

Arts Advocacy Arguments: Friend or Foe?

By Kimberly Mathie

Abstract

In pursuit of increased public financial support, arts advocates strategically align arts and culture with larger policy issues like economic and community development, and academic achievement and social development for youth. Through comprehensive literature review, this paper examines two major arts advocacy arguments that rely heavily on research that supports the largely instrumental benefits of the arts: the arts and academic achievement, and economic impact studies.

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Introduction

The debate over arts education and arts policy has changed over the last several decades. As availability of public funding for the arts decreases and cuts in K-12 arts education abound, there is a regular need for arts and cultural organizations to justify the use of limited public funds on arts education and arts programming (Gee, 2004; Strom & Cook, 2004; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Not surprisingly, arts advocates¹ must persistently and adeptly argue the benefits of the arts, and ultimately, their meaning and value to the public in order to gain and maintain necessary support. This is, of course, not new. What *is* new, or at very least shifting, is the tenor of these arguments, that is, what arts advocates communicate as the value and benefits of the arts.

While the exact definition of “value” has multiple meanings depending on context, there is no generally accepted definition of the value of art within the cultural sector. Because value can be quantified to a degree, the value of art debate focuses on its utility. Art’s value, primarily, is determined not by what it is as a stand alone phenomenon, but rather by looking at epiphenomena²—what it *does* or produces, that is, art’s ability to promote economic and community renewal, enhance academic performance, and less so, create personal aesthetic and expressive experiences for the individual (Cameron, 2005c; Cameron, 2006; Deasy, 2002; Eisner, 1999; Ellis, 2003; Fiske, 2004; Gee, 2002; Guetzkow, 2002; Geursen & Rentschler, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Kritzmire, 1993; McCarthy, et al, 2004; Strom & Cook, 2004; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Despite the multitude of ways arts advocates can talk about

¹ Arts advocates should not be considered solely as those who are paid to lobby over a specific piece of legislation, but should also include members of the public and/or arts and cultural organizations who request support from whomever may be in a position to give it, for example, philanthropists, the public, and of course, policymakers.

² The idea of art producing epiphenomena was introduced by Adrian Ellis, Managing Consultant for AEA Consulting, in a blog discussion of *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts*, a recent study conducted by RAND.

the value of art, it is discussed more and more as something that creates other benefits or that has revenue-generating power (Geursen & Rentschler, 2003). Ultimately, art is positioned as *adding* value to something else, rather than *possessing* value. Therefore, so long as art is instrumental in achieving other phenomena (benefits) for the public, it has public value and is, thus, worthy of public dollars.

Capitalizing on the instrumental benefits of the arts as justification for public funding is further supported by current research, typically sponsored and published by government agencies, which boast the correlations between arts and academic performance, for example, but do not offer up statistics or definitive causation, rather provide anecdotal evidence passed off as fact (Eisner, 1999; Gee, 2002; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Additionally, arts advocates liberally utilize economic impact studies as “the tool of choice” (Sterngold, 2004, citing Toepler, p. 168) to persuade skeptical leaders that “public arts dollars [are] worthy investments, not subsidies or entitlements” (Sterngold, 2004, p. 167; Strom & Cook, 2004). Notably missing from these arguments is the position that support arts and culture should come from the public because of what it is, and secondly, for arts and culture’s intrinsically positive effects on the individual. This paper outlines two major arts advocacy arguments that relies heavily on research that supports the largely instrumental benefits of the arts: the arts and academic achievement, and economic impact studies.

Arts Education and Academic Achievement

The efforts of arts advocates to market the importance of arts and arts education revolves around art’s proscribed ability to be instrumental in promoting positive academic enhancement or social development in youth (Cameron, 2005c; Cameron, 2006; Deasy, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Fiske, 2004; Gee, 2002; Guetzkow, 2002; Geursen & Rentschler, 2003;

Jensen, 2003; Kritzmire, 1993; McCarthy, et al, 2004; Strom & Cook, 2004; Winner, 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Thus, the focus is not necessarily on *arts* learning but what it can contribute to *other* areas of learning (Gee, 2002, Eisner, 1999; Jensen, 2003, Kritzmire, 1993; Winner & Hetland, 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2003). Many advocates of arts education believe these types of arguments highlight disturbing trends in arts advocacy in general as well as raise a multitude of issues by making such arguments.

