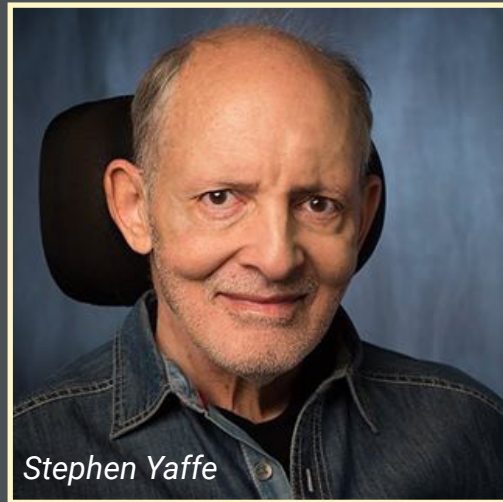


RESOURCES FOR TAs: GETTING TO KNOW THE ARTS FOR ALL ABILITIES CONSORTIUM |

INTERVIEW WITH LISA
DENNETT & STEPHEN
YAFFE BY ELISE MAY



Lisa Dennett



Stephen Yaffe

(Please note this interview was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic.)

My teaching artist practice has always included students with disabilities (SWD's) in inclusion and self-contained settings. When I learned about the Arts for All Abilities Consortium (formerly the Arts in Special Education Consortium,) I started attending their yearly conference. I wanted a broader community of teaching artists to be aware of what the consortium does and the resources it offers. To that end, I interviewed two of its co-founders, Stephen Yaffe (**SY**) and Lisa Dennett (**LD**). The result follows, edited for length. And, full disclosure – we are all on the Consortium's Steering Committee.

Briefly, Stephen is an Arts and Education consultant whose professional development (PD) work has been called "brave, visionary, smart" (Director of Education Programs, PBS). He has mentored classroom teachers, teaching artists and arts administrators in inclusive practices nationally, served as the VSA Teaching Artist Fellows coach and provided PD to those working in the field of disability on five continents. He is a recipient of the 2018 VSA NYC Arts Advocate of the Year and serves on the Arts Committee to the Panel for Educational Policy of the NYC Department of Education. Stephen has been using a wheelchair for the last 15 years.

Lisa Dennett became a teaching artist when she was looking for work between acting jobs. At the same time, she spent her free time volunteering with people with disabilities of all ages. In an effort to address the disconnect between theater arts education and students with disabilities, she developed a program which blossomed into a nonprofit that operated for nearly twenty-five years. She has created theater with a vast myriad of youth and adults with disabilities. She is a member of NYSTEA and former chair and co-chair of the NYC chapter. Currently Ms. Dennett is a working actor, consultant, sign language interpreter and occasional teaching artist.

For those who have never heard of it, what is the Arts for All Abilities Consortium (the Consortium) and how and why did it come into existence?

SY: In December of 2007, a small group of teaching artists, Arts administrators, a school principal and a NYC Department of Education supervisor came together to address an important need: There were many stakeholders in Arts Education for students with disabilities in New York who shared similar goals. They had little-to-no means of coming together.

LD: While other arts education conferences may have been good, they lacked anything related to special education and disabilities. We wanted the same type of conference conversations with other professionals doing the work we were passionate about. We were teaching artist, administrator, and consultant, but were working with paraprofessionals, teachers, related service providers such as PT (physical therapists), OT (occupational therapists), ST (speech therapists) and mental health professionals, and as we progressed we realized parents and others might also benefit and have a lot to add to the conversation.

SY: The Consortium provides these constituencies opportunities to engage with one another, share ideas, perspectives and solutions. Our purpose is to deepen practice, understanding and the quality of Arts Education provided students with disabilities (SWD's).

Can you share what your yearly conference offers Teaching Artists?

LD: Each annual conference is different. TAs can learn about successful partnerships, techniques and best practices from TAs and other professionals who present. Connections between professionals and shared practices can be invaluable in continued learning as well as validating one's own practice.

What else does the Consortium offer?

SY: We offer a variety of Professional Development as well as mentoring opportunities for TAs and their administrators. We convene focus groups, facilitate an ongoing professional learning community and have been known to respond to requests through our website for advice and recommendations.

You both have different experience with students with disabilities. Can you share what gaps you hoped the consortium would fill?

LD: For me I had hoped the Consortium would provide a place, albeit abstractly, where anyone who was doing the work in arts education with young people with disabilities - particularly in schools - could share a common language.

SY: I was a TA for over 20 years. I received no training in working with students with disabilities. It was all trial by fire. I had no one to go for advice in any art organization that hired me and knew of no TA who'd received professional development (PD) in the area. This was the 70's. Things have gotten better since, but not enough. This was a gap the Consortium needed to address.

Another gap - The largely unspoken idea that artistic rigor and special education are mutually exclusive. I saw how often expectations for SWD's were unnecessarily lowered. When you expect less, you often get less. Which is to say, you can get a very inaccurate sense of what someone can actually do.



