

Exploring the Artist's Pedagogy

by Robin Mello

The state of Maine, famous for lobster, rocky coasts, and pine forests, harbors another resource—the strength and diversity of its arts community. For more than twenty years, the Maine State Commission on the Arts has supported a vital and unusual program, the Maine Touring Artist Program (MTAP), which provides funds and services to a variety of state programs. One, the Maine Arts-in-Education Program, primarily assists schools in sponsoring artist-residency programs that focus on direct classroom instruction using arts-infused curricula. MTAP has had a long and successful history, but the efficacy of its sponsorship on projects and its effect on both schools and the arts community has not been examined in any substantive way. The following qualitative study attempts to rectify the lack of research in this area by asking: How do artists perceive their role as teachers?

Method

In order to explore this question, MTAP artists were asked to reflect on their perceptions of the teaching profession as well as their experience working in public schools. A participant pool was developed using the following criteria: a) ten or more years' touring experience; b) self-employment as an artist; c) five or more years on the MTAP roster; and d) a successful track record of in-school residencies. Four artists who met these requirements and acted as core respondents subsequently participated in in-depth interviews: Karen Montanaro-Hurl, a dancer and mime artist; Rick Adam, a vaudevillian, one-man band, and musician; Randy Judkins, a humorist, juggler,

master of circus arts, and comic character actor; and the author, Robin Mello, storyteller, performance artist, and stilt dancer. Data from these conversations were taped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Portions of these data are quoted here to illustrate key findings.

All artists who participated in this study agreed to the use of their names for publication purposes. Data quoted here are excerpted from the entire transcript and are indicative of trends, concepts, and ideas expressed by study participants.

Can Artists Teach?

In unequivocal terms, all participants began by stating that artists *are* teachers and that the role of artist and the role of teacher are connected, especially in their own lives. For example, Rick felt that artists cannot be entirely successful unless they also know how to teach: "I'm stronger than a lot of performers because I go out there and I teach it. To really become a good performer you have to give it back to someone. I think the finest performers are people who have paid their dues as teachers." Randy went so far as to redefine his entire profession as "edu-tainment." He reflected on the evolution of his career by noting that he had "become an 'edu-tainer consultant' . . . All the artistry that I've been a practitioner of, for all these years, continues to serve this means to an end."

Robin had a different view. She felt that teaching and creativity are part of a continuum that enriches her professional life.

ROBIN: One of the biggest surprises of my life was when I went back to school for my teaching degree. Wow! All of a sudden my art took off. I mean I was getting into the studio and creating new pieces and telling more stories than ever before. I guess focusing on my teaching made me a stronger and more creative artist. It was an amazing revelation to me. I think all teachers are artists and vice versa.

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Teaching as a Way of Knowing

Participants discussed teaching enthusiastically, and although each artist had different definitions of the teaching profession, all expressed respect and esteem for the educator's role.

RANDY: When I'm in front of an audience of teachers I'm always reminding them that they are important people, and that they are doing absolutely fantastic work, that they are marvelous inspirations for all these kids, and they are.

RICK: If you don't know how to dance in this crazy world, then you don't know how to flap your wings and fly. If you don't know how to do things on your own then you are not going to make it. That's why teaching is so very important.

When asked to reflect on the dual role that a teaching-artist has to play, Karen felt that her major task is to "teach courage." She also felt that teacher-artists are "explorers of the psyche." Rick felt his primary role is to "create connections," while Robin considered a teacher-artist's primary role as "combining educational goals and artistic disciplines so that children can learn and create at the same time." Participants made connections between their work in classrooms and their work on stage. During interviews, conversations rapidly shifted from classroom to stage, teacher to artist, and back again. Data show that informants saw the act of performing as a metaphor for teaching. For example, Randy observed that performance is a way of linking art with education.

RANDY: I've just come to really appreciate and have a lot of respect for that position, being on stage. . . . I think anyone who is in a powerful position as performer . . . they have this incredible link with the audience already. . . . They can really persuade and affect people in a very incredible way. . . . I think anybody who is on stage is an educator. Anybody who performs . . . is educating.

Artists felt that their work helped them develop intellectual insights and knowledge. Randy compared his professional work to the mathematical skill of solving theorems and working out geometric problems. Robin and Karen, on the other hand, thought of their art as part of their cognitive experience.

