Arts and Engagement

Integrating arts-based education strategies and tools into a study/practice of civil society

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The intention of this document is to generate conversation and stimulate inspiration with respect to the design of the School for Civil Society (SFCS). It investigates two primary questions:

- **Why include the arts in a study/practice of civil society?**

- **How can we create an educational model that integrates arts-based approaches into a study/practice of civil society?**

These questions are explored through a synthesis of information, anecdotes, thoughts and opinions from:
1) Loosely structured discussions with:
   o University of Guelph faculty (specifically from the College of Arts)
   o Representatives from community organizations in Guelph
   o Practitioners who are active in the field of art for social change;
2) A brief review of some pertinent literature and popular media;
3) Personal experience as a researcher in the field of governance/human geography, and as a practicing, performing artist.

The document advocates for the intentional integration of arts into the new educational opportunity emerging at the University of Guelph that will address the vast notion of 'civil society'. The term 'arts' is used with an intentionally large scope that captures multiple expressions of the idea including academic disciplines also associated with humanities, creative crafts and folk traditions, specific art forms (music, dance, poetry, visual art, theatre) as well as arts-based learning strategies and research methodologies. The term study/practice is used to illustrate the notion that there can be many ways to engage, both in a theoretical/academic sense and in a practical/applied sense.

It is easy and common (especially in our current economic paradigm) to perceive the arts as frivolous and elitist – good in times of wealth but wasteful in times of scarcity. It is also easy to perceive arts as too "touchy-feely", "airy-fairy", "new-agey" and unprofessional or inappropriate in a university context. But art is what grabs our attention. It is what connects us to our shared human experience. It puts us in touch with our emotions and makes us listen to our hearts and other sources of intelligence and knowing. When done well, it can reveal universal truths and impact our perceptions, attitudes and even behaviour. It can take us into realms of innovation and allow us to see aspects of reality that we haven't seen before. There is an endless list of reasons why it is important to integrate arts into various aspects of our lives and our culture, but why exactly should we talk about this – why should we talk about our hearts – specifically with respect to civil society?

Using three aspects of civil society to frame the discussion, this document will highlight the reasons why arts integration is significant, articulate some possible models and strategies and offer other information and resources for further investigation into this topic (e.g. examples and current initiatives).

Important Aspects of Civil Society

As a multi-faceted and complex topic, there are many ways to conceptualize and approach a study/practice of civil society. Three broad aspects have been selected to provide a framework for exploring the primary questions. The brief description of each of these aspects and the related critical challenges provide a context for the following discussion of possibilities with respect to the integration of arts into a study/practice of civil society.

In broad terms, civil society (from a North American perspective) is a sector of our socio-economic system, theoretically distinct from government and the market, comprised of people who are:

1. Associating to advance common interests through shared decision-making
   - e.g. governance, collaboration, partnerships, multi-stakeholder initiatives

2. Creating/sustaining a fair and democratic culture and political identity
   - e.g. active, responsible, informed, concerned citizens

3. Developing social/community linkages
   - e.g. trust, shared values, understanding, respect, patience, consciousness, cultural awareness

A key aspect of civil society is its evolving role in decision-making processes. Where government agencies have traditionally managed certain aspects of society, some of these responsibilities are falling to new players (e.g. non-government organizations, charities, social justice coalitions). Through more inclusive 'governance' approaches, diverse stakeholders are participating in realms of policy development, program management and implementation that were traditionally allocated to government. We are in a paradigm where collaboration and partnerships between government and civil society organizations are popular solutions to complex problems.

However, this leads to many challenges including the need to manage competing views, to develop appropriate models for collective decision-making and to establish mechanisms for ensuring accountability. There is a clear imperative for generating innovative solutions to controversy and conflict, as well as more productive ways of relating to one another when it comes to sorting out priorities and developing effective working relationships among multiple stakeholders.

The second important aspect of civil society is the creation and maintenance of a population of active, responsible citizens. Recognizing that there are severe power

imbalances, social injustices and deeply engrained problems in the world, a key role of this sector is to find ways to enhance the likelihood that people will pay attention, critically consider government actions, contribute informed opinions and activities and do what they can to act in service of their values.

What is challenging about this aspect of civil society is creating viable, meaningful platforms that truly and equally allow for expression of the many voices that exist. The virtual connectivity of the Internet, through electronic petitions, alternative news sources and other personal/organizational web activity, has played a huge role in advancing this, however, other platforms that are more personal and connected in real time are needed. Further challenges are those of complacency, apathy and disinterest. Whether it is having contempt for protest, disregard for the electoral system, or an attitude of ignorance, these are strong barriers to the sustainability of a democratic political culture.

