

Opening Remarks –

In Sync: Ensuring Continuity, Expanding Conversation, Extending Community The Consortium Conference 2022

By Stephen Yaffe

It is so nice to be together in person. Back at this lovely museum, Museum of Jewish Heritage. So nice to be together after all we've been through.

Hello. My name is Stephen Yaffe. I'm Chair of the Arts for All Abilities Consortium. Welcome. Thank you all for coming.

Those of us joining us virtually, welcome. We're so glad you can be with us, some of you from as far away as Texas, California, and even Ireland.

I am going to refer to notes in these opening remarks, something I don't think I've ever done before. Almost every single one of our Steering Committee members has gotten sick in the last few weeks, or in the case of one, had a baby early. I've simply not had time to memorize. My apologies.

But Go, Steering Committee! It's happening. We are here.

Planning this conference, we saw this last year has been a time of enormous disconnection. Something many, if not most of us, thought would not be the case once in-person learning began again; we'd gotten past the initial fears of being face to face again. Normal was supposed to resume.

But some of us still remain fearful. Whether we're parents sending our children to school. Teachers or TA's, related service providers, or principals working with them and one another. Or Arts administrators trying to figure out how best to bring TA's together for training, or how to hire skilled ones.

As we planned, we looked hard at this disconnection.

Many teachers were absent, making their instruction discontinuous, Teaching artist planning and implementation difficult, and follow-up between residency lessons sometimes non-existent. School administrators were faced with new directives and the challenge of how to implement them. School staff was often left waiting for clarity.

And, Arts administrators were having a hard time finding teaching artists skilled in working with students with disabilities. Many had already been hired by other Arts organizations. But, sadly, many also had left New York City, and – worse still – had left the field.

I'm speaking of these things in the past tense, as if they no longer apply. They do apply. And while things may have gotten better, we are, in so many ways, not In Sync. We are not In Sync enough. We are not nearly as In Sync as we can be.

And by *We*, I specifically and most importantly mean the Arts and Special Education community. A community often seen as the step-child of Arts education. But we – the classroom teachers and arts specialists, teaching artists and museum educators, school and arts administrators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, parents and guardians – we partner. We are the largest partnering community in Arts education. We don't just have much to offer Arts education in general. We have much to offer education – as a whole, special education and general education.

This part doesn't get said enough. Because it never gets said.

Nor does this. We are at the forefront of educational change – pedagogical/instructional, evaluative change – because of how we partner.

I know, that sounds startling and a bit self-important – *We are at the forefront of educational change*. But I've been doing this now for 50 years – not just special education, not just general education, not just Arts education. And I can honestly say it's Arts and special education that's undergone the most change, has effected the most change and is the most open to change of anything I've seen.

This is the avant-garde. Own it.

Today's conference will focus on many ways to make this community stronger, richer, deeper, smarter. Through panels and break-out conversations. Hands-on Arts workshops. Learning about many important working models. In sessions led by incredibly knowledgeable, experienced practitioners. Culminating with an unprecedented community offering, which itself will be followed by a plan to stay together as a community and continue the conversation – us, all of us – into 2023 for those who wish to. Because – call Consortium people crazy – we don't want to just talk about conversation, community and continuity. We want to Be it, together.

These things I've been talking about are important means to get there. But I want to talk about something else first, before this day “Begins”. I want to talk about how and why we are already connected at the core. That thing that binds us, that we are so often so consciously not aware of. Those things so need to be known and so need to be said out loud.

So, fair warning, I'm going old school. Apologies to those who may have heard me say some of what I'm about to say before.

Initially, Math, Science, English (ELA/Language Arts), Social Studies were ways of making meaning out of the world and our place in it – which is to say, they were verbs, long before they became subjects.

The Arts, on the other hand, have stayed verbs. They live at the very heart of Literacy, if one considers literacy to be making, understanding and expressing meaning. It's a Literacy that's not just germane to ELA, but what it means to be literate in all the other academic disciplines – Math, Science, etc. This is because the Arts' core skills and processes are the very core skills and processes necessary in the *doing* of Math, Science, etc – Memory, Retention, Sequencing, Recognizing patterns, Flexibility, Analyzing, Extrapolation, Synthesizing, Concluding The list goes on.

Which is why I say, "The Arts are learning".

The Arts raise the bar on Literacy. They do so because there is an audience, always an audience. Making, understanding and expressing meaning is not enough. One needs to make, understand and express meaning clearly. That opens the door to and provides a powerful reason for refining content, wedding intention to articulation – *Speak clearly, Enunciate* – considering others, developing empathy. In other words, participating & communicating more effectively in the world. With more agency. And the knowledge that what you have to say is important. Important enough for others to hear it, see it. Something hugely implied in the fact that there is an audience.

The Arts are not just a really important model for teaching and learning, but a really important Nexus for those Pillars of which the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education has so eloquently spoken.

We don't have time for me to go through them. And you aren't here to have me do so.

But I will say this. In his Pillars speech Chancellor Banks praised the Brooklyn Occupational Training Center (OTC) for engaging "students with wide ranging learning needs in a quality civic education." It just so happens the OTC's principal puts the Arts at the center of her school's teaching and learning. Under her leadership the multi-site school has developed Arts teams of Dance, Music, Theater and Visual Arts teachers that work together and partner with related service providers (Occupational, Physical and Speech therapists, etc) and classroom teachers – and outside Arts organizations. That principal, Barbara Tremblay – also a member of our Steering Committee – is a panelist in the session immediately after these opening remarks. Also on that panel, a member of one of those multi-Art teams.

In that same school a few years ago I observed a Spoken Word residency over a number of weeks. It focused on high school students who were reading on a pre-primer level and had the intellectual capacity of 3rd– 5th graders. The Art form required students to write poetry. In the process they demonstrated they understood and could compose – sometimes quite movingly – metaphor and simile.

Metaphor and simile require Synthesis, the ability to find points of commonality between seemingly unconnected things. Synthesis is way up there on Bloom's Taxonomy in terms of higher order thinking skills.

The Arts reveal, often unknown, capacities – not just for special education students, but students in general. As such, they're important points of entry. Capacity revealed is capacity that can be expanded upon.

The Chancellor writes, "[W]e need to rethink how our students demonstrate mastery We need to think beyond standardized tests so that students have the flexibility to progress through material at a pace that fits their needs and so that schools have the space to implement innovative, out-of-the-box ideas for teaching and learning."

The Arts have much to offer here.

And, again, we need to own what we can do.

The Arts build from the Inside out. They move from *There* to *Here*. And as such, better mirror the way we actually learn. And offer a very powerful way of learning, of knowing, of revealing capacity, of assessing growth.

This is what we share. We are already in such deep sync. The problem is we don't often realize it. We can better do so together. Not for nothin, as we say in Brooklyn, the word *Understand* comes from the Old English meaning *between, among*.

So as you move through this day, please keep in mind two really important things:

The tools that are being shared here that you may choose to use to better be and stay together, In Sync, in communication.

And

How at heart – in the core of what you do and what you want to accomplish – you are already in community, And how to build upon that with those tools to be better In Sync, have continuity, community, communication

I turn you over to Elise May, discussion facilitator par excellence, and three wonderful speakers with much to share. Please welcome them.