

# A New Framework for Understanding the Field of Artists Who Work in Community and Education Settings

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## **KEYWORDS**

Teaching artist, activism, digital media, community engagement, arts integration, capacity building

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents a framework for understanding the field of teaching artists (also known by other terms such as community artist, participatory artist, social practice artist, civic practice artist, artist-in-residence, and more) in the U.S. and around the world. This paper describes the current state of this disparate and disorganized field and suggests that previous ways of describing it have proved unhelpful. This pioneering framework was developed in partnership with practitioners in many communities over years and was vetted by practitioners in communities around the world to affirm its validity. This framework was introduced by the author in 2010, categorizing the field according to the purposes for which these teaching artists are hired; vetting by many practitioners affirms that this framework holds almost all employment in the U.S. and other countries. An informal report suggests that this*

*framework has proven useful in clarifying and advancing the field in a variety of communities, for administrators, practitioners, funders, and for those discovering, entering, and advancing in the field. This paper introduces the Purpose Threads and describes each one, giving community-based examples of organizations that employ teaching artists to achieve their goals, and suggesting ways in which one might evaluate whether each purpose is achieved. This paper acknowledges that the seven purposes do not play out discretely in practice, but naturally overlap, and the author identifies a series of basic teaching artist tools that apply across all threads. The author also discusses teaching artists to work in digital media, a reality that has burst into prominence during the Covid pandemic. The author proposes next steps for further development of this framework and invites readers to apply this material in whatever ways are useful.*

[Note: This material was used as a foundation in the now-closed Lincoln Center Education Teaching Artist Development Labs (2014-2019). This framework is now used in various teaching artist training programs, but it has not been published.]

Let's start with a few agreements:

1. Let's recognize that all people have an innate capacity for artistry. Many of those who develop their innate capacities in a particular discipline aspire to become artists of that discipline. Some of those artists wish to expand the range of their artistry; they aspire to open their artmaking to reach beyond the studio and performance/exhibition halls into participatory engagement with many different people, in many settings, for many purposes. These artists seek to activate the artistry of others. This community of artists—sometimes called teaching artists, community artists, social practice artists, participatory artists, and other titles too—comprise a workforce in the U.S. and many other countries—crucial to the future of the arts and the achievement of many social, cultural and political goals. These artists know that once the universal, birthright, skillset of artistry is active in anyone, it can be guided to accomplish many things.

2. Let's recognize that this practitioner field of artists with the skills and passion to activate the artistry of others is disorganized, lacks a public voice, identity, and clear pathways for entry and advancement. (See footnote 1 below, which suggests the handful of organizations, all modest in size, that are dedicated to networking and advancing the field of teaching artistry.) This is true at the local, national, and global levels. Even so, this workforce is deeply embedded in institutions and communities, and many individuals work on their own without intermediary institutions. The work of these many thousands of artists is relied upon in many sectors; it leads most pioneering efforts to expand and diversify arts audiences, and yet is far less visible than its current contribution

warrants, and that its potential impact requires. Mainstream funders have rarely attended to cultivating and developing this vital workforce, even though the programs they fund completely rely on these skilled workers.

3. Let's also acknowledge that like some amoeboid masses, the field of artists who choose to expand their art-making to include participatory involvement and service is hard to define. It includes various job titles, each with its own history and tradition and uncertain relationship with being part of a larger whole. Some networks manage to connect parts of this field, but the infrastructure to support a larger field is absent. Organizations are arising to address this need, at all levels, but they are still adolescent.

To help define this larger field, let me offer a working definition—not perfect, not catchy, not even very specific, but not rejected by any sector either (an accomplishment!); so let's accept this as a working definition as most of the field has come embrace it. I will use the term "teaching artist" to signify the larger field, both because it is the primary tool I have used throughout my career and because it is the most widely used term within the larger field.

Teaching Artists (TAs) who work in communities and schools are practicing artists who develop the skills, curiosities, and habits of mind of an educator needed to achieve a wide variety of social and learning goals in, through, and about the arts, with a wide variety of participants.

Notice the key points about teaching artistry that are suggested by this definition:

- They are active artists;

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<sup>1</sup>Examples of such organizations include the Teaching Artist Guild (national in the U.S.), the New York City Arts in Education Roundtable, Teaching Artists of the Mid-Atlantic, the TAT Lab (regional in the U.S.), and the largest of all, the International Teaching Artist Collaborative (global).

