Innovation for Arts and Cultural Education Amid a Pandemic

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Creative Generation

Abstract

Defined by lockdowns, face masks, and video conferences, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused the world to shift to an era of physical distancing, at-home and online learning, shuttered cultural institutions, and the possibility of stifled creation for young people around the world. From their positions at the frontline of learning and cultural development, educational and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) institutions have pivoted their practices through rapid innovation. In May 2020, UNESCO identified a cohort of "good practices" in arts education; meanwhile research in the U.S. was conducted on how youth-serving cultural programs adapted to the crisis. These case studies traversed the broad spectrum of arts and cultural learning, online and at-home, across disciplines, and offered by both large and small institutions. During this same time, scholars, envisioned new theoretical frameworks for how ICH and educational leaders can adapt their practices to address the needs of young people in times of crises. It is through this lens that the author conducts an analysis, identifies trends, and names replicable tactics for ICH institutions to more deeply engage in a 'new normal' for high-quality education for youth. The author summarizes demonstrative anecdotes from programs aligned with the four trends and provides recommendations, using an educational futures lens, for the ICH field of practitioners to inculcate these tactics into their future plans for the cultural and creative development of youngsters.

Keywords:

Arts education, COVID-19, innovation, learning, UNESCO

Introduction

Defined by lockdowns, face masks, and video conferences, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused the world to shift to an era of physical distancing, at-home and online learning, shuttered cultural institutions, and the possibility of stifled creation for young people around the world.

Recently a colleague shared an essay, "A Message of Hope" by English author, Neil Gaiman, in which he describes the unusual moment of panic, disruption, grief, and pause we are collectively experiencing as the COVID-19 virus blankets – and potentially re-blankets – the world. Gaiman describes the moment between breaths:

> *"I've been asked to say something about fragility, about resilience, and restoration here in this peculiar pause. I don't think there is a word for the moment between one breath and*

> *the next. The pause between an inhalation and an exhalation. But it seems to me that is precisely where we are, living in that fermata, a world full of people waiting to breathe again"* (Gaiman, 2020).

His astute observation provides – in a way that only creative writers can – a powerful image for this unique and unprecedented moment, in which we, as a collective society, operate in a pause of unspecified length.

This pause began with a global pandemic that stripped down many of the immediate cues that define full human interactions. Since, we have witnessed a cascade of crises: national failures to address the healthcare and well-being effectively; widening recession with growing unemployment; and a growing awareness of the disproportional effects of the pandemic and recession on poor, rural, or otherwise disenfranchised populations in society. Technically, these are separate crises, but for young people, their families, and the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) organizations serving them, it is a confluence of hardship.

In the early months of 2020, a colleague and I embarked on a journey to understand how creative youth development[1] (CYD) organizations in the United States (for the full discourse, please see Poulin & Wolf, 2020 forthcoming). What we learned can be directly applicable to the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) field of non-governmental organizations (NGO's). As such, I have expanded my scope of inquiry to conduct an analysis of a set of ICH NGOs identified by the United Nation's Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized for their 'good practices' in the early months of the global pandemic.

I seek to identify trends that emerged from effective practices by ICH organizations early on in the pandemic to inform the future of ICH NGO's as they navigate the extended COVID-19 pandemic and other like crises in their communities.

In this paper, I will first provide a discussion about the theoretical modeling I previously developed in the context of the United States' response to COVID-19 and other crises. I will then outline my exploration of the UNESCO 'good practices' in arts and cultural education. Finally, I will provide a discussion overlaying my findings with the theoretical modeling in hopes of illuminating some lessons which can be taken on by ICH organizations as they move forward through this and other crises.

Innovation through Organizational Development

In the early months of 2020, I was invited to observe gatherings of two regional networks of CYD organizational representatives (executive leadership, staff, and youth) convened by the San Diego Creative Youth Development Network and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Through my observations of the topical conversation being shared, many CYD organizations were subconsciously entering into the work of organizational development. This field of study was pioneered by Polish-born theorist Kurt Lewin (1890 – 1947) and is largely utilized in the for-

[1] **Creative Youth Development** (CYD) is a recent term for a longstanding theory of practice that integrates creative skill-building, inquiry, and expression with positive youth development principles, fueling young people's imaginations and building critical learning and life skills (Creative Youth Development National Partnership, 2020).

profit business world. However, the underpinning theories, particularly around change management, lend us some language to use to describe what we have seen in the moves of CYD or ICH NGO's in early 2020. This literature has been broadly used in the field of arts management, and education in relation to the nonprofit sector in the United States; it is my hope to apply it within the specific field of my inquiry.

Lewin proposed a simple three-phase model of organizational development, whereby leaders manage the movement of an organization from the known current state through evolution to a new crystallized future state; it consists of 'freezing,' 'changing,' and 'unfreezing' (Hussain, Akram, Haider, Hussain, & Ali, 2016).