The third, and potentially most critical aspect of civil society is the development of strong social linkages -- a tight social and cultural fabric, which promotes a way of being that is welcoming, generous and sympathetic. This kind of social capital, also expressed as positive human relations, can include trust, tolerance, shared values, respect, patience, and understanding (just to identify a few). It is extremely valuable that groups of people have the capacity to exercise these traits, recognizing that they are related and interdependent in various ways. People who can do this can also come together during times of scarcity or crisis to solve problems. This is critical in a nation of increasing diversity and in a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

The challenges to weaving this fabric are immense. From discrimination and racism to religious intolerance and violence, there is a persistent divisive quality of "us and them" that permeates many societies. Whether due to fear, stereotype, negative experience or prejudice, these are keystone issues that block advancement toward other important aspects of civil society, such as good governance or improving standards of fairness. The overarching need in this regard is to create social and cultural technologies for building better relationships and connections among people.

In summary, these three aspects of civil society, while broad, capture some of what a study/practice of civil society can address. Enhancing collaborative literacy and collective consciousness in a time where isolation, independence and concentrated individualism are prominent is not easy. Connections at the local scale, in neighbourhoods, districts, cities, watersheds and regions are critical. It is from these places that much change can occur. If these challenges can be addressed with innovation, creativity and contemporary ideas, much is possible with respect to social change.

What do the Arts offer?

"…to re-enchant our lives in a disenchanted culture."
-- Thomas Moore in Max Wyman

The arts have a long history of reflecting, creating and fostering civil society. Through philosophies, stories, expressions and critical reviews of human experience comes a significant amount of wisdom focused on the art of living, both individually and collectively.

Unfortunately there has been a trend toward seeing the fields of arts and humanities as "extraneous", "boutique" and "frivolous" as they do not generate scientific conclusions or marketable products. They are seen as secondary to other subjects that have greater levels of rigour, reliability and economic/industrial value.

The School for Civil Society (SFCS) has a unique opportunity to support a shift in this trend. Based on the values expressed in the early SFCS discussions (see December 8th 2011) and the desire to improve the quality and level of engaged experiences for students, it is imperative to consider the tangible benefits of arts-based programming. From encouraging adaptability to improving skills for relationship development and group work, there are numerous reasons to design the SFCS with the arts as a central component. Several prominent themes including *connection*, *citizenship*, *culture* and *co-operation* are briefly highlighted below.

▪ We are living in a world full of messy, wicked and complex problems. Enhanced levels of connection (including greater compassion, empathy and understanding) serve to raise social consciousness, reveal power relations and challenge stereotypes, which are critical first steps in addressing these contemporary problems. Participating in the creation of art – an aesthetic experience of expression – can generate a level of connection that cannot be replicated through other means. Connection to others through art can offer purpose and meaning, which are necessary when it comes to transcending differences and overcoming the barriers of diversity.

▪ An engaged citizen recognizes diversity, understands the value of privilege, sees sources of oppression, respects their responsibility to contribute to something larger than themselves, and has learned that engagement in community can offer many benefits. The integration of arts-based methods with other forms of inquiry (e.g. social science) offers creative ways to address and explore some essential questions of civic identity: Who are you in relation to an issue? What is your responsibility? How can you be active socially, culturally and politically? The incorporation of art is also highly effective in publicly communicating the answers to these questions for others to consider.

- Knowledge and awareness of self is paramount. It is critical for people to have the space and motivation to reflect and to ask questions of themselves through multiple creative experiences outside the verbal, intellectual, conversational realm. Art can activate the imagination in ways that foster inspired forms of personal inquiry.

- When it has a larger social intention, the creation of art can offer a nexus between culture and politics. Using various art forms (i.e. sculpture, composition, puppetry, film, spoken word) to bring attention to critical political and cultural issues like homelessness, gang violence, climate change and food security can create avenues for meaningful demonstrations of citizenship and raise the profile of both individual and collective voices.

- A shared artistic process can be an entertaining and engaging way to practice collaboration. It is a way to experience first hand the challenge of sharing leadership, of negotiation, of navigating disagreement, of discovering appropriate sacrifice, of communicating honestly and openly. If we need to practice these skills in order to solve other challenging social issues, why not start with making art? To create art is not only a process, but also an outcome or a product, with the potential for highly impactful rewards. Generating collaborative art and sharing it with audiences can encourage a cultural practice of creatively thinking about issues, and can generate more holistic understanding based on the quality and diversity of the communication.