- their work is more than a kitbag of educational activities; it is a broad suite of internalized approaches and understandings, developed by working closely with specific community audiences;
- their expertise can be deployed to achieve many kinds of goals, from enhanced quality of life to increased engagement in schools to reduced prison recidivism and prescription drug intake for seniors, etc.;
- they can work with the widest array of audiences, basically anyone, including, for example, arts-disinterested people, young children, people with special needs or psychological disorders, and those with dementia—note that this ability to engage so broadly, so far beyond already-arts-interested audiences, is rare and valuable in the field;
- and they often achieve “instrumental” outcomes that institutions and communities want (such goals are frequently the rationale for a project and are sometimes disdained by arts purists), but they recognize that the only way to achieve those outcomes is by activating the universal “intrinsic artistry” in participants.

## REFRAMING THE FIELD

Traditionally, the national field of these artists (including practitioners and those who train and employ them) is described by the type of employer, location of work, or type of project.

For over a decade, I have proposed a different framework for understanding this as one field rather than a collection of similar subgroups that do not affiliate with one another. This re-categorization has proven to be both helpful and also true to the way the field actually functions; I organize this field around the different purposes for which these artists are employed. The key question behind this framework is: What is the

primary purpose of the project? Analyzing this field’s range of employment, I find the breadth of work can be distilled to seven main purposes, plus one additional one that is a little different but helpful to name. This categorization scheme has been presented to colleagues in over 20 countries to determine if it satisfactorily contains the employment for participatory artists in their country, and their agreement leads me to assert that this organizational scheme works to include almost all professional practice.

My methodology in developing and testing this framework has been with and for practitioners and program administrators, with an eye out for funders. My freelance practitioner and consulting careers have brought me into direct experience

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of all these employment threads. As an advocate and active organizer, I have long been frustrated that few inside or outside the field seem to grasp its scope or the ways the wider field has a coherent core and different channels of employment. Iterations of this framework evolved through conversation, opportunities with funders and supporters, and many challenges to introduce the field to a variety of stakeholders. This current framework has settled over years, giving me enough confidence in its accuracy to share it widely. It will and should continue to evolve, and I invite others to contribute to that evolution.

Such employment purposes are never entirely singular nor conveniently discrete in practice, of course; they naturally overlap. In prioritizing one purpose, we know that others will be incidentally (and valuably) accomplished—for example, in engaging people to enrich an aspect of their community life, any artist working in that setting is likely to create artworks that enhance the appreciation of artworks made by other artists. The value of focusing on purpose threads is that they prompt the questions: “What is the most important goal or outcome for me to aim for in this work?” and “Of the many kinds of impact this work is likely to have, which are most important to assess?” After introducing the purpose threads below, I will mention some teaching artist tools that apply across all of them. Using these Purpose Threads has proven useful to many, as a way to: enrich and refine teaching artist training, sharpen the effectiveness of practice (clarifying goals), help artists understand and

advance their careers, help with the assessment of impact, illuminate inchoate partnerships that have never been fully tapped, and clarify for those outside this field how widespread, effective, and relied upon these artists are. This Purpose Thread framework that I introduced was used to structure the national/international Teaching Artist Development Labs at Lincoln Center Education, active from 2014 to 2019.

The Seven (plus one) Purpose Threads of Artists Who Work in Schools and Communities

Before a brief discussion of each thread, which includes examples of programs that use teaching artists to achieve each purpose, here is a reminder of some basic teaching artist practices that apply across all-purpose threads. The first four derive from the “Four Core Concepts” that was used in the Lincoln Center Education Teaching Artist Lesson Design.

<i>Name of thread</i>	<i>Primary purpose of the work</i>
Work of art	To enhance the encounter with art works.
Community	To enhance the life of communities.
Art skills development	To deepen the development of art-making skills.
Arts integration	To catalyze the learning of non-arts content.
Activism	To impact a political or social movement.
Social/personal development	To develop personal or social capacities.
Partnering for non-art goals	To achieve goals important to other institutions.
+ Digital	To activate personal artistry in digital media.

