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**Meaningful Data for Learning in the Arts**

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**Abstract**

Arts programs are important to the community as sources for artistic entertainment, performance, and enrichment. These programs and initiatives also rely on grants and external funding for support and sustainability. While there is a push from government funders to document learning in the arts with statistical data, research demonstrates that meaningful artistic experiences are best evinced through rich, qualitative narratives. Using a case study as a focus, the author discusses ideas for gathering qualitative and quantitative data through observations, interviews, surveys, and work samples that support learning in the arts. This article provides ideas for shaping and writing a grant proposal that meets the needs of both arts initiatives and funders.

**Introduction**

Through music, theater, dance, visual, and media arts, individuals listen and analyze, create and compose, shape and sculpt, paint, move, make, or interpret, to communicate, share, and compare meanings and experiences. The arts are complex, shaping society, and ourselves. Renowned arts educator and activist Elliot Eisner (2002) describes ten lessons the arts teach, including how the arts celebrate multiple perspectives, and enable students to have unique experiences. These viewpoints have been argued for decades, yet remain caught within a debate on how the arts should be viewed within schools – as integrated into the regular curriculum, as after-school activities, or simply for art's sake.

## **A Place for the Arts**

In 2013, President Obama's budget called for a five percent increase in funding for arts and culture, demonstrating an interest and motivation from the United States government in supporting the arts. Specifically, the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) represents only approximately one one-hundredth of one percent of federal discretionary spending (NASAA, 2013, p. 1). However, even with presidential support, the role of the arts in our society and its place in education is frequently compromised. Consider that since its inception, the NEA endures constant criticism for its relevance, and receives less funding than nearly all other federal grant making agencies. Alarming, critics often cite "that taxpayer funds shouldn't be used to support nonessential activities like the arts" (Smith, 2013).

For arts advocates, this juxtaposition of validating a need for the arts and making arguments for funding is not a new struggle. To address the challenge of thriving solely on performance revenue and the creation of new art, many arts organizations generate additional revenue by developing educational outreach programs. Through these activities, teaching artists often collaborate with schools and classroom teachers to bring enriching artistic experiences to students in low-income, high-risk settings. In a report published by the U.S. Department of Education, *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1999-2000 and 2009-2010*, the data suggests that forty-two percent of public elementary schools have partnerships with cultural or community-based organizations that help build and sustain learning opportunities through the arts (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012, p. 7).

## **A Case Study**

There is much research demonstrating that students learn in complex, unique ways through artistic experiences (Eisner, 2002; Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Smithrim & Uptis, 2005). Grants funded to support arts outreach initiatives often promote learning opportunities through arts integration or residency programs – where the arts are connected to a teacher's existing curriculum and professional artists visit classrooms to work with students. However, one of the challenges with securing grants to demonstrate learning in the arts is that the reporting guidelines may require quantitative, statistical data, rather than evidence of the rich, detailed experiences of the teachers, students, and artists. To address these challenges, this paper uses a case study approach to offer suggestions for how arts organizations should address the requirements of funders while continuing to meet the artistic vision of their goals and objectives.

As an example, consider an arts integration residency program. An arts organization in a large metropolitan city wants to expand its focus on performance by collaborating with three elementary schools. In the proposed program, two teaching artists (one theater specialist and one dance specialist) from the arts organization initially work with two classroom teachers in each of the three schools to bring arts integrated experiences into the classroom. As part of the proposal, the teachers and teaching artists meet twice to pre-plan their activities and ideas. Next, the teaching artists visit each classroom

once a week for approximately six weeks. As a culminating activity, the families of students in each participating classroom are invited to a presentation of the performances. The arts organization wants to apply for a \$10,000 grant through the NEA to implement this pilot program and promote sustainability across time.

As critics continue to acknowledge that funding in the arts requires persuasion and justification not evident in other fields, it is important to find ways to effectively document learning and growth through arts experiences. To meet these funder expectations, arts advocates should first identify the program in need of new or continued funding, then consider strategies to collect both quantitative *and* qualitative data. Additionally, the data must be formative and summative, meeting the short term needs of the grant and the long term goals for the program. Formative evaluation assesses whether planned activities are successfully executed as they occur, or require adjustments during actual project implementation. In contrast, summative evaluation measures the attainment of stated goals once a project ends.

### **Assessment and Arts Learning**

One of the major components of a grant proposal repeatedly overlooked or written as a second thought is the evaluation and assessment plan. Too often, the focus is on shaping a strong proposal statement that highlights the need for the grant and how it matches the organization's own goals. However, describing how the outcomes are measured with both formative and summative data is just as important. While some granting agencies will specify exactly what they require, either through a formal report, presentation, or documentation of materials, other funders are open to how the results will be shared. Therefore, it is important to consider ways to measure program results at the beginning stages of the proposal development process.

In the case study illustrated above, qualitative data are collected from observations of the arts integrated experiences in the classrooms, the planning session notes and outlines, the teachers' curriculum guides, the teaching artists' lesson ideas, the work samples or artistic products completed by the students, and any written components included to document student learning through self-reflection or discussion. Additionally, the teachers and teaching artists are individually interviewed to capture their unique experiences, along with focus groups for the students from each of the three schools. The collective analysis of all of this qualitative data provides rich, detailed examples of the learning resulting from the arts activities.

While this data is useful both in championing the importance of arts education and addressing the goals and outcomes of the educational outreach program, many funders either only want statistics in the final reporting or a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative reporting is a particularly strong focus in government grants, where learning and outcomes are measured through statistics. To address this, arts organizations may utilize protocols and surveys as quantitative measures when collecting observational data of student engagement in the arts. Such protocols rank how often an indicator or activity is observed, or used, to better measure the quality of

these experiences. Surveys including Likert-type scale items may also be distributed to teachers, teaching artists, and students. The goal here is to gauge varied perceptions, experiences, and attitudes by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with several statements using a five, seven or ten point scale.

### Finding a Balance

The most important component of writing grants in the arts is to use data that effectively demonstrates a need for funding, and makes an argument for why we need the arts. The arts provide us ways to learn, teach, share and experience culture (Rajan, 2012). It is a discussion that continues to evolve as available funding and public sentiments change. There will always be individuals who argue that the arts are trivial in contrast to those who contend that more funding is needed. Arts researchers, advocates, and organizations are the cornerstones of this discussion as they continue to promote awareness of the importance of the arts within communities globally while struggling to find ways to build and sustain their own educational outreach programs and research initiatives. By focusing on documenting learning in the arts, the qualitative and quantitative data gathered helps fuel the discussion, and builds reciprocal mutually-beneficial artistic connections between organizations, advocates, and funders alike.

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