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TEACHING ARTISTS: A WORK IN PROGRESS

BY DANIEL RENNER

Eric Booth, whom many of you know from national conferences and regional seminars, is an articulate spokesperson for the field of arts-in-education. As a teaching artist, actor, teacher, writer and consultant, he has been a leader—often throwing himself (think human barricade) into the path of trendy educational movements. He has also been a passionate advocate for expanding the boundaries of current arts-in-education programming.

I have had the pleasure of working with and learning from this cultural warrior over the years. When he told me of his most recent endeavor, the creation of the quarterly *Teaching Artist Journal*, my first response was, “Great idea, but when are you going to have time to do it, Eric?” followed by “Do you think teaching artists are going read it?” Well, he did find time, and people in the field are most certainly reading it. I asked his permission to reprint an article from the premier issue, in the hope that it will initiate discussions in your theatres about this growing profession and the rising population of teaching artists. Many of you reading this hire teaching artists; many of you are teaching artists yourselves; and we should all be part of this ongoing discussion that is happening nationally.

Teaching Artist Journal features leaders in the field who are writing a wide range of articles, from new studies and compilations of web resources to pieces on subjects like “Using Video for Self Assessment,” “Professional Development,” and “Outcome Models for School Residencies.” The journal is a means for us to discover what our counterparts are doing in all areas of arts-in-education, not just in the theatre. It will expand your rolodex (yes, I still use one, because my laptop address file is a fickle beast), and it provides a national printed forum that mirrors some of the work being done at convenings like Crossing Paths, Spring Hill and the TCG teleconferences.

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SEEKING DEFINITION: WHAT IS A TEACHING ARTIST?

Nineteen colleagues try to define the attributes that distinguish the teaching artist from other arts-in-education practitioners.

BY ERIC BOOTH

For many years we used the term “actor/teacher” in our program descriptions and grant proposals. The work in Seattle was very particular, and that term was the best at hand at that time. I don’t even remember when I first heard the term “teaching artist,” but it crystallized much of my thinking. When I first used the term at a training session with artists who were working for me in public schools and community centers, they just beamed. It made them proud, and they too felt that it was somehow...just right. Here in Denver I have a crew of teaching artists, and it is with great joy that I watch them train other artists who are beginning to see the rewards of making the commitment to be a teaching artist. —*Daniel Renner*

It makes sense, doesn’t it?—defining the term “teaching artist” in the first issue of the first national publication for and about teaching artists. If only it were as easy as it is sensible. There is no commonly accepted definition to refer to, and there is no single authority to propose one. So we begin the process here.

We might have printed an article offering an individual’s point of view. However, we thought we could build consensus within an emerging field more authentically (and effectively) by tapping the distributed intelligence of a range of informed individuals. So I asked 19 colleagues (listed at the end of this article) to write a one-sentence definition of what a teaching artist is. I invited further comment and asked about distinctive characteristics and the ways in which a teaching artist differs from any artist who teaches. These responders relate to the term in various ways: some are teaching artists themselves; others are cultural organization staff or school administrators; one is a classroom teacher and one an education researcher; and others serve in multiple roles.

This article has three goals: to report the findings from an analysis of responses; to challenge and invite you, as subscribers and readers, to reflect on your own understandings (and send the *Journal* letters with your thoughts); and to add a few perspectives of my own that may spark the ongoing dialogue. My additions derive from decades of asking these same questions of colleagues and myself.

In soliciting the responses, I expected neither a harmonious chorus of agreement nor a cacophony of 19 different tunes. That middle ground is what we got—some ideas in unison; many ideas in harmony; little overt discord, but a few areas of uncertainty.

History of the Term

David Shookhoff notes that the term “teaching artist is one of those amorphous, hybrid neologisms that serve a useful function. It suggests some roles and responsibilities of the individuals so designated without itself having ever been rigorously defined.” It seems that the term was officially coined

by June Dunbar at Lincoln Center Institute in the early 1970s. In answer to my question about this anecdotal history, she writes, “I guess I was the originator of the term “teaching artist.” I came up with the words as a reaction to the dreadful one used by my predecessors at what was then known as the Education Department at Lincoln Center. The words they used to describe the activities of artists in schools sounded to me like a description for a typewriter repairman, plumber or an irritating educationese term: Resource Professional. Anyway, my term seemed more direct and specific, and it has stuck.” (“Resource Professional” was actually inherited from language in the federal government grant that established the Lincoln Center program.) So, at its origin, the new term shifted the identity of this artist-educator away from the needs of the institutions and funding authority involved toward the unique hybrid practice we still struggle to define; and it put “artist” at the center.

