

The Art of Discussion: Defining Community Art Methodology

By Rebecca Yenawine

For the purposes of this essay, I will define community art as art that is made through a collaborative process, by a community, about a social-justice issue that impacts their lives and has social significance beyond their lives. After 11 years as a practitioner, I see clearly that the quality of discussion that happens prior to art making can make the difference between getting students engaged or not, between a superficial message and a probing one, between a project that has meaning to the greater community and one that remains personal. At its best, this methodology, and the art making that follows, allow participants to gain a sense of their own importance and power and viewers to explore social problems from an often-unheard perspective. For this to be effective, practitioners must make sure that the themes of the work are explored fully before the act of making begins.

This philosophy emerged from a program called Kids on the Hill (KOH) and currently lives on in an organization called [New Lens](#). KOH was a Baltimore nonprofit organization offering young people support and an opportunity to make change in their community through art. The program worked with 45 teens in a citywide afterschool program and served an additional 200 youth each year in schools and in summer programs throughout Baltimore. Over the 12-year life span of the organization, KOH staff developed pedagogy called Art Action for Social Change for the creation of community art with a focus on social justice. This pedagogy consists of three phases. The first is *experiential education* where a social issue is chosen and explored, the second is *art action* where art is made about the issue and the third is *civic engagement* where the art is used to facilitate change. This three-part pedagogy was created by looking at the projects that have been most successful and trying to define what qualities those projects have that made them work so well. (For further discussion of this pedagogy, see "[Art for Social Change: Kids on the Hill](#)," an essay by myself and Mark Carter, published on CAN in 2008.

Our first project at KOH took place after I caught three teenage girls about to spray paint on some vacant buildings. They were walking past my house with bundles beneath their coats. I took their spray paints away and invited them in for an art lesson. We took out charcoal, easels and modeled for each other. They loved it and suggested we start a weekly class. We then gathered a group of young people and learned basic figure drawing and painting, and eventually learned to paint self-portraits. We got permission from a landlord and the neighborhood association to paint over the boarded windows and doors of three abandoned buildings. Less than six months after I caught them with spray paint, their portraits and other art covered nine windows and doors and brightened the whole block. The girls were proud of their art and when the younger children walked by, they felt proud of their older friends. Instead of seeing graffiti, and the negative statement it sometimes makes, adults saw how creative and talented neighborhood teens were. This was the first time I was able to see how art had the possibility for affirming a group of young people—and possibly even altering a communities' mindset about those young people.



The author, second from left, with some Kids on the Hill: Chris Hughes, Audrey Wilson, Bilal Smith and Reco Johnson. Photo by Mark Carter [Click here to enlarge](#)

What made this piece powerful was the context in which it happened. If we had just painted on the boards, we would have beautified the block but not addressed the desire that young people have to make their mark and the negative stereotype adults have about youth. Graffiti is generally a chance for someone to represent their name and who they are in some public setting. By making self-portraits, intuitively we embraced this desire and gave young people a chance to make their mark in a way that earned them lots of praise and neighborhood support. This allowed the project to address a larger neighborhood challenge that was bigger than graffiti — the fact that many young people often don't feel valued in their community, that they can behave in ways that impede gaining adult support and that often adults think the worst of them. Though this project focused primarily on

learning art skills as we painted on the boards, the larger social context for the work was important to its success. In future projects, we began deliberately defining the context for the art making with participants.

In the experiential education phase of our pedagogy, after the issue is chosen, there is the most important part of a project — facilitating a dialogue or series of discussions on the issues. Dialogue is an important quality of many education theories from Socrates to Freire. It is important in getting students to think critically and in creating a student-centered learning experience. In Art Action for Social Change pedagogy, it is our belief that discussions improve capacity to consistently articulate ideas, ground those ideas in evidence, and to learn to question and search for root causes of a problem. If we make art in the context of this kind of discussion, we are bound to have a product that has some social relevance.