- The creation of rules by which we collectively operate (i.e. policy development and evaluation) is not always the most engaging or accessible activity. When these kinds of processes are open to participation, they often require co-operative learning – about issues, respectful communication, conflict resolution and collaborative action. These are not easy tasks and 'civic literacy' is not always part of individual experience. However, by introducing the element of creativity, more is possible. Arts-based methods offer opportunities for drawing people out differently as these approaches can provide alternative ways to speak, listen, observe or feel in relation to experience, and enhance the likelihood of co-operation in a variety of contexts.

Relevant Web Resources:

Centre for the Study of Art and Community
http://www.artandcommunity.com/

California College of the Arts, Centre for Art and Public Life
http://center.cca.edu/community

New York University, Tisch School for the Arts, Centre for Art and Public Policy
http://app.tisch.nyu.edu/page/home.html

Anna Deavere Smith Works (ADS Works), New York University
http://www.artsandcivicdialogue.org

Working in Public: Art, Practice and Policy
http://www.workinginpublicseminars.org

Michaelle Jean Foundation
www.mjf-fmj.ca

Arlene Goldbard
http://arlenegoldbard.com/

Arts = Different Tools in the Toolbox

Various arts disciplines and traditions together can be seen as a large toolbox full of social and cultural technologies. Both researchers and practitioners can use these technologies in many different ways to address issues, as appropriate. The tool, however, must match the issue, situation or context. Using art-based methods is not always the right approach. Conversely, excluding arts-based approaches can significantly limit the capacity of a project/research to reach a desired outcome.

Generally speaking, arts-based tools, especially when used in the context of inviting positive social change, have the capacity to: 1) nurture and heal, 2) educate and inform, 3) build and improve, and 4) inspire and mobilize. If the SFCS is striving to promote relationship building and community engagement, then an awareness of, and experience with, arts-based learning strategies is fundamental.

Arts-based Learning

Learning that is arts-based is defined by the quality of an educational approach and the integration of something creative, generative and exploratory into an educational process. It invites personal, intimate engagement with a topic or issue, and is focused on the development of specific kinds of skills, sensitivities, competencies and abilities including:

- Analysis (observation, reaction and critical thought)
- Interpretation and awareness of meaning-making
- Storytelling proficiency
- The ability to think conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically
- Tuning into personal creativity, flexibility, intuition
- Relating to many forms/ways of expressing knowledge and information
- Recognizing limiting behaviours (e.g. judgment, blame, assumption)

Using art provides a different lens for examining something and introduces elements of discovery, fun, play and exploration. This does not imply a lack of rigour or discipline in the work but rather the chance to engage with a distinct set of learning systems that can be employed to generate a variety of experiences, processes and outcomes.

Post-secondary student experiences can be very isolating with alienating large lectures and assessments reflecting their ability to memorize or support a critical argument – which are both important skills, but this does not create a well-rounded learner or innovative thinker who is ready to face complexity. Students need both technical and aesthetic experiences. If one of the goals of the SFCS is to provide students with an opportunity to develop skills that will help them to be more creative, flexible and able to work in collaborative group settings, arts-based tools for learning are both relevant and highly useful.

Whether choreographed and rehearsed or improvised, performance can be a medium for sharing values, stories, images, and metaphors in ways that effectively reach people. The use of emotion and expressive force can powerfully communicate in a language that is universal. It also asks viewers to participate in the construction of meaning – to explore their own knowledge, perception and interpretation of an issue. This is art's public purpose.

Performance invites an audience to engage with what they are seeing, and there are many ways to take advantage of this dynamic. Both pre-performance and post-performance dialogues are good examples. They can be specific and structured or loose and exploratory. Dialogue can be used to inform, design and construct a creative process, or to gather thoughts and reactions in order to spur or inform another process. Furthermore, performance can serve as a way to practice and encourage democratic activity, in that protest and activism can have many faces. Augusto Boal's concept of legislative theatre, where laws are influenced by the content of community performances, is based on this idea (see Howe 2009).

Animating ideas using different art forms allows learners to experience each other, the issues and themselves differently. These practices have distinctive outcomes as compared to the experience of sitting at a table. Being "at the table" is interesting metaphor for being stuck as it represents a singular strategy; a protected boundary between people and it is not always the right place to start or to stay. Getting visual and kinesthetic and becoming more open is critical to honest listening and shared learning. This is where connection happens – and connection is where community building begins.