In the ensuing nearly three decades, the term has been used within the network of Institutes of Aesthetic Education, led by Lincoln Center Institute, and it sprang into use in the early ‘70s in other programs. It is not unusual for an idea whose time has arrived to spring up in disparate areas almost simultaneously. In recent years, the term has gained wider use, by many different programs and by individuals. As Richard Burrows writes, “I have noticed the term “teaching artist” has been appropriated nationally as a designation of this kind of work.”

Many other terms are still used to refer to these same individuals and practices. You will hear: “artist-in-residence” or “residency artist,” “artist-educator,” “visiting artist,” “arts consultant,” “arts expert,” “arts provider,” “workshop leader” or even just “artist.” Perhaps you have other terms you prefer. None of the respondents, when specifically asked, has a problem relating to the term “teaching artist” as the national designation for the work they are involved in, whatever term they commonly use in practice.

It is an interesting moniker, this label that has emerged to identify our work. The focal noun is “artist,” with the descriptive adjective being “teaching”—rather than an “artistic teacher” or

WHAT IS A TEACHING ARTIST?

- ❖ A teaching artist is a practicing artist whose teaching is part of that practice. Teaching artists don't necessarily have education degrees, but they might. Teaching artists are role models for lifestyle, discipline and skill. They pass on an oral and experiential tradition in ways of thinking, seeing and being. They are educators; in the truest sense of the word (the root of the word "educate" is "to draw out") they "draw out" rather than "put in." They are guides/facilitators/bridges to creativity. Teaching artists are social activists. —*Tina LaPadula*
- ❖ Teaching artists are arts translators, whose primary responsibility is to use their own art form's language, precepts, concepts, strategies and processes to translate the personal and collective arts events of other individuals into a meaningful experience. —*Richard Burrows*
- ❖ A teaching artist is a practicing artist who is steeped in (lives in, thinks in) an art form—and who has made a substantial commitment to share her artistry with students and teachers in schools. —*Judith Hill*
- ❖ A teaching artist is a practicing professional artist who extends the definition of practicing professional artist to include collaboration with classroom teachers with the goal of advancing teaching and learning. This goal is achieved through the design and presentation of activities that aim at illuminating the curriculum by engaging students in the medium of a craft and its skills, procedures and social/historical contexts. —*Daniel Windham*
- ❖ A teaching artist is an artist who actively engages learners in consciously developing the aesthetics of their own processes for learning. —*Arnold Aprill*
- ❖ When an artist "teaches" through his/her work (and by teaching I do not mean giving information, but rather opening possibilities), art is produced. When a practicing artist agrees to break down the components of art-making to fit some more linear model, then, I suggest, art is being taught *about* rather than taught. When a practicing artist, on the other hand, is able to tap those more aesthetic and original ways of communicating that have made his/her art production deeply satisfying, then I think the real potential of the teaching artist is achieved. He/she is *not* teaching about art; she is teaching aesthetically, is being an artist in the way he relates to learners and situation. —*Linda Duke*
- ❖ A teaching artist is an artist who has extensively engaged in—and reflected deeply on—the creative, perceptive and reflective processes inherent in making and viewing works of art, and who has made a commitment to guiding others to *make* works of art, *perceive* works of art, and *reflect on* the connections between art and the rest of life.... A teaching artist does not want to shape their students in their own image, but support learners to become more of who they are. —*Christine Goodheart*

even an "artist-teacher." "Teaching artist" places artist at the center—a balance that accurately reflects the 19 definitions I received. To be a TA, first you have to be an artist.

Etymologically, the word "art" comes from an Indo-European root meaning "to put things together," and the word "teach" comes from the Greek meaning "to show." So, the term is born of two verbs (appropriately, since the work of a TA is more about creation than information), and might be said to mean: "one who shows how to put things together." This underscores the frequency with which respondents state that artistic/creative processes lie right at the heart of teaching artistry.

