

# Chapter 3

## Connecting the Past and the Present: Using Our Deep History of Learning Through Community Art to Inform Contemporary Student Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*Given our deep history of socially-situated artmaking and the human propensity for learning in social contexts, participation in community art offers a wealth of educational potential. Supported by research from neuroscience, anthropology, psychology, education and the arts, as well as concrete examples from higher education, this chapter will outline the theoretical basis for a curriculum rich in community art and establish such practices as a potential antidote to student apathy in contemporary classrooms. This body of interdisciplinary research situates community-based art education at the intersection of transformative community art, social learning theory, and student engagement. By first generating a community of practice within the classroom, then providing students with an opportunity to apply course content, contribute to their immediate culture, and take advantage of some of our most entrenched educational tendencies, community-based art education can be invaluable to student learning and engagement.*

### INTRODUCTION

Most educators are aware of a growing understanding of the brain's functions and purposes, as well as the tacit implications for curriculum design. Neuroscience is consistently unveiling new discoveries of the brain's architecture and yielding new insights into the origins of human thought and learning. The profound connection between the body and brain (Damasio, 1994), the import of social context and emotional thought (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), and the origins of our capacity for empathy (Iacoboni, 2005, 2007, 2008; Ramachandran, 2004, 2011) are just a few of the recent findings that have

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turned the traditional, decontextualized concept of cognition on its head. Educators are wise to take notice, but knowing how to utilize these findings and concretely implement them through curricular design may not be apparent. Struggling to compete with verbal and numeric subjects that are often perceived to be more valuable (Eisner, 1985), art educators, in particular, may benefit significantly from a robust understanding of the newfound breadth of cognitive research (Blatt-Gross, 2010).

Flashing across disciplines, the humanities have witnessed the rise of community art becoming increasingly popular as a means for revitalization and community engagement. Art educators are no doubt aware of community art's potential to connect students with the community and incite social change through its increasing presence, particularly in urban centers. Examples, guidelines, and frameworks abound (Bastos, 2002; Borwick, 2012; Cogdon, Blandy & Bolin, 2001; Knight, Schwarzman, et. al, 2015; Krenksy & Steffen, 2009; London, 1994). While many describe the recent history and transformative powers of community art, few—if any—delve into its ancient origins or the profoundly cognitive reasons behind those transformative powers.

This chapter attempts to bridge these two fields of study, with the aim of yielding greater insights into the educational potential of community art as a means for student engagement. Specifically, it makes the following inquiries:

- How is the human brain tooled to learn in social contexts?
- How does art explicitly meet the brain and the body's socially-driven needs?
- How might educators use an understanding of the brain's origins and architecture to inform community-based art education?
- What does a contemporary curriculum based on these findings look like?

In sum, this chapter examines, through the lens of anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and educational research, our cultural past as makers of community art. With an eye toward the original conditions under which human lives flourished, this investigation seeks to inform readers of the deep history of making art in social contexts and the architecture of the brain that predisposes us to learn in socially-situated venues. Using the theoretical and practical potential for the deep roots of community art to feed pedagogical design, this chapter explores the possibility of using communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), combined with a community-based art education curriculum, to cultivate student engagement, thereby transforming classes into *communities of artists* (Howells & Zelnick, 2009). Finally, this chapter will conclude with an adaptable curricular model from higher education as a concrete example of what this type of pedagogy looks like in the classroom.

## **BACKGROUND**

A range of literature exists on both community art and the social aspects of learning, but none appear to decisively cross the threshold of disciplinary boundaries to understand the educational potential of community art from an anthropological or neuroscientific perspective.

Neuroscientists, psychologists and anthropologists have produced a range of interesting work exploring the cognitive aspects of the arts and the social role of art making (Donald, 2009; Mithen, 1996; Sacks, 2007; Sarason, 1990; Solso, 2003; Wilson, 1998; Zeki 1999a, 1999b). Independent scholar Ellen Dissanayake (1988, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2008) takes an anthropological lens to the origins of art

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