Evidentiary support linking arts and academic enhancement by proving causation and transfer of skills to master other subjects is weak (Eisner, 1999; Winner & Hetland, 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2003). *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002), published by the national Arts Education Partnership (AEP), is a compendium of studies and essays that, according to editor Richard Deasy, point to strong *relationships* between arts learning and transfer of skills but for which evidence of causality is short. Principal investigators for The Reviewing Education and the Arts Project (REAP), Winner and Hetland (2000) discuss some of their findings after looking at 188 studies to determine whether studying the arts leads to greater academic achievement in non-arts subjects. According to the executive summary, only three areas were found to have demonstrable causal links, for example listening to music and spatial-temporal reasoning, however, there were wide variations in the studies and the results were temporary. While Winner (2000) acknowledges that this information holds little significance for education, it does reveal a need for further research to fully develop the connections. Further, in areas like arts-rich education and verbal and mathematics scores/grades “no evidence was found that studying the arts causes academic indicators to improve” (p. 5). Additional studies in areas like arts-rich education and creative thinking, learning to play music and mathematics, and

visual arts and reading, for example, reveal small causal relationships but from which conclusions could not be drawn without further research (Winner, 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2003).

Elliot Eisner (1999), professor and chair of the Department of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education at Stanford also finds fault with many of the research in the field mentioning methodologically weak studies that claim to connect arts education and academic enhancement. The problem he cites with these studies is that they are not actually designed to measure arts learning, to which Eisner rhetorically asks, “How shall we appraise an arts program whose effects are measured solely on non-arts tasks?” (p. 145). Eisner (1999) also raises concerns, echoed by Winner and Hetland (2000, 2003) and Gee (2002), that so long as advocates justify arts education by what it might possibly do (and perhaps done better another way) and not by the unique contributions that only the arts make possible, then “the place of arts education in our schools and their potential contribution to the student’s education is compromised” (p. 147). Focus instead should be placed on improving arts education (Gee, 2002; Kritzmire, 1993; Winner and Hetland, 2000) and evaluating outcomes by determining what students learn that “pertains to the arts themselves and what they learn that pertains to the aesthetic aspects of the general environment” (Eisner, 1999, p. 148; Kritzmire, 1993).

While Gee (2002) believes that improving arts education should be the heart of all arts education advocacy arguments, she notes an increasing trend to use the term “arts participation” rather than “arts education” because it encompasses a larger scope of where arts experiences occur, not primarily in the schools. Government agencies often support the movement of arts education out of the schools and into arts and cultural organizations in the

community, finding them better able to handle the charge (Gee, 2002). However, Gee (2002) argues that the farther arts education programs get outside of school, the less ably some can access the arts: “nationwide accessibility to a quality arts education throughout the elementary and secondary grades is the single most effective, efficient, and democratic way to make it possible for everyone to derive the private and public benefits of the arts” (p. 4). It falls to arts and cultural organizations, then, to reach “under-served” populations whose socio-economic needs may reach beyond the compass of their arts programming. Which leads to the question, would there be the necessity for community arts programs to specifically target under-served populations if arts education programs actually had a real presence in the schools?

The quest for public funding and the need to fill widening gaps left by cuts in arts education programs in schools places undue economic and political pressure on arts and cultural organizations to offer a level of programming they are perhaps not prepared to offer (Gee, 2002). The situation is exacerbated by the possibility that the quality of this programming may not necessarily be equal to that of arts education programs offered in schools that have national standards to meet, due to the very reasons they seek support in the first place: lack of resources. It further requires these same organizations to produce measurable results in terms of academic achievement and/or learning, when measurement of any outcome in the arts in general is already problematic. Quite often these arts and cultural organizations, in their efforts to garner support from policy makers and financial sponsors, purposefully misrepresent the level of learning taking place by “[confusing] learning outcomes associated with years of regular arts study with intermittent arts “experiences” and exposure (Gee, 2002, p. 5). While these arguments might hold sway with policy makers

initially, as their weaknesses become more evident, it may be too late to re-address the justification for arts education programs through a different line of argumentation; by then the battle would be lost.

