

Chapter 15

Art Empowering At-Risk and Opportunity Youth: A Case Study of artworxLA

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ABSTRACT

artworxLA is an arts education organization with the mission to combat the epidemic high school dropout crisis. Based in Los Angeles where nearly 16,000 high school students drop out each year, a key strategy in re-engaging at-risk and opportunity youth is through art. Through partnerships with Los Angeles County schools and with the region's key cultural institutions, youth are motivated to learn and stay in school through the use of progressive teaching and learning methodologies that have proven to be effective for this community. The teaching methodology of artworxLA uses a concept-based curriculum with inquiry discussion and other interactive participatory modes of learning. The key principles of experience, engagement, relevance, and authenticity guide teaching artists to leading dynamic learning experiences that empower youth to become more civically engaged and to reclaim their futures.

INTRODUCTION

artworxLA (formerly The HeArt Project) is an arts education organization founded in 1992 with the mission to combat the epidemic high school dropout crisis by engaging students in a long-term, sequential arts program offering a pursuable life path that inspires them to stay in school, evolve as unique individuals, and flourish as creative adults. artworxLA achieves this by creatively engaging alternative high school teenagers with sustained arts exposure and immersion; connecting students to a network of peers, artists, cultural partners, higher education, creative industries, and supportive adults; and investing human and financial resources around ongoing, persistent student and alumni support.

The core of the organization's mission is to guide students toward a pursuable life path. This begins with staying in school, graduating with a high school diploma, and then pursuing further education and careers that allow them to thrive and contribute as active citizens. This pathway, while assumed easily by

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some youth with enough resources to make it happen, is one that is often extremely challenging for the students of artworxLA. For the majority of artworxLA students who have limited resources, the cycle of poverty, and all of its effects, is all too common.

Community arts is most effective when facilitated through partnerships that are grounded in an “ethos of equivalency” that involve “trust, sustained give-and-take, shared purposes, and lots of communication geared toward the mutual benefit of those involved” (Karraker & Grams, 2008, p. 91). Based in the city of Los Angeles, artworxLA has the advantage of access to major museums, community-based organizations, civic institutions, and colleges that have all contributed to the work of artworxLA over the course of its 25-year existence. As home to the industries of entertainment, publishing, and fashion, as well as to internationally renowned art schools like Art Center College of Design, California Institute of the Arts, and Otis College of Art and Design, artworxLA draws inspiration and expertise from these sources.

artworxLA empowers youth through its school residency program that brings together teaching artists and students at alternative high schools in exploring issues of public concern. This chapter will demonstrate the strategies of artworxLA, outlining the organization’s philosophy and methodology that is informed by research and best practices in arts education. Samples of student work specific to civic engagement will be shared to demonstrate how the organization’s strategies lead to students’ development of voice and empowerment (see Figure 1). Partnerships with schools and cultural institutions will be addressed, considering the complexity of this kind of work in reaching and retaining students at most risk of dropping out. The professional development of teaching artists, in particular, will be a major component explored, specific to how artworxLA over the years has evolved its training to emphasize how students learn.

Figure 1. Freedom 2013, a photograph by artworxLA alumnus at an immigration rally in downtown Los Angeles

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