Relevant Web Resources:

Simon Fraser University, Centre for Dialogue
http://www.sfu.ca/dialog/study+practice/honeycomb.html

LINK Dance
http://www.linkdance.ca/

Headlines Theatre
http://www.headlinestheatre.com/

Animating Democracy
http://animatingdemocracy.org/

University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy and Practice
Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)
http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/

Arts-based Research Practice

When a researcher employs a craft that is rooted in history and tradition, and uses that craft to investigate experiential reality, that is an arts-based research practice (from Leavy 2009). It serves to generate data, but "with a soul". The research can be just as rigorous as that of other disciplines but through the use of different skills and sensitivities. The desire for excellence, skill refinement, increased understanding and unique knowledge contributions are important values in this field.

Arts-based researchers use different "texts" which include a variety of technologies, such as sound, film, images or gestures. The inclusion of these texts can factor into multiple steps of a research process, providing alternative investigation tools during data collection or unconventional communication tools for reporting. These methods can lead to new ways of posing and answering questions, and to different strategies for sharing knowledge with non-academic audiences.

There is also an important aspect of critical reflection, evaluation and self-awareness that makes this kind of practice unique. Practitioners of these methods are constantly questioning themselves in relation to an issue. Most definitively, these methods can allow emotion a place in research. They can give a researcher various opportunities to engage with knowledge in physical and felt ways, and to relate to knowledge and information that exists beyond just intellectual, verbal, or conversational realms. Scholars can use these tools as a way pull themselves into new and varied perspectives and create invitations into research practices that are both engaged and engaging.

This field adds aesthetic and evocative dimensions to qualitative research. Through the use of narrative, poetry, music, performance, dance or the visual arts, there can be many ways to engage with a topic, question or problem that reveals its essence and its complexity in a potentially beneficial and innovative way.

Relevant Web Resources:

University of Toronto, Centre for Arts-Informed Research
http://www.utoronto.ca/CAIR/airchome3.html

University of British Columbia, Faculty of Law
Project CRANE
http://www.law.ubc.ca/pdr/crane/index.html

Hemispheric Institute
http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/course-list

Community Based Research Canada
http://communityresearchcanada.ca/?action=who_are_we

Cautions!

There are a number of important cautionary points that require attention when considering the integration of the arts into the SFCS.

- You need to have artists who are trained in a craft/tradition who are able to contribute both excellence and professionalism. Part of improving the ways arts are respected and valued is to respect and value the offerings of dedicated artists.

- A very careful ethic is needed when it comes to arts-based processes - not just research approval but a clear understanding power dynamics, potential for harm, and how to humbly approach other people and their life scenarios as these methods used clumsily can break connections as much as they can build them. The ability to create and hold space for authentic dialogue; to safeguard a social container that allows for the honest expression of thoughts and feelings; to support discovery of the diversity of stories and experiences that exist within a group of people – these are the abilities of skilled facilitators, which are critical components of arts-based processes.

- Arts-based methods are not better than or superior to – they should not replace other successful programs. They should not be forced upon unwilling social scientists. They provide a set of useful tools that can be highly effective in the right situation. While they may be very appropriate and useful to work related to the SFCS, they should not be viewed as threatening to other departments and faculty. The quality of other curriculum must be maintained.

- Arts-based processes require specific kinds of space (not your typical lecture theatre) and time to be successful. They also require resources that allow them to flourish in the form of people, materials, technologies and communication platforms. Questions pertaining to faculty, external expertise and administrative structure are significant.

- There is a risk of narrowly seeing arts-based methods as only being useful with respect to helping marginalized groups or providing charitable services. While often used in these contexts, there are many other applications for arts-based learning strategies, research and social practice that extend into other arenas of the very diverse entity that we loosely label "community".

- There is a common perception that the arts need to be "more relevant". This is a misleading idea as many artists and practitioners are doing the work that the SFCS seeks to do (e.g. community building and engagement). It is more accurate to say that the arts need to be understood/perceived differently.

Existing Programs in Guelph

At the University of Guelph, within the College of Arts, there are a handful of excellent programs that foster arts-based learning methods as well as social practice. Two are highlighted in the table below. These programs could be augmented, re-structured or privileged differently as they are currently and successfully engaged in work that is relevant to the goals of the SFCS. Addressing social and cultural issues and engaging in relationship building is an understood and fundamental component of these programs.

Program	More information
Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP)	http://www.improvcommunity.ca/about/
Art, Science and Technology Research Alliance (ASTRA)	http://www.uoguelph.ca/arts/Astra

In the larger Guelph community, there are organizations formally participating in ideas of art for social change or community-engaged art and cultural development. The University has a growing connection with some of these organizations and limited connection with others.