While academic achievement and enhancement for youth are important advocacy arguments in relation to arts education programs and their value and benefit to the public, economic impact studies likewise seek to enhance the role of arts and culture in the public sphere. This next section discusses the uses and abuses of economic impact studies.

Economic Impacts Studies: Uses and Abuses

Utilizing economic impact studies as a source of justification for public funding is not a new trend but they are currently the most widely used “tool” in the arts advocate’s tool box. Economic impact studies were more or less fully embraced by the cultural sector by the 1970s. New York was the first city to describe Broadway and the city’s myriad cultural offerings as a value-adding industry, thus making an important connection between arts and culture and cultural tourism (Strom & Cook, 2004). Additionally it was the first city to create public arts agencies that then became “among the first arts advocates who needed to find ways to argue regularly for public support” (p. 507). A report studying the impact of a Broadway season on New York’s economy further supported a move from the sentimental view of art as the “looking glass of society” towards an “appeal to local economic self-interest” (p. 508), as the cultural sector positioned itself as an industry that “provides jobs, tax revenues, and other economic benefits” (Sterngold, 2004, p. 167), an angle that particularly appealed to public officials.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) began linking the arts and economic development through economic impact studies more in

more in public statements as a response to ideological attacks on the NEA and the use of public funding to sponsor works thought to be pornographic and obscene, e.g. the Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano cases. This conflict gained in strength and fervor (Final Report of the American Assembly, 1990; Jensen, 2001; Sterngold, 2004; Strom & Cook, 2004). During this tumultuous time, the American Assembly (1990), a national, non-partisan public affairs forum, met to devise a set of guiding principles for the NEA and for arts policy in general to reaffirm the place of the arts in the public sphere and that it does, in fact, serve public purposes. Included in its recommendations is a suggestion that arts advocates “improve communication to the public about ways that government-supported arts programs and projects are benefiting the economies of, and enhancing the quality of life in, cities, towns, and other localities” (p. 263). Bill Ivey, then chair of the NEA, also encouraged arts advocates to “sell themselves as part of the solution” to problems in their respective cities (Strom and Cook, 2004, p. 508). In general, there was a move to focus on the “positive externalities of the arts” rather than arts’ more intrinsic, yet intangible, benefits to the individual (p. 509).

The cultural sector, as an industry, is said to spur growth in local economies through patronage of local businesses, generation of household income, and support and creation of local jobs (Cameron, 2005c; Cohen, Schaffer & Davidson, 2003; Geursen & Rentschler, 2003; The Final Report of the American Assembly, 1990; Thompson, 1998).

The most common approaches arts and cultural advocates take with economic impact studies are through the use of “‘size’, ‘flow-on’ and ‘multiplier’ analyses” (Madden, 2001, p. 162). Essentially these seek to measure the impact an industry has on Gross National Product (as a percentage), measure spending that would not likely happen without arts and cultural events,

like annual festivals, or measure the spending that occurs in addition to that already spent on a particular arts and cultural activity, coined as multiplier effects (Madden, 2001; Sterngold, 2004). These studies do so by looking at impacts of four key economic indices: number of full-time equivalent jobs supported, amount of household income generated for residents, amount of local government revenue (city and county) generated, and amount of state government revenue generated (Cohen, Schaffer, & Davidson, 2003; Thompson, 1998).