ROBIN: My own decision to pursue a Ph.D. in educational studies was influenced by a strong desire to explore new ways of teaching and also understanding the process of creativity. I personally view education as a valuable life process. I also feel that intellectual exploration is a part of the artist's work.



In addition, participants often cited references from Ezra Pound, Joseph Campbell, Jean Piaget, Marshall McLuhan, Albert Einstein, and Louis Pasteur. For these artists, teaching, creativity, and intellectual growth are related processes.

KAREN: I feel like dancing has been my laboratory. . . . I love knowledge . . . so my first love is really the mind, and knowledge.

Building Learning Communities

Another key concept discussed at length by participants was the definition and use of art disciplines in classrooms. With the exception of Robin, participants felt that art is both a tool and a process and can be presented simultaneously as both a discipline and a tool. The clearest example of this debate came during the following conversation:

ROBIN: Some people say that art is a tool, and some people would say that art is a process, that to teach children sometimes people pick up the tools, and sometimes people lead children or their students . . . through the process. Which would you recommend?

RICK: I think it's both. I think you teach a child how to use the tool, and then you set them on the process. The process of building whatever they need to build.

ROBIN: But what are we really teaching those students? I wonder. I mean . . . do they really learn the discipline of the art that takes a lot of energy and concentration—or are they just learning to cut and paste?

RICK: For some people that process of creativity through using their imagination is going to

build computers; for some people it may be building a new kind of car, and that is what's wonderful. How it comes from each individual spirit, soul, and heart. It's the tools, the more that we can empower people with the tools in their hands of using imagination.

Artists expressed a strong interest in their student audiences. What children think, feel, or say directly influences the artist's material, choices, and often their life direction. Rick noted that he had changed his artistic goals in order to serve the needs of "at-risk" teenagers in his community.

RICK: I started creating my pieces of work for the audience where I was, in the environment that I was, and the community, the village . . . that I had been a part of [all along]. . . . I think that the function of an artist is to build community and to communicate. . . . How do I communicate? . . . Right now my focus is dealing with drugs, alcohol, and eating disorders. . . . In a performance setting you can reach lots of children. You can move lots of [students] in a way that a therapist may take months to get to. A performer can go up there and focus on what needs to be focused on.

Randy also felt that arts-in-education programs are vital because they establish relationships between the world of schools and the world of the arts.

RANDY: The most important thing for me is the relationship I have with the material, students, children, and the audiences and with how I'm growing. . . . They say art . . . doesn't belong in schools, or that it is separate from the education process, and it isn't. It is the education process.

In discussions about arts-in-education programs, the focus often turned to the place of the artist in society, how an artist negotiates social position, and finally, how artists have contributed to, and learned from, their communities. Randy and Rick spoke definitively on this point; they felt their role is to bring "theater with a message" into educational venues.

RANDY: I'm standing up in front of these people doing these character pieces, and getting them to interact with me . . . and these people are loving every second of it. This is where I want to be. This is where I want my artistry to infiltrate. . . . I've become an 'edu-tainer consultant.' An educational message wrapped in top-quality entertainment.

This kind of "message behind the medium" was not as important to Karen or Robin. Both felt that the purpose of an artist-educator is to give

audiences and students a chance to focus on their own ideas and develop multiple perspectives.

KAREN: I think that the exchange of ideas is actually what moves [people]. . . . People don't move unless their ideas move them.

However, all four artists spoke about the importance of "communication" between audience and performer, noting that this relationship leads to a process of learning and growth.

RICK: It's a really wonderful thing, trust, that an audience will give a performer every once in a while. I really honor and respect it. . . . A performer can go up there and get you to communicate and focus on what needs to be focused on. That's always been the role of the artist.

The transcript shows that these artists thought of themselves as people who can guide and encourage students to use their intellectual and creative capacities. As teachers they considered themselves to be "learners of ideas." In addition, they also felt that the interaction between students and artists is a unique experience, one they described as an "act of communication."

RICK: I believe in the art form of live performance. There's something that happens in a live performance that cannot happen in any other medium: communication between the audience. You talk it through with an audience. They tell you what is going to work. It is a dialogue. Some of the finest moments on stage have come out of something going blahooley.