Organization	More information
Musagetes	http://www.musagetes.ca/programs/guelph/
FAB5 Festivals	http://www.guelphfab5.ca
Transition Guelph	http://www.transitionguelph.org/
Downtown Guelph Business Association	http://www.downtownguelph.com/projects
Guelph Arts Council	http://guelpharts.ca/guelphartscouncil/
Guelph Arts Platform	http://www.guelphartsplatform.ca/
Dramatic Action	http://www.communityengagedtheatre.ca/index.html
IMAGEO artworks	http://www.imageo.ca/index.php/projects/

Preliminary Possibilities for SFCS

It is possible that the SFCS adopt a number of different models in the design of this new educational opportunity. The right combination will depend of various factors including resources, partners, leadership and administration. Some preliminary suggestions are listed:

- Voluntary associations of faculty, students and community partners that apply to the SFCS for support

- Centralized clearinghouse of opportunities
  - e.g. requests from community organizations are gathered in a hub-like system (this already exists in several formats on campus)

- Animating explorations of current issues
  - e.g. salons, cultural journalism, coordinated "thought responses" from different disciplinary teams, performance-based dialogues

- Outreach to improve civic processes
  - e.g. offering consultation and facilitation support to the municipality or to not-for-profit organizations

- Art laboratories where faculty/students from any discipline can seek guidance from/collaboration with artists
  - e.g. choreography, idea animation, composition, knowledge translation

- Apprenticeships/internships with local artists in the City of Guelph who are interested in social practice

- Incentives for faculty/students to support policy development and transformation by lending expertise and current research findings to civil society organizations

- A seminar/workshop series that includes registered students as well as members of the public

- Output through a variety of media to channel awareness of activity
  - e.g. radio programs, magazine, theatrical productions, public events and commissions

Unanswered Questions

A number of important questions remain unanswered as the answers are being discovered through processes of conversation and dialogue. The questions listed here come from conversations with faculty, community organizers and other interested people in Guelph:

> Does the title "civil society" really communicate the right idea?

> How can a university promote the characteristics of a good citizen?

> What kinds of skills and competencies do students need to have to "engage" in "community"?

> What is the primary goal of this program?

> Are we going to study civil society or participate in it, or both?

> Should this be a course or a certificate, or a whole new institutional model?

> Who will have the expertise to teach the material? Can we have artists and faculty working together?

> In the end, what skills do we want students to have anyway? What is missing? What outcomes are intended?

> What values will guide us in developing this work? How can we ensure that our stated values match our actions and strategies?

> What outcomes are intended?

Closing Remarks

> *"If we stop seeing culture as the sum of artistic representations and begin*
> *to see it as the set of processes and practices that humans create to coexist*
> *in a specific place, we start to see it as a basic human need."*
> *– Catalina Velasquez, advisor to Colombia's Ministry of Culture*

There is important work to be done in building trust in arts and culture and in supporting the understanding of the relevance of culture to the wellness of a society. The contemporary reality of cultural diversity requires that cultural experiences be created and re-created in dynamic processes that evolve, and making art helps us to do this.

While many view art as something that entertains or something that is only pertinent to the realm of the elite, these perceptions are damaging, limited and misrepresent the richness that can exist in artistic expression. It is easy to see arts and culture as something we are meant to consume from celebrities instead of generate ourselves. But it is a central part of our shared identity. It can be as simple as an experience that brings people closer, where they can celebrate and enjoy the company of strangers. To be moved by an experience, visually, kinesthetically or otherwise, is to be engaged in an experience and potentially be inspired to think, make different choices and behave in different ways as a result.

Whether we are associating to make decisions and solve problems, expressing our political and cultural identity or generating linkages that make community strong and capable, we are practicing civil society. The arts provide us with powerful and captivating ways to do these things. We have an opportunity to give students a taste of these possibilities and I think it is our responsibility to make these both real and accessible in this new school.

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List of Conversation Guests

University of Guelph Faculty

Dr. Ajay Heble	Professor, School of English and Theatre Studies
Dr. Alan Filewod	Director, School of English and Theatre Studies
Dr. John Kissick	Director, School of Fine Art and Music
Dr. Matthew Hayday	Associate Professor, Department of History
Dr. Stuart McCook	Associate Dean, College of Arts

Community Representatives

James Gordon	Musician; community facilitator; former NDP candidate
Shawn van Sluys	Director, Musagetes Guelph
Annie O'Donoghue	Founder of 10 Carden; social entrepreneur/researcher
Gail Lotenberg	Artistic Director, LINK Dance (Vancouver)
Dr. Mark Winston	Director, Centre for Dialogue (Simon Fraser University)
Tanya Williams	Context and performance artist (Kitchener-Waterloo)
Barry Karp	Theatre teacher, Ottawa School of Speech and Drama