

Keeping the “Art” in Teaching Artists

Community-Word Project Helps Artists
and Writers Bring Their Creative Process
to the Classroom

CHARLES CONLEY

AS I ENTERED THE ROOM for Community-Word Project’s first training session of 2009–2010, what immediately caught my attention were the posters covering the walls. The wide murals—created in the classrooms of teaching artists—featured student poetry and art from schools around the city, bringing color and optimism to my Saturday morning.

Chairs lined the walls in an oval. On the side of the room farthest from the door, they made a double row like shark’s teeth, and this is where I took my seat—in the back of the room, out of the way, I thought. I had a shelf for my coffee, and I was near the only windows in case the room got too warm as it filled with people on this sunny October day. I wouldn’t bother anyone as I took notes for the article I’d be writing. I was there to cover Community-Word Project’s Teaching Artist Training and Internship

Program (TATIP), which offers both new and experienced working artists innovative ways to “transform their creative skills into educational tools.” Community Word Project is a New York City-based arts education organization working with children in underserved communities. The 25-week teacher training sessions they run to support and promote their model of arts education are open to creative writers, visual artists, theater artists, media artists, dancers, and musicians.

Any expectations I had about sitting in the back while Ellen Hagan and Renee Watson, the lead trainers for this year’s program, lectured a classroom full of slightly bored trainees were almost immediately shattered. After a short introduction by the trainers, I found myself out of my seat, walking the classroom with a card in my hand that read “Describe the town where you grew up,” seeking someone who would do what my card instructed and who, in turn, would read to me his or her card. I found someone rather easily, and she asked me who my worst teacher was. I vented as if I had been waiting fifteen years for someone to give me the opportunity. We traded cards and parted to meet more trainees and to ask and answer more questions. In five minutes, I’d met four trainees, shak-

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en off some of my discomfort, and—for the moment—forgotten my doubts.

These doubts stemmed from the immediate and instinctual resistance I have whenever I sense a bureaucratic encroachment on the arts. It is difficult not to sound alarmist—how can a reasonable person object to better training for adults working with students? That isn't what I object to, though. I object to what often feels like the unstoppable momentum of bureaucracy—training leading to certification leading to masters degrees leading to doctorates—and to the standardization of something as individual and unpredictable as creating art.

I'll admit that in addition to these concerns I was also in the middle of a long writing slump. I'd been banging my head against the same four narrative walls for months, and a Saturday morning observing this training program meant a morning I wasn't working my way out of that slump.

After our “cocktail party” icebreaker, I returned to my seat in the back of the room, and the impossibility of my sitting unobtrusively out of sight to take my notes became clear. Because of the roughly circular arrangement of the chairs, every participant could see and be seen by almost every other participant, and I happened to have chosen the spot directly across from the lead trainers. It would turn out that we moved around so much—walking (even dancing) around the classroom, writing on large pieces of paper taped to the wall, arranging ourselves in small groups—that where we sat didn't matter all that much anyway. I didn't know that yet, though.

I sat back and waited to hear about Department of Education requirements and how to work with school administrators and the reorganization of the New York Public School system, but heard instead that the

focus of the first day's lesson would not be on any of that, nor on teaching at all. Instead, that first day was to be spent focusing on the trainees and their own artistic practice.

Whenever Watson and Hagan mentioned teaching that first session, it was because they wanted to be sure we noticed how they were modeling good teaching practice. *Get the students up and moving. Offer different entry points. Constantly invite participation. Ask to hear student voices. Be present, be attentive.*

The rest of that first training session—nearly four hours—was spent interrogating our own artistic practice. The trainees and I filled out a worksheet reflecting on our history with our chosen art form, answering questions such as, “What is your earliest memory related to your art form? What were some of your first experiences with it?” and “Where are you now? What are you thinking about/working on in your creative work?” We used the answers to these questions to guide us in creating an artist map, and yes, there were colored markers and paper available so we could draw that map.