**Table 1. The Seven (plus one) Purpose Threads of Artists Who Work in Schools and Communities**

**Art-making:** In every thread, teaching artists guide participants to make things they care about, balancing their attention toward creative process and product (rather than the predominant priority of product-mindedness). Creating conditions and invitations for people to make things of personal meaning in artistic media is an effective way to awaken personal artistry and activate its power. Intrinsically-engaged participants seek ever-higher quality and artistic satisfaction in the self-assessed quality of their final result, as professional artists do, regardless of whether those products achieve high quality by the traditional standards of the arts discipline or not. The multiple dimensions of excellence identified in the report *Aesthetic Perspectives* [<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>] have been useful in expanding traditional judgments of quality in community and youth artmaking.

**Inquiring:** Questioning is used throughout all teaching artist practice, for many specific purposes. Indeed, teaching artistry is an inquiry process that uses production as one of its tools; this is, of course, inherently true of artist practice. Leading group reflection requires the teaching artist's skills of facilitation, offering and discovering great questions and guiding participants' answering processes. Consistent and curious questioning establishes the teaching artist environment and builds habits of mind for participants to develop and to pursue their own inquiries.

**Reflecting:** John Dewey wrote extensively on reflection and learning. The essence of his thinking comes down to this: If we do not reflect on our experiences, we do not learn from them. I maintain that reflection is the most stunted component of arts learning. Teaching artists regularly guide participants to “bend back” (the etymological meaning of “reflect”) their

experiences toward themselves in order to grab essential elements that give them ownership and advance the particular purpose of the work.

**Contextualizing:** Artistic experiences do not live in a vacuum; they must connect to lived life to gain relevance and power. The teaching artist finds organic ways to stimulate those connections and share relevant information at teachable moments. The contextual information that is shared situates the artistic experiences within the particular purpose thread.

Other basic tools of teaching artistry appear in all the purpose threads too; explication of these practices live in other writing—for example: engagement before information, entry points, high priority on personal relevance, observation before interpretation, warm-ups, culminating events, scaffolding, use of fun, enabling constraints, focus on choice making, tapping competence, pre- and post-self-assessment, and many more.

## THE PURPOSE THREADS

**The Work of Art Thread—** The purpose of this thread is to enhance the audience member's encounter with art works. This is the goal of “outreach” in many arts organizations: to introduce, excite, and interest people in their art offerings. Teaching artists accomplish this goal in many ways, in many settings. It was the central work of “aesthetic education” at Lincoln Center Education (where the term “teaching artist” was born in the early 1970s, and where I worked for 41 years), and it has been the mainstay of Young Audiences, the largest and oldest network using teaching artists in the U.S. It was the instinct of Leonard Bernstein in his Young People's Concerts, and is the goal of learner-centered, inquiry-based teaching that is widely adopted in the museum world. Teaching artists often guide participants to create works of art as a tool in this process, and to

carefully study works of art made by others, often masterworks. What unifies all the practices of this thread is that they seek to deepen personally relevant connections with works of art. If you were to assess the Teaching artist's work in this thread, you would seek to assess the quality of engagement with the artworks and the impact of such encounters on the viewer.

**The Community Thread**— The purpose of this thread is to activate and empower the artistic assets within a community in order to enrich its quality of life. This has been the domain of “community artists” and “civic artistic practice”; it has deep and proud traditions around the world. In this thread, the artist serves the community's aspirations and needs, often helping to surface, identify, and build consensus around those hopes and needs. From community choruses, public dance classes, and participatory mural projects in major cities around the world to creative placemaking projects in the U.S., a broad definition of art is used to engage a broad inclusion of participants. There are programs with especially deep traditions in the U.S., like Appalshop and the Philadelphia Mural Project. If you were to assess the teaching artist's work in this thread, you would seek to assess the change in community members' attitudes and how the functioning of the community has changed.

**The Skills Development Thread**—The purpose of this thread is to deepen the development of art-making skills. Along with the essential technical, mechanical, and imitative learning of artist training, working within arts-training programs, teaching artistry aspires to produce artistically alive people. This is a “new kid on the teaching artist block,” and the kid is still a little controversial in the professional arts pipeline. There is no clear line separating an arts teacher from a teaching artist; let's not argue whether the ballet mistress who focuses exclusively on technique should be

considered a teaching artist or not. Let's accept some gray areas to acknowledge that many experienced arts teachers are teaching artists, and teaching artists do teach the skills of their discipline, but they add something more than the tools of the art form—they teach the artistry in the art form that carries beyond it.

