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LINCOLN CENTER COMES TO BOWLING GREEN

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the establishment of an arts program in a small Ohio community. It describes the implementation of aesthetic education with shared resources.

LINCOLN CENTER COMES TO BOWLING GREEN

Arts Unlimited is one of the newest organizations joining the ranks of community and school arts projects in Ohio, but it is built on an on-going and successful concept in aesthetic education that was pioneered by the Lincoln Center Institute of New York. Designed to enhance and foster the aesthetic skills perception of students in elementary and secondary schools, the 'Lincoln Center concept' is based on some well-established principles, but it puts them together in a way that has excited teachers and their students not only in New York City, but also in Nashville, Houston, Rochester, New York--and now Bowling Green.

For its part, Lincoln Center was eager to help. Starting in 1975 with 30 teachers, Lincoln Center had expanded by 1981 to over 500 teachers. During the six years of the project, 'alumni' of the Institute, together with Institute demonstrators and consultants have reached an estimated 30,000 students in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. In 1980, Mark Schubart, Director of the Institute, began meetings with Bowling Green teachers, administrators, and University faculty to assist in setting up an institute, returned several times to meet residents, and later to visit the summer session. The Nashville Institute, which held its first session in 1980, helped to train BGSU faculty as teacher-trainers and cost-shared a ballet from the Memphis Institute that appeared in Bowling Green and Nashville. Arts Unlimited was becoming a part of the national network. The problem was then to make it a part of its local environment-- namely Bowling Green State University and the area schools.

In February, 1981, Arts Unlimited offered a one-day demonstration workshop for 25 teachers. Since it was held on a holiday, the Bowling Green school administration demonstrated its continuing support by paying the participants an honorarium. The follow-up to this workshop saw demonstrators pay a total of nearly 50 visits to the schools in visual art, dance, music, and theatre, reaching nearly 600 students. At the University, the College of Musical Arts and the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation combined to present a special program for the youngsters in music and dance, the School of Art hosted student visitors to its ceramics and print shops, and the theatre program arranged for tickets for a university production.

In June 1981, fifty teachers from the Bowling Green schools and two Wood County schools gathered at Bowling Green State University for an intensive week--8-10 hours per day--of study, practice, and viewings of performances in the areas of music, dance, theatre, visual art, and film. On hand was a staff of faculty from BGSU, guest artists from the University as well as the Memphis Ballet, and three artist-teachers supplied by Lincoln Center. Their goal was: to develop their aesthetic perception not through generalized, abstract principles, but through hands-on experiences with specific works of art performed live by

accomplished artists. Over ninety per cent of the teachers had little or no experience in the arts and their formal training in arts education or performance was minimal. The week sought to make them more familiar with art participation and evaluation, and got them to the point of being willing to take their experiences back to all their students--not just the talented or sifted--and develop lessons and experiences for their students, with the continuing help of the Institute staff. By approaching aesthetic perception on a "piece by artistic piece" basis (as one teacher put it) and taking that piece apart in an experiential way, participants were thus not overwhelmed or isolated by the actual performance itself. They learned what to look or listen for, how a particular style of composition or performance might enhance the artistic effect, how composers, playwrights, artists, dancers used their artform as a medium of communication, and how a good performance or exhibition touched our humanness to make us a part of what we see and hear. Of equal importance was to create a mechanism to involve University resources on a longterm basis--with an appropriate "pay-off" in terms of reaching new audiences--and to mesh this with the resources of the schools.

The key elements in the Lincoln Center approach are:

1. Choosing artistic pieces of high quality and "teachability"

(Some pieces lend themselves more readily to this type of institute than others);

2. Having those pieces performed live by the best talent that one can assemble (and afford!);

3. Having the seminars taught by "artist teachers"--individuals who have a deep commitment to actual performance but who can communicate the essence of their art to lay persons without becoming too technical or esoteric;

4. Providing a strong support system for the teachers that extends beyond the summer experience throughout the school year;

5. Bringing the performances/exhibitions that the teachers previewed during the summer back to the school during the school year so that the children may have the same kind of experience of perception that their teachers had.

