Module 3: Engaging Communities

Hello again. I'm Dr. Melissa Crum with Mosaic Education Network and this is Module 3: Engaging Communities. In this module, you will explore various approaches to interacting with and supporting artists in your community. You will reflect on the personal, social elements and value of arts and culture, learn the importance of acknowledging and supporting culture, and how to build productive relationships with artist communities.

LESSON ONE: Art and Cultural Change

When we engage with communities, it's important to think about assumptions we may have regarding what art is and the purpose of art. Those assumptions can help or hinder our relationships with diverse artists.

Diversity includes a consideration of race, gender, sexuality, physical and mental abilities, religion, citizenship, language, socioeconomic status or any combination of these identities. You will discuss how we can think about artists in a larger social context, how their art work can be a reflection of their experiences, and how you can think about ways to support those artists. Watch "How art gives shape to cultural change," by curator Thelma Golden. After you watch the video, review the list of discussion questions located on your worksheet. Pick two that interest you and write down some ideas to share with the group. Remember, with community engagement, it is not the job of the artist to change how your organization thinks about their art and its purpose. It is the organization, the entity with the most power, to change internal perceptions for more equitable support. Think about how art can help us think about ourselves and the world we live in and I will see you for lesson two.

LESSON TWO: Cultural Awareness

What is culture really? The critic Raymond Williams argues that culture is both a way of life and the tangible items that circulate in society. Therefore, to understand culture we have to see how both of these concepts coexist. Williams writes that culture has three divergent meanings: First, culture as a process of individual enrichment. This is more of an internal, thoughtful cultivating of one's mind and ideas. Second, culture is a group's "particular way of life" (for instance, Nigerian culture, company culture, or multiculturalism). Lastly, there is culture as an activity, pursued by means of museums, concerts, books, and movies. Or as a professor once said, "Culture is what you do where you are."

In the arts, we often look at the last two: a group's way of life and the activities and products created that are reflections of that way of life.

Understanding what culture is and what it can be is important when you are attempting to identify it. It might not be what you are looking for. You also have to ask yourself what is your goal in identifying a culture? Is it to fund it? Market it? Support it in another way? If this is the case, then you want to be focused on building trust and a partnership, as opposed to seeking

to save or offer unsolicited guidance. Those approaches can appear paternalistic or patronizing. We will talk more about this in the module on partnerships.

The other question is are you attempting to align an artist's culture with your own culture or what you understand culture to be? This can be challenging if we have a limited definition of what creative culture is.

Below are some discussion questions. You can pause in-between each question and discuss for ten to fifteen minutes before proceeding.

1. What are some cultures in your city that you are a part of or have engaged in? These cultures can be based in ethnicity, language, artforms, worldviews, sexuality, or other identity markers. They can also be a combination of identities and influences. For example, the female Muslim hip hop group, We're Muslim, Don't Panic, or the Columbus Gay Men's Chorus.

2. What are some of the creative products that have come from those cultures? Products can be activities, performances, physical art work, digital interactions, and other expressions.

Activity
Identify a local newspaper or blog that highlights emerging local creative talent. You can also try Facebook or Eventbrite for local artistic events. Find one upcoming event from a culture that you don't identify with. Stretch yourself and choose events that you normally wouldn't attend. Answer the following questions and bring them back to the next class to share.

● What was the identity (or identities), idea, concept, value or belief that grounded the work?
● Was the event in partnership with other artists, artist collectives, or cultural organizations? If so, what were the similar missions or objectives of each of those partners in order to bring them together? They may state the reason for collaborating openly or you may need to check on the partners' websites or publication materials for their missions and connect the dots yourself.
● What is something you learned or a new insight you gained?

This is a way for you to see some other ways artists are expressing culture and to get some insight into how some artists collaborate, with whom they collaborate, and how that connects to the culture. Remember, your goal is not to evaluate the culture, art, artists, or organizations. The goal is to learn how groups and individuals can express and live their cultures. Therefore, avoid words that can sound like judgement such as "strange" or "exotic." Such words can demean or make the culture, art, or artist sound like outsiders. Focus on what guides the artists and the culture that supports their art.

For more examples of the dangers of evaluating culture from our own lens, take a look at the video Edward Said - An Introduction to Orientalism.

Have fun learning more about your city's creative art scene and I'll see you for the next lesson.

LESSON THREE: Get a Better Understanding

Art administrators interested in diversity or seeking out forms of creative expression they hadn't experienced before, often have the best intentions regarding artistic inclusion. That said, sometimes good intentions can be harmful. One way harm can be done is through cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is taking pieces of a culture out of context. Sometimes this is done in an attempt to show appreciation or for other leisure activities. Or as blogger Dounia Tazi writes, "It's wearing a hijab and bindi in a selfie without having to deal with the micro-aggressions many of us face while sporting the same attire."

