; the limitation helps the participant be more successful, and deepens the creativity in areas that relate directly to the work under study.) The approach is built upon the specific focus of an entry point, and nimbly guides participants into creative decision making that resonates with key aspects of the artwork under study so that the encounter with the artwork is activated, and likely to spark personally relevant connections. The approach invites each participant to experience the masterwork from a kind of collegial perspective, as one who has made choreographic and dance choices similar to those Cunningham made in this work. Aesthetic education tries to spark intrinsically-motivated curiosity to enter the world of that artwork. Sarah then expanded her exploration of teaching artistry beyond the practice of aesthetic education (one approach among many

others) to include additional ways in which teaching artists in the U.S. address learning agendas. She suggested an extremely wide array of goals and approaches and tools, including those that Carnegie Hall teaching artists use to contribute to the lives of individuals in communities in need, such health care settings, homeless shelters, and prisons.

Sarah also proposed seven principles of teaching artistry that she sees in practice across different programs in the U.S. All seven elements of these appear in the longer list of worldwide core essentials that I offer later in this essay. Sarah proposed that U.S. teaching artistry is built upon: 1) the importance of a personal connection with arts and artists; 2) engagement before information (participatory learning before "talking about" the focal topic); 3) an assumption of participant competence; 4) artistic process at the center of the activities; 5) experiential learning (rather than "telling" about); 6) fun and playful participation; 7) time for reflection.

The contrast between the teaching artist's role in Tanzanian social development and preparation to see an abstract dance in New York couldn't have been much starker. One was all about the teaching artist as facilitator of community change, with art making as one essential tool in a large slow arc of changing lives. The other was all about an individual's capacity to gain greater entry into a specific abstract work of art with hopes the discoveries would be resonant. At the end of that first day, I described the polarity as whiplash. The challenge for the key conference question was clear—*given these extremely different goals and processes, were there things these teaching artists did in common?* What were the greater truths that contained them both?

Over the next two days, we experienced more examples of differing practices—from a whole group art-making process in a park creating patterns with woolen threads, to watching a youth orchestra led in El Sistema style by a lead teaching artist from Batuta (Colombia's El Sistema-inspired national program) and the use of the Studio Habits of Mind as a template for youth development in the Batuta work. The keynote speeches opened up the use of teaching artists throughout the city of Dallas (Gigi Antoni from Big Thought), challenged us to not settle for less than artistic excellence (Anna Cutler Director of Learning at London's Tate Museums) and to keep a bullshit whistle handy, and to be mindful of ethical dimensions of our work (Brad Haseman from Queensland University of Technology in Australia), and Johannes Johner from Norway traced his journey from artist to teaching artist. In the 26 presentations about teaching artist work in over a dozen foreign countries, we saw the wide and complex landscape of teaching artistry open in front of us. In all these different cultures, on all the continents (except Antarctica), teaching artistry has arisen in different contexts and for different purposes. And here it was. Did it have any consistent elements, some irreducible core of elements in teaching artistry?

13 CORE ELEMENTS OF TEACHING ARTISTRY

In reflection on those days, and the reflective conversations that abounded in the evenings, on bathroom and meal breaks, while walking from the hotel to the House of Literature where we worked, common elements began to appear. In the subsequent few

weeks, as the jumble of experiences settled, and as I was able to have some hindsight conversations with others who went through the swirl, a set of ideas has clarified. I propose these following elements as the core commonalities of the teaching artist work we saw and heard about from around the world. Consider them as a preliminary set of ideas to be developed over years, as we learn more about our worldwide practice. I encourage others who were in Oslo, and others who have had experience of teaching artistry in other cultures, to add to or challenge this provisional gathering of common practices. This essay is a starting place.

I certainly do not suggest that every teaching artist uses all of these elements on every occasion. Indeed, some of the demonstrations of teaching artistry in Oslo didn't contain some of the elements below—did this mean that TA practice in that culture didn't include some of the following? As I reviewed what the partner-presenters from their countries had shared as the context within which the necessarily-truncated 75 minute sliver would occur, I found that in each case the context confirmed that the teaching artist would have included all of the following elements, including those we didn't experience in the activity they shared.