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development of artists. Teaching artists at Say Sí in San Antonio develop young artists in many disciplines, but those young artists are not just professional-track actors and filmmakers. They are community-minded contributors through their art. The TAs at Marwen, in Chicago, nurture professional-level accomplishment in their young visual artists, in such a way that dramatic life change is a consistent side-effect of the art learning. I led the teaching artist program at Juilliard for more than a decade, and students consistently reported to me, and to their studio faculty, that learning teaching artist skills enhanced their musical skills. Many school-of-the-arts/university/conservatory teachers should be considered teaching artists when they prioritize opening wide the artistic lives of their students and not merely teaching for skill mastery and career advancement. If you were to assess the TA's work in this thread, you would seek to assess the intrinsic motivation of the learner, the student's ownership of arts skills (an understanding of how

it may be used for one's own expressive purposes and the ability to apply it in varying contexts), the development of individual voice, and the strength of connections the learner makes inside and outside of the discipline, as well as the ways the TA goes about nurturing those four goals.

**The Arts Integration Thread**—The purpose of this thread is to catalyze the learning of non-arts content. This is a large experiment happening in U.S. arts education, and it is spreading to other countries. Finland has the largest commitment to this in their national schooling, and is, probably not incidentally, always rated among the top few academically-achieving nations in the world. The gamble of arts integration is that by bringing arts learning together with learning other subject matter both will advance further and deeper than they would on their own. This can be a tricky balancing act in partnership so that the arts component does not become a handmaiden to the more institutionally-urgent and formally-tested material of the other subject (the arts used to pep up a boring curriculum); conversely, so that the subject matter is not a legitimizing excuse to do a cool art project. Usually the TA leads in this partnership and must show discipline to ensure the balance, in a school setting that usually prioritizes academics over the arts. There are hundreds of programs across the U.S., and they go by many names including arts project-based learning, arts-rich, and arts-infused curriculum and schools. National programs include STEAM, Leonard Bernstein Center's Artful Learning schools, Symphony Space Education, Ford's Theatre Civics Education, as well as programs offered through Young Audiences and the Kennedy Center. If you were to assess the TA's work in this thread, you would seek to assess the learning in both the art and the other subject area. For example, in a theater and history project, you might assess what students have learned about writing strong scenes,

as well as their grasp of the historical material they were dramatizing.

**The Activism Thread**—The purpose of this thread is to impact a political or social movement. This thread is connected to the community life thread and has a long public history, sometimes including artworks labeled “propaganda,” and often intends to be controversial or provocative. This thread includes street theater, group singing (including “Complaint Choirs”), political artworks, graffiti, and public artworks with the purpose to change minds, challenge ideas, and build solidarity. Specific examples include Theater for Social Development, Cornerstone Theater Company, the actions of the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, and the work of graffiti artists such as Banksy. The International Teaching Artist Collaborative has a climate initiative in which teaching artists around the world lead projects that seek to change local understandings, actions, and policies regarding climate issues. Many artists naturally apply their artistic skills to causes they care about by making artworks that carry their messages, and some develop additional activist skills that intensify their impact in community and political organizing.

Whole genres of art have been born out of an activist movement, such as the Nigerian rock music movement of the 1960s, and “krumping” (a dance form born in Los Angeles) in the 1990s. If you were to assess the artist-activist's work in this thread, you would try to determine the impact and the lingering effect on people's hearts and minds. Certainly, imitation is a measure of impact, as Shepard Fairey's “Hope” image for Barack Obama has shown.

**The Social/Personal Development Thread**—The purpose of this thread is to develop personal or social capacities through the arts. This is the fastest-growing thread. Teaching artists, or “social practice artists” work with social service or other

organization partners to achieve social goals. This is the thread of El Sistema and music for social change programs around the world, which seek to redirect the lives of young people in poverty and other stressful conditions like migration through intensive, long-term youth orchestra engagement. This thread contains the work of creative aging, the fastest-growing employment sector of the teaching artist field in the U.S., and many prison and juvenile detention arts programs. It includes the Lullaby Project (Carnegie Hall, launched in 2011) that strengthens bonds and health outcomes of young mothers and their babies, in ways that careful research confirms. If you were to assess the teaching artist's work in this thread, you would seek to assess the development of the desired social outcomes, from reduced medications, improved morale, and health outcomes in senior centers, to reduced recidivism rates, to reduced gang and crime involvement, and high school graduation for music for social change programs (including Venezuela's 46-year-old El Sistema and over 200 similar programs around the world).

