

The Global Narrative for Arts Education Is Changing

Will a piece of paper change how we talk about arts education? Probably not. But it's a very good place to start.

By **Jeff Poulin** - November 21, 2019

Just a few of the delegates at the ninth World Alliance for Arts Education International Conference.

The ninth [World Alliance for Arts Education International Conference](#), held in Frankfurt, Germany, from Oct. 25 through Nov. 1, gathered more than 200 people from 47 nations. Delegates debated big ideas, connected over pretzels and beer, and took in the sights of student artwork, politicians speaking in favor of the arts, and regular performances. The conference conveners notably shepherded a global dialogue around a call on [UNESCO](#) to host a third-world congress on arts education — how to support arts education in a changing globalized world. Let me write that again:

...to support arts education in a changing globalized world.

I rolled my eyes and listened to my colleagues. Why? Because around the world, arts education continues to be a source of debate. While it is widely viewed as essential to education, questions about arts education still remain: How is it being delivered? By whom? How much? Which art? For what purpose?

India recently made [arts education compulsory](#) for grades 1 through 12, with a mandatory minimum of two hours per week. Ireland passed similar policy in 2013, but is [working its way through determining the implementation](#) of these requirements. Next door, [the UK remains embroiled in a years-long debate](#) about arts education, with cultural organizations and government agencies facing off against one another.

Meanwhile, over the past five years here in the US — arguably since Congress began taking up reauthorizing legislation of our federal education law — we've

seen a [concerted effort for more advocacy for arts education](#). Before that, there was nearly [a decade of gathering and synthesizing](#) large federal data sets, which were consolidated into quippy talking points. It followed longstanding efforts by our national [nonprofit arts community](#) to make the case for consistent (and growing) public investment in the sector. One must wonder, though: can artists, educators, advocates and policy-makers really evaluate educational impact as we do, say, economic impact?

My answer? No. We cannot simply quantify and measure young people like we do dollars and cents.

Starting in May of this year, I began to think and write about the role of arts education, especially at a time when we see young people taking the helm of global movements (see [A March for Our Lives](#) or [Fridays for Future](#)). I have been asking myself a question: “What is the role of arts and cultural education in the lives of these remarkable young people?”

What I’ve learned is that arts and cultural education (I use “and cultural” to disengage from the more formal teaching of “high art”) was an absolutely essential component for many of the young leaders spearheading and participating in these global movements. They often credit this education when an interviewer asks “How did you begin doing this work?”

I’m the managing director of a new initiative, [Creative Generation](#), that works to inspire, connect and amplify the work of organizations and individuals who are committed to cultivating the capacities of this next generation. We recently conducted a literature review and held a focus group with 15 national leaders in arts and cultural education. Here’s what we found.

First, and to a large extent, the data that is regularly cited about the benefits of the arts — or a community-based music education — has fallen into the category of instrumental value since the late 1980s. The most dominant

narratives from the published literature of some 27 different national arts education service organizations in the US are as follows:

- Learners in the lowest brackets of socioeconomic status exhibit lower dropout rates when engaged with the arts in formal education;
- Learners with an education rich in the arts have historically earned higher grade-point averages and standardized test scores;
- Learners who are highly engaged in the arts are more likely to go on to, and graduate from, institutions of higher education than peers without arts education.

Our focus group also discovered that our field has been trained to show how arts education helps to develop other skills or capacities in order to appeal to the perceived gatekeepers of funding, resources and policy. It was also revealed that the way most programs frame their work is *not* how they actually implement their work.

Using antiquated language is problematic: educational **psychology research** tells us that how we describe our work impacts the fidelity of how we implement that work. When we justify our arts education programs through antiquated talking points, we run the very real risk of implementing our work with fidelity to those antiquated talking points — not to the *actual* reason in our hearts.

We then **conducted more research**. In 30 case studies of youth-focused arts and cultural education programs in 21 countries around the world, we explored these questions:

- How can young people be supported in the pursuit of creative community action?
- How can we support adult artists, educators and community leaders who are themselves supporting the development of young people as catalysts for creative community action?
- How can young people and adults who are both committed to creative community action navigate the strict systems which govern their work?

Here, then, is what I shared at the World Alliance for Arts Education Conference:

1. The field struggles with articulating its work and often uses antiquated rationales for it, which leads to...
2. Severe isolationism, lacking meaningful communities of practice for practitioners, which results in...
3. A lack of mechanisms to share knowledge and effective practice, thus resulting in stagnated pedagogies.

We know of longstanding **communities of artists** engaged in social change movements. One can naturally assume, then, that young people are in their ranks. So why do we focus on the educational attainment of young people?

On the final day of the conference, we finished our work, took a photo, and agreed on “The Frankfurt Declaration,” which you can [download here](#). When you read it, you may notice a different narrative — one more aligned with the actual work taking place in communities all around the world, and reflecting the role of young people in arts education. The Declaration calls on our governments and decision-makers to support arts education as the means — not the end. Now, do I think this one piece of paper will forever change the way we, as a field, talk about arts education? Probably not. Is it a good start? **Absolutely.**

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Jeff M. Poulin is an American scholar, nonprofit administrator and social entrepreneur whose work is grounded in social justice and seeks transformative solutions to society’s most-challenging problems. In 2019, Jeff founded Creative Generation, which works to inspire, connect and amplify the work of organizations and individuals committed to cultivating the creative capacities of young people. With over a decade of experience as

a performer, teaching artist, education researcher and arts administrator, he previously led a national program where he worked to advance local, state and federal policies supportive of equitable access to arts education throughout the US. Jeff is widely published, serves as a reviewer for grant and research panels, and speaks to audiences across the country and around the globe. Jeff hails from Portland, ME, and holds degrees in arts management, cultural policy and education from Oklahoma City University, University College Dublin and the University of Glasgow.

