



# TCG

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

## CENTERPIECE FOCUS ON: EDUCATION

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### QUESTIONING OURSELVES

BY DANIEL RENNER

When I was asked to curate these pages, I was reminded of a conversation Ben Cameron had several years ago with a group of education directors. In it, he expressed his concern about the speed of our society and its emphasis on results — and lack of emphasis on time for reflection — especially among the young. Often, it is the lack of time rather than the lack of money that is our greatest challenge. I think we, as a field, need to heed that concern and take the time to reflect seriously on what we are attempting to do. In the daily rush to get artists into the schools, work with national standards, raise money, guide groups to matinees and find an empty room to hold classes, we rarely take time to reflect, as a department or institution, about our deepest goals.

The last fifteen years has seen an explosion of new education programs in theatres across the country. The range of programs being created affects not just children, but entire families, seniors, people who are incarcerated and a host of different communities that are part of regional-theatre education efforts — efforts that strive to make the arts central to people's daily lives. What is now being offered is nothing short of astounding. What was once seen primarily as an outgrowth of marketing has evolved into a field that numbers hundreds of education directors and coordinators with separate budgets and departments.

There is a growing national conversation about the role of education in theatres. TCG's biennial National Conference in San Francisco devoted an entire day to examining questions about the education of our audiences and training of a new generation of artists. Later in the summer, the Crossing Paths Conference in Minneapolis brought together education directors and teaching artists from all of the performing-arts disciplines to discover new ways to work together.

This *Centerpiece* includes a reprint of Bruce O. Boston's questionnaire for performing-arts institutions, a comprehensive series of questions that provides a forum for your theatre to examine its programming and goals. In addition, two education directors, Patti Saraniero from La Jolla Playhouse and Wesley V. Montgomery from the New Victory Theater, reflect on some of the challenges they face in creating successful education programs. All of these are designed as a springboard to help your theatres engage in earnest discourse.

Education *Centerpiece* curator: Daniel Renner, Director of Education, Denver Center Theatre Company.  
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# ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

BY PATTI SARANIERO

I recently attended a focus group of arts patrons with disabilities, who were asked to reflect on their experience attending arts organizations in my community. The group came up with a list of extremely diverse needs and I was a little overwhelmed. How on earth could my theatre begin to accommodate all these requests and provide all these services?

This focus group started me thinking about the patrons of my theatre's educational and outreach programming and set me wrestling with the question, "Who should the education and outreach program serve?" To find the answer, the first place I turn is my theatre's artistic mission statement, which specifies the goals of new-play development and presentation of classics. It does not mention summer camp or a pay-what-you-can program or ASL interpretation. So how do we create coherent programming?

The reality is that we cannot serve everyone, and, inevitably, we cannot meet all the demand for programming. As in the majority of education programs at regional theatres, resources (staff, dollars and space) do not allow my institution's programs to reach out to the extent we might wish. So how do we spend those dollars and use the staff we do have? Given the many deserving groups that make up our communities, whom do we choose to serve?

Many of us, as in the case of my own theatre, opt to reach out primarily to children and adolescents.

There is a strong rationale for this decision — future audience development, solid funding, positive press and community support of programming for young people can all depend upon the work we do in this area now. But there are many other groups, besides children and people with disabilities, whose members are knocking at the doors of regional theatres around the country. There are the economically disadvantaged. Bringing people (particularly children) from a low-income neighborhood to the theatre may help make a positive difference in the community. Senior citizens have been a longtime staple of our matinee series. With statisticians forecasting that a record number of persons will enter this segment of society over the next 20 years, it is in our interest to develop the senior audience, which has been proven to attend theatre regularly and loyally.

Of course, we cannot forget our own members or subscribers, who are our lifeblood and sustain us throughout the season. Providing educational opportunities for them can increase their estimation of the theatre and future involvement in it. Such programs can also develop their level of understanding and appreciation. And then there are, within our communities, unique subcultures to which we often feel the need to reach out — people who speak languages other than English, gang members, pregnant teens, people living with a disease, people who are homeless... The list goes on.