**The Partnering for Non-Art Goals Thread—**  
The purpose of this thread is to achieve non-arts outcomes that are important to partner institutions. This is a dull title for a thread, but the range of experimentation is broad, vibrant, and entrepreneurial. In this thread, artists work with businesses to boost innovative capacity (for example, the Second City corporate division), build teamwork, boost creativity, and develop leadership. They work with doctors in training to sharpen diagnostic acuity and build patient empathy. They work with planning commissions to bring creative vitality to urban planning. They work with environmentalists to change local regulations. This thread is growing unpredictably, as organizations discover ways that creative engagement can help them achieve their objectives. The teaching artist field has not investigated this thread much yet,

and because the employment opportunities are so scattered, it does not communicate well about the promising practices or the learning. If you were to assess the artist's work in this thread, you would focus on the goals of the project and find out if they are being attained.

+ **Digital—**Here we seek to activate personal artistry in digital media. This isn't a thread; it is a domain, and it uses various media, but its importance for the profession of teaching artistry, an importance which was amplified during the Covid pandemic, demands that it be considered in relation to the other threads. After decades of disinterest in virtual engagement, the field of teaching artistry was blasted into digital engagement in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even with all the activity in the electronic/digital realm in the lives of young people, the distinctive quality of engagement TAs can bring to internet connections had been largely absent prior to the pandemic. Artists who work in communities and schools had used digital media in some ways—in electronic portfolios, in searches and communications, in workshops—but the teaching artists' distinctive power to activate artistry had not yet found its footing through the internet. The sudden start in delivering their work online had teaching artists scrambling at first just to complete contracts, to keep online participants engaged and interested. I must say the early experimentation was disorganized and more earnest than effective. After the first flurry of several months, the field began to recognize the insufficiency of the initial ideas and settled into experimentation and deeper kinds of engagement. As the field has come to recognize that there would be no full return to “the way it was before the pandemic,” programs and practitioners began exploring deeper work to master hybrid programs—taking advantage of the benefits of what can be effectively accomplished online to set up more potent investment in

the precious opportunity of in-person creative engagement.

There is the new framework—seven threads plus one. I invite you to use the framework in whatever way makes sense for you. In practice it has been applied to various purposes. It has enabled previously disconnected organizations to have conversations as colleagues. For example, Carnegie Hall is committed to the power of music in people’s lives, Jacobi Medical Center has a clinic committed to helping young mothers living in stressful circumstances bond well with their babies; in the shared purpose of the Social/Personal Development Thread, the Lullaby Project was born and has spread around the world. The recognition of shared purpose has enabled school arts specialists and teaching artists to set aside the historic uncertainty of their relationship to accomplish their goals in better coordination. Working within this framework obviates old separations when “teaching artists” and “community artists” work together on a project—“we share the same goal, that’s what matters.” Focus on purpose has prompted fresh interest in teaching artist accountability, focusing on the degrees to which an intended purpose is accomplished—impact assessment has become a common practice in teaching artist programs.

I can imagine the next steps in developing the utility of this framework. It would be valuable to introduce the Purpose Threads to those beginning teaching artist training so that it could inform their choices in building careers—individuals inclined toward some purposes more than others, and to know the range of possibilities early could empower new field entrants with more agency. In the Lincoln Center Teaching Artist Development Labs (before they were discontinued during the Covid pandemic), we were planning special training tracks in different Purpose Threads; the

developmental sequence of four lab stages focused on the common core set of skills, and we aspired to add specializing threads that emphasized the skill sets that were distinctive to these purposes.

The Purpose Threads framework makes clearer to those outside the arts what artists who work in participatory settings can accomplish. It helps artists to clarify career choices and to become more intentional in having their intended impact on the world. It makes clear to teaching artists themselves that they are part of a big field, with many kinds of expertise, and that any particular area of expertise is just one among many. And perhaps, it can finally help funders envision ways to build infrastructure to grow this field—a painful blind spot in the funding field that has limited the benefits teaching artists are ready to deliver. The flexible, adaptable, muscular skills of teaching artistry are ready to accomplish the many important results they are distinctively capable of bringing into the world.

