

# ARTS and positive change in communities

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*Arts and culture make considerable and necessary contributions to the well-being of communities*

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**T**he arts and culture are powerful tools with which to engage communities in various levels of change. They are a means to public dialogue, contribute to the development of a community's creative learning, create healthy communities capable of action, provide a powerful tool for community mobilization and activism, and help build community capacity and leadership.

- 1 The arts are one of the primary means of public dialogue.**
- 2 The arts contribute to the development of creative learning communities.**
- 3 The arts help create healthy communities capable of action.**
- 4 The arts can serve as a powerful tool for community mobilization and activism.**
- 5 The arts can build community capacity and leadership.**

**Key arguments:** Arts and culture make considerable and necessary contributions to the well-being of communities

**1 The arts are one of the primary means of public dialogue.** Communities talk about and express difficult issues, emotions, and the otherwise inexpressible via the arts (Augaitis, Falk, Gilbert, & Moser, 1995).

The arts raise awareness of important issues facing communities and educate the public in powerful and creative ways (Augaitis, Falk, Gilbert, & Moser, 1995).

A positive means to be visible and heard is provided through the arts (Smyth & Stevenson, 2005).

Arts processes facilitate learning within and between communities.

Public art is the agent for the interpretation, negotiation and expression of “communal meanings” and what is considered significant to a community (de Herrera, Garcia, & Goldman, 1997; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004).

“Art is a unique form of communication that takes as its subject the whole of human experience and that often engages an individual at the emotional and intellectual as well as the aesthetic level.” (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004)

“The arts deal with meanings. Other activities do not do this. Art helps us understand our values. It helps us make sense of life and it reflects what matters to us whether this is through a song, a painting, a quilt or a play. Exploring what life means touches us deeply and enables us to act on and shape our lives. Sharing this process through metaphor, colour, sound [for example,] creativity, also contributes to our understanding of others.” (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

“Changes in body image may be expressed through movement and dance. Drama offers the opportunity to explore identity by integrating childhood roles and experimenting with future possibilities. Music expresses emotional dissonance and volatility. The visual arts provide a vehicle for translating inner experiences to outward visual images. Writing and oral history projects bring a greater understanding of one’s family and neighborhood.” (President’s Committee on Arts and the Humanities, 2005)

**“Culturally, learning begins with the stories we are told. By sharing stories in the classroom we begin from a foundation of knowing instead of a knowledge deficit. It is this respectful starting point that helps people build bridges to new and meaningful constructs. We also affirm a person’s sense of being by listening to those stories they value. Stories are often a window into a person’s soul that allows us to glimpse values, attitudes, and beliefs. We each have a story that relates to the essence of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are journeying. Storytelling is a powerful facilitator of culture and spiritual identity and growth.”** (Cueva & Kuhnley, 2003)

“Creativity allows people to explore their values, meanings and dreams and raises expectations about what is possible and desirable.” (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

“The arts speak to the spirit. We can experience the entire spectrum of human emotion and diversity through the arts. The arts work on our imaginations and fire up our creative engines. The arts show us how to change the world around us by allowing us to change our inner world. The arts create beauty and order where there appears to be none. The creative act can reveal and bring into light contrasts and contradictions in ways that speak powerfully and directly to a wide range of audiences, across boundaries of language and education.” (Tresser, 1977)

**“The cultural dimension encompasses the world of values, motivations, aspirations, attitudes, creativity; a world where hopes, dreams and plans engage the heart and soul, not just within the psyches of individuals but between them and among them at the heart of communities themselves.”**  
(Hawkes, 2001)

**“Empowerment through the use of community media and art is also about policymaking at the local level and efforts to link local politics with national. It is about another way of constructing local history and providing narratives which are more personal and directly related to the experiences of communities and the people who live in them.** There is spontaneity to local culture, which far exceeds the descriptions, and analyses, which can be made of it. The process is in constant evolution and by its very nature challenges preconceptions of subjectivity, public discourse, and modes of communication.”  
(Burnett, 1966)

## **2. The arts contribute to the development of creative learning communities (Wyman, 2004).**

When the arts become central in an organization or community, the learning environment improves, and the organizational culture transforms to become more positive, creative, and supportive (Brice Heath, 1999; Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Fiske, 1999; Murfee, 1995; President’s Committee on Arts and the Humanities, 2005; Seidel, 1999; Smyth & Stevenson, 2005). The arts stimulate creative problem-solving and innovation within a group or community.

Creative thinking abilities – expression, risk taking and imagination – are improved through arts involvement (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999; Murfee, 1995; President’s Committee on Arts and the Humanities, 2005).