The issues surrounding our choice of audience relate to the roles

our theatres play in their communities. Some theatres are actively involved in the processes that impact their city (or county or state). Others see it as their role to comment on, rather than participate in, these processes.

In my own organization, outreach and education programming aims to be like a buffet lunch, offering many choices to suit the tastes and needs of a wide variety of constituents. We take this approach for a number of reasons. The large metropolitan area in which we are located has a breathtaking variety of citizens, speaking dozens of languages and practicing dozens of traditions. In acknowledging this wealth of uniqueness, we throw our educational programming "net" wide.

Such diverse programming gives us a very broad development base to which corporations may choose to offer support. However, the downside to this advantage is the difficulty of attracting sponsors for programming that seems less "sexy" or "do-gooder." For example, our outreach program to homeless children and adolescents is very fundable, almost to the detriment of other programs. However, one of our "workhorse" programs, the ASL interpretation, seems to be less interesting to funders but is no less valuable to those who benefit from the service.

The buffet style of programming is more receptive to constituencies that wish to lobby us for programming. At one point, for example, classroom teachers

vigorously requested professional development opportunities from my theatre and we were able to implement programs like an annual conference and year-round workshops, that responded to their needs. However, a more focused approach to programming also has significant advantages. My previous experience with more in-depth programming allowed my theatre to form a very committed and connected relationship with the community we were working with.

Serving a small constituency is very scary. There is a perceived pressure (whether real or not) from funders to serve greater numbers of people, and more focused programming can be and often is very risky. It can be difficult to justify why large amounts of money were spent to serve, say, 1,000 children when the same amount of money could have served 10,000. Quality of

experience comes into play here: serving only 1,000 children means more arts experiences, more instruction, more theatre-going for each child. Those 1,000 children will have a deeper, more meaningful learning experience that will potentially have a greater impact on their academic careers and their lives than the experience that could have been offered to 10,000 children with the same money. On the other hand, this approach to programming does leave 9,000 children who have received no programming at all. This difficult question is one I grapple with often — should we serve 10,000 children once or twice a year, offering some kind of exposure to the art form, or should we serve 1,000 children with the intention of making a profound impact on their lives? It is a dilemma that is exacerbated by the continuous cutting of arts programs in our public schools. Just what is

our responsibility as an arts organization to this growing need?

At my institution, we talk and debate these issues at length, trying to strike the best balance and make the best response, given what our theatre is at each moment. Our educational programming should be as vital and compelling as the work we present onstage. However we address this issue — via an open buffet or more focused approach — we must be specific about our goals and our anticipated outcomes. We must make a clear connection with the artistic vision. We must be responsive to the uniqueness of our own communities. We must be willing to say both “yes” and “no.”

*Patti Saraniero is the Director of School and Community Programs at La Jolla Playhouse.*

## A FACE-OFF WITH FEAR

BY WESLEY V. MONTGOMERY

*The biggest challenge in developing and implementing successful education programs is finding ways to use the arts to build a connecting bridge between an individual and a larger community. My response to this challenge, while very personal, underscores my commitment to connecting my own experiences and training with communities I may encounter on my professional journey.*

Recently, while leading a session on community outreach for a nonprofit organization of volunteers, I realized that most of the group participants (primarily Anglo-Americans) were allowing their thinking to remain pigeon-holed in categories based on race. It never occurred to them that the people they were planning outreach programs for were just that — *people*, with families, hopes, fears, values, religious beliefs and so on.

During the rest of that focus group, I let conversation turn to redefining exactly what multiculturalism is. So, what

is it? Well, each individual is the sum of his or her collective characteristics, and each characteristic identifies a community of which that person is a part. When we bear this in mind, we realize that conversations with people who are seemingly different can begin on common ground, and then move into an exploration of exactly where experiences and views intersect, or diverge.

