

Diversifying Arts Education: A Conversation

Sarah Bainter Cunningham, Director of Arts Learning at the National Endowment for the Arts, has been talking with folk arts in education practitioners with an eye toward the 25th anniversary of the National Heritage Fellowship Program almost since the day she began her job. An educator with a philosophy degree, she thinks deeply about different modes of learning. Her belief that the Heritage Fellows have a lot to teach arts educators as well as young people led to her advocating more emphasis on folk arts in the Arts Learning Program. I sat down with her to record her thoughts about the Heritage Fellows and education early this summer.

—Paddy Bowman, CARTS Co-Editor

Why are the National Heritage Fellows so compelling to you and what do you believe the field of folk arts in education brings to arts education?

I find the passing on of traditions important. First, I am the daughter of a sculptor whose mother, my grandmother, is an art collector. We have a lot of oral histories in my family about art. While my dad is in fine arts, passing on the experience of artists who have crossed paths along the way is an invaluable part of his story, so it's very different for me to experience sculpture or visual art because of that connection. Often I ask about my dad's and grandmother's experiences to try to really hear what they went through. That is part of the idea of being connected to your family and community through the practice of your family life.

In arts education, we talk about getting arts in the schools and every child experiencing art in some way. At the Endowment we have 14 disciplines, and there are lots of opportunities a student could have, but that's a huge goal—to make sure that young people are exposed to all 14 disciplines in some focused way. The folk arts encompass all the disciplines and happen

in everyday life in locally specific ways but are often unrecognized or invisible in school. The depth of value in folk arts, the quality of projects, and the different approach to thinking about art lend something invaluable to the conversation about art and arts education in young people's lives. When I first arrived I thought, wouldn't it be great for the Endowment to tackle this to provide more support for folk arts in education?

Engaging in Community

Ethnography intrigues me. Thinking about who we are and where we're going, where we came from, where we're going as individuals, as part of a community, as part of a larger country—those conversations are really navigated profoundly in the traditional art forms. Because of my philosophical background, I love the beautiful way that the folk arts address these very important questions and engage generations of the community as one creates. This is very different from the idea of individual originality that we often see in fine arts, whether music, visual art, digital media, or dance.

I get really excited when I see the artistry of the Heritage Fellows. The funding that we currently provide to folk and traditional arts education projects is a

relatively small part of our learning in the arts investment, but makes a very important contribution. At NEA, we have this portfolio in which we make multiple investments, not just grants but leadership initiatives and policy, to support a rich community of arts education. So when you see that many folk arts grants go to small community-based organizations, in addition to seeing the value and responding to the importance of it, we ask if it is also where can we make a difference and help the field grow and develop. We have NEA Jazz in the Schools, NEA Poetry Out Loud, and the NEA Big Read literature curriculum, different ways that we invest in disciplines, so when I came in I wanted us to take some time out to invest in this discipline.

There is a lot of need. People have expressed an interest in adding a folk arts perspective to professional development. Now, in our age of accountability, measuring what students learn from folk artists and in folk arts will help us communicate the value of folk arts learning. I would like to see folk arts at the table in the larger dialogue on American education. How traditional artists assess students differs from assessment in arts education, but it's rigorous and specific to the tradition and the artist. One challenge is to help put assessment into language that can be communicated to a wider public, so we can welcome in a broader array of people to the conversation on American learning.

I think this work will assist us in identifying values at work in traditional art forms. What words does a community or cultural group use to describe Guinean dancing, klezmer music, Beijing Opera, or Native American weaving? We can recognize the educational value of art forms originating in Native American communities as well as art forms brought to this country and now incorporated within the American cultural fabric. Every young

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Photo courtesy of NEA

Sarah Cunningham, Arts Learning Director, and Barry Bergey, Director of the Folk Arts Program hosted a meeting of folk arts in education advocates at the Endowment last summer to discuss education initiatives to mark the National Heritage Fellowship's 25th anniversary. Front row: Heritage Fellow Mary Louise Defender Wilson, Marsha MacDowell, Maida Owens, and David Marshall. Back row: Marjorie Hunt, Nancy Daugherty, Guha Shankar, Amanda Dargan, Kristin Congdon, Barry Bergey, Sarah Cunningham, Terry Liu, Alexandra Zsigmond, and Paddy Bowman

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person should have the opportunity to recognize and celebrate the richness of all the traditions that constitute the art history of the United States. To celebrate these forms with living artists can inspire young people even more!

What does it take for a young person to master the art form? There are really clear criteria for excellence. We can also help give voice to excellence and the processes that lead to excellence. We can assist more people, for instance, K-12 teachers, bring folk arts to their classrooms and provide them with contexts for doing so. The Endowment can stimulate conversations between traditions and artists and the educational community. We can translate work to a wider audience and garner interest from more mainstream arts education organizations. Often the folk arts are invisible to many in a community, but this doesn't mean that there are not community and culturally based resources educators should know about.

Historical and Aesthetic Imagination

Folk arts can teach us a lot about teaching, about ourselves, about American culture and history. In this venue, young people often encounter past generations, developing their historical imagination as well as their aesthetic imagination. When it comes to conversations about a healthy future, an understanding of our own traditions in relation to others' cultures can be developed in a folk arts engagement. Engaging in folk arts practice requires an extended relationship to time, developing your art over years, not one semester or school year. In addition to linking us to extended families and communities, these traditions connect us with places, landscapes, and geographies. In our fast-paced world of immediate gratification, we desperately need this sort of long-term thinking, with long-term goals and a historical sense. Informing long-term thinking with place-based knowledge is precisely the education that young leaders will need to bring us into the future. You can develop a more sophisticated relationship to time, thinking about your participation in the world on a whole different level. There is a continuity of place as well as time, there is interaction and connection across generations.

In the many years that young people spend as students, the learning environment should include things that validate

their knowledge and experience, while also extending and challenging them. The diversity and breadth of the Heritage Fellows speak to budding artists who might not be drawn to academic fine arts. Study of traditional arts also enriches and deepens other artistic practices. Most importantly, however, recognition of Heritage Fellows allows students to see themselves in celebrating practices often missed in the frenzy of popular culture. Think of the incredible local artists who do not appear in 13 years of K-12 curriculum.

Many Doors

A healthy society cultivates different ways of thinking about the world, both by exercising tolerance but also by celebrating and extending all the voices at work in a rich community. Mastery of traditional genres is certainly important, but a young person does not need to be a prodigy to be allowed to learn. You may not be the best but you can participate, your talents are plumbed. You realize you have lots of doors, not just one or two. Or, put another way, as a young American, you realize you can draw on different voices from your cultural heritage. What a terrific moment! Young people can find their extended artistic family, their aesthetic heritage! Finding this family—which also sometimes means saving the voices of these family members—automatically empowers a young person with extended connections and deeper self-knowledge. And it is that self-knowledge that will build a great future by informing actions and decisions by links to our forbears.

We have numerous tools to accumulate in a toolbox to problem-solve and think about the world. For example, I studied flute, visual art, and literature. I was a writer, and then I got a philosophy degree. So I have these tools. The way you learn traditions within a culture is another way of creating a toolbox, one that will have to be more and more valued in the future for we must be attentive to such resources, to authenticity, to the history of American cultures that informs our current circumstances. We increasingly appropriate culture in contemporary society. We add, cut, paste, and mash information out of context in our Wiki culture. We also need to link to cultural creations and historical context; otherwise, we quickly slip into superficial generalizations about the world. The folk arts remind us, teach us, and train us in context. This is vital to our aesthetic lives, to the living heartbeat of our local communities, and to the success of our citizenship within a democracy.

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