6. Keeping the pedagogy simple. There is much emphasis on "learning

by doing" and of encouraging creativity on the part of the learners.

7. Obtains a financial and administrative commitment from the schools.

In addition to the work on artistic pieces, participants listened to BGSU's "Philosopher-in-residence" focus on how perception and values interact with reference to the works they were studying. Starting with common optical illusions, she quickly moved her audience into consideration of art works, asking them to think about what was going on inside them as they considered different ways of looking at a painting.

The institute also had a public dimension. Several of the performances were combined into a "gala evening" to which the community was invited to see Andrew Krichels of Lincoln Center dance some excerpts from Anna Sokolow's ROOMS, Leslie Howard and Dorothy Shrein of the Memphis Ballet dance Anthony Tudor's SCENES FROM CHILDHOOD, Jerome Rose, artist-in-residence at BGSU, play Schumann's DAVIDSBUNDLER TANZE, the BGSU String Trio perform Beethoven's STRING TRIO OP 8, students from the department of theatre do two scenes from Shakespeare's MERCHANT OF VENICE, and dance students from the University do an original piece by BGSU instructor, Debbie Tell, RIGMAROLE. The teachers had studied all these--plus some art works at the Toledo Museum of Art and the film, CITIZEN KANE.

The summer institute was the first step. During the fall, each building's teachers who attended the institute formed a team to choose which of the above pieces they would like to work on with their students. The institute supplied consultants and demonstrators to assist in the design and implementation of lessons in the classrooms, timing them to fit into established performance schedules of certain pieces--such as the dances of MERCHANT--or else arranging the time when the performances could be given in the schools.

Is the concept working? As can be imagined, several modifications in the Lincoln Center concept had to be made to fit the relatively limited and scattered arts resources in northwestern Ohio. As with anything new, inertia had to be overcome. But three things stand out that are making this venture successful:

The first is the administrative and organizational support that quickly coalesced, even in this era of stringent budgets and a governmental attitude that was hardly encouraging. The Jennings Foundation gave a grant of \$8,000, the Ohio Arts Council wrote letters of endorsement, the Bowling Green and Wood County school administrations found budgetary ways of helping out, the University made a sizable commitment by providing a half-time director with office support as well as space in the Musical Arts Building, and key members of the community rallied to the cause by forming a citizens committee which, among other things, christened this venture "Arts Unlimited" to reflect the optimism that it will not only continue but expand into other areas of northwestern Ohio.

The second is the response of the teachers and staff. Colleagues within the University termed the experience the high point of the year (faculty development officers please note), and the participants from the schools had some nice things to say about their week. Comments such as "excellent," "rewarding," "outstanding," "well-done," and "thank you" appeared pretty regularly in the evaluations.

Most important, however, has been the response of the children and several of their parents. By making the program a (relatively) integral part of the schools--at least in terms of making the classroom teacher a partner in this enterprise instead of an appendage--we began to see evidence that some degree of aesthetic awareness was taking place in at least some of the children. Certainly their enthusiastic response to the demonstrators and the programs and their degree of involvement in the exercises surprised some of their teachers who had tended to underestimate the ability of students to enjoy the program.

Of course, much of the success of the program was the "halo" effect that anything new would create. As the program enters its second-- and probably more difficult--year, a clearer assessment of its impact may be made. Even so, the response of the community which has so far donated over \$3,000 to the project through a fund-raising drive, plus a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts has given Arts Unlimited some much-needed financial lead time to continue its planning--and its enthusiasm.

COMMENTS

Effective communication is the result of a desire to contribute, rather than to feed an ego and when an individual makes known his/her real needs instead of working from hidden agendas.

Good records are the key to reducing communication problems. Agreements that are well-written and approved by both parties increase the efficiency of operation. Many gentlemanly agreements lead to undentlemenly disputes.