Throughout the conversations I observed in early April 2020, organizational representatives described how their programs were largely "frozen" due to the nature of the COVID-19 shutdowns nationwide. When observing a call of program practitioners, hosted by the Massachusetts Cultural Council (2020), one observer remarked that their building seemed to be frozen in time. Lewin describes this phenomenon as the 'freezing' or moving organizational operations into a holding pattern while strategic decisions – or 'changing' – are being made.

During the 'changing' phase, numerous stakeholders such as employees, management, and beneficiaries are involved in the reimagination of the work (Hussain, et al., 2016). In the programs I observed, executive leaders worked alongside staff and young people to reimagine their work. Though this process can, and mostly is, fostered intentionally, it can also occur intuitively, particularly in times of crisis for a company or organization. With the case of highly developed organizations, who foster intergenerational decision-making as part of their work in positive youth development, this is standard practice. In the case of one such CYD program, Elevated Thought in Lawrence, MA, programs originally froze into the status as they had always been conducted, and then changed at the hands of youth leaders. As of July, Elevated Thought's programmatic schedule was unfreezing in a new re-invented, youth-led way.

As programs began to grapple with the impact of the crisis, they moved from Lewin's 'changing' phase to the 'unfreezing' or re-opening. This transition presented many challenges for programs due to the rapid unspooling of consequences from the original COVID-19 pandemic as it transformed into an economic recession and civil unrest due ongoing inequities which disproportionally impact the communities which are served by the programs we studied. In one such case, a CYD organization in San Diego County, California successfully "unfroze" and began offering their programming to then re-freeze due to the need to construct different pathways for their programming to respond to the economic recession and civic protests occurring in their neighborhoods.

From an outsider's perspective, and considering the fluctuation of responses by observed programs, I would argue that due to the ongoing nature of the crises of 2020, that the 'unfreezing' has yet to occur in the vast majority of programs, and the 'changing' nature of Lewin's second phase continues onward (through to the time of the authoring of this article).

Proposing a Working Model

Based on this understanding of the kind of organizational change programs were navigating, my colleague and I sought to develop a simple and easily understandable model, which could help program leaders (especially amidst the rapid changing environment they were facing) locate themselves in rapid change and map their path forward. We began by examining much of the literature and picking a simplified model, which we could modify to suit the language described in the previous sections of this article.

Over time many scholars have put language and modeling around the observed phenomena of personal or organizational change, especially in times of rapid response or crisis. Some of this literature comes from the study of creatives (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and others from trust in gaming (Rohnke, 1984). The model built by Rohnke (1984) focuses on several objectives like building confidence, increasing mutual support, and developing agility (11). Though mostly applied in rock climbing and other similar techniques, the visual model that has been derived by contemporary scholars of Rohnke's work focused on Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones and is often applies to the NGO sector.

In more recent years, this model was popularized and connected to organizational growth by CJ Alvarado (2015), who described a frame to think about an organizational response to the crisis. This frame maps Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones, as well as the corridors that exist within them, which lead to opportunity: "As you step out of your comfort zone and into learning zones, you uncover new opportunities and possibilities as well. That's because learning zones have corridors that lead to new opportunity." In the case of a crisis, one is not choosing to step out but is, rather, forced out of their comfort zone. This leads to the corridors, which are lined with numerous doors to opportunity, Alvarado's says. I wondered: How can we then sustain opportunity when navigating through comfort, learning, and panic zones?

We recognize that some of this language feels disconnected to the work of ICH programs. For example, the idea of "comfort" here relates to an individual and anxiety. However, when extrapolated we take this to describe the everyday work of an ICH organization; work that does not drive high anxiety because that is what is known and how the organization excels. We chose Alvarado's model because it was not intrinsically tied to any one type of activities (i.e. Csikszentmihalyi's creativity or Rohnke's adventure games), but rather was connected to organizational growth. Further, one could overlay Lewin's three phases of organizational development – freezing, changing, and unfreezing – to the spheres of comfort, learning, and panic.

We modified Alvarado's model slightly (in Figure 1 pictured at right) to incorporate language we heard through our observations of CYD program leaders into a parallel structure of zones:

- Fear & Uncertainty,
- Insight & Learning, and
- Sustained Opportunity.

Each zone represents the types of possible responses employed by programs and their leaders during a crisis. In the center, the 'comfort zone' is where programs were pre-crisis: their regular operating, mission-driven approach. The crisis, signified by the purple circle, could represent the myriad disruptions, ranging from international pandemics to natural disasters or even organization-specific ruptures like the loss of leadership.