This aspect of the pedagogy is inspired by Visual Thinking Strategies, which is a teaching method that invites students to decode meaning in a work of art by asking a series of questions and paraphrasing the answers heard. VTS questions include: “What’s going on in this picture?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?” The first question is open-ended and the second invites viewers to ground their ideas in evidence. This process is incredibly useful in teaching participants to think and decode a work of art. In order to use the lessons learned through VTS and apply them to a community arts context, we have expanded on its principals. The following is a list of qualities that, when applied to the first phase of community art making (issue exploration), we believe will define an effective Art Action for Social Change project:

Ask questions that are open-ended. Open-ended questions assume there are multiple answers and they invite participants to think out loud and to be influenced by each other’s thoughts and ideas as they explore a topic. This style of discussion places the teacher in a role where s/he is not the expert but the facilitator whose job it is to create the space for exploration so that others may become expert. The facilitator refrains from expressing an opinion but rather keeps asking questions that will further the conversation.

One of the classes taught by Kids on the Hill took place with ninth graders at a public school called the Academy for College and Career Exploration (ACCE). It was a media arts class taught by myself and a team of three teenagers from KOH. There were 25 ninth graders that included a group of boys who often lacked focus, misbehaved and postured as tough. They all sat together. Our conversation veered to issues of homosexuality and homophobia. The challenging boys expressed several offensive opinions: It’s great for females to be gay but gross for males to be gay; if a gay guy ever came onto me I’d kill him, etc. Though we had all the cameras set up to animate the credits for their project, the teen teachers and I knew that this conversation would and should take up the entire hour-long period. Megan and Cheri were the primary facilitators; James, who had far less experience, stayed in the background. The facilitators asked the larger group questions about their beliefs. Some continued to express their prejudice and others began to think through the answers differently. Our students took each statement and comment that was made and asked them follow-up questions. One boy said he believed that everyone is born straight and that people who choose to be gay should be taught to be straight by being taken to strip clubs. Teen educators responded: Given how much hatred there is out there, why would someone choose to be gay — if it is in fact a choice? Why do you believe you were born straight but that gay people were not born gay? Why are lesbians less offensive to you than gay men? Why do some people assume gay men are attracted to every male? Why do you think gay males would be interested in someone who hates them as much as you? By the end of the conversation, Thai said, “They can do what they want to do and I’ll do what I want to do.” Roderick had to admit that he did not know why he believed what he believed and the third boy said nothing. These two attitudes at least were dramatically different than where we started. Roderick had laughed when Megan said that gay and lesbian people were discriminated against and killed in the way that black people were 60 years ago and Thai had threatened to kill any gay person that even looked at him the wrong way. Their change in tone demonstrated at least the beginning of a change in attitude.

Homophobia is one of the hardest issues to tackle. The prominence of religion, socially conservative ideals and homophobic or derogatory language are considered the norm to many of the young people we have taught. To confront someone on a belief that is echoed by their families and peers is a huge challenge, but by asking open-

ended questions, you don't impose a belief on students but invite them to explore their own more fully. This process can help them arrive at new conclusions on their own. There are times as a teacher that I wouldn't have time for the conversation described above and would just disallow certain language in the classroom and express my own belief about why it's unacceptable. This tactic is sometimes the best one can do within time constraints, but to truly try to change young peoples' minds, we need to help them think critically about the issue. By asking questions that don't have a right answer, but that genuinely invite exploration of beliefs and attitudes, we gave young people a chance to think it all through. Though I think it was clear where we stood as facilitators on the issue, the questions we asked were not blaming, but were focused on increasing understanding.

Invite participants to ground their ideas in evidence. After a statement or observation, ask the participant why s/he has that particular perspective or request examples that back up those thoughts and beliefs. This requires that participants attempt to objectively legitimize their beliefs through finding evidence. This reasoning process is fundamental to critical thinking and helps them see if their thoughts are idiosyncratic, if they are true for others and/or if they are possibly an attitude that has been shaped by a larger social system that really doesn't make sense.