Economic impact studies as justification for public funding is the weakest tool for several reasons. They are often widely misinterpreted, confusing net economic impact with gross economic impact which distinguishes between “expenditures that represent true additions to regional demand (i.e. exogenous spending increases) and expenditures that represent diversions of dollars from other regional uses” (Sterngold, 2004, p. 171). Multiplier effects of economic impact studies follow the dollar to see how many times it is re-spent in the local economy before it leaks out. In this way, spending on arts and culture events also impacts other businesses and organizations outside the arts and cultural event. However, economic theorists believe that local spending does not have a significant impact on the economy because it represents a substitution effect: money for one event is diverted from money being spent at another. In this way, “substitute uses produce negative effects that partly or fully offset the positive effects of non-profit arts and cultural organizations (NACO)-related spending” (Sterngold, 2004).

Substitute uses are the basis of Sterngold’s (2004) assertion that economic impact studies are not convincing justifications for government support. While arts and cultural organization-related spending might create net additions to their local economies, they, in fact, do not have an impact on a national scale, because their spending is merely a diversion

of dollars from other domestic uses. What this means is that increasing government funding to arts and cultural organizations does not produce growth effects like increased personal income or job growth. While this influx of funding may stimulate some growth, “these gains will be offset by the negative impacts on other sectors and parts of the country. Conversely, reducing government subsidies to NACOs is unlikely to negatively affect the nation’s overall levels of economic activity, employment, and income” (Sterngold, 2004, 174-175). In this way, economic impact studies do not reveal an accurate view of arts and cultures impact on the national economy.

Despite these misuses and misinterpretation of data, economic impact studies are still a very powerful tool for the art advocate. However, Madden (2001) cautions that the “generic treatment of ‘economic’ impact studies invites the government to intervene in the arts and cultural sector for the purpose of financial gain. Comparisons of multiplier effects can be made between incongruous industries such as “art galleries and a casino and weapons trade, without distinguishing between the intrinsic, functional aspects of such diverse options” (Madden, 2001, p. 171). If the government cared about multiplier effects alone, and therefore the financial bottom line, a simple cash transaction might have larger net financial effects than an arts festival but it would not take into account the purpose of the activity (Madden, 2001). By focusing only on the financial contributions arts and cultural organizations may make to the local economy, economic impact studies disallows for the opportunity to talk about why the arts and cultural activity should happen and its unique place in the economy.

Not talking about this purpose, enhancement of quality of life, for example, is primarily why the use of economic impact studies may weaken the cultural sector even as they convince policy makers to increase funding. Firstly, they endorse the use of arts and

cultural organizations for tourism promotion and economic development policies (Sterngold, 2004). Because of the reality that only “exogenous” expenditures bring increases (i.e. tourist dollars from outside the economic region), and thus makes a larger impact on the economy, this encourages the development of arts and cultural organizations as extensions of the chamber of commerce, for example (Sterngold, 2004). Further, economic impact studies disadvantage smaller arts and cultural organizations as funding opportunities will favor more tourist-oriented NACOs that can attract large amounts of visitor spending” (Sterngold, 2004, p. 184).

This point is all the more evident when looking at the Arts and Economic Prosperity calculator published on the Americans for the Arts website. While it mentions several caveats that are very important to note, the study itself encouraged participation by larger arts and cultural organizations in, perhaps, larger communities by the nature of the cost of participation³. As Sterngold suggests, these larger arts and cultural organizations by the fact that they can afford to participate in studies of this magnitude and evaluate their economic impact inherently makes it difficult for smaller organizations in those same communities, never mind those around the country to (1.) Even conceive of what their economic impact may be because the calculator is based on participant information that may not prove to be universal models; and (2.) Makes it nearly impossible for them to raise a voice against the din about the quality of life contributions they may make without having to exchange the currency to do so. These studies fail to recognize the myriad ways that the presence of arts and cultural organizations contribute to enhancing quality of life. Even more so, these studies

³ While the website does not give figures from the first study conducted in 2001, a new call for participants for Arts and Economic Prosperity II 2006 lists participation fees at \$7500 for non-members and \$6500 for select members. For more information see http://www.americansforthearts.org/information_resources/research_information/services/004.asp

are not designed to measure enhancing social amenities and quality of life and how those increases also contribute to economic growth and vitality (Madden, 2001; Sterngold, 2004).