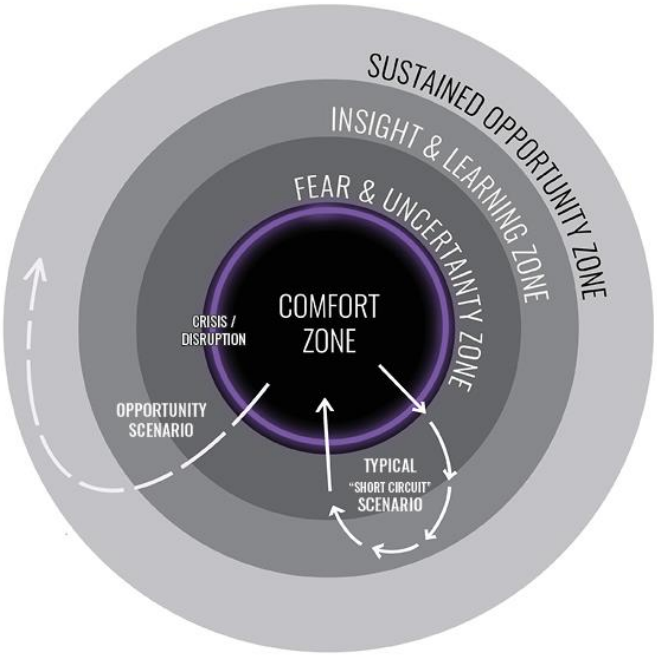

Figure 1. Design by Bridget Woodbury.

The rings outside of the crisis align with Lewin's phases of organizational development, with fear and uncertainty aligning with "freezing," insight & learning aligning with "changing," and sustained opportunity aligning with "unfreezing."

The figure also portrays two scenarios that signify divergent pathways through the crisis. The first, typical or 'short circuit' scenario, illustrates how a program exits their comfort zone in fear and uncertainty as a result of a disruption, adapts briefly to the circumstances, but circles back to return to their comfort zone, leaving behind the insights and learnings garnered during the crisis. The second opportunity scenario, which is propelled by our observed actions of ICH programs in distributed leadership and growth mindset, illustrates how programs and their leaders can exit their comfort zone as a result of disruptions, grapple with their fear and uncertainty, gain insights and learnings as they adapt to new circumstances, and grow into sustained opportunities as a result.

Good Practices in Arts Education

During International Arts Education week from 25-30 May 2020, UNESCO proclaimed the significance of the celebration during the challenging times young people, communities, and organizations were facing around the world. UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azouley stated:

> *[T]he world is facing another tragedy, one that exposes our interdependence and fragility. And, once again, we are witnessing the incredible power of human creativity. Across the globe, the arts are proving to be a powerful antidote to confinement, an outlet to express feelings and, above all, one of the most universal ways to share, uplift and express solidarity. Creativity builds the resilience we need in times of crisis. It has to be nurtured from the earliest age to unlock the imagination, awaken curiosity and develop appreciation for the richness of human talent and diversity. Education is the place where this starts. In an unprecedented context where up to 91% of the world's students are affected by school closures, more than 90% of museums have closed their doors, and artists around the world are unable to make ends meet, International Arts Education Week takes on special significance* (Azoulay, 2020).

During this time, UNESCO launched a call for good practices from organizations around the globe to highlight the innovations they were implementing to address the ongoing crises facing their communities. This call was occurring at the same time as my analysis of CYD programs in the United States. Both studies yielded similar results related to digital delivery, the connections to mental health and well-being, and the empowerment of home-based or community educators.

UNESCO's Good Practices

In total 41 projects were identified by UNESCO and were organized in five regions: Africa, Arab States, Europe & North America, Latin America & the Caribbean, and Asia & the Pacific. With this sample of projects across the world, we conducted an analysis of the publicly available information and resources about these projects in order to identify key trends, which can inform the field of practitioners working in ICH NGO's.

As of the time of submission (1 May 2020), approximately half (*n=41, 53.6%)* of the good practices had changed their strategies as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those programs, 100% relied on digital connection and the internet to deliver the programming to young people and community members. One such example is offered by the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, which has a belief in the empowerment through music and music education in times of crisis. Their move to online programming was quite simple due to the ongoing nature of natural disaster preparedness in the country. The infrastructure they used to teach music online was established after the 2015 earthquake which devastated parts of the country (UNESCO, 2020).

One trend, which emerged from our analysis was the focus of ICH organizations on additional services of young people beyond the artistic or academic development. One-third of the studied projects used arts and culture as a mechanism to support young people's mental health and well-being. One such example is the #ArtConnects online course in Central Asia supporting children's mental health and emotional state in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The specific focus of this project was digitally delivering arts instruction for children and adolescents from the most vulnerable groups in order to improve children's mental health and emotional state for better well-being and successful recovery from the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020).

