

Chapter 47

Socially Responsive Museum Pedagogy: Education at the Wexner Center for the Arts

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ABSTRACT

Art museums in the United States have long been called upon to provide educational and engaging experiences for their visitors; more recently, this expectation has expanded to address the most salient needs of local communities and respond to issues of social inequality. At The Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts, these collaborations are woven into the mission of the institution and serve as a foundation of its educational framework. In this chapter, the authors highlight specific community collaborations between the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy at Ohio State, and the Columbus, Ohio, community. They suggest that these programs not only individually serve as examples for other institutions and university students engaged in museum education scholarship, but also collectively form a socially responsive museum pedagogy enacted in an ongoing cycle of collaborative inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships between art museum education departments and university programs are fast becoming a hallmark of civic engagement in that they create a rich opportunity for collaborative inquiry (CI) (Gates, 2018), for professional educators, professors and instructors, and university students. According to art education scholar Leslie Gates, who engaged in action research with a group practicing K-12 teachers, this model of professional development involves dialogue with small groups of learners who meet regularly

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to discuss issues that extend beyond those identified as important by the academy, school administrators, or current educational policy. CI values the co-construction of knowledge and recognizes the legitimacy of lived experiences rather than just the systemic knowledge that is typically presented in a professional development or continuing education framework. The authors adapted Gates' work in thinking about the ongoing relationship between the Wex staff, professors, university students, and audiences as they create a cyclical space for learning, enacting, and re-imagining their work in the service of local communities and one another. This chapter introduces a somewhat unique model at the Wexner Center for the Arts ("the Wex") at The Ohio State University, a contemporary arts center featuring exhibitions, film screenings, performances, artist residencies, and education programs. The center's long-standing commitment to what may be considered *socially responsive pedagogy* (Kletchka, 2018) and community engagement in Columbus, Ohio, embodies the spirit of this collaborative inquiry. Their staff works with multiple constituencies throughout the university and Columbus metropolitan area to offer programs that honor the work of contemporary artists, explore current issues of broader concern in our society, and engage the public in increased awareness and involvement. Undergraduate and graduate students from across the university engage in docent training and give tours of exhibitions, paid interns and student work on projects with artists and audiences throughout the institution, and partnerships with students and faculty result in public programming as well as academically-focused explorations of contemporary work. This chapter details several examples of such projects.

BACKGROUND

Co-author Dana Carlisle Kletchka is a former art museum educator who spent more than 20 years working as an educator in public and university art museums and serving as an affiliate art education faculty member before transitioning into the role of assistant professor at Ohio State. In the Department of Arts Administration, Education and Policy (AAEP), she directs a museum education/administration specialization at the graduate level that consists of three courses and an internship with a docent/public practice experience at the Wex. Her department houses undergraduate arts management and art education students and graduate students in art education and arts administration and policy. Any enrolled graduate student is eligible to specialize in museum education and administration, a curriculum that includes close work with the Wexner Center for the Arts in addition to other museums and gallery organizations in Columbus.

The faculty is openly committed to teaching for critical social justice through examining, critiquing, and undoing structural inequality at micro and macro levels. This philosophy undergirds their teaching, research, and service and resonates through the academic and community work of their students.

Co-author Shelly Casto was the Director of Education at the Wex from 2005–2019 and currently serves as the Executive Director of the Highland Youth Garden on the Hilltop in West Columbus. During her time at the Wexner Center, she focused her efforts on connecting assets found in the university and in the community to pursue shared interests and priorities. Community collaborations and a deep concern for social inequality are woven in to the mission of the Wex and serve as a foundation of their educational framework: "In its programs, the Wexner Center balances a commitment to experimentation with a commitment to traditions of innovation and affirms the university's mission of education, research, and community service" (Wexner Center for the Arts, 2019, para 5). The Wex's focus on supporting contemporary artists centers creating and presenting innovative and socially relevant work. The university environment provides myriad educational opportunities through a large, diverse student

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