Areas of Wide Agreement

- ❖ **Beyond the art form.** Our respondents concur that teaching artists are based in a particular art form (or more than one for some) and use the practices, understandings, language, history and wisdom of that art form, but, the respondents note, the teaching also reaches beyond the art form. They teach more than "about" quilts, more than "how to" dance. Teaching artists connect their art form to other important areas of life: to other information in schools, to other arts, to things happening in the world, and (most importantly) to relevant aspects of people's lives. Much of the TA's power derives from his or her skill in guiding people to put together satisfying connections between their arts experiences and their own lives. TAs artistically engage participants as meaning-makers. Phillip Ying suggests that a good subtitle for the *Teaching Artist Journal* might have been "Art That Connects."

“A teaching artist assumes the mantle of a broader experience. Artists who teach primarily teach from their own experience, their own life, or their own professional process. A teaching artist primarily offers opportunities for others to make entry into the creative, artistic, historical and aesthetic experience of the arts.”
—Richard Burrows

- ❖ **Audience.** Our peers who were surveyed for this article agree that the teaching artist’s audience is extremely broad (perhaps the broadest audience in all the arts) and describe it as consisting of learners, students, the general public, everyone. The audience is not limited to those training in a particular art form; indeed, many felt that TA work does not include training students in an art form. Christine Goodheart says, “I would not call an oboe player giving an oboe lesson a teaching artist, but I am not sure I can defend this.” I asked Sarah Johnson (a fine TA and an oboe teacher) about this, and her answer reminds us that it is the learning approach, and not the occasion or the audience, that makes the difference.

“When I am teaching a private lesson using “traditional” practices, I focus on technique and musicality or expression. I do things like work on repetition of specific finger exercises, discuss the shape of the embouchure, tongue placement, etc. I listen to students play scales, etudes and pieces. I criticize fluidity of technique, ease of attack of notes, etc. But I do definitely use my TA muscles in lessons—when that happens, it is out-of-the-box private teaching practice. I might listen to a recording with a student and ask her to choose two things about the performance that she would like to emulate, then discuss how we think the performer achieved those effects, and try them out. I might ask a student to figure out a way to visually map out one or more phrases, or to try to experience a phrase kinesthetically to figure out where the phrase is going. As a TA, I feel like part of my job is to set up challenges and situations in which students can safely engage musically and have success in some way.”
—Sarah Johnson

Respondents stated widely that the capacity to draw in, to activate participation, is a distinctive skill of the TA. Teaching artists are the exemplars of this skill that arts need so badly—they are the ones who can engage *anyone* in something essential about the arts.

- ❖ **Modeling.** About half of the responders mention a “modeling” function—teaching artists don’t just “teach about” the arts; they embody the teaching. The teaching artist is an authentic presence who thinks, listens, responds and improvises as an artist with learners and devises teaching approaches that are also authentic to professional exploration of the art form. Marlene Roeder notes the power

of “being an artist” among learners—in her six years of coordinating teaching artist work in her classroom and school, the most powerful learning encounters were with teaching artists who both performed in the art work they were studying *and* worked with the students in the class. This power carried over even to teaching artists the students did not particularly like, or whose teaching was a little weak. (While we may enter a situation “trailing clouds of glory,” we also know that the phenomenon doesn’t last long unless the ongoing work is engaging.)

- ❖ **Pedagogy.** There was wide accord that teaching artists use teaching approaches and techniques that differ from the ones typically used by school arts specialists, classroom teachers and those who teach “about” the arts. (However those professionals do sometimes use teaching artist approaches, and teaching artists sometimes use traditional approaches, so the distinction is not so clear. The practices, more than the job titles, create differences in the learning.) Several respondents mentioned the importance of these “unconventional,” “more effective” methods—not only because they spark such good learning, but also because they provoke improved teaching in partners who adapt or adopt the approaches. Our respondents (and a number of significant arts education programs around the nation) see teaching artist approaches as important tools for improving schools, even for school reform. A couple of respondents note that teaching artists have a different kind of curriculum than other arts educators. It is organized, but not sequential in the same way a skill-development program is. This is a juicy question for a future inquiry: what is the nature of a teaching artist’s curriculum?