However, while even those who acknowledge that economic impact studies are the most persuasive message to bring to policy makers, they also acknowledge that it is a message fraught with conflict between the ideal and the pragmatic, as stated by Robert Lynch, President and CEO of Americans for the Arts, in *Arts and Economic Prosperity* (2003): “We must always remember the fundamental value of the arts. They foster beauty, creativity, originality, and vitality [...] But not all Americans appreciate this value yet [...] It is important that we also be able to articulate the contributions of the arts to our nation’s economy” (Cohen, Schaffer & Davidson, 2003, p. 31). Nevertheless, some fear that using economic impact studies in particular relegates arts and culture to being an adjunct to policies aimed at wealth or job creation, which further pushes arts and cultural policies to the very edges of government interests as merely ‘policy attachments’⁴ (Belfiore, 2006; Madden, 2001; Sterngold, 2004). Given the weak methodology of academic achievement and inappropriate uses of economic impact studies, what direction might arts advocates take to gain greater support for arts and culture?

A New Direction?

There are two advocacy debates that occur simultaneously when seeking support for the arts: the justification as to why public funds should support arts and culture and secondly, why the arts matter at all. Who these arguments influences is different because, for example,

⁴ Belfiore (2006) cites Clive Gray who defined the phenomenon of ‘policy attachment’ as “a strategy that allows a ‘weak’ policy sector with limited political clout to attract enough resources to achieve its policy objectives. This is achieved through the sectors ‘attachment’ to other policy concerns that appear more worthy, or that occupy a more central position in the political discourse of the time” (p. 21). This evident as arts and cultural organizations offer programs with social service aims or targets, like academic enhancement, at-risk youth, and urban regeneration.

public policy makers are not necessarily concerned why the arts matter in the aesthetic sense only in so far as it matters (or has impacts) on the public they serve. The same is true for public (and private) funders. “Leveraging donations” is the new buzz phrase in philanthropy as funders want their dollars to have the greatest impact whether through improving organizational capacity or by sponsoring programs that reaches a large number of people. The bottom line of these arguments is to answer: who arts and culture are serving, how many people it serves and to what degree? However, it is widely agreed that the general public does not necessarily participate in arts and cultural events because doing so might increase their SAT scores or help them build social capital, rather for the experience arts and culture offers. This experience, however, is hardly quantifiable and thus, meaningful to those who can give financial support. Therefore, it is no wonder that arguments have moved away from the value of the aesthetic experience towards the value of skill building and social development, hardly qualities unique to the arts.

The shift from the intrinsic benefits of the arts to the individual, to its larger, transformative powers to renew urban communities, boost economies, create smarter students, and increase civic engagement is a major theme in arts advocacy arguments (Cameron, 2005c; Eisner, 1999; Ellis, 2003; Gee, 2002; Guetzkow, 2002; Jensen, 2003; McCarthy, et al, 2004; Sterngold, 2004; Strom & Cook, 2004; Winner & Hetland, 2000). How or where arts advocates position themselves in relation to the value of art (in terms of its benefits) is in large part determined by current policy and funding opportunities (Strom & Cook, 2004). As federal and state funding agencies increasingly look for outcome results programming (impacts) when deciding whom to fund, the more likely arts advocates will justify the arts from those perspectives and the less likely they will talk about art as aesthetic

and expressive experience for the individual (Cameron, 2005a; Cameron, 2005b; Gee, 2002 and 2004; Jensen, 2003; Kritzmire, 1993; Strom & Cook, 2004).

