

Why Do We Do What We Do in the Arts? by Edward P. Clapp

Call me crazy, but it seems to me that there are certain ideas, principles, and beliefs held by arts professionals that are so strong—they seem to be stamped into the very DNA of the arts and cultural sector.

What sort of ideas?

Ideas that suggest the arts are an important part of culture, an essential element of a healthy society, an exhibition of human expression, and an invaluable means to communicate the blatantly obvious—as well as the abstract and intangible. Arts professionals believe that the arts are one of the primary mediums through which children acquire critical thinking skills, foster innovation, and nurture budding imaginations. The arts solve problems, create problems, and offer new pathways to invention. The arts provide comfort, remind us of our inner humanity, inspire empathy, and dare us to dream of what can be. These beliefs are at the core of why we do what we do in the arts.

Assumptions about the world and about the arts

But while the above beliefs address the purposes of the arts, there are other ideas that govern our practices in the arts. These concepts are widely, though not universally, accepted, among them: that the arts are a nonprofit venture; that successful arts organizations are sustainable over time; that visual art, dance, theatre, and music are the core arts disciplines, and; that arts funding should be drawn from foundation grants, corporations, and individual giving.

While many of these beliefs about what we do in the arts—and how we do it—exist for a reason, in a world where the arts are undervalued, under-funded, and quickly losing pace with the interests of contemporary culture, it seems natural to question whether our purposes and practices are valid approaches to practice.

This past May I had the privilege to travel to Seoul, Korea to present at the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education. I was part of a panel discussing possibilities for the future of arts education. In my presentation I chose to tackle this very topic. I argued that the best way to work towards developing a new future for the arts sector was to develop the ability to change the field's core assumptions.

But what's a core assumption?

Depending on the dictionary, an assumption is most generally defined as an idea or concept taken to be true, without any evidence of its truth. Once upon a time there was a widely held assumption that the world was flat. There was little evidence aside from commonsense that this was indeed the case. Then some intrepid explorers sailed around the world and proved otherwise. There was once an assumption that the sun, moon, planets, and stars revolved around the Earth. Then a man named Copernicus wrote a book called *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* that proposed a more likely heliocentric model of the universe. The way we looked at the stars, the sun, and our place in the solar system changed dramatically.

Assumptions are what we base our realities upon. When we have nothing better to grasp, we grasp onto what makes most sense to us. And what makes most sense to us is often that which we intuit, that which we are passionate about—or that which we've always been told to be true. It takes a concerted effort to imagine that things can be otherwise. Why? Because assumptions are at the core of how we make meaning.

If I were to ask you (yes, you!) if you have core assumptions, it is likely that you'd say yes. "Sure, I've got core assumptions," you'd respond, "doesn't everyone?" Myself, and constructive developmental theory psychologists, however, may argue otherwise. In fact, it's a trick question. You don't have core assumptions. Your core assumptions have you.

It is common knowledge that the arts and arts education experienced a renaissance of sorts here in the US when the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was created in the 1960s. Cultural institutions flourished, arts education was on the rise, and a new era of the arts in America was underway. More or less a half century later, I argue that many of the structures and beliefs that shaped the arts in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, are still at the core of what we do in the arts, how we do it, and why we do it—today.

A decade into the 21st century the world we live in has seismically shifted from that of the later half of the 20th century. But our core assumptions—that stuff at the center of the art sector's operating system—haven't so readily kept up with the pace of change.

There are many reasons why the core assumptions held by those in power throughout the arts sector incline themselves to be more the stuff of the Eighties than the Internet. One possibility is that many of the decision-makers at the top of the cultural sector are the same people who were there twenty, thirty, maybe even forty years ago. While it is important to honor these individuals as pioneers in the field, it is equally important to incorporate the voices of the next generation of arts leaders into discussions about the future of the arts—and to encourage those younger individuals (with their generation-specific perspectives) to be our next game changers: to challenge our core assumptions.

Challenging our core assumptions about the arts

For nearly two years I have had the good fortune to work with young people who have done just that. Recently the book *20UNDER40: Re-Inventing the Arts and Arts Education for the 21st Century* was released. This anthology of critical discourse challenges the core assumptions of the field by publishing twenty essays about the future of the arts and arts education from the perspective of young arts professionals under the age of forty. In June of 2009 I launched this project from the living room of my apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts. My goal: to find the most radical ideas about the future of the arts from the perspectives of the most innovative emerging arts professionals.

Amongst the selected authors, David J. McGraw challenges the assumption that long-term sustainability is a measure of success for arts organizations. Instead of crafting ambiguous missions statements and designing our institutions to last forever, McGraw argues that the nature of the arts is ephemeral, and therefore arts organizations should be established with an end date in mind. McGraw calls this operating structure the Epoch Model, the purposeful building of an arts organization with a predetermined end date—and a mission that can actually be accomplished.

In her chapter *Please Don't Start a Theater Company!* author Rebecca Novick notes that artists who intend to work outside of the traditional theater world develop near replica structures of the institutions they are reacting to (with less resources and support). Instead of mimic the professional theatre system, Novick wisely suggests a host of alternative career paths that boldly step away from existing frameworks for practice. Though theater-specific, Novick's suggestions can easily be adapted for a variety of disciplines.

Authors Ian David Moss and Daniel Reid take on the problem of funding for the arts. In their chapter, Moss and Reid acknowledge that foundations are under-equipped to make fair decisions about designating resources to artists and arts organizations. There is just too much volume for any one foundation to consider. To address this problem, Moss and Reid present a Guided Crowdsourcing model for arts funding. The framework Moss and Reid present is a radical departure from the current grantmaking structure—one that is far more meritocratic, more democratic, and more participatory by nature.

In the lead chapter in the anthology, author Brian Newman argues that the influx of digital technology presents a host of challenges and opportunities for the arts sector. Newman addresses seven digital trends, ranging from the adoption of intermediation, to new hybrid with-profit business strategies that go against the traditional 501(c)(3) model. Newman even suggests new approaches towards literacy, arguing that electracy will become the cultural language of the future. In the opposite end of the book, author Kylie Pepler proposes *New Fundamentals* for arts education, suggesting that “creative coding” will become the new, new media literacy—and a dominant arts practice.

Author Casey Lynch also discusses the effects of digital technology on the arts. In his chapter, *Ctrl C + Ctrl V* Lynch looks carefully at our digital remix culture and asks: if no work can be traced to its origin, how can intellectual property rights exist? Lynch's discussion of remix culture suggests that the arts may play an important role in dramatically altering our current intellectual property and copyright laws.

These are just a few of the many core assumption challenging ideas discussed throughout the anthology. For the *20UNDER40* authors, the future of the arts lies in what's possible, not in what has been the status quo. “Why do we do what we do in the arts?” is the taste in their mouths they wake up with in the morning. The conversation surrounding the possibilities to new alternatives to practice and potential in the arts is the meat of the matter that is always on the table.

And so I ask you as I have asked them: What appears flat today, that can be re-envisioned to be round tomorrow? What change can you envision that would greatly alter how we see ourselves in the broader universe of arts and culture? Perhaps by challenging why we do what we do in the arts—we can not only alter our practice, but also get beyond the assumptions that the arts will always exist as underfunded, undervalued underdogs throughout society and culture.

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