**“Participating in the arts helps people develop their creativity. Creativity involves imagination and the ability to visualize. ‘Seeing’ situations as they might be in the future is a valuable tool for solving problems and changing situations.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**“Many arts organizations and projects work along non-hierarchical and co-operative structures. People take on roles according to need and are adaptable and flexible. This encourages innovation and promotes positive social relationships.”**  
(Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**“Creative projects involve positive, responsible risk taking. Risk taking is a pre-requisite for growth and development. Overcoming risks such as those associated with identity, ability and relationships creates confidence, and flexible and risk competent people are able to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of the future.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005; see also Brice Heath, 1999)

**“Artistic activity that embraces the ideas and visions of different cultures can lead to new and innovative ideas and inventions.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

Learning through the arts deepens exploration of complex issues (Cueva & Kuhnley 2003; Murfee, 1995; Seidel, 1999).

The arts encourage self-directed and lifelong learning (Seidel, 1999) and self-efficacy (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, Brooks, 1996).

**“Participating in arts activities offers people an opportunity to discover new talents and ability. Success and pleasure gained through creative activity encourages adults to pursue further personal development through other education opportunities.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**“The use of art promotes learning by respecting people’s ability to process information in many creative ways. This personal expression of creativity allows participants to connect with information in new dimensions...Art allows us to expand the possibilities, creating a new paradigm to which people can choose to move.”** (Cueva & Kuhnley, 2003)

### **3. The arts help create healthy communities capable of action.**

People’s motivations for participation in arts and culture suggest strong links with other aspects of community life (Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002).

In an American survey of cultural participants, people frequently asserted motives that are related to social and civic purposes, particularly in light of current concerns and comment about the decline of civic culture (Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002).

Reasons cited by percentage of respondents (Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002):

- 1 to get together with friends or family for social reasons (63%);
2. to support a family member or friend (47%);
- 3 to support organizations or events that are important to the community (44%).

Participation in arts activities can reduce isolation in rural and urban areas (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005).

Students reported significantly improved attitudes relating to self-expression, trust, self-acceptance and acceptance of others in the “Arts Alternatives” program in New Jersey (Murfee, 1995). The arts assist community members to socialize beyond their family boundaries (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2001).

Arts involvement creates opportunities for people to develop positive social contacts in pro-social environments (Department of Justice Canada, 1999).

Parents with youth involved in sustained, structured community-based arts programs show a positive increase in the perception of their neighbourhoods (National Arts and Youth Demonstration Project, 2004).

The arts provide opportunities for intercultural learning, community healing, and conflict resolution and resilience.

The arts play an important role in “communication on existential issues,” which has become central to promoting harmony between various “ways of living together” (Jeannotte, 2003).

The arts encourage empathy, intercultural exchange and respect of differences (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004; Murfee, 1995; Smyth & Stevenson, 2005).

Youth involved in theater develop higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others (Catterall, Champleau, & Iwanaga, 1999).

Participation in multicultural arts allows people to retain contact with their roots, enhancing feelings of community and self-esteem (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005).

The arts also create fruitful fusions of old and new traditions (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005).

“Public art can also serve as a meaningful form of public relations – engaging a community, adding visibility to a project, and in some instances, resolving controversy.” (de Herrera, Garcia, & Goldman, 1997)

**“At the most basic level, the arts provide opportunities for people to come together through their attendance at arts events and classes, arts festivals, and arts fairs. Regular involvement in these arts activities can produce social solidarity and social cohesion through the creation of community symbols (e.g., neighborhood murals) and community identity.”** (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004)

The arts and arts processes build cultures of collaboration and creativity. Many arts activities are dependent upon collaborative efforts, teaching valuable teamwork skills. A culture of collaboration is essential for the achievement of sustainable community change (Department of Justice Canada, 1999; Jeannotte, 2003; President’s Committee on Arts and the Humanities, 2005).

“Groups and activities bring young and old together. Young people learn to interact with a wider age range than their peer group and anxiety about different generations is reduced. Arts activities can encourage sociability in areas where sociability has been eliminated by poverty, crime and mistrust.” (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**“Because dance, music, photography and other visual arts transcend language, they can bridge barriers among cultural, racial and ethnic groups. The arts also can promote a deeper understanding of similarities and**

**differences among religions, races and cultural traditions. For some children, the exploration of their unique cultural histories can be critical to their sense of themselves and to others' images of them. This knowledge can help bind them more fully to the larger society of which they are a part."**  
(President's Committee on Arts and the Humanities, 2005)

"Scholars and social observers interested in civic engagement suggest a relationship between cultural participation and a sense of community. In this view, **cultural participation helps people identify with their personal heritage and the larger community in which they live, thus encouraging attitudes, values, and social ties that underpin a well-functioning society."**  
(Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002)

#### **4. The arts can serve as a powerful tool for community mobilization and activism.**

The arts reach many people in communities who are not otherwise being reached. The arts are often the primary, and sometimes, the only motivation for some people to engage in a community activity or issue (Fiske, 1999; Kay, 2000; Voluntary Arts Network, 2005).

