

THE ROLE OF THE ARTS & EMBODIMENT IN COMMUNITY BUILDING (A POST 9/11 REVIEW)

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HOW A COMMUNITY LEARNS: THE REALITY OF METAPHOR

Buildings are symbols of people. George P. Lakoff, linguistic theorist, viewed the attack on the World Trade Center as a ‘decapitation.’ He contends that because of “mirror neurons” that cause images to feel real, anyone exposed to the image of the Twin Towers falling needed to heal, specifically in the neck and head region. We each felt a shock. Lakoff maintains it was the brain, high up in our bodies that suffered most. Of course the pain resonated everywhere.

Lakoff describes that there are connections from these “mirror neurons” to the emotional centers of our brain.

“Such neural circuits are believed to be the basis of empathy. This works literally – when we see a plane coming toward the building and imagine people in the building, we feel the plane coming toward us; when we see the building toppling toward others, we feel the building toppling toward us. It also works metaphorically: If we see the plane going through the building, and unconsciously we metaphorize the building as a head with the plane going through its temple, then we sense unconsciously but powerfully – being shot through the temple. Our systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with our mirror neurons systems, turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors. All of what we know is physically embodied in our brains. To incorporate the new knowledge requires a physical change in the synapses of our brains, a physical reshaping of our neural system.” (Lakoff, 2004: 54)

In times of conflict and violence, arts-based communities can address all types of human problems through just this kind of metaphoric thinking. Spoken or unspoken—rules, traditions, or laws within a community may support justice or counteract violence within a community. There are specific skills that contribute to a peaceable community and artists will use their creativity to breakthrough injustice and support peaceable forms of human interaction. *The Arts* in general can be used for “sneaky healing” in that they use symbolism and abstraction to approach difficult issues.

Embodiment is also an important skill for healing. The work of Body-Mind Centering offers the artist/community worker a sophisticated entry into embodiment through its comprehensive understanding of the body in the context of human development. Other relevant integrative methods include: Arnold Mindell's Process-Oriented psychotherapy and Ron Kurtz's Body-Centered psychotherapy or educational models such as those of Brazilian activist educator Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" and the Laban/Bartenieff "Movement Analysis" work. My own research has used these embodiment methods together with the performing arts in schools. I call this work "Embodying Peace"(Eddy 2006; Linden 2007; www.EmbodyPeace.org).

When Lakoff claims the mind is "embodied" he is arguing that almost all of human cognition, up through the most abstract reasoning, depends on, and makes use of, such concrete and 'low-level' faculties as the sensori-motor system and the emotions. "We are neural beings," he states, "our brains take their input from the rest of our bodies. What our bodies are like and how they function in the world thus structures the very concepts we can use to think. We cannot think just anything—only what our embodied brains permit" (Lakoff 2002: 143-76). When a negative stimulus is strong or repetitive, we commonly respond by 'freezing' with no expression at all or by numbing out. Another reaction causes a sudden motoric response which often backfires and damages our body or our psyche

Body-Mind Centering teaches us to note specific areas of trauma and give them voice, allowing a 'motoring out' of these negative experiences. Physical expression helps the human emotional system become responsive again by balancing the nervous system's sensory-motor loop. A healthy nervous system is one where the stimulus is first "sensed" and then reacted to ('motoring out') in apt proportion. It is known that bonding with other caring people and feeling part of a community balances the nervous system.

The events on September 11 were "shocking." Of paramount importance during that time was the necessity for bonding with others in community and connecting with one's own somatic processes through embodiment that proved restorative. From this, new communities were made, spontaneously, and in overlapping, and concentric circles, where people gathered both locally and worldwide to find out to how to heal from the shock.

HOW COMMUNITIES EDUCATE: THE DEMOCRATIC PARADIGM

In considering the education of the democratic citizen, the educator/social thinker John Dewey recognized that communities do not simply exist; they are shaped by human enterprise. Dewey makes a case for educating all citizens of a democracy to make informed decisions, to practice engaging in their communities as individuals who think. Children can learn to make their own decisions. This takes practice. It involves learning listening, negotiation, and mediation skills. In schools, it requires adults releasing a bit of leadership, allowing children to flounder a bit, and working to facilitate problem solving. As somatic educators our task runs deeper, in that the subject and object of our shaping and our practice is the body-mind connection. We teach others to practice shifting governance from ‘the brain’ to each and every part of the body or the body as a whole.

Arts-based communities have the role to both perpetuate the culture, as it exists in the moment, and at times, to break down conventions of the culture and create new models. Art can be perceived as a method of change, of breaking through. Dewey (1927) saw art “as a way to shatter the crust of conventionalism and the routine consciousness.” Given that exposure to violence at varying levels (teasing, bullying, gangs, media violence) pervades most schools, it is useful to know that art education activities can be used to directly confront bullying, avoid sexual harassment, practice conflict resolution, gain cross-cultural appreciation, and embody peace with self-presence (Eddy, 1998). It is also important to note that an authoritarian approach to art education or the competitive challenges of the art world are counter-productive. As educators, we can consider what type of community we are making and invest in determining group values consistent with our educational philosophy.