These artists hoped that their audience would be transformed by the learning process. In addition, they considered their work as praxis.

RICK: I think what I'm trying to teach people is their place of creativity, which is their place of creation. To find and explore who they are, to know who they are, to be able to create, just as God creates, only maybe with Crayolas.

The Artist's Pedagogy

When asked to reflect on their role as teaching artists, participants consistently chose to talk about their spiritual philosophy. Interviews that began with questions about teaching the creative process quickly led to conversations that focused on philosophical ideologies. All four artists connected their teaching philosophy to their spiritual and metaphysical lives. Rick called his work "shamanism," while Karen called it "universal spirit." Robin felt that pedagogically an artist's job is "activism," "part of my soul," and "connecting to the needs and position of others through a pow-

erful spiritual force, a force that is grounded in creativity and imagination.”

RICK: It’s funny, as a performer and a teacher you work like a shaman in a village. You have a purpose—it’s a part of the human condition. Sometimes people need to have a jump-start and that’s what the clown and the performer does.

Karen also defined her philosophy as an “employment of spirit” and observed that in order to do quality work, as either a teacher or an artist, the philosophical roots of what she does had to be explored *first*. For Karen, defining a pedagogy was the first step in approaching creative pursuits.

KAREN: I think that before you talk about arts in education you have to define what education is. . . . Education is following enthusiasm. You want to be employed by spirit. You want to tap . . . your own innate sense of life, sense of worth, sense of enthusiasm.

Randy said that being an artist was like “God in action.”

RANDY: It’s like a god. God is like that. God is that, whatever God is. It is there. The power is there. . . . To me he’s the ultimate art form. He is a collection of all that is, or that was, or that ever will be. World without end. Amen, you know? So if God is the ultimate artist we’ve got a good model. Everybody is an artist—it’s just a matter of making a choice.

RICK: My work for me has always been my spiritual path. It has brought me to clarity in my life, it has been the strength there for me, it’s my connection to God. The creative process for me is my connection to spirit.

KAREN: The sacred is what holds the dancer up. . . . Artists have an innate understanding with this. . . . They find out, though, that the origin of everything they do, the origin of movement is spiritual. . . . I mean, that’s common knowledge in the arts field.

This study found that the connection between teaching and art is an iterative one, and that these artists have a pedagogical stance that developed as a result of their work as artists-in-residence. Teaching their art through performance, demonstration, and classroom instruction has led them, over the years, to understand the art of teaching and the act of art making as twin processes. These processes, in turn, have caused artists to develop a pedagogy based on the following beliefs:

- 1) Teaching is an activity that develops relationships between learner and instructor.
- 2) The creative process is an exploration of knowledge.
- 3) Teaching is a creative process.
- 4) Teaching and performing is a spiritual, ethical, and moral activity through which the participant learns and connects with others.

Findings also suggest that teacher-artists see themselves as learners who present, create, and perform in order to build knowledge, which in turn is directly related to the creation of learning communities. This is what pulls them from the studio, off the stage, and into the classroom. Teaching allows them to use their skills as tools for exploration, inquiry, and a celebration of deeply held beliefs.

Conclusion

There’s a hackneyed saying, often repeated among educators, that stipulates: “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” In artistic circles the opposite belief is frequently expressed: “Those who can do art *can’t* teach it.”

We need to take a hard look at these statements. Certainly, in many schools nationwide, the lack of arts programs and the paucity of strong collaborations between artists (those who “do”) and teachers (those who guide and instruct) is problematic. Perhaps the perception that artists are somehow separate from the rest of society has added to the lack of in-depth programming in schools today. This study suggests that we take another look at the role of artists in our schools; it finds that artists see themselves as integral parts of the educational process. Teaching artists provide a much-needed resource. They think deeply about their work as teachers and have come to view their work as “connecting with learners.”

By participating in the professional activity of teaching and performing, these artists have become agents of change, learning, growth, and transformation. The artists who participated in this study also believe that they are vital members of society as well as influential factors in the lives of students and schools. Findings show that through dedication and thoughtfulness, artists provide radical and vital instruction in classrooms. In addition, due to their pedagogical stance, they are able to create learning communities when they perform and teach.