As we talked about homophobia and posed open-ended questions about their beliefs, we also asked them to back up their ideas with evidence. Some people believed what they believed because of their religious faith, and others could not find any evidence other than their personal convictions and feelings. Generally in a conversation like this, the comments that have the most evidence behind them rise to the surface and become group wisdom while the comments that do not have evidence begin to hold less objective value. This is the reason that Thai ended up giving up some of his initial conviction: He couldn't figure out why he believed what he believed.

This particular conversation ended with Megan saying she thought that the students should always figure out why they held their beliefs so they were not just thoughtlessly following someone else's opinion. Even the students that cited religion as their reasoning seemed to take a look at that idea — acknowledging that every pastor has a different interpretation of the Bible and they couldn't just believe what they hear as truth without thinking about it for themselves.

Through the work of VUE we know that evidential reasoning is a quality of critical thinking that, when followed in the format that VUE recommends (asking what do you see that makes you say that,) can translate to increased verbal and written skills. If we ask young people the same kind of questions in relationship to their beliefs and ideas about social issues, we can hypothesize at least that they are at the beginning of decoding and thinking critically about the oppressive system we live in.

Ask questions that probe for the root cause of a problem. Ask questions that try to find the source of the problem: When, why and how did this problem come to exist? What events or environments first created it? Without examining history and root causes, we are likely to articulate ideas that are superficial or just a reiteration of common beliefs and assumptions.

An instructor at KOH was tasked with focusing on environmental issues with youth. Though this is not typically an issue that makes it to the top of urban young people's list, it is an important societal issue, and young people, like many of the rest of us, are often part of the problem. Inner-city young people are generally not shy about littering and tend have little experience with nature that might connect them to the issues. This instructor's task was to think about the inherent challenges in the topic and to help this group of teens connect to environmental issues. The instructor took them on a "toxic tour" of Baltimore where they looked at playing fields that were created through leveling and not disposing of toxic building materials properly; they looked at smoke stacks owned by a prominent hospital and talked about the impact of toxic materials being released into the air; they learned about the prevalence of asthma and other respiratory problems in that community; they created a worm compost, went out into nature, learned about the water cycle and most importantly discussed the barriers to

teens caring about these issues. The first time they brainstormed how they could use art to promote solutions they came up with slogans like: "Save the bay, keep trash away!" This slogan is catchy and has a clear message but probably wouldn't do much to change the mind of someone who litters. Changing someone's mind with a slogan is difficult with any issue, but if the slogan focuses on the root cause of why someone might not care, the artist has a greater shot at impacting the intended audience. As young people have explored these issues over time, they have talked about how most people care about things that impact them individually and not as much about issues that might affect them down the road or are not connected to their day-to-day survival. In a society that teaches us to think about money over education or clothes over healthy food, this is particularly challenging. To get at this root cause of the problem, we asked the group a series of questions about causation: Why don't people recycle? Because they don't care. What is it about recycling that makes them not care? It doesn't really impact their lives directly to not recycle. Why do people only care about things that impact their lives? Because we are individualistic in our society. Why are we so individualistic? Because our families don't take care of us so we have to take care of ourselves. Why don't some families take care of their kids? They are stressed out and just trying to survive. Why are some families so focused on survival that they would not take care of their kids? Because they don't have enough money to survive so they do what they have to do. What about wealthy people — are they individualistic too? Yes, they just care about themselves too. So, if poor people and rich people only care about themselves and it's not just about basic survival, what's going on here? Why don't most people care about the bigger picture? As the questions and answers unfolded, young people identified our economic and political system as the root cause of why we are so individualistic. This system is reinforced by the media and by families. Though this conversation is not specifically about the environment, it was an attempt to search for the deepest cause for the problem and to create a slogan from that understanding. The message that emerged from this conversation was very different than "Save the bay, keep trash away!" Though this group hasn't finished its project at the time of writing this article, the kinds of messages that are emerging are: "Expand your care, be a part of the big picture." "Care more, we're in this together." These slogans attempt to inspire the audience to think about the collective good, which from their discussions seem to be the mindset that is the key to building support for environmental issues.