“I do not consider, for example, the artists and faculty of the National Theatre Conservatory to be teaching artists. They are committed to very specific learning outcomes for emerging young professionals. Nor do I consider arts teachers in the public schools, where the Denver Center provides arts education programs, to be teaching artists. They have made a commitment to educate young students, but it is prescribed by a set curriculum and audience. Teaching artists balance several worlds at once. They are practitioners of their art form but actively seek to use components of the art to teach in new ways. They bring to teaching the techniques and disciplines of their craft, using these to initiate growth and challenge assumptions. They provide new pathways and connections between disparate ideas and facts to engage students in real learning. In many ways, I consider them the catalyst for change.” —Daniel Renner

Although only three respondents explicitly mention this idea, it is implicit in many definition statements: TAs have a sense of the developmental capacities of their participants. They know what learners of different ages and abilities are

excited by and are capable of doing. They know how to tap the multiple intelligences in each individual and how to take advantage of different learning styles. I would add that another skill of TAs is the capacity to keep a roomful of people of somewhat differing abilities involved at the same time, to adjust flexibly, creatively, on the spot to suit the needs of individuals within a group. TAs can spot and draw out the different capacities of individual learners. So often learners who struggle in some areas of learning “surprisingly” thrive in response to the work of the TAs, who discern and celebrate success that appears outside of expected norms.

- ❖ **Profession.** Our responding peers agree that the term “teaching artist” currently describes a *practice*, and not a profession. Some hope it never describes a profession; others feel the term should grow (and is growing) into professional status. A number of respondents mention personal commitment (a vocation to keep developing their practice, to keep making a difference), ongoing inquiry and abiding passion as features that distinguish TAs. Daniel Renner writes that the term “is becoming a professional designation born out of a professional dedication.” Without that motivation, a TA’s work is just a gig. I note that the etymology of the term “profession” comes from the Latin, meaning “to acknowledge in public.” By publicly professing the existence and importance of the identity and commitment of TAs (a mission of this *Journal*), we begin to build the cultural consensus that recognizes teaching artistry as something more than a quick buck for the underemployed.

Christine Goodheart wisely reminds us not to over-romanticize the term, that there are many complex motivations for artists seeking opportunities to teach, and it is only for some of them that it becomes a true part of their vocation. She also notes that “for those who develop a sense of vocation, this work becomes an important way of learning and knowing.” She adds, “I am not sure that it makes sense to call it a profession, because the beauty is that each artist can combine art making and teaching in ways that makes sense to them at different times in their life. The down side of its not being a profession is that people who do this important work can be marginalized, underpaid and deprived of a voice in developing the context of work.”

- ❖ **Focus on process.** Many of our respondents mention the importance of focusing on, emphasizing, artistic processes rather than just artistic products. Teaching artists guide participants to create things in classes and workshops (as do all arts educators), but TAs balance the emphasis on construction with a focus on the processes involved, sensitive to the richness of the learning along the way. Some of the respondents mention careful attention to works of art (made by participating learners and professional artists) as one of the essential parts of their work. A surprising number

use the word “inquiry” in describing what TAs do with learners. Only one mentions reflection as part of defining the role. Two mention a concern about the length of a residency or program with students, suggesting that short-term contacts may not qualify for teaching artist practice because so little of the deeper potential of a TA can be tapped that quickly. Others disagree, feeling that one can work as a teaching artist even in brief encounters, although, granted, the impact is much reduced in “drive-by” teaching.

- ❖ **The dual nature of the role.** There is one central identity feature that every respondent addressed—the relationship between the roles of artist and educator. Even though this may seem paradoxical to some, teaching artists are fully both. However, I noted subtle differences in the ways this inter-relationship is described in the 19 answers. In general, responders agree that the two sets of skills do not take turns, but come together in some way—the words “combination,” “integration,” “catalyst” and “synergy” are used. However, each description places the two roles in slightly different balance and interdependence. As a community, we do not agree on the nuances of this relationship between the arts and education. Perhaps we never can or should come to agreement; perhaps this relationship must remain dynamic, created and perpetually re-created in different ways in different individuals and programs. Perhaps, as Tina LaPadula phrases it, “a teaching artist is an artist who considers her art practice and teaching practice to be integrally connected within her creative process.” This implies that creative process is the larger passion that holds the two “separate” roles of teacher and artist in a larger, ever-changing embrace.