While the intrinsic benefits of the arts are outlined in great detail in the RAND study *The Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* study, the focus is nevertheless on “benefits”, this is, what an individual will “get out” of the arts. Moreover, McCarthy, et al (2004) suggest that while the arts “fosters a range of intrinsic benefits that are primarily personal, they can also generate private benefits that have indirect, spillover effects on the public sphere, as well as direct effects on the public sphere” (McCarthy, et al, 2004, p. 69). They are quick to point out, however, that these intrinsic benefits accrue over time and are not the result of fleeting arts exposure (McCarthy, et al, 2004; Taylor, 2006). Therefore, they concluded that sustained exposure to arts experience puts individuals in a greater position to gain from the intrinsic benefits of the arts. As a result, focus and attention should be placed on exposing a “greater number of American to engaging arts experiences” by shifting resources toward cultivating demand (p. xvii). In this way, more Americans can reap the benefits—both public and private-- from exposure to the arts, and which, therefore remains a policy concern.

However, Jensen (2003) suggests that studies like these are “mostly instrumental rather than expressive, that is, they are designed to increase arts participation rather than to understand how art is meaningful” (p. 78). They are instrumental because they increasingly focus on why art is good for the public and not why art is good. This is evident in how McCarthy et al (2004) point out that intrinsic benefit to the individual has instrumental impacts on the public; in this way, no matter who participates in the arts, the arts are good for *everyone*. However, Jensen (2003) contends that “the arts, as cultural forms, are valuable to

us because of the aesthetic experience they offer, and not because they are ‘good for us’” (p. 76).

Jensen (2003) suggests arts advocates talk about why art is good using “an expressive perspective—one that sees the arts as experience” because it more accurately describes how and why art matters (p. 66). While the *Gifts of the Muse* study believes the arts experience to be the most important aspect of the study, it nevertheless couches these experiences in relation to benefits, which, while starting out private, ultimately spills over and impacts the public sphere in some way (McCarthy et al, 2004). For Jensen (2003), “expressive logic is based not on extrinsic or intrinsic benefits, but on the value of aesthetic experience” (*Is there a better case to be made for the arts?*, 2005, p. 23). And this aesthetic experience, Jensen contends, is available in all levels and kinds of culture. “If what we want is to broaden and deepen the varieties of aesthetic experience for others, then our concerns should be with enhancing access across groups and styles and hierarchies” (*Is there a better case to be made for the arts?*, 2005, p. 15). However, as Bill Ivey, former NEA Chair, suggests “it’s only possible to ‘make the case’ for a moral claim on public support or philanthropy if there’s general agreement that the sector making the claim serves the public purpose by enhancing quality of life [...] most of the gatekeepers are unconvinced” (*Is there a better case to be made about the benefits of the arts?*, 2005, p. 14).

Essentially this means that while not only broadening the notion of how arts and culture are valuable, we must also broaden our notion of how people engage in art. Limiting the scope of interaction to just the schools or community arts programs leaves out the myriad of opportunities and instances where people are having meaningful arts experiences. As Bill Ivey suggests “if we are going to connect art and art making with quality of life in order to

establish sufficient agreement on value to support our case, we've got to derive meaning from the way citizens really engage in art every day. That's where art connects quality of life and the public interest" (*Is there a better case to be made for the arts?*, 2005, p. 14).

Ultimately what distinguishes one advocacy argument from another is who the argument hopes to convince. While touting the aesthetic experiences and why art is good may convince some individuals to participate in the arts experience, the reality is that these arguments lack appeal to public policy makers and public funders. Perhaps, as McCarthy et al (2004) suggest, the best efforts combine intrinsic benefits with their instrumental overflows as a point of justification because it has the potential to appeal to a much larger audience. Understanding that intrinsic benefits alone are not sufficient nor do instrumental benefits hold all the weight they should, a conscious effort to combine language that is both conscious of a skeptical audience yet respectful of the place arts and culture can play in the lives of an individual is not wholly a bad idea.

Nevertheless, while the purpose for arguing the benefits of the arts seems at surface to be entirely about financial support only, from public policy makers and public funders, there is another advocacy effort that must not be abandoned: one that works towards a basic understanding of the value of art, whether it is in the context of varied cultural and social constructs or varied cultural and artistic art forms, we must not bypass the truth that "not all the American public appreciates [the fundamental] value the arts" and move directly to arguments that allows for the possibility that appreciating the value of the arts *is not required* to support the arts.

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