Present contrasting views to the group. Present other perspectives on the issue. Play devil's advocate, present statistics, show artwork, newspaper articles or images, tell a story or watch an excerpt from a video that provides a concrete way of challenging the perspectives that have been explored before. This requires participants to create a deeper argument that responds to the thinking that has already been done on the topic. Whether they change their initial thoughts or more vehemently disagree with a new perspective, their own thoughts are inevitably strengthened.

When we began doing work around youth and police relationships, the majority of young people in the room were anti-police. We knew we wanted to do a project that fostered some kind of healing between youth and police, and an important way to do that was to create a space for young people to have compassion for the other side of the issues. To do this work, we had police who were knowledgeable and sympathetic toward young people come visit our center. Young people were nervous but ultimately eager to understand police. Our visitors described the challenges of policing in a city where there are so many other social issues and where they are charged with confronting problems that aren't solvable through arrests. Specifically they talked about the drug problem and why it's an impossible situation for police. They also talked about the challenges of dealing with sassy young people and young people who dress in gang attire because it's what's cool but then feel their civil liberties have been violated when an officer pulls them up. Through these experiences young people understood the role that they can sometimes play in youth/police tension and they understood more about what police are up against as they try to do a difficult job. After hearing a police perspective and measuring it against their own, they emerged with a much more nuanced picture of the problem where no one is the bad guy.

Distillation. The facilitator invites participants to think about all the perspectives that have been expressed and to think about what perspective is most true for them. This is when the conversation moves from being open-ended to finite, where participants can disagree and agree on ideas and through the process refine and whittle down a final idea into something that feels most true. It is here also that the group begins to think about who the

audience might be for an art project, what message and medium might best reach that group and what perspective is most needed. Through critique, revision and more discussion the most poignant, grounded and needed perspectives rise to the surface.

A group at KOH was working on a video about healthy relationships. They had tried to define what makes up a healthy relationship as objectively as possible and kept arguing about the definition: "There is no one thing that makes a relationship healthy, everyone likes something different." They felt like they had figured it out. This was the message they wanted to convey to other teens. "All you need to do is communicate what you like and don't like and make sure your partner wants what you want and then you'll be in a healthy relationship." Then Brittany threw in a monkey wrench: "I know this girl whose boyfriend beat her, but she really loves him." Brittany thought this added proof to the idea that relationships are entirely subjective, but this idea did not sit right with everyone in the room. The facilitator asked, "Is that really healthy? What do people think?" The same girl argued, "You can't say that's not healthy because she really loves him." Someone else chimed in, "That's not right." Most people, however, were ready to admit that everyone is different and there is no objective definition of "healthy."

This is a situation where young people were gathering evidence from their own lives to support a message that could allow for unhealthy practices in relationships. The instructor took Brittany's comment and tried to dig around in it. She grabbed the dictionary and had someone look up the word "health." Shay'Erica read it aloud: "To be well in mind body and spirit." The teacher then invited them to think about how their own definitions held up to this dictionary definition. The students argued two positions. Some argued that being mistreated can't be healthy, even if you like it, and others argued that you can't define healthy for anyone else but yourself. Eventually as they explored why someone might "love" an abusive partner; they decided that they'd probably had something unhealthy happen to them before and they were now addicted to the mistreatment. This new idea became incorporated into their definition so that they would now say that to be in a healthy relationship you have to both be well in mind body and spirit and communicate and negotiate your wants and needs with your partner. Through questioning, presenting opposing opinions, looking for evidence for beliefs, the facilitator allowed the group to distill the ideas into the most thorough and thoughtful message possible. Ultimately this group made a video to creatively teach other teens this message.