I propose that good teaching artistry, as it expresses itself in various cultures and for various purposes, relies upon:

• The TA guides participants to **imagine new possibilities**: "To imagine the world as if it were otherwise," as John Dewey states. This goal is universal, quintessential in every culture, even as it is evoked differently and used for a variety of purposes.

• The TA **listens acutely** before, during, and after the work. The excellence of the listening, the humble dedication to hearing and respecting the person or people who offer their voices, and the priority on hearing the true artistic voice in everyone, throughout the entire process, is a distinctive element of teaching artistry. TAs have deep interpersonal courage—listening profoundly is one of its key expressions. We can hear one another into consequential artistic expression.

• The TA seeks to lead participants beyond compliance into activating their **intrinsic motivation** to "**make stuff they care about**." The TA encourages, invites, and magnetically draws participants to engage in two fundamental actions of art—pouring themselves into creating something new and valuable, and creating personal connections inside worlds others have made. With this crucial motivation, people invest themselves, find their way into the flow experience motivated by personal yearning toward that which they value.

• The TA uses **active participation as the main tool** for learning, providing information as an extension or expansion of, response to, or follow-up from, experiential learning. The guideline of *engagement before information* suggests the natural (rather than academically habituated) relationship between the two. Beginning with engagement prompts the discovery of relevance and emergence of curiosity that enhance the taking in of information and the greater retention of it.

• The TA **assumes the innate competence of participants** and constructs experiential activities that intentionally tap those competences (often latent capacities that individuals didn't know they had), to spark and speed the experiential learning process.

• The TA offers **activities that are inherently fun**, that launch interesting creative problem solving processes, and that seek to engender pleasure and gratification, hopefully joy, in every participant on every occasion. TAs use many varieties of play as learning tools, not to mention charm and charisma as ways to get people started.

• The TA **scaffolds the sequence of activities** to provide satisfaction and success at each step, building courage and investment toward greater challenge and accomplishment. With scaffolding, TAs can eliminate anxiety and lead a group to accomplish things they would never have imagined possible in a short period of time.

• The TA **uses great questions** as underpinnings of the work to provoke participants to identify the ways in which this activity is relevant to their lives and cultures, and to deepen the resonance of the process. A great question is one that is innately interesting, has a kind of emotional or intellectual bite, one that lingers and provokes interesting answering processes.

• The TA engages participants in **reflection** to ground and expand the learning of doing. As John Dewey says, “If we do not reflect on our experiences, we do not learn from them.” TAs use a variety of reflective invitations to guide participants to consider what actually happened inside and outside them during activities and to grasp key elements of their experiences—a feeling, a thought, a question, a memory, a specific word, an insight, etc. TAs model reflection throughout activities and guide reflective pauses at junctures in the process.

• The TA has a plan for a given occasion and **improvises** within it, responding to learning opportunities and challenges that arise within the process itself. This improvisation embodies the bold learning style participants can adopt, and it honors the richness of the occasion by turning it into a unique group creation.

• The TA takes on a **variety of roles** in leading a group, including facilitator of group process, as well as the roles of designer, leader, colleague, teacher, and witness. Good TAs are nimble in changing their role relationships to learners, enjoying each role, and modeling the multiplicity of roles that artistry requires.

• The TA seeks, in the long view, to **change cultures**. TAs seek to activate the human birthright for a caring, creative, collaborative culture that respects the capacities and contributions of all members, that recognizes and appreciates excellence in all its forms, and that delights in the play of imagination about other ways reality can be. Cultures can be as small as a group of learners or a classroom, or as large as a village, a community, a professional field, or a state or nation. Good teaching artistry is aware of the dynamic balance between the individual’s experience and the larger context within

which the work happens and seeks to change both together, recognizing their inseparability.

• **The Law of 80%—**80% of what a TA teaches is who she/he is as an artist/person/learner/citizen. Accepting the responsibility that we must be that change we wish to see in the world and embracing a wide view of the role of an artist, the TA is dedicated to living authentically and bringing that self into teaching opportunities, which include more occasions than just dedicated workshop time.

