Work of Art

Evaluative Report

Springboard for the Arts
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“This is my work”
– Work of Art participant

A short sentence with deep meaning and powerful implications for the artists involved in the Work of Art program from Springboard for the Arts, this statement summarizes my evaluation following two months of artist and staff interviews, meetings, curricular review, and participant observation.

Springboard’s Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists is a professional development curriculum designed to teach business skills to artists in all disciplines – visual, performing and literary arts. Artists can take the whole series, customized combinations, or individual workshops that best suit their needs. Springboard’s Work of Art series has been taught at arts organizations, libraries and colleges in over 80 communities in the Upper Midwest.

For the participants in the Work of Art (WOA) workshops delivered by teachers from Springboard for the Arts, the artist’s sense of agency and empowerment is clearly linked to an individual and collective affirmation of their identity as artists. This identity construction process is, furthermore, linked to the ability to plan, organize, practice, and do the business of art with implications for the cultural and economic participation of people whose contributions to the greater community may not be otherwise harnessed.

In this report, I will discuss the above links, their manifestations, and the individual and collective impact WOA workshops have on participants in this study and the communities they inhabit. These conclusions are based on 20 interviews with people in the Twin Cities Metro Area, West Central Minnesota, and Dubuque, Iowa. Interpretive Research Design was the methodological approach used to generate hermeneutical insights in accordance with long accepted standards of scholarly rigor.

The impact of WOA will be discussed through three interpretive groupings followed by a synthesis and suggestions for next steps. The three groupings include: 1) Agency & Empowerment, 2) Pedagogy & ‘Special Sauce’, and 3) Community Economic Development.

“Carla,” the Work of Art Workbook sample artist. Design by Chad Nestor.
Agency & Empowerment

It has been widely articulated across the community development, entrepreneurship, adult education, and civic engagement academic literature that a sense of agency is of significant importance when trying to understand how a person or group of people become empowered to live healthy, meaningful, and productive lives. It is, therefore, of great importance to note the attitudes and assumptions one has toward their own agency when trying to understand their wellbeing. This insight is key to understanding the impact that WOA has on individuals and communities.

Nearly every artist interviewed for this project communicated a personal sense of agency, created by or extended through WOA workshops. As one artist put it:

“[I now have] confidence in not only the comfort level with the logistics of business, but also just with calling myself an artist because I can... It is a journey and it legitimizes me by attending the class because that is a language that other people can understand. A lot of people don’t understand the art process, but when I say, ‘I’ve been, you know, taking these classes’, people say ‘Oh!’ That’s something they can sink their teeth into, and it’s something I can sink my teeth into.”

Time and again, artists told stories that illustrated their own journey – from a sense of inadequacy, timidity, or even shame to a proud and confident avowal of an identity as an ‘artist’. It was typical to hear an artist who had struggled for years to find their ‘calling’ or ‘niche’ describe the uplift they received through the words of a WOA teacher or classmate. That inward struggle is expressed in this artist’s anecdote:

“India Flint is this natural dyer... one of the questions she always gets is ‘Why do you want to be an artist?’ And her response is ‘Because I am otherwise unemployable.’ And you know, I love that. But... some of us are otherwise employable and that almost becomes a crutch, kind of, you know? Because you can to this other thing and life would be maybe a little simpler at first, but...”

For a number of artists, the hard skills being taught (e.g. Time Management or Pricing) combined with the workshop’s characteristic affirming, warm, and supportive atmosphere provided a catalytic experience that led to months or years of increased personal productivity. In addition, the technical skills provided the confidence for many artists to express to family and friends that “this is my work,” an important act of agency through which artists affirmed their own identity as both an artist and a worker (i.e., business person, productive member of society, provider, and so on).
This is especially true for new or transitioning artists. For many WOA participants, the workshops were also an act of practicing agency as they gave serious thought to what had previously been understood as ‘just a hobby’. A number of artists expressed the importance of WOA in helping them change direction after careers that were emotionally unfulfilling. Hope for a changed life and newly acquired know-how were two outcomes for these artists.

For more seasoned artists, WOA affirmed their identity as an artist in other ways. For instance, many artists (as well as teachers of workshops) discussed the hole in their formal artistic training when it came to business and subsistence know-how. Many expressed the lack of exposure in BFA and MFA programs to the kind of concrete business development and entrepreneurial skills that allow them to make a living off of their skills and talents. In addition, these artists tended to emphasize the collaborative and communal opportunities that WOA facilitated. Participants in both metropolitan and rural settings celebrated the ‘community of artists’ that was either created by or extended through the workshops.

In the case of both transitioning artists and seasoned artists, most could draw lines between exercises from and goals created during their workshop experiences to current practices, goals, or accomplishments.

