Editorial: We Have Work to Do In How We Describe Our Work

by Jeff M. Poulin, Founder & Managing Director, Creative Generation

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We are experiencing a new kind of revolution in our time. This revolution is not centered solely in politics, technology, or the increasing globalization of our planet—but rather, it features the voices of the next generation, centered in the discourses of all elements of our collective, global future.

For generations, young artists and creatives have been at the center of policy debates in town councils and community gatherings. More recently, international media has amplified voices such as those of Greta Thunberg, the inspiration for the "Fridays for Future" movement, and of the young people who led a "March for Our Lives" on Washington, D.C. about gun violence in the United States. Both are examples of youth artists and activists at the intersection of music and the arts, learning and community development.

As the founder of an emerging organization that aims to connect and amplify global work dedicated to cultivating the creative capacities of the next generation, I have long been interested in the capacity of El Sistema programs to harness the creative agency of young people to redefine the traditional orchestra and imagine transformative change in communities. The El Sistema movement is a prime example of the Creative Generation ("Gen C"): it thrives on the energy of students, young teachers and older teachers driven by passion and creativity.

At Creative Generation, we have been particularly interested in the language of social activism through the arts. For the past six months, we have studied the question of how arts education organizations articulate their goals. In May 2019, we conducted a literature review and held a focus group with 15 national leaders in the field of arts and cultural education in the U.S. We found that ever since the late 1980s, the data regularly cited about the benefits of the arts has fallen largely into the category of "instrumental," or utilitarian, value—meaning benefits that are not about the value of the arts themselves, but are about using the arts to achieve some extrinsic purpose, like achieving higher grades. Most of the organizations we studied emphasize the

following advantages of arts education: lower dropout rates, higher academic achievement, raised standardized test scores, and higher college graduation rates.

In sum, arts education advocates and activists have been trained to justify arts education by citing its ability to help students develop other, non-arts skills and capacities—because that is considered the best way to appeal to funders and policy makers.

Those skills are important, of course. But such framing language can be problematic. Educational psychology research tells us that how we talk about our work impacts how we actually do our work. By justifying our community-based music programs through utilitarian talking points, we run the risk of automatically aligning our work with these talking points instead of with the actual reasons in our hearts. For example, if we tell our school board that our El Sistema after-school program will help raise students' test scores (because we know that is the board's number one priority), we are likelier to actually cancel an orchestra rehearsal if it conflicts with a test-prep session. On the other hand, if we state that our desired outcomes are community building and civic engagement, we are more likely to forego the test-prep in favor of a community-engaged performance opportunity.

I have noted many instances of exemplary use of language by Sistema programs. Certainly, the movement's main mottos, "Music for Social Change" and "Tocar y Luchar," use contemporary language and bold claims to inspire practitioners across the world. And there is no better example of aspirational language than the eloquence of José Antonio Abreu: "Music has to be recognized as an agent of social development in the highest sense, because it transmits the highest values — solidarity, harmony, and mutual compassion."

It is my hope that the El Sistema movement can be a leader in the arts for social change field, in using the language of transformation instead of dominant narratives

focused on narrowly defined metrics. I would encourage the entire field of arts and cultural education to continually embrace language that includes wide aspirations of community-based, social justice-focused cultural education—to align stated goals, as much as possible, with the following capacities:

- Creativity – a comprehensive approach to solving problems in new and different ways.
- Cultural consciousness – a deep understanding of one's own cultural identify and a respect for, and often participation in, other diverse cultures.
- Connectivity – a commitment to remaining engaged with peer or social groups regardless of time or location.
- Commitment to Community – acting as a servant leader, regardless of means, to strengthen the communities to which one belongs.

These four capacities, I believe,uniquely position Gen C to solve society's greatest challenges by leading efforts of creative community change. My hope is that, like the language, the work itself can influence a revolution in practice among artists, educators and community leaders, a great empowerment of young people through deeper engagement with communities, and, ultimately, a disruption of the systems which maintain the status quo.

We know that music education can change lives and whole communities. Why not say it?

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