“When I talk to others who call themselves teaching artists, the biggest challenge that they cite is trying to balance performance, or art making, with teaching. It is the essential struggle, and yet most of these TAs wouldn’t have it any other way. It would be one kind of a choice to be an artist who occasionally teaches a workshop or seminar, or has an occasional ‘exposure’ presence in a classroom. But a TA has made a larger commitment to the endeavor, even though it presents professional challenges in terms of organizing time and energy. I think many of us feel the TA role enables us to share our art form in a unique way—it reveals a different side of our art than a performance or exhibition might—or even just ‘showing’ students what we do. Serious teaching enables us to share our ‘art-think,’ our art-making processes.” —*Judith Hill*

A Plenitude of Purposes

There is one major area of disparate response: goals. Most of our responding peers cite a primary purpose for the teaching artist’s work, but few have the same idea. This should not be surprising in a field of individuals and programs that have worked separately in response to many different opportunities

and needs. Perhaps variety is healthy, in that there are so many different things teaching artists can do, so many different ways in which they can be successful.

Here are some of the primary goals that are cited: to develop aesthetic skills, to provide “apprenticeship” with a real artist, to advance teaching and learning, to draw forth the creative spirit, to spark learning about art, to foster connections with other people, to generate meaningful experiences, to facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge, to develop an aesthetic of learning processes, to provoke learning about life, to challenge people to develop their own understandings, to foster creative perception. Clearly, there is overlap—these aspirations are not mutually exclusive. And there are divergent intentions too—is the TA’s intent to bring people into art, to foster human development, to wake up learning?—is it to sell tickets? Perhaps the real aim is found in the vague area where all these goals overlap? Or perhaps we select specific goals from the more general pool in response to particular situations?

As I read each answer, I sensed two things: First, there is a general, ineffable aspiration we all share. As the Hindu saying has it, “all paths lead to the same summit.” Perhaps that peak is artistic experience, of the kind that is so rewarding and satisfying that it compels so many to dedicate their lives to it. Second, the respondents seemed to be expressing a deep and personal goal. It was as if teaching artists’ goals represent the highest good, the most important, deepest aspiration each individual has about this field we share. Including the goal in the definition of the teaching artist seems like a Rorschach test of sorts—it invited people to name their hopes for the field.

Refining the Defining

So what is a teaching artist? Has this exercise gotten us anywhere closer to clarity? Is the best we can say that a TA is a practitioner of some never-to-be-codified combination of the skills of art and teaching, applied for any number of purposes that might arise for artistic, cultural or education needs—who uses a wide variety of traditional and unconventional practices with and for almost anyone? What kind of definition is that? A lousy one. (However, it is probably no weaker than the hundreds of differing definitions of art, of learning, of understanding, that we see. I have discovered over 60 different definitions of creativity, none of them conclusive, most of them provocative, all of them far from capturing the importance of the human actions they attempt to denote.)

I can propose this definition as a reduced core of agreement among our 19 colleagues: a teaching artist is an artist with the complementary skills and sensibilities of an educator, who engages people in learning experiences in, through or about the arts. Perhaps it is too generic to be useful. Perhaps even this does not represent full consensus.

—Eric Booth became a teaching artist 25 years ago and now works with arts-in-education programs around the country. On the faculty of Juilliard, he teaches at The Kennedy Center, Tanglewood, Lincoln Center Institute and dozens of universities, schools and arts institutions. He’s the editor of the Teaching Artist Journal, and his award-winning book, *The Everyday Work of Art*, was a *Book-of-the-Month-Club Selection*.

An additional list of article contributors follows on the next page.

I felt guilty imposing the assignment on my 19 over-busy colleagues. However, in noting the difficulty of the task, most of them state how fruitful the effort had been. Many thanked me; some apologized that they couldn’t whittle their definition down enough to satisfy themselves. The purpose of this definition exercise is the process, not the result. Teaching artists, whatever their definition is, know that as a fact.