Everything the trainers put us through served two purposes—to help us get (back) in touch with our own artistic practice, and to model a lesson plan based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner's theory posits that there is not one kind of intelligence, but many, and that not all individuals learn and remember the same way. Community-Word Project structures its lessons on the belief that understanding how to engage these different ways of learning helps teachers reach each and every student in the classroom. As Keith Kaminski, Community-Word Project's program director, explains, “teaching artists usually have a very limited amount of time with students, so they need to try to maximize every minute they have.”

In the training session, we'd already hit the linguistic, visual/spatial, and intrapersonal intelligences in filling out the worksheet and creating the map.

Next we formed small groups and shared what we had done. As a small group, we came up with a presentation for the class about our artistic practices that used as many of the multiple intelligences as possible. In doing the small group work and the presentation, we added the musical, bodily/kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences, touching on nearly every one of the multiple intelligences in one lesson.

Yes, sharing something so intimate was slightly uncomfortable, but each group presented to the rest of the trainees, and everyone in the group participated, so we were all in it together. And, if doing this was uncomfortable for us, perhaps this would make us better able to sympathize when we were in a classroom asking our own students to share their work. Needless to say, in a room full of practicing artists and aspiring teaching artists, the presentations were inspiring, creative, original, and surprising. After all the groups presented, Hagan and Watson explained the homework assignment, ran us through a quick warm-down, and sent us home.

It hadn't been at all what I expected.

What made the session different, I realized after it was over, was that Watson and Hagan were not just teaching us, they were modeling how to be *teaching artists*. This meant helping us see how our work as teachers should come out of our work as artists. During that first training session, Watson and Hagan focused not only on the trainees' artistic practice, but on their own as well; both read us poems they had written, reinforcing the connection between their teaching and their art. This connection, says Kaminski, is at the core of the training program. “We believe that the most effective teaching artists teach from their own art-making,” he notes. “Helping teaching artists to be able to talk about their own artistic practice is the first step to being able to bring

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Michele Kotler, the founder of Community-Word Project, says this has been the guiding philosophy of the program since its formation in 1999, when the first five trainees held their sessions in a Greenwich Village café. “It's important for artists to have an idea of how they create,” she says. “So many artists—and writers especially—can't do it. They can show you their work and tell you how they revised it, but they can't tell you the process that got them from experiencing something in their life to forming that into a poem. And that's the process we're asking these artists to explore with students in the classroom. If we can't talk about how *we* do it, then how are we supposed to get these young people to do it?”

Over the years, says Kotler, Community-Word has refined its program, but the emphasis remains the same: transforming individual creative processes into teaching tools. The homework assignment after the first session helped facilitate this transformation: Each trainee was asked to create a ten-minute interactive presentation about their unique creative process, communicating the various elements of this practice using several of the multiple intelligences identified by Gardner. These presentations—by dancers, musicians, painters, actors, poets, and writers—took place at the second training session, a nervous and exhausting but rewarding day.

The third training session brought the focus down to planning and executing a single lesson. If this had been the first session, my defenses would have been up, looking for the ways art was being standardized, diminished so it could fit in a classroom, but because the program had started the way it did, with



Participants in Community-Word Project's Teaching Artist Training and Internship Program. Photo by Keith Kaminski.

the focus on the artistic part of the equation, I was much more willing to go along. Hagan and Watson explained how to divide a class period into segments, from the ritual that precedes every lesson to the closing that completes your time in a classroom, and they demonstrated each part (as they'd been doing all along). They reminded us that, as teaching artists, we're not heading into a vacuum, but a dynamic classroom where things happen when we're not around that can affect how the class interacts with us. They discussed how to work with a classroom teacher and how to create and execute a lesson plan. We learned how to create objectives or inquiry questions for a lesson plan, and worked in small groups to come up with age-appropriate objectives for theoretical lesson plans.

The homework for this session was to work with an assigned partner or two and create a full lesson plan starting with the objective and proceeding to map out every part of the class period. These 45-minute plans were presented—in an abbreviated twenty-minute version—to fellow trainees at the fourth session.

The final Saturday training session was divided evenly between classroom management—how to keep a class paying attention and ways to get them back when you feel them slipping—and mapping a whole residency. Coming from Hagan and Watson, two experienced teaching artists, the tips for classroom management were as good as expected, making points

as simple as being strategic about where you and the classroom teacher stand in a given class setting to using the challenging students to be classroom leaders—“you're already standing, why don't you hand these out for me?”