TWO PARTS OF ONE WHOLE

There is a divide in the field of teaching artistry. While it is more pronounced in the U.S., (and present in other European-lineage cultures), it is worth mentioning in the light of the Oslo conference because it was on vivid display. The Tanzanian and New York examples described above from Day 1 of the conference, symbolize the two sides of the divide. These two come from different worldviews and definitions of the arts, but significantly, both use the same 13 principles above.

The two approaches may be distinguished most easily by the two different terms used in the U.S.: "teaching artist" and "community artist." Teaching Artists, in general as the term has been used in the U.S., seek to empower the encounters with artworks, and community artists seek to enhance the quality of community life. To clarify the difference, let me use the exaggerated pejorative views each side might argue about the other: community artists might say that teaching artists have swallowed the values of elite arts institutions and are agents for institutional preferences and priorities; teaching artists might say that community artists are willing to settle for mediocre art, without rigorous attention to quality, when excellence is what delivers arts' power. In western cultures, there are usually two distinct institutional sectors: arts organizations reaching out to a wider public, and another that thrives in community based, grassroots endeavors. The efforts tend to be funded by separate streams; they work with different populations for different purposes. This is, of course, not a clear divide, as both sides use many of the same approaches, often employ the same people, and celebrate many of the same accomplishments. I have noticed in recent years that these two traditionally-separate approaches are merging in the U.S. The respect of each for the knowledge of the other is growing; there is much more borrowing of practices and language; programs are even merging institutional and community goals. Increasingly, the same individuals work in both capacities.

On Day 1 in Oslo we experienced the two extremes—the Tanzanian work goes as deep as community-focused teaching artistry (whatever it is called) can go, and the New York aesthetic education work was fully and ingeniously focused on a masterwork. We witnessed the greater truths that contained them both: the 13 principles above and the dedication to the power of art to catalyze consequential change. It was touching to me that the European-lineage teaching artists I spoke with were deeply inspired by and challenged by the community focus of our African and South American (and other community-focused program) colleagues. Concurrently, those dedicated to community work were impressed by the skills and scope of the western teaching artists. I could feel

them moving toward each other, each adopting aspects of the other's strengths. The fundamental hybridity of teaching artistry was gaining a new level of hybridity as the two traditional streams of this work began to borrow and blend.

I envision a potent future for teaching artists resulting from this mix. Imagine arts organizations realizing their power to use what they know to guide community change processes. Imagine community-focused programs tapping the power of masterworks to deepen their impact. Perhaps the best widespread example of this is El Sistema in Venezuela, which we met in Oslo through the work of Batuta, Colombia's El Sistema-inspired program. This youth music program is unabashedly dedicated to youth and community development, yet its zeal for artistic excellence drives the development process and produces some of the best "high art" orchestras in the world. Similarly, we learned of Carnegie Hall's commitment to working with prison, homeless, and health care communities, bringing their "high art" teaching artistry to the service of the needs in these settings. This hybrid intention may well be the future of the arts. And the hybrid identity of the teaching artist stands right at the center of this possible future.
There is a reason teaching artistry has arisen in every culture, even as art has arisen in every culture. Indeed, as I study the full story of Paleolithic cave art, I am convinced teaching artistry was infused throughout the process, inseparable from the iconic image-making. The conference in Oslo is a marker for the entire arts community, as we recognize the essentialness and universality of teaching artistry's core practices. From this day forward, we are not isolated practitioners, not a peripheral subset of the arts, nor even a field within any single nation. We are an international fellowship, growing closer.

Eric Booth is a freelance teaching artist, arts learning consultant, author, and speaker. He works with arts organizations (including six of the ten largest orchestras in the U.S.), educators, businesses and governments on a wide variety of projects. He designs, leads, and keynotes many conferences, including several of the largest gatherings in U.S. arts history, and was the closing keynote speaker at the first UNESCO arts education conference (Lisbon 2006). Founder of "The Teaching Artist Journal," and author of 40 articles and five books, including "The Everyday Work of Art" and "The Music Teaching Artist's Bible," which are widely used as textbooks, he works across the U.S. and internationally to help launch El Sistema-inspired programs, to advance the practice of teaching artistry, and to bring creativity into schooling and professional life.