Participating in a discussion of this sort requires a willingness to open the doors to personal life stories, and share them with others. It isn't always easy. When leading a

group in this kind of exercise, I've often noted that people fear personal disclosure, and I can't blame them. I remember the first time I participated in a discussion of multiculturalism, in the summer of 1989, while I was working with the student-orientations staff at the University of California, Berkeley. The staff was drawn from nearly every social, ethnic, religious and cultural background imaginable, and each of us was eager to meet the challenge of educating students and parents to the nuances of student life at Cal. But when it came to sharing some of our deepest, most private assumptions and personal beliefs, we all experienced a surprising mix of fear and anxiety. I remember vividly the tight feeling in my stomach and the dryness in my mouth as we proceeded through the various levels of the exercise and ensuing discussion. It was an alternately uncomfortable and exhilarating experience, all wrapped into the same afternoon. Near the end of the session, our facilitator shared a statement with us that has remained with me ever since. She said simply, "You are most open to learning when you are the most uncomfortable."

I often share this maxim with my groups, and urge them not to shrink from challenging themselves to take the next step: to share their personal stories, however uncomfortable that might be, so that they can learn, and help others learn, about diversity and about themselves.

When we exploit this valuable resource — our own life experiences — we are not far from the idea of "the personal as political," a concept that was immensely important to me when I encountered it at Berkeley, in a course on Black Women in Theatre. Growing up as an African American male on the public-school academic fast-track, I had spent the majority of my formative years learning how to be an "X" in a mass of "O"s. For years, I had been one of the few, if not the only, African American students in my classes and student groups, and as I got older, the frequency of that phenomenon (racial isolation) increased.

And then my study of black women playwrights set my mind racing with new thoughts about how we can and should relate to our neighbors, friends, relatives, and others. While helping to shatter myths about African American

women, their sensuality and sexuality, their views on family and the home, and their relationships with others within their respective communities, African American women playwrights during the late '70s and '80s, threw open doors to the understanding of all kinds of communities. What made writers like Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, P.J. Gibson and Elaine Jackson so electrifying was not only that they dared to write about their experiences and perspectives, but that they wrote about them in ways that were previously unheard-of in academic or artistic circles. They dared to write not only about the color of their skin, but about their hearts — they told true, personal stories.

Inspired by these women, I have in subsequent years based my arts-in-education work on a search for new stories, convinced that this quest will help us to respond to an ongoing challenge: how to effectively use the performing arts to connect with some of the most diverse communities on the planet. Throughout the last several years, I have watched the conversation about racial and ethnic representation in the arts ebb and flow, depending usually on the strength of the person or organization leading the discussion. Whether August Wilson is pointedly reminding us to nurture and develop works reflective of the country's diversity of experiences, or the NAACP is threatening a boycott of television because of a disparity of quality representation of ethnic minorities in programming, the message is clear: More stories need to be told — stories that reflect the rich, ever-changing tapestry of our nation's citizenry.

In fact, when I look around at the upsurge of violence in schools, in the home, and on the streets, I fear what will happen if I — if we — *don't* share our own stories. Our stories are paths to understanding diversity: telling them might just save a life or two.

*Wesley V. Montgomery is the Director of Education at the New Victory Theater.*



## **A CHECKLIST: SOME BASIC QUESTIONS FOR THEATRES**

Based on a brief examination of the educational activity of a sample of the nation's leading performing arts organizations, the following checklist of questions is offered to all theatres that are seeking to gain some perspective on their education programs, or that want to strengthen them. The questions are by no means all-inclusive, but they do provide a way of thinking about the effectiveness of education programs.

### **OVERALL**

- Does your theatre have a thorough and detailed understanding of the dimensions of your current education program?
- Why is this program being offered? Do your choices constitute a coherent pattern of thinking and response to educational needs?
- How many people are being served? Why expend resources on this group instead of another?
- What are the professional development dimensions of your program?
- What role do you play in the local education community (e.g., service provider, catalyst for education change, community educator)?
- Is there a revenue-generating component to this program? Why not? If so, how can it be strengthened?
- What relation does your program have to your organization's financial and artistic health?
- How does your education program serve your organization's artistic goals?
- Which elements of your education program are strongest and weakest? What indices do you use to determine your effectiveness? How often do you evaluate your overall effectiveness as an arts educator?