The discussion of mapping the residency is when the worst of the paperwork came up. Lists of goals, skills, and outcomes; week-by-week timelines; using the kind of language the New York City Department of Education knows and trusts. It was what the dubious part of me had been waiting to pounce on through five training sessions, but by the time it came around, I was ready to defend it myself. You can only be a teaching artist if you can get into a classroom, and this is what it takes to get into a classroom right now. We can bemoan the way things are, but if we want to get into the classroom and work with students, being organized and using the vocabulary administrators and bureaucrats want to hear are not negotiable. Having seen so clearly that Community-Word Project's goals are in line with my own, a process that would have felt constraining and limiting in the first session felt instead like an opportunity to learn how to negotiate a difficult bureaucracy and get into a classroom to teach students.

Every Community-Word Project residency ends with the creation of a “community-poem” and a class mural. At the final Saturday training session, in mid-December, we were given a taste of this process when we were asked to collaborate with fellow trainees on our own community-poem. Working in small groups, we sketched out a few lines in response to a statistic about the realities of the world our students inhabit. My group's statistic was, “On average, seven people under the age of eighteen are murdered each day in the U.S.” Using one line from each member, the group then created a stanza. When we went around the room, each trainee reading his or her contribution, the lines came together to form a moving poem.

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After a month-long break, the program resumed in mid-January with five mandatory Friday evening sessions, covering topics like “Diversity and Sensitive Topics in the Classroom” and “Navigating the DOE System and Co-Teaching,” and optional Saturday seminars that covered more specific areas that might not be applicable to all the trainees. These included subject-specific seminars on visual arts, creative writing, and theater arts, as well as one seminar on working with students with special needs and another on alternative populations (strategies for being a teaching artist in prisons, jails, and residential treatment facilities). At the same time these meetings were going on, the trainees were moving ahead with their in-class internships, where they worked with two experienced Community-Word Project teachers first observing, then co-teaching, then finally planning and teaching a class on their own.

When I’d walked into that first Community-Word Project training session back in October, I had feared that the training would ultimately just create standardized teaching artists perfect for going into a classroom without embarrassing themselves or the organizations they represented. I was relieved and encouraged to find that Community-Word Project is something else entirely. Far from creating a standardized “teaching artist,” the program is intent on empowering its trainees, letting each one become the teaching artist who will best serve his or her students and his or her own artistic practice, uniting rather than severing the artist and the teacher within the individual. By beginning the program with an investigation into the trainees’ own creativity, Community-Word Project helps build the foundation of the teaching artists, then gives them the tools to feel competent and prepared when they go into a classroom to bring that creativity to the students. Every level of the training program is designed to ease the teaching artist into the role he or she will eventually assume, and the quality of the teaching artists who have come through the

program bears out the process.

The training is well-known and well-regarded in the local arts education community, which often looks to hire graduates of the program. “Training more teaching artists than we need for our own programs is our way of giving back,” says Kotler. “We are not just another arts-in-education program—we want to help the field grow.” Her vision is to keep expanding outside the New York City area, by connecting with other programs through the national Writers in the Schools Alliance to help train their teaching artists. When I asked Kotler whether she was at all concerned, as I have been, about the dangers of bureaucratic meddling in arts education, she acknowledged the importance of the training being “in the right hands,” and reminded me of our shared interest: “The whole point is to have people prepared to do this work.”

The number of successful teaching artists who come through Community-Word’s training program speaks for itself, and I can speak firsthand about the influence of Community-Word Project on my writing. After that first training session, having spent several hours examining my history as a writer (including significant time as a non-writer), presenting a brief overview of that investigation to my small group, and then drawing a visual representation of my struggles as part of a multi-disciplinary presentation to the rest of the class, I went home as excited about getting back to my writing as any time I could remember. It was as if, by looking at my process, my history, and my goals, I recalled not only just how important it was, but how much I love to do it. Now imagine fifty new writers, visual artists, dancers, and musicians every year bringing that kind of enthusiasm to their art and to their teaching, and you’ll begin to have an idea of the kind of impact Community-Word Project’s training program can have on a community. ☺

Interview with Ron Chironna

Teaching Artist and Participant in the
2009-2010 Community-Word Project
Training Program

Ron Chironna has been a professional freelance illustrator for the past 32 years, providing artwork for books, magazines, advertisements, games, and private commissions. For the last three years he has been teaching illustration classes at a Staten Island nonprofit arts group called The Art Lab. He was interviewed by Charles Conley this spring, shortly before the end of the training program.