There is a fine line between appropriation and appreciation and sometimes we aren't sure how to differentiate. So, before we wear a dashiki, hijab, make a dreamcatcher, make ethnically disconnected African masks or get henna designs ask yourself: Am I reducing this to a fashion statement? Are people of this culture the ones who are profiting off of this? Am I in an environment where this is appropriate? Are there deeper values, morals, or principles I am overlooking?

Now, I can't promise you that people won't say you are being overly sensitive, as you choose to be cautious. Just remember, it's better to be respectful and cautious than to offend and burn a bridge. I also can't promise that some people of the culture you are attempting to respect WILL tell you that using a cultural artifact or performing a certain custom out of context is okay. Remember, no single person can speak for an entire group of people.

Depth and respect are the most important. Thinking that we should be able to do whatever we want with whatever culture we want begins to look like entitlement and we begin to think from a place of privilege. We don't want to do that. We want to avoid engaging with culture in superficial ways. Costumes or mimicking are rarely good ideas. Learning can be an enriching experience without attempts to perform an identity. Be a curious learner and use that as an opportunity to build relationships with communities.

Activity
Review your organization's event schedule from last year, or that of a comparable organization. Check to see if there are any events that highlight a particular culture. Identify two to three events. Find out the following:

- The name of the event.
- Was there an opportunity for people to learn the history, reason for and usage of the cultural objects or costumes presented?
- Was culture reduced to a fashion statement?
- Are people of this culture the ones who are profiting from the event?

- Was the event in an environment where it was appropriate?
- If you found an instance where cultural appropriation occurred, what would you have done differently to avoid cultural appropriation?

Push yourself to consider new ways to be culturally sensitive. Share your responses next class.

LESSON FOUR: Knowing Your Audience – Don't Subvert

If you are going to work with a particular community of artists, it's important to know what drives their art and if your organization discounts that drive by limiting access to opportunities and funding. Identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, physical or mental abilities, religion, or socioeconomic status can be driving forces behind someone's art. Artists can also be inspired by external forces, such as governmental politics, the state of the environment, violence, peace, or technology to name a few. It can also be inspired by a combination of identity makers and external forces. When you find out what drives their art, you can better understand what they are creating, why they are creating it, and how to build a supportive and reciprocal relationship.

In order to ensure that sustainable and authentic engagement with artists occurs, we have to take a hard look at our organizations to see if we are subverting culture. When cultures are subverted, the guiding values, morals, or principles are opposed or compromised in an attempt to transform the established social order or system. In some cases, challenging social norms is productive (i.e., when the social norm is oppressive to a particular demographic). But in arts organizations, subversive acts can be arts administrators acting as gatekeepers by withholding funding because the artist doesn't produce art in the way the organization prefers or chooses to prioritize. Art administrators that use phrases like "quality control" or "professional standards" can be institutional ways to discredit certain artists. Those artists using non-traditional approaches to art can be left behind when it comes to access to resources.

For example, Yinka Shonibare (YEEN-ka show-knee-BAH-reh) is a British-Nigerian visual artist who explores complex socio-political issues such as cultural identity and post-colonialism. He is also physically challenged. Therefore, some of his work required other artists to bring his vision to life. For artists in your community who aren't internationally renowned, but who have similar vision and restrictions, how could you better support artists? From making the grant application accessible and user-friendly to having guidelines that allow funding for artists who may not be directly making the art, where could your organization stand to improve?

Therefore, your goal in engaging communities should be two-fold. One, to help communities know that your organization exists and there are funding and partnership opportunities available to them. Some underrepresented artists may not be aware.

Two, to determine how to not be a gatekeeper. Many artists do not want to compromise their values, culture, identity or external forces that drive their work in order to fit into an organization's confined definition of what is decidedly "fundable" or appropriate art. As you

continue to engage communities, you can better understand how creative products of culture can manifest in a variety of ways.

Activity

Investigate some unique approaches to art happening in your community. You want to choose art that your organization has not traditionally funded. Consider artists or art collectives you have already come into contact with during this series. Ask two to four artists if they have attempted to get funding from your arts organization. If not, why haven't they attempted? What are some barriers and what are some opportunities they see with local arts funding for their work?

Review your organization's guideline for funding artists or creative projects. Are there any barriers identified by the artists that you see in your organization's funding guidelines? If so, what are some possible changes you can suggest to your administration? You want to talk to artists that appear to be historically excluded from your organization's funding system. The goal is to find some ways to make your organization more accessible. For some organizations, this will be easy because there is a pattern regarding who gets funded. Therefore, it is a bit easier to see which artists are not being supported. For other organizations, this might be a little more difficult because your organization is already pretty inclusive. Just remember, we all have room for improvement.

Have fun meeting more of your creative community and report your findings next class. Don't forget the quiz at the end. See you next time!