Importantly, artists expressed that their own sense of agency as an artist and a businessperson was bolstered through WOA workshops and that they would in the future and have already recommended the sessions to others.

In many cases, artists could point to specific examples of how their participation had led to increased or more consistent income. In other cases, artists were confident that the path they were walking following their WOA participation was making a difference and that economic dividends were on the horizon.

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that WOA has a significant impact on the artists who participate through the bolstering of agency and the affirmation of personal identity. Furthermore, artists report that this sense of agency and empowerment has material consequences for their wellbeing that they tend to attribute directly to WOA.

WOA Participants:

“There are tools... that I still have in my folder that I use everyday”

“The concept of making a ‘To-do tomorrow List’ instead of like a to-do list for today – that simple change for me, that probably number one thing – it gives me time to think about and prepare myself for the tasks that I’m gonna do tomorrow, um, has made a huge difference in how I organize myself... As simple as that is, I wouldn’t have come up with that”

“I think it’s a great program and... I do recommend it anytime it’s anywhere near here”

“I’m still not comfortable [with pricing] but I feel like I have the tools”
Pedagogy & Special Sauce

The curriculum development and delivery of WOA programs by Springboard teachers is more than the transfer of technical knowledge and best practices from experts to novices. Springboard leadership, WOA teachers, and workshop participants share this view and responded positively to the idea that Springboard has some kind of ‘special sauce’. That is to say, there are certain qualities of presence, teacher identities, and pedagogical characteristics that are summarized through the metaphor ‘special sauce’:

Qualities of presence: The pedagogy of WOA workshops relies heavily on the atmosphere created and fostered by its teachers. According to workshop participants, Springboard teachers create a balance between a professional, quick-paced atmosphere and a relaxed, shared learning space where all comers are met at their own level. A mixture of enthusiasm, patience, and personal vulnerability was used to hold this space. Vulnerability on the part of the teachers had particular power in creating a sense of trust, respect, and safety while modeling a non-defensive, humble approach to self-reflection. As one artist put it:

“Anna is a fabulous, natural teacher.”

[Why do you say that?]

“Because of her experience and how she handles the group. Keeping us on track but also leaving it open so people feel comfortable”
– WOA participant, [bracketed quote is interviewer]
Teacher identities: Woven into the quality of presence that the teachers possess is their identity as artists themselves. For participants, a sense of belonging was shared, with a number of artists telling stories of an experience where a teacher affirmed their identity as an artist or businessperson. Importantly, it was the teacher’s own identity as an artist and businessperson in these stories that gave the affirmation meaning for the WOA participant.

Pedagogical characteristics: Related to vulnerability is the WOA teacher’s practice of using personal experience as an artist to illustrate the curriculum. There was universal agreement that first-hand experience as an artist on the part of the teachers was key to participants’ own learning process. Participants found it particularly helpful and edifying that Springboard teachers took a dialogical approach to education through problem-posing, group discussion, and personal reflection. One artist expressed a catalytic moment she experienced at WOA:

“I talked to Naomi about it at one of the workshops, and this was kind of a pivotal moment, too. I said ‘I have all of these other issues, these other factors that come into play, and I get all jazzed when I’m here at the workshops and I feel all energized and I feel like I have these skills – but then there’s this fear of, you know, really going for what I want.’ She said, ‘So what would you tell your kids?’ And I went ‘Oh.... oh.... OH!!! So that was kind of ‘AHA!’”

[So what would you tell your kids?]

“I would tell them to work as hard as they possibly could for their dreams. And that, you know, the other stuff is gonna... you’ll find a way. It’s gonna, it’s gonna work out if you have the talent and the desire to do it.”

– WOA participant, [bracketed quote is interviewer]

In general, the WOA participants are very happy with Springboard’s workshop teachers. One expressed interest in being trained by Springboard to deliver workshops in his region and others seemed to hint that they are looking for future opportunities of that kind. Finally, WOA participants appreciate the continuity between teachers and across curriculum as well as the creative, catalytic energy that teachers curate during the workshops.\textsuperscript{vii}
Community Economic Development

Although this study did not attempt to quantify the economic impact of WOA on the communities in which it has been delivered, there are at least three points worth noting regarding community economic development as it relates to WOA.

First, many artists report that WOA workshops offered concrete steps that they have used to set and reach goals regarding financial wellbeing through their arts practice. That is to say, one can be confident that there is meaningful economic impact at the level of the artist and their dependents that is directly linked to their education through WOA. And, in most of those cases, those artists report that WOA is a wholly unique resource for them.