What brought you to Community-Word Project's training program?

In the fall of 2009 I had my first teaching artist position for six weeks at a small private school. It was a humbling experience. I realized then that I needed some training in order to do a better job for the kids in that kind of setting.

When I started to seek out training, I first thought of going back to college to become a certified school teacher. However, the time and money needed for that was not affordable for me, and the colleges I contacted all said that there would probably be no art teacher jobs available when I graduated. Then I learned about becoming a teaching artist, and that seemed a better fit for me. And the name of the training program that kept popping up was the Community-Word Project. They have a sterling reputation, and their education process is thorough, diverse, and very practical.



Photo of Ron Chironna by Charles Conley.

What was the most valuable thing you learned from the training?

Adaptability. Community-Word Project provides its trainees with knowledge of all sorts—theories of learning and teaching, and practical real-life methods of forming lesson plans for the classroom and implementing them while managing the class. But once a teaching artist is actually in front of the class, Community-Word Project stresses that he or she has to have the skills to adapt to whatever occurs in the classroom, so that the students still get a valuable lesson, though it might not be the lesson that was

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intended when the class started that day.

What does a practicing artist/writer bring to a classroom that is different from what a classroom teacher can bring?

However well-trained a classroom teacher might be in implementing lessons in art or writing, that teacher is foremost a teacher, not an artist or writer. A teaching artist is foremost an artist, and brings to the classroom his own experience in his field of endeavor, which is certainly more up-to-date than what the school's curriculum can provide, and much more expansive in nature. In addition, some students accept knowledge more easily through visual means, others through the written word, others through music or dance, and so on. Teaching artists bring the ability to reach students through those various avenues.

What has the program taught you about your own creative process?

Mainly that I've been taking it for granted. I've been an illustrator for so long that I've been going through the creation of each illustration without really thinking about the creative process, and perhaps having my work suffer because of that. The program has taught me how important it is to consider my process all the time, so that I can not only benefit from everything I've learned, experienced, and done up to this point, but also consider incorporating new creative elements into what I do.

How have you integrated this understanding with your teaching style?

When I start to construct a teaching curriculum, I not only use the knowledge and practices I've been comfortable with for so many years, but I also look out of my comfort zone. So, though I'm a visual artist teaching visual art primarily, I try to construct lessons that bring in music, performance, the written word, and other creative disciplines. I hope that this

way of working also influences the students to think in a more expansive way when they go through their own processes of creation.

How does teaching influence your art?

Being an illustrator is a very solitary profession. I sit in my office studio and create my images with my only company being a radio and CD player. I only communicate with my clients by phone or e-mail. Now, I'm in classrooms full of vibrant, active, smart, interesting, and interested kids. It's an amazing difference. How can that interaction not influence me and what I do? How can hearing all those different thoughts, opinions, and experiences not get into my head and come out through my pencil point? When I start a job now, especially an illustration aimed at kids, I consider how my students would react to my images, and how they might want me to revise a visual idea or the way I drew an element in the illustration

How does your art influence your teaching?

As an illustrator, my job is to tell stories through the images I create, whether they're for a storybook, a magazine article, or an ad image for a brand of cooking oil. I've always felt that my job in the classroom is to help the students somehow tell their own stories, and I know that each one of them has a story that should be told. Now, my lesson plans might help them tell a very direct and obvious tale of how they live or think, or they might just lead them to reveal an interesting subtle aspect of their personality, or a hidden talent. I go into a classroom hoping that by using my own art, or by incorporating another art form such as music, I can teach a lesson that relates to the school's curriculum, and also aids in helping the students express their creativity and individuality, and tell the stories that are only their own, and that make them each very special. ☺