Unless we try to define the term, we cannot draw distinctions. We “know” that someone teaching the illusion of walking in place in a mime class is not acting as a teaching artist, but we can’t say why. When we hire and train new teaching artists, we hope they arrive with the innate understandings of the distinctions we carry, but without an ongoing process of defining, we are less effective in developing their work. Without an ongoing process of definition, we speak to one another about this work, but we bring different understandings of the terms we use, and have weaker communication as a result. As a field, we need to be engaged in the ongoing challenge of reflective clarifying and articulating, as well as practicing.

The etymology of *define* means *bring limits*. Our 19 responders do clarify some defining limits: a fluid combination of the skills of art and teaching; the capacity to actively engage the widest array of people in creative inquiry processes that open up relevant discoveries (often powerful insights) in each individual; the reach for a wide range of connections between art and anything else that is important to a wide range of participants; the ability to authentically model the power of artistic thinking, creating, perceiving, reflecting, attending. Those are ambitious capacities. Only a small percentage of the tens of thousands of people who participate in the arts and in arts education can actually do them. Those are teaching artists.

“Every act of teaching requires the process of recapitulation, a bringing back of the motives, interests and ideas that provoked the teacher’s mastery of the subject she is teaching. As the teacher recovers these beginnings, she also imagines the lived experience of her students, finding bridges to span her own interests and theirs. The history teacher may strive to recover her curiosity about time, or ancestors or causality; the math teacher the appeal of relationships or patterns. The teaching artist, also, must recover the origins of her attention to movement, to expressivity, to communications that dance around the edges of conventional discourse and imagery. Then she can bring her students on a journey that starts at the beginning of their experience and interest, travels through their introductions to the forms provided for their expression, and arrives at a celebration of artistic achievement.” —*Madeleine Grumet*

Additional Resources for Teaching Artists

There are numerous resources available for teaching artists, and we have included the following for your reference:

- ❖ [Creating Capacity](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/partners/creating_capacity.html), published by the Kennedy Center. This self-assessment tool and resource checklist are intended as planning tools for a group of administrators and teaching artists in designing a professional development program for their organization. www.kennedy-center.org/education/partners/creating_capacity.html
- ❖ [Artists as Educators: Becoming Effective Workshop Leaders for Teachers](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/partners/handbook.html) provides an introduction to designing professional development workshops for teachers K-12. The 64-page book sells for \$15 and can be purchased through the Kennedy Center Education Department online. www.kennedy-center.org/education/partners/handbook.html
- ❖ [The Association of Teaching Artists](http://www.teachingartists.com) is a not-for-profit advocacy organization that brings together artists who teach in schools and in the community to educate, collaborate and communicate. www.teachingartists.com

Respondents whose answers form the basis of this article are

- ❖ **Arnold Aprill** (executive director, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education)
- ❖ **Terry Baker** (senior research scientist, Center for Children and Technology)
- ❖ **Richard Bell** (national executive director, Young Audiences, Inc.)
- ❖ **Richard Benjamin** (executive in residence, Office of the President, Kennesaw State University)
- ❖ **Richard Burrows** (director of arts education, Los Angeles Unified School District)
- ❖ **Linda Duke** (director of education, UCLA Hammer Museum)
- ❖ **June Dunbar** (artistic director, Lincoln Center Institute, retired; ceramic artist)
- ❖ **Christine Goodheart** (executive director, University-Community Partnerships/Educational Partnerships and Learning Technologies, University of Washington)
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- ❖ **Judith Hill** (full-time teaching artist, Lincoln Center Institute)
- ❖ **Sarah Johnson** (program associate, Educational Outreach Dept., 92nd Street Y, New York City; teaching artist)
- ❖ **John Knowles** (independent teaching artist and musician, Nashville, TN)
- ❖ **Tina LaPadula** (teaching artist coordinator/arts educator, Arts Corps) with colleague **Lauren Atkinson** (Arts Corps teaching artist/arts educator)
- ❖ **Greg McCaslin** (director of programs, Center for Arts Education, New York City)

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