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EDITORIAL
Four Steps to Cultivate Creativity for Good

By Jeff Poulin, Managing Director, Creative Generation



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In November 2019, I wrote an article for The World Ensemble titled "We Have Work to Do in How We Describe Our Work," issuing a call to socially motivated music programs to more authentically and effectively describe the outcomes of the socially engaged music education they deliver. Since that time, we at Creative Generation—a global NGO working to inspire, connect, and amplify young creatives catalyzing social change—have sought to more closely align the ways we describe our work with our organizational values. What we've come up with is an enriched set of terminologies that our field can use to impact both how we do our work and how others understand it. The operative term is "applied creativity." Rather than untangle this term's many uses, let's define it for our purposes: "applied creativity" can be understood as the process of utilizing one's creativity to envision local solutions to complex global challenges.

To fully realize this idea, however, our sector needs to reimagine the logic of our work. Over the last few years, we have been unpacking this logic in a number of ways. What follows is a quick summary of what we have learned.

First, we must recognize arts and cultural education is a human right codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. When young people learn through the arts and culture—and particularly through music—they are able to effectively develop or realize other human rights, like those outlined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Second, we must update our language about music education's intended outcomes to align with the social justice we hope to achieve through our work. My colleagues and I are proponents of the term "creative capabilities", which we've based in part on the "capabilities" model pioneered by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. But any model of inclusive, community-oriented, and youth development-centered music education is a fruitful context for an inquiry about language. Here is where you can start using "applied creativity," too.

Third, we must promote the creativity we help cultivate as a means to social transformation: i.e., creative social transformation. This term speaks to process as well as product—the creative process through which young people catalyze changes in institutionalized relationships, norms, values, and hierarchies within their community or society. An emphasis on creative process enables us to look outside the arts, culture, and education sectors. How can music education help to bring about substantive change in areas like environment, housing, food and agriculture, policing, and more? At Creative Generation, we are working on this through our Creativity for Good Campaign, which is available for all to join.

Fourth and finally, we must center young people in all that we do, understand their approaches to their work, follow their leads, and determine success on their terms. In December 2020, we published a set of resources derived from youth researchers and documentarians, challenging established norms for determining success of creative youth and community development work and proposing new, youth-visioned models for determining the impacts we hope to achieve.

In effect, we envision a new logic model for our work, one that can be adaptable for every situation. It might look something like this:



Credit: Creative Generation.

Most importantly, it is imperative for us—the adult leaders of music for social change programs—to challenge our own habits. For so long, we have viewed youth participation in our programs as the win. Our challenge is to think about it as the means to a greater end: What comes next for those youth participants? What can they do with the creativity they develop in our programs?

We owe it to ourselves, our students, and the generations of future creatives to establish artistic learning communities that look beyond the short-term outputs and aim for long-term impacts. Ultimately, those impacts will serve as the legacy of our work—and the foundation upon which future change-makers stand.

APRIL 2021, CREATIVE GENERATION, JEFF POULIN

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