TA Congress 2017 - Master teaching artists convene at the Consortium's inaugural Teaching Artist Congress – NYC, 2017

Going into a wheelchair gave me a fresh and much deeper understanding of access – in the classroom, studio, theater, as well as in lesson and unit planning. UDL (Universal Design for Learning) was not well-known and even less consciously practiced (in NYC) in 2007. The Consortium has advocated strongly for it, offered conference sessions and non-conference professional development in it.

What advice would you give teaching artists new to working with students with disabilities?

SY: Research and find training in the following areas:

- Understanding Disability Classifications and Their Pedagogical Implications
- Understanding and Providing Adaptations and Modifications
- Modifying Behavior
- Working in the Inclusion

Classroom

- Working in the Self-contained Classroom
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Understanding by Design (UBD)

A combination of long-term, sequential and arced PD in conjunction with mentoring is the best way to go. By mentoring, I mean the ability to observe a master teaching artist at work, de-brief and co-teach with them, teach solo and receive feedback on in-class work and lesson/unit planning.

LD: I have always wanted TAs to be open to asking questions. There are questions that wouldn't typically come up in general education. Questions can be asked of the arts organization, if working with one, of the classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and often the students themselves! Questions like: How many

paraprofessionals are in the class and are they for the entire class or individual students? Do any students have related therapies? Are there behavior rules in the classroom that need to be reinforced? Are there sensory or motor challenges to be aware of? Shockingly, this information was and is still often not provided from the start.

Do your homework. Make your needs known. The next step is finding out how to adapt anything you've learned from the questions you've asked and/or the information given. I'm a firm believer that any activity can be adapted to include everyone, it just takes more advance planning.

The jargon seems to change frequently. How do Teaching Artists know which terminology to use?

LD: This made me laugh.



Visual Arts 2014 - visual arts session work from the Consortium's 2014 conference, *Revealing Capacity: Opening the Inner and Outer World*.

One of the biggest growth areas,
if not the biggest, in teaching
artistry is working with students
with disabilities.



Heidi Latsky - Heidi Latsky and Jerron Herman deliver the keynote at the Consortium's 2017 conference, *INCLUSION – Practices, Partnerships and Possibilities*

Yes, alphabet soups and jargon. It's a good question. In NYC the vast majority of TAs work through an organization, or many organizations. I think the onus should be on the administrators to pass on current lingo to their TAs. However, I know in other geographic areas TAs work more independently. In those cases, I would say to be sure to have a relationship with the school arts administrators on this as well as arts education organizations on any level, local, statewide or national.

What kind of support can Teaching Artists expect when working in classrooms with students with disabilities? What about in community settings?

LD: I think this is different

depending on the type of school as well as geographic location, so it's not a simple answer. The same with community settings. That makes things even more variable. Sometimes the partner sites feel they are revealing some secret if they share information about a student's needs. They don't understand it will simply help a TA design activities to maximize learning. It's important to have everyone at the table, so all involved understand what is needed to set expectations for success.

SY: I want to talk about what TA's working with SWDs should expect – and push for.

You should expect greater support in your work and in the level and scope of professional development you

receive.

You should expect greater support through expanded partnerships. You should ask for and take advantage of collaborations that include not just the host classroom teacher/s, but, for example, related service providers. You will learn from them. They will learn from you.

You should know your value. One of the biggest growth areas, if not the biggest, in teaching artistry is working with students with disabilities. More and more students are being diagnosed with disabilities and more are being mainstreamed. There is great demand for teaching artists who can work skillfully and meaningfully with these populations.

Is there a place where TAs can go to find or share best practices for working with SWDs?

SY: In the spring of 2017, the Consortium launched its Teaching Artists Initiative, convening a Teaching Artist Congress to examine best practices for Teaching Artists working with students with disabilities. That was the first step in our putting together a best practices publication addressing this. Stay tuned.



P177Q - P. S. 177 Technology Band perform at the Consortium's 2014 conference, *Why Good Work Works: Raising Expectations*

The Consortium, along with others in the community, worked with the NYC Department of

Education's Office of Arts and Special Projects to develop the NYC Department of Education's Students with Disabilities Online Resource Compendium. That compendium can be found [here](#).



2018 Conference - Small group planning at the Consortium's 2018 conference, *INCLUSION – Practices, Partnerships and Possibilities (Another Take)*.

You might also visit the Resources section of our website for information on a wide variety of areas, including Specific Disabilities, a Glossary of Important Terms, Classroom and Art-Specific Resources, Notable Pedagogies. You can find it [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elise May, an independent Teaching Artist/Arts Administrator, creates original programs focused on enhancing communication skills through theater arts, empowering students of all ages and abilities. Programs include Storytime Theater, Expressive Elocution, Multicultural Voices and Creative Readers (an inclusion program, 2017 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award winner). She is on the Steering Committee for the Arts for All Abilities Consortium and currently devising and performing in a sensory immersive show for audiences on the autism spectrum at Tilles Center for the Performing Arts. www.expressive-elocution.com

