

Chapter 20

Watching the Walls Crumble: Conversation and Community-Building through a Weekly Youth Art Workshop

Kira Hegeman

University of Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter offers an account of nine-months with the Young Lion's Global Artists, a youth arts program based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This chapter serves as a practitioner's account, illustrating the program's creation, selected activities and group dynamics. Through these accounts the chapter further seeks to offer this program as an example of the potential for community-based art programs to cultivate conversation and social engagement. Over the course of a nine-month period this particular program was instrumental in creating bonds across ethnic divides that had initially caused social separation and tension when the program began, further highlighting the potential for arts program to inspire conversation and transformation (Greene, 1995; Eisner, 2002; Barrett, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

The sound of dried tamarind fruit crackles beneath my feet. Across the street a gong chimes loudly, calling saffron clad monks to afternoon meditation. The landscape around is timeless, almost eternal. Thousands of years of northern Thai history emanate from the bricks of temple ruins, clashing with the beeps and buzzes of new technologies, changing demographics and fading traditions.

A softer bell rings intermittently as a red motorbike selling ice cream glides down the street. This local symphony of bells signifies the end the school day, and the beginning of a different, more informal style of learning. Soon, neighborhood children dressed in white and blue school uniforms will stream through the open gates, approaching our makeshift garden classroom with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. In broken English and watered down Thai, they wonder where the arts will take them today?

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1727-6.ch020

Watching the Walls Crumble

This small garden, located in the ancient Thai city of Chiang Mai, carries with it many layers of meaning. Back in the United States during wintertime, the garden carries nostalgia for warm sunny days living in Chiang Mai. It reminds of the daily adventures that accompany life abroad. The joys of exploring hidden alleyways, local markets, and ancient temples, the frustrations over miscommunications, sadness of never fully being able to assimilate into a culture that is not your own, and the lessons learned about the shared experiences that connect us when language and culture divide us. The landscape above is not just a garden, in front of a house, along a street in Chiang Mai. It is also a symbol of the power that art and space may play in uniting communities, even when the barriers may at first seem unbreakable.

The author was first introduced to this garden as the Art Program Director for Art Relief International (ARI), a Chiang Mai based non-profit dedicated to education and empowerment through the arts. When she began with Art Relief International, the garden was little more than an entry space to an office, a home base for operations that took her and her colleagues to various partner sites around the city in order to provide art workshops. While they travelled much of Chiang Mai and the surrounding towns, they had not yet reached out to their own neighborhood, the neighborhood of Wat Suandok, named after the historic temple that stood across from the office gates.

Beginning in August of 2010, the garden served as the home base for the Young Lions Global Artists Program, a weekly free after school art program for neighborhood youth aimed at travelling the world through art and expression. The program was the initiative of Art Relief International, a Chiang Mai based non-profit organization dedicated to education and empowerment through the arts, of which the author was the Art Director at the time of this account.

This Young Lions project stands out in particular for the positive relationships it inspired and the ways in which it grew beyond its original intentions. On a small scale, this project provided individual students with a space to explore visual and performing arts and creative expression. Expanding a bit further, it opened the door for broader interpersonal connections between members of a diverse, South-East Asian inner city neighborhood through conversations and concentrated time together. At an even larger scale, it offers an illustration of the potential for intersections of arts engagement and place specific community building to bridge social divides and encourage compassionate community interactions.

At the time of this particular account, the project was conducted as an educational and socially-engaged art project rather than a formal empirical study. In the context of this chapter it serves as an example of the potential for such a project to expand thinking around creative community engagement and alternative forms of gathering and sharing knowledge regarding human, social experience. While there are many areas of the project that would benefit from more thorough and clearly defined research, such as the implications of cross-cultural volunteer work, the long-term efficacy of such programs, and the individual experiences of community members, this account offers a reflection on experiences within a specific context which may guide further research and practice in the areas of arts pedagogy, creative place-building and cross-cultural activism.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

As a phenomenon, “community” is active, both a noun and a verb (Campana, 2011). Rather than a passive acceptance of external elements, community assumes an effort to acknowledge one another and work together. In being active, community is also malleable, capable of change when necessary. Communities may be long established, anchored by history such as a long-held legacy or affiliation with a

18 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/watching-the-walls-crumble/172995

Related Content

First-Generation Students in Service-Learning Programs: An Exploration of Institutional Support Practices

Matt Newlin and Andrew Brown (2021). *The Proper Role of Higher Education in a Democratic Society* (pp. 133-152).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/first-generation-students-in-service-learning-programs/285248

A Model Proposal for Local Governments to Increase Citizen Involvement in the Age of Information Society and E-Government: Crowdsourcing

Ceray Aldemir and Eyüp en (2022). *Research Anthology on Citizen Engagement and Activism for Social Change* (pp. 344-362).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-model-proposal-for-local-governments-to-increase-citizen-involvement-in-the-age-of-information-society-and-e-government/295000

Thoughts and Highlights Involving an Urban Museum Education Partnership and a University

Bryna Bobick (2022). *Research Anthology on Citizen Engagement and Activism for Social Change* (pp. 1156-1173).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/thoughts-and-highlights-involving-an-urban-museum-education-partnership-and-a-university/295048

Building Cultural Capital and Workforce Skills for Immigrants Through Adult Education in the United States

Tracy Poon Tambascia and Emma Diaz (2021). *Handbook of Research on Promoting Social Justice for Immigrants and Refugees Through Active Citizenship and Intercultural Education* (pp. 76-97).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/building-cultural-capital-and-workforce-skills-for-immigrants-through-adult-education-in-the-united-states/282308

Vulnerability Assessment of the DPRK's Responsiveness to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Human Rights Challenges and Pathways to Greater Adherence to Human Rights Norms

Jina Choi (2022). *Fighting for Empowerment in an Age of Violence* (pp. 173-188).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/vulnerability-assessment-of-the-dprks-responsiveness-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/310992