### **MISSION AND POLICY**

#### **Does your theatre:**

- Have either a written mission statement that includes a commitment to education or a separate written statement for educational goals?
- Have a clear picture of the resources you are able to commit to education?
- Include education as part of your long-range or strategic planning process?
- Reflect a sense of the priority education has, compared to all the other goals espoused by your mission and policy?
- Where, on a 1 – 10 scale, would you rate your current fidelity to your professed educational mission?
- What policies or strategies do you have now in force that support your educational mission? What policies or strategies impede your educational mission?
- What role does your education program play in creating and building audiences? How successful have you been in making this link?
- In what ways does your education policy change your organization from within?
- What factors (e.g., demographics, location, funding) restrict or enhance your educational potential? How well are you taking advantage of, or overcoming, these factors?
- How does your educational mission interact with your local school district's and state's policies and curriculum frameworks on arts education, instructional offerings in the arts, and the broader curriculum?
- Has your theatre become the "arts educator by default" in your community because school authorities have abandoned their role in this area? Was this a conscious choice or did it just happen? Have you thought about what you need to do to change this?

## **PHILOSOPHY**

- Do you have a distinct philosophy of education, view of aesthetics, or theory of learning that informs and shapes your educational programming?
- Does your education programming have an interdisciplinary dimension? Why or why not?
- Is the interdisciplinary nature of the education programming you do grounded in the integrity of the arts disciplines as well as in other school subjects?
- How, specifically, do you use arts-in-education to integrate school curricula?

## **ASSESSING STUDENT NEEDS**

- Do you have a clear picture and sense of priority about the arts-in-education needs of the schools and community you serve? Can you articulate it?
- Do you have a procedure or model for direct assessment of student knowledge and performance to help you shape educational programming? How do you know you are, in fact, meeting student needs?
- Are all affected parties represented in your assessment process?
- Do you do any training that is related to making an assessment of student needs or the needs of other education constituencies?
- Do you share assessment data with other arts organizations in your area?

## **WORKING WITH TEACHERS**

- Do both arts and regular classroom teachers in other subjects have direct input into the development of your school education program?
- Do both arts and regular classroom teachers in other subjects participate in creating your educational materials?
- Do you get regular feedback from teachers on the content and quality of your educational offerings?
- Do you depend on teachers to help you meet state and local frameworks and curriculum guidelines?

## **CONNECTING TO THE CURRICULUM**

- Do you think your theatre is underutilized by your local schools and community? What is getting in the way of a more productive relationship?
- What conclusions have you reached about your role in curriculum building in the overall context of school reform where you are? What questions remain?
- Do you have curriculum specialists working with your education department or assisting you in the curriculum-building process?
- Do you work to be responsive to state frameworks and curriculum guidelines when creating curriculum and other teaching materials?
- Is your curriculum-building effort restricted to the arts disciplines you are concerned about, or is it interdisciplinary?
- Do you find you are able to preserve the disciplinary integrity of your arts discipline when working in an interdisciplinary context?
- Are you able to exploit your own resources in your relationship with schools as you work with others to build curriculum? Is your curricular role cost-effective in terms of your overall educational effort, as measured by impact on students?

### **Are you involved in:**

- Developing or reconstructing state learning and performance standards for students in arts education in your state?
- Developing or reconstructing state learning and performance standards for arts education teachers in your state?