“I have this skill, I have a nice following, I wanna do my art and share it and teach and do all of these things, but I have to pay the bills. So making the leap from a day job to that is awfully intimidating... (since WOA) I’ve kind of reframed that. Instead of ‘what day job could I have that would allow me to do a little more (art) work?’ is ‘How do I transition from this day job to that (full time art)?’ (WOA) has made it far more realistic than it had been.” – WOA participant

Noah Keesecker leading a Work of Art Workshop. Photo by Bruce Silcox.
Second, the collaborative and community-oriented nature of Springboard’s approach to hosting WOA workshops has the expressed effect of strengthening the bonds and networks among artists. This has led to new participation in both publicly and privately funded granting programs as artists gain a sense of agency and affirmation through participation in a group rather than simply accessing the curriculum on their own.

“I’ve made some good connections, whether short-term or long-term. And those conversations have helped boost my confidence, but in turn, I’ve been able to return the favor to other people. And I’ve just had some really good, rich conversations, or gained knowledge that you would not get if you were in the college setting, because there, everyone’s so green that they really can’t contribute – and so you get a richer dialogue.”
– WOA participant

The social fabric, in other words, that WOA helps to weave also has demonstrable impact on the income capacities of individual and collective artists.

Third, new participants in local arts economies, arts-based granting programs, and arts-related tourism have the effect of bolstering local economies at the community and regional level. Although difficult to quantify in isolation, there is no doubt that artistic expression increases local sense of shared meaning, a sense of civic pride, and therefore collective agency. These are the bedrocks of sustainable community economic development. It is, therefore, of large significance that WOA is convening and equipping artists with the skills and sense of agency to be creative catalysts in their own communities.

“I was just lucky that this was offered in my region. And it was free for us, which would have been something... It would have been an obstacle for me had it not been free.” – WOA participant
Conclusion

In both the Twin Cities metro area and Greater Minnesota, the wellbeing of artists are significantly and positively impacted by their participation in the Work of Art workshops from Springboard for the Arts. That impact is psychological, emotional, social, and economic. Springboard does indeed have a special sauce that compliments the technical content found in its curriculum. That special sauce, while elusive to articulation, can be captured and expressed more fully through further facilitated reflection on the part of the teachers.

The Work of Art curriculum is additionally available as a free toolkit in both English and Spanish via Springboard for the Arts’ national program, Creative Exchange.

**Work of Art:** [http://springboardexchange.org/workofart/](http://springboardexchange.org/workofart/)

**Trabajo de Arte:** [http://springboardexchange.org/trabajo-de-arte/](http://springboardexchange.org/trabajo-de-arte/)

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Notes


ii From Freire (1970) to Sen (1999) and Giddens (1986) to hooks (2010), there is significant agreement across disciplines that economic, civic, and social empowerment are deeply connected to a person’s sense of agency; that is, capability to live the life one desires to live.

iii BFA stands for Bachelor of Fine Arts degree while MFA is a Master of Fine Arts degree.

iv While the magnitude of this sense was not universally singular, most reported a significant change in their own practice that they attributed to participation in WOA.

v This attribution sometimes took the form of non-exclusivity. By that I mean an artist may have worked with a regional arts council at the same time they were taking WOA workshops, so while they affirmed the impact of WOA, they did not necessarily look back and say “I learned this from WOA and not the arts council”, but rather “WOA was so helpful at that time... so was our regional arts council”. This should not be interpreted as a lack of linking, but rather evidence of another theme in these interviews, which is collaboration and synergy. Still, it should be noted that in some cases WOA was not described as the only source of increased agency and empowerment. At the same time, SPRINGBOARD makes a habit of collaborating with other community groups so it is argued here that some ambiguity regarding the exact, isolated cause of empowerment is not, and was not previously, the value, vision, or organizational approach in the first place. So, it is true to say that WOA is directly linked the empowerment and agency of these artists even if it is not always true to say it is the only link. I would submit that this tension is not problematic, but emblematic of a collaborative and inclusive approach to artist education and development.

vi The idea of ‘special sauce’ came from initial conversations with Executive Director Laura Zabel. There was a shared sense among leadership that the WOA workshops provided something more to artists than the simple availability of downloadable workbooks. Laura called it ‘our special sauce’ and the idea stuck. As I interviewed staff and artists, I sometimes introduced the metaphor toward the end to see if the idea resonated with them. Both groups responded enthusiastically to the idea, even as they, too, were unsure how to describe the special thing to which they were drawn. This was affirmation to me that the ‘special sauce’ was not just a projection of leadership’s hopes for programming, but a realized part of the WOA experience.

vii It is my opinion that the special sauce that Noah and the SFA teachers have demonstrated through WOA is transferrable through training. It would definitely be my recommendation that these areas be further articulated for curriculum development. As I mentioned above, there is interest in training from SFA in these areas.

viii For more on these interactions, see Sen (1999); Bhattacharyya (2004); Emory & Flora (2006); Talmage, Dombrowski, Pstross, Peterson, & Knopf (2015); and, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf (2016) among others.