Paraphrasing. The facilitator rephrases people's comments throughout the discussions so that everyone feels heard and ideas can be continuously framed in the context of the other comments made. The rephrasing process is neutral. The facilitator doesn't choose a side but rather catalogues and tracks the ideas that are expressed as a way of validating all the ideas and allowing participants to decide which ideas are most compelling, powerful or true for them.

In a class at the Academy for College and Career Exploration, we were beginning to work on issues of race. To begin the conversation, we brought in a series of images that we thought would spark conversation. One image was of a photo of baby chickens. There was one yellow chick and a bunch of brown ones that looked as if they were running away from the yellow chick. There was a speech bubble coming from the yellow chick's beak that read "Niggers!" We asked young people to look and think about the image in Visual Thinking Strategies style. What did they think was going on in the picture? What did they see that made them say that? "That chicken is racist," one student said. "What do you see that makes you say that?" "Because of what the yellow chicken is saying." "So the speech bubble makes you think that this chicken is being racist to the other chickens. What else can you find?" "I don't think animals can be racist," said another student. "So you're providing a different opinion about the nature of animals and saying that they can't be racist. What do you see that makes you say that or what makes you believe they can't be racist?" The student didn't know. Half the group was convinced that the image was literally saying that chickens were racist; another segment of the group disagreed and thought that animals were not capable of racism. There seemed to be no resolution to the disagreement and no different analysis for what the pictures meaning might be. The conversation finally ended with my co-teacher and me paraphrasing the beliefs that were expressed. Well, this image could be showing that chickens, like humans, are racist or it could be that animals are not racist and this picture is maybe more of a joke.

Generally in a group, paraphrasing in this way will inspire them to think through what they've just said and take their analysis further. This particular group had no interest in taking the conversation further and were happy with the ambiguity they had come up with. There is no need to force young people to take away a meaning; it's more important for them to practice thinking through their ideas and hearing them reflected back. It is more important that they be invested than that their analysis be correct. Paraphrasing affirms their thinking process and, with more practice, will allow them to see more and more deeply.

There is much educational value for participants in this process. Through the research of Abigail Housen on Visual Thinking Strategies we know at a minimum that there is a link between their discussion method (which we have borrowed from) and improving critical thinking skills. In addition, we believe that this process enlivens learning and activates participants' interest in becoming engaged citizens. This is especially critical for oppressed groups that are often educated about issues that don't matter to them.

Art making in the context of this kind of discussion and exploration can be different than an art education model where techniques and art processes are often most prioritized. Art about issues instead focuses on the capacity for the product to communicate ideas that amplify the voice of the maker and build bridges between the maker and an intended audience. This does not mean that art processes and quality are unimportant but that the emphasis is more on content than on the individual student mastering an art skill.

Part of the importance of this kind of community art is about the second population impacted by community art impacts: the viewers who see the work. The general purpose of looking at art, according to the mission statement of many art museums, is for the viewer to enjoy, discover, learn, feel inspired and understand something as a result of looking. This is true for community art as well: It, too, invites people into an inspiring learning experience, but adds an important emphasis on learning about a social problem. This is significant because experiencing a social problem from the perspective of those who bear the brunt of the problem is inevitably different from hearing the perspectives of mainstream society, which is mostly made up of those with power. This is problematic because without fully understanding multiple perspectives of a problem it is unlikely that we, as a society, could solve it.

In the absence of the opportunity to connect with someone who experiences a different reality, media and art allow us to vicariously experience another's story. In some small way you have the opportunity to be in someone else's shoes and see life through their eyes. Community art, when made with attention to addressing a social issue, is an authentic way to amplify often-oppressed voices, to make diverse perspectives on social issues accessible to a wider audience and ultimately to become a catalyst for change.

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