In a similar way, approximately 40% of studied programs worked to empower other types of educators – like parents and community elders – to carry forward the education of children and youth during the crisis. A common strategy was the production of toolkits, teaching guides, and other resources which could be digitally or physical delivered to families and local communities to create continuity in education and cultural development. One example is the Teacher's Guide for Culture and Arts to effectively facilitate culture and art-based activities for children. Inspired by the UNESCO World Heritage in Young Hands Education Programme, CISP collaborated with teachers, experts in the education sector and in arts methodologies to develop the manual as a tool for teachers and mentors for the facilitation of extracurricular sessions using culture and arts to promote cultural heritage, peace and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

Exploration of American CYD Program Responses to COVID-19

During the same time that UNESCO was identifying 'good practices' for their affiliated projects around the world, a colleague and I were seeking to identify similar trends in the United States

among CYD programs and leaders. we facilitated strategic conversations with CYD leaders to explore the question, "What allows organizations to seize the opportunity path?"

Building on our expanded version of the "Fear, Growth, and Opportunity Framework," we connected with CYD programs, their leaders (executive, staff, youth), and several regional networks to investigate their response to the crisis. We collected responses from a representative sample (*n=48)* of CYD programs that were convened by regional stakeholders in networks in Massachusetts, Pittsburgh, and San Diego, with others represented from Chicago, the Bay Area, San Antonio, central New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.

What we garnered from these dialogues were questions that CYD leaders were asking. After collecting these responses, we coded, reformed, and organized thematically the distinct queries of leaders as they emerged from the Fear & uncertainty zone through the Insight & Learning Zone towards the Sustained Opportunity Zone. Five recurring action-oriented themes emerged:

- Harness Internal Reflections and Insights,
- Build Productive Collaborations,
- Strengthen Program Design,
- Improve Organizational Stability and Sustainability, and
- Instigate Shared Leadership

A further exploration of these findings was explored in a the recently published special issue of *Arts Education Policy Review*.

In each of the observed areas, we found that programs were questioning their new dependence on technology and exploring how it could expand or inhibit the distributed leadership they regularly employed as a youth-serving and youth-led organization. Further, we found numerous examples of a shift in services provided: in one case a music program stopped lessons entirely to ensure that food was delivered to families in need. Finally, we found that programs were building, disseminating, and providing online instruction for entire families – not just learners – to enable the house of parents and caregivers as at-home instructors with the digital and physical resources of the program from a distance.

In every case, whether UNESCO-affiliated projects of American CYD programs, mush can be learned by the global ICH community. Specifically, NGOs working in ICH must grapple with their new dependence on digital delivery, the connections to mental health and well-being for the young people they serve, and the empowerment of home-based or community educators.

Lessons Learned for the Future

If we observe a futures orientation, one could conduct a lengthy analysis about the possible, probable, and preferable futures we face as ICH NGOs. However, due to the rapid speed of changes facing our communities and organizations throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic, I propose we focus our energies on observing the past and preparing ourselves for the future, rather than conducting extensive modeling.

Reaching Sustained Opportunities

Calling back to the model I developed and shared in the first part of this paper, focused on organizational change, I believe that the observable trends of ICH NGO's follows that of what we

saw in the CYD sector in the United States. ICH NGO's have been jolted into crises by the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have rapidly adapted through their fear and uncertainty gaining insights and learning. Meanwhile, some have short-circuited and remained in their comfort zone. My hope is that through this modeling and a further analysis of the UNESCO good practices, ICH NGO's can better understand where innovation can occur and how to reach sustained opportunities.

From our review of the 'good practices' identified by UNESCO, there were several trends, which can inform ICH organizations as they look towards the future:

- First, organizations must understand their inter-dependence on digital delivery and the internet. This is not only for the safe-distancing and health-based models to contain the spread of the virus, but also for the democratization of learning and knowledge consumption.
- Second, organizations must connect their work to the pressing needs of young people and communities, like mental and physical well-being.
- Third, organizations must conduct themselves with humility and focus on the empowerment of other educators – like parents, elders, and more - in homes and communities to ensure the continued learning and cultural engagement of community members.

Still Work To Be Done

Regardless of what happens today, in the next few months, or in the years following a vaccine for COVID-19, ICH NGO's have work ahead of them to effectively respond to the long-lasting impacts of this crisis.

Further research is needed. Longitudinal research would benefit the field by tracing the arcs of change for NGO's as they adapt to the ever-changing needs of their communities. More study into the role of leaders in organizations and how they guide organizational change through the crisis (health, financial, or otherwise) would be beneficial. And finally, a better understanding of the governmental (UNESCO, national, regional, and municipal) may help the field of ICH organizations forecast their adaptations.

Looking toward the future, ICH NGO's can learn from what has happened and must remain centered on the needs of young people and the communities they serve. By acting responsively, they may maintain their role as a community asset and ultimately serve their intended purposes. Amidst a crisis, ICH NGO's hold a vital place in the cultural fabric of society and should continue to do so.

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