According to Dewey, a democratic community involves engagement in activity and engagement with others. There is no single, perfect community, or even one way of being a community. Indeed Dewey named all communities, *communities-in –the– making*. And we need skills that help us capitalize on the “making” process. Art educators are often comfortable with a “process.” We can help to support communities-

in-the-making through all of their stages—from the messy to the productive. Adding in somatic education, as in Body-Mind Centering, we have tools for finding and including the ‘felt-sense.’ Teaching how to experience the body-mind allows communities to access a moral conscience and collectively find solutions during problematic times.

TEACHING DANCE IN COMMUNITY: A PARADIGM FOR CREATIVITY

Dance affords the creative process that can move us through a conflict or trauma to a culminating shared resolution with witnesses (Eddy 2010). We can begin with familiar dances/dancing within our culture or sub-culture to gain confidence in learning, using, and devising movement and body awareness activities. We then can move onward to find expression for new experiences. Given that stress, trauma and violence are almost always accompanied by ‘felt’ body symptoms, the tools of ‘dance somatics’ (Bartenieff, Body-Mind Centering, Continuum, Dynamic Embodiment, Halprin’s Life Art Process, Kinetic Awareness, Topf Technique to name a few), help us to activate the body) help to unravel stuck or traumatized places (Eddy 2009). With dance skills we make personalized work that addresses the whole story and/or the specific experience. Then we can exchange this experience with others in performance.

Dancing offers shared rhythm with experiences of harmony. Somatic awareness adds depth with the possibility of personal reflection. “Somatic Dancing” then combines self-awareness with communication and group interaction. With shared experience we can reflect on commonalities first. This often feels safer to an individual. Then we can discern our personal stories. We can do this by listening to our own and another’s non-verbal behavior (inclusive of the use of the body and voice). By exploring movement in a group, we can avoid the problem of feeling isolated when feeling pain (too much inward directing of sensory sensitivity). Indeed in some instances the inward focus of ‘chronic’ art creation has lead to isolation. The power to negotiate one’s feelings within a group is key to experiencing empowerment that moves outward, providing experiences for co-creation. We can allow for trying on different roles: the initiator, the coach/director/conductor, the active observer, the participant, the critic, and the advertising agent.

As educators we are aware of the natural creativity in children; as educational advocates we strive to encourage the place of each child's creativity in schools. But why should we use the arts to build communities? A few reasons include:

- as an antidote to isolation: the community defeats loneliness;
- as a place of acceptance: communities serve as places to rest and be at home;
- and as a safe place: to work through conflict.

While we may often not be able to overcome conflicts, in functional communities we can at least come together to work through problems - THIS CAN BE DONE Through making ART together. As educators we need communities to help us seek adequate school funding and better art education. As citizens we need communities to help us work to uphold our values, to find justice for inequities, or to celebrate our heritage. Communities are also a place for the cultivation of the human creative process. Community supports collaboration and help us to create more fully. Hence fostering community supports art making, and art making fosters community building. This statement is in contrast to the idea that creativity is best spawned through angst and isolation. Both can occur but both may not be necessary or necessarily helpful in preparing for democratic behavior.

To engage children and adults in healing from trauma, or overcoming conflict, we use art-making as a practice in transformative communication. We recognize, much like nature's seasons, art-making has necessary periods of gestation, with phases that are muddy. It helps to have patience with the messiness, the intense feelings and surprising growths that arise, and that sometimes—even at the end point of creating an artistic product—we need to wait again to identify what we have and plan for the next steps. To foster this process, it is helpful to learn how to be in dialogue with oneself, and eventually with others. We can walk ourselves through challenging times with healthy self-talk and then extend that clear communication to others.

Creativity unfolds like a seed growing in the soil supported by water and sunlight. There are educational and therapeutic systems that acknowledge the importance of varied dynamics: gradual unfolding, abrupt transitions, intense imbalance, back and forth swinging of feelings and actions. Somatic systems such as Laban Movement Analysis

teach people to find familiarity with all dynamics of living. Body-Mind Centering does this too. Experientially engaging in exploration of any of the somatic movement systems may be helpful in widening our palettes of tolerable experiences, our adaptability, and our resilience. As we do this we enter into new awarenesses, new feelings and sensations, opening up to the possibility of “being other.” BMC is particularly rich in accessing subtle and nuanced sensations, emotions and perceptions. It helps us identify our different cells and how they live in community. These are metaphors for being in community.

TEACHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A PARADIGM FOR COMMUNITY

Creating communities also has the potential for leading to cliques, gangs, and hegemonistic tiers of leaders. We ought to be alert to the formation of groups with rules defining who is an “insider or outsider”—amongst colleagues and within classrooms, auditoriums, gyms, and recess. Somatic experiences with a wide range of movement styles can cross personal and cultural barriers to help us appreciate other. Experiencing the membranes of cells brings recognition to permeable borders and the need for healthy boundaries.

