

Creating Meaningful Dialogue at Arts Events

GETTING BEYOND Q & A, TESTIMONIAL, ART CRITIQUE, OR SOAP BOX ORATORY!

Meaning making can be a profoundly important contribution that dialogue can make to the world of the arts and, in turn, that the arts can make to the world of dialogue. ...Dialogue, even as a single-event, gives the audience a mechanism for deeper exploration of the work and of their own response to it.

—Ted Wiprud, Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra

STRATEGIES TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE AUDIENCES IN CIVIC DIALOGUE AT ARTS EVENTS

1. Consider the length and positioning of the art experience in relation to dialogue.

- Work with shorter art formats when possible; but uphold artistic integrity.
- Hold dialogue at separate time from the performance or art event.
- Try afternoon times rather than evening, when fatigue may be less an issue.
- Set an appropriate expectation for taking the time for dialogue.
- Develop short dialogue exercises that elicit lively but briefer reflection and responses rather than aiming for full dialogue.
- Think in terms of “project” rather than single event. Offer multiple opportunities for experiencing art and dialogue allow for more points of entry as well as a cumulative experience.

TYPICAL CHALLENGES:

- time limitations
- physical challenges of spaces such as theater auditoria or art galleries
- audience fatigue
- unclear expectations or intent for the dialogue

2. Shift audience expectations by changing the structure and format of arts events or activities.

- Orient and introduce people to convey the purpose and set the tone of the event.
- Describe the opportunity for conversation in a welcoming way in promotional materials.
- Frame the questions for dialogue before the art presentation in anticipation of the post-performance to encourage people to think about the artwork in relation to the issue.

3. Keep the art present in the dialogue.

- Become familiar with the art to maximize its potential as a focus for dialogue.
- Respect people's natural desire to talk about the art. Allow for visceral, emotional, and spiritual responses.
- Draw upon the art to move the dialogue (characters, images, metaphors, a dialogue moment in the work, etc.).
- Tailor the format and approach of the dialogue specifically to the artistic work.

4. Develop conscious strategies to connect the personal and the public; moving from the heart/gut place of art to the head space of dialogue.

- Consider best practices of dialogue for creating trust and a safe space.
- Give people space and time after experiencing art that is emotionally and/or personally charged, before participating in issue-based dialogues.
- Allow participants the choice of remaining in a private reflective space, engaging more publicly with others, or both. Offer various ways for visitors to make their private reflections public.
- Pivot between the personal and the public through use of story.

COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ARTS AND DIALOGUE PRACTITIONERS

Artists can become more intentional in their approach to dialogue within their creative process and/or in relation to the presentation of the final artistic work.

- Artists can learn useful skills and techniques from dialogue training.
- Dialogue professionals can help artists recognize and maximize the dialogic aspects within artistic process and art works.

Dialogue professionals can learn to incorporate art to support their dialogue goals.

- Link attendance to an arts event to a dialogue group's work; work with an arts organization or artist to create complementary or integrated activities.
- Employ story circles methodology (For a description of this methodology as practiced by theater artist John O'Neal of Junebug Productions, go to: www.racematters.org/storycircleprocess.htm).
- Learn theater exercises and techniques for resolving conflict and encouraging dialogue, (Michael Rohd, *Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue: The Hope Is Vital Training Manual*, Alibris publishers).
- Learn movement and nonverbal expression as a conscious and creative dimension of dialogue, (Liz Lerman Dance Exchange "toolbox" series of exercises in how-to format at www.danceexchange.org).

Be aware of specific skills and sensibilities that may not be readily transferable.

- An unsatisfying aesthetic experience can be disheartening, or even counterproductive. Skilled aesthetic leadership may be necessary.
- Inexperience in planning and designing dialogue can be unsatisfying and may even do harm.
- Artists may not wish to be in the role of dialogue facilitator or lack skills in facilitating issue-based or challenging dialogues.

Collaboration can build on skills of both and ensure the integrity of creative and dialogue practice.

- What's a good fit?
- Start the collaborative process at the right moment in terms of artistic and dialogue goals.
- It's possible that philosophies or needs of artists and dialogue facilitators may conflict. Is art serving dialogue or dialogue serving art? Some possible tension points:
 - Guarding artist autonomy and integrity
 - Dialogue professionals might inadvertently neglect aesthetic issues when crafting dialogue questions
 - Respecting the stake people have in the dialogue
 - Possible ethical issues (e.g., confidentiality) related to using stories heard in dialogue for public productions