Arts approaches can catalyze a community's interest and energy towards change (Rogers & Spokes, 2003). The arts help mobilize communities of support (Fiske, 1999).

Art often has the potential to captivate – that is, the intrinsic ability "calling us out of ourselves and stimulating rapt involvement" (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004).

Participation in the arts can lead to more active citizenship and the cultivation of positive civic values (Kay, 2000).

A comprehensive American survey of cultural participants found that personal motives for participating in arts and culture more often reflect social and community purposes than an interest in the artistic and cultural experiences themselves (Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002).

Frequent arts and culture participants are also likely to participate in civic, religious, and political activities that is, arts and cultural events constitute one form of community engagement for people who are active in many ways (Jeannotte, 2003; Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002).

"The experience of having control over one's life, gained both through creative and organizational activities, facilitates participation in public affairs and effective public consultation especially when it addresses local political issues. This experience encourages people at local level to take part in the re-generation of their community." (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**"New skills, confidence, a sense of belonging increases enthusiasm for local projects. Artworks are symbols of**

**energy, commitment and achievement and this fosters pride in where people live.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

**“The arts can reach people, can move them, can inspire and challenge them. It is in the amorphous dimension of art and culture that lies the vital ingredient to any effort to build community capacity to act.”** (Rogers & Spokes, 2003)

## **5. The arts can build community capacity and leadership.**

Involvement in community-based arts projects can help people feel better connected, more inspired to get involved, and more confident about their ability to make a difference in their communities (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005; Rogers & Spokes, 2003).

Frequent participants in arts and culture also tend to be very active in civic, religious, and political activities, and this is true at every income level (Walker, Scott-Melnyk, & Sherwood, 2002).

Arts involvement assists community members to learn new skills and build new social networks (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2001).

**“People also gain new practical and social skills, which improves their private lives and increases their employability. The skills acquired in the voluntary arts are wide and include work experience, administration, fundraising and training as well as transferable skills such as lateral thinking, creativity, problem solving, organizational and communication skills.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)

The arts contribute to the development of civic values, leadership and active citizenship among youth (Brice Heath, 1999; Department of Justice Canada, 1999).

Arts involvement opens pathways for citizens to make contributions and connections (teaching, coaching, employment, etc.) to their communities (Department of Justice Canada, 1999).

**“Volunteering, organizing an arts group, serving on a board, and other forms of stewardship are important ways to build community organizational capacity, identify and develop leaders, and engender a variety of skills needed for community action. These activities can also facilitate the cooperation between arts and non-arts groups that is essential for community organizing.”** (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004)

**“The management and organizational processes which support group projects enable individuals, groups and communities to develop group-work skills: team-work, negotiation, pragmatism, compromise, communication, organizational, administrative. People with these organizational skills go on to set up new activities and groups in the community. This contributes to local self reliance and strengthens community co-operation.”** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2005)



**“The move from social capital to community organizing involves the development of both a sense of collective efficacy and skills in leadership and organization. The way in which the arts facilitate these developmental processes is through the raising of funds for local arts projects or facilities, the running of arts organizations and community arts projects, and the advising of local arts groups. The arts can also help create linkages across different groups, thus developing intergroup cooperation and establishing partnerships.”** (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004)

## **PROFILES**

### **Various Canadian communities**

Hip Hop for Human Rights: Music empowers 30,000 students as global citizens.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Various-Hip-Hop-Musical-for-Human-Rights.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Various-Hip-Hop-Musical-for-Human-Rights.html)

### **Toronto, ON**

Building the power of community: Jumblies Theatre’s Once a Shoreline community play.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Toronto-Jumblies-Theatre.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Toronto-Jumblies-Theatre.html)

### **Waterloo, ON**

Waterloo’s Scholars’ Green Neighbourhood Commemorative Heritage Project.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Waterloo-Scholars-Green.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Waterloo-Scholars-Green.html)

### **Winnipeg, MB**

Art City: A grassroots approach to community development through arts.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Winnipeg-ArtCity.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Winnipeg-ArtCity.html)

### **Woodstock, ON**

Get connected: Woodstock’s innovative partnership in cultural and social outreach.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Woodstock-Get-Connected.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Woodstock-Get-Connected.html)

## **REFERENCES**

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