## FUNDING

- Does mission drive the budget in your area of theatre activity? Put differently, do you decide what you want to do educationally first, then try to find ways to fund that program; or, do you decide what you can try to accomplish once you know what resources are available?
- Can you construct a reasonably clear picture of what proportion of your theatre's total budget goes to education?
- Do you think that different management and accounting procedures would provide more clarity?
- Are you able to put a value on the volunteer time and in-kind resources that support your education program?
- What strategies have you adopted to leverage funding for education, and how successful are they? How might you change them?
- Is your education program dependent on the theatre's development budget, or does it stand alone? Do you have the kinds of information required to make a decision about changing if you wanted to? If not, how would you get it?
- What percentage of your educational income is earned income from schools? How can it be increased?

## PERSONNEL

- How many full-time positions are allocated to education in your organization? Is this adequate?
- How many part-timers contribute to the education program, e.g., staff assistants, docents, faculty, paid consultants, and other theatre staff? Is this enough?
- How well does your staffing pattern fit your workload and your educational goals and objectives?
- Would you benefit from having an executive-level officer (e.g., a vice president) whose portfolio is education?
- Do your existing union contracts limit the amount of time your artists can give to educational activity? How can this problem be addressed?

## FUNDRAISING

- How much of your organization's fundraising effort is targeted to education?
- Are you satisfied with the priority given to education in your theatre's overall fundraising operations?
- Is there a discrete fundraising effort for educational activity in your theatre?
- Are you satisfied with the priority given to different line items within the education budget, e.g., curriculum development vs. subsidies for tickets?
- Is fundraising an area in which the education staff of your theatre receives training, e.g., in grant writing?
- What percentage of contributions to your theatre is specifically targeted to educational programming and what percentage is allocated to unrestricted funds?
- Is there any possibility for your education program to become separately endowed? How would you go about exploring that?
- What size endowments would it take to make your organization self-sustaining? Is this possible? Desirable?
- Do you currently work with your school system's central administration staff responsible for raising funds?
- Have you targeted "arts opportunities" among current state and federal funding sources and programs, e.g., Goals 2000, America Reads, Safe Schools and state pass-through funds?

## **TRUSTEE/BOARD ROLES**

- Does your board review and revise its education policies regularly?
- Does your board have a separate education committee?
- Does your board's education committee recruit members from the constituencies served by your education program?
- Is your education program being used creatively as a part of the theatre's overall development strategy? Could education become a net contributor?
- Does your board "push the envelope" educationally by suggesting innovative programming?

## **PROGRAMMING**

- How diversified are your educational offerings? How wide a range of audiences are you trying to appeal to?
- Alternatively, are you over-extended, trying to reach a set of audiences that over-taxes your resources? How would you narrow your focus? What criteria would you use?
- Who are your audiences? Can they be discriminated to a higher degree, e.g., potential supporters, seniors, ethnic and racial groups, at-risk children and youth, gifted and talented youth?
- Are your program offerings comprehensive enough, e.g., are you having a system-wide impact and are you reaching the right audiences? How do you decide what to do next?
- Are you making efforts to mount – or move toward – fully articulated (K-12) programming?

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- Do you have specific, stated objectives for your overall professional development effort, as well as for each specific program in this area?
- Is your professional development effort directed primarily at skill-building for teachers, curriculum outcomes, or some other objective? On what rationale are your priorities based?
- Is your professional development effort structured so as to learn as much from teachers as you impart?
- Do you attempt an interdisciplinary focus or dimension in your professional development activity?
- Do you train artists to carry out educational programming? Are they compensated for this activity?

## **ADVOCACY**

- What role does advocacy play in your overall strategic educational mission and planning?
- What linkages are you able to build between educational goals and your theatre's advocacy agenda? Are they mutually reinforcing?
- What percentage of staff time is devoted to arts-education advocacy at local and state levels?

## **EVALUATION**

- How would you honestly characterize the evaluation done of your education programming? How does the evaluation you do square up with the assessment you have made of education needs?
- What kind of evaluation data would it be most useful for you to acquire, i.e., what information might have the most far-reaching effect on your education programming? Are these data within reach?
- What changes might you make in your informal evaluation efforts to make them more rigorous?
- Have you considered developing evaluation data from several years of programming to show changes? Have you considered developing external support for specific evaluation efforts?

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