We are capable of using any conflict, mistake, or accident as a step toward healing and re-generating our communities and ourselves. Art and conflict transformation can stem from difficulties. From my work in New York City schools, it is extremely satisfying to convey the message that conflict itself is inevitable and that from conflict we can learn newly and fashion new solutions. I like to convey that mistakes are also great sources of creativity, especially if we can stay relaxed enough when they happen, avoiding conflict or trauma about failure. Those of us in marriages can probably attest to the fact that the overcoming of conflict deepens intimacy. We are often hesitant as we approach the making of new friends. We would often rather spend time with people with whom methods for conflict are already established. Ultimately, we seek situations where our feelings are accepted and we feel our transgressions will be forgiven.

From my own research, I have found that building A Peaceable Community requires:

- Releasing trauma
- Reducing stress
- Practicing embodied conflict resolution

- Confronting bullying of all types (personal, corporate, governmental etc)
- Eliminating harassment based on gender, racial, ethnic and class discrimination
- Cultivating cross cultural appreciation
- Becoming peace activists

The most effective peaceable classroom resides inside of a peaceable school where the adults have found respectful ways to get their needs met, mature ways to deal with power struggles, and creative ways to appreciate one another. Furthermore, adults model respect to one another and to each child including children who do not act respectfully toward them. Children come to school in pain, hungry, angry, neglected, bothered by someone, irritated, in a growth spurt, confused. We have more perspective on these issues than they do; we need to model how to handle internal and/or external stressors gracefully.

Indeed, one educator from the school nearest to Ground Zero reported that in the fall of 2001 she had been witnessing increased suspiciousness and paranoia amongst her elementary school students. She was frustrated by not being able to gather enough scissors, get copies made, or get to her lessons in makeshift rooms shared by three classes. Everyone was on edge. She has discovered that she needed to spend more time resting, and taking care of herself in order to be emotionally ready for her group and their greater needs. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen has said – “If you are feeling stressed about not having enough time, lie down and rest.” (Nov 16, 2009, NYC)

The arts are formative in building empathy and can help us recuperate and connect to our inner selves. Art can help us build a connection to others by communicating our feelings and ideas. Aesthetic and symbolic depictions may also convey innate understandings of “what is right,” and certainly of what is possible (Greene, 1995). Appreciation of others’ art can foster our ability to perceive, tolerate and appreciate differences. This type of appreciation takes time and is a developmental process, an unfolding. A large factor is letting go of “being right.” Teachers can explore the realm of what is right for humanity versus what is right in art. This process shifts the work towards deep cooperation. When students are asked to tune-in to their

“felt sense,” using tools from somatic education, they also confirm that finding one’s personal best is more satisfying than squashing another person’s sense of well-being.

A COMMUNITY OF HANDS (OR A HANDS-ON COMMUNITY)

A Fable

There was once a wise old man who could answer any question, no matter how difficult. One day, two people decided they were going to fool the old man. They planned to catch a bird and take it to the old man saying, “Is what we have in our hands alive or dead?” If he says “dead,” we’ll turn it loose, and it will fly away; if he says “alive,” we’ll crush it.

They caught a bird and went with it to the old man. They said, “Is what we have in our hands alive or dead?”

The wise old man considered them and smiled.

Then he said, “It’s in your hands.”

(Anonymous, taken from A Call to Character, Greer & Kohl)

To conclude, how we go forward each day is in our hands. It is our job to take responsibility. The process of making anew, making art, and creating new symbols reshapes our brain, our perceptions, and our experience. This helps our healing, as individuals, and as a world. As we grieve, we can also shine in our spontaneous eruptions of compassion. Each of the arts has been fully present in expressing our grief, our rage, and our call to action. The creation of sites for drama and dance filled with art/facts and music has been poignant in New York City since 9/11. I have seen the burgeoning of *peace* through dance programs ever since (www.EmbodyPeace.org).

Through the outward expression of collaborative effort, each individual is more able to grapple with conflict and cooperation. Using metaphors from the body we learn that a community can be considered as a cell, defined in large part by its membrane. That membrane can become rigid or amorphous, or it can be well defined, permeable and resilient. The healthy membrane strives to keep what is needed for vitality in and to let toxins out. It also allows entry to that which is nourishing and defends against what is toxic, keeping it out. Determining what to allow in or out is challenging.

As teachers we need to help our communities determine what is right, what is healthy, what is unfamiliar but indeed safe, what is too challenging, and even what is toxic. We can build these skills through body awareness and through art making. And, as

we find ways to experience our embodied selves *and minds* (to paraphrase Lakoff), we will be able to empathize and heal more often, creatively, and in connection with others.

This article is based on a keynote address given on Sept 15, 2001 to a statewide convention of art educators at the Ohio State University.

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