Arts education is often associated with four primary disciplines: (1) theater, (2) music, (3) dance, and (4) the visual arts. National arts organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts Education Partnership also include in this list media arts, design, and literature. Within and across these domains are the performing arts, defined in this entry as the use of voice, movement, and/or other tools (instruments, props, puppets) to create metaphorical representations of events and experiences intended to be performed for a live audience or a future, digital audience. Learning out of school about and through the performing arts is important because, through these activities, young people gain self-confidence and learn valuable skills in creativity, communication, and collaboration. Moreover, such activities are often most impactful for young people who feel alienated from school and other mainstream institutions in which they participate. This entry provides examples of out-of-school performing arts activities, the learning outcomes associated with these activities, and the organizations that host these opportunities for young people.

Types of Performing Arts Activities

Examples of performing arts activities may fit neatly into one of the aforementioned disciplines (a piano recital might be strictly musical), straddle two disciplines (the performance of a scripted scene with costumes and set incorporates theater and the visual arts), or cut across multiple disciplines. A performance incorporating the elements of hip-hop, for example, includes rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti art, thereby representing the domains of music, dance, and the visual arts.

Because the definition of the performing arts centers on sharing work for an audience, several artistic forms do not fit into this category. As stand-alone activities, creative writing and the visual arts (poetry, sculpture, video games) are not captured by this definition unless they are performed for an audience. Dramatic exercises designed for the social development of participants but not performed publicly—a course without a public performance component; “creative drama,” a nonexhibition, process-centered form of drama often facilitated with children; and the use of theater structures to help participants visualize and deal with oppressions are also not included in this definition. While the experiences described in this entry may use creative drama and improvisational techniques within their process, the end goal is always to create a performance that can be shared.

Across domains, there are five primary types of out-of-school performing arts activities in which youth participate:

1. A learning experience that culminates with an informal sharing of performing arts work, such as a course offered by an arts organization with a performance for family members—early performing arts experiences with young children tend to favor this activity format
2. The practice and performance of improvised work, often offered by organizations that specialize in jazz music and improvisational theater
3. The rehearsal and performance of pre scripted/choreographed work, such as one might see in a community theater—in these activities, learners are handed a completed script in which all details (characters, dialogue, choreography) are provided
4. The devising, rehearsal, and performance of original work, which may be adapted, biographical/ethnographic, or autobiographical—in these activities, learners create the scripts and staging themselves from nonfiction material (historical events, biographical stories, autobiographical experiences) or through their own fictional narratives; this
dramaturgical process serves as a live space for identity exploration and presentation, specifically around issues of identity relevant to the participating community.

5. Local community practices such as storytelling circles, step shows, and parades, which are grounded in the performing arts but not necessarily structured by particular organizations.

Out-of-school performing arts activities can happen across a range of spaces: at a school outside of the regular school hours; as part of an after-school setting, such as a Boys & Girls Club; through nonprofit performing arts organizations, some of which may be dedicated to working with young people; or in self-organized groups. It is also important to note that many performing arts activities have long cultural histories that are taught through extended apprenticeships in local communities, rather than through formal instructional programs, such as drum circles, storytelling circles, community radio broadcasting, and step-dancing shows.

Learning Outcomes Associated With the Performing Arts

The National Core Arts Standards identify four broad constructs that anchor learning in the arts across all disciplines: (1) creating, (2) performing/presenting/producing, (3) responding, and (4) connecting. The performing arts address all of these categories. When young people create original performances, they engage in cycles of telling, adapting, and performing stories or events. When they work with existing material, they must experience and respond to that material, practice and internalize that material, and then perform it for a public audience. In both cases, participants have opportunities to create, perform, respond, and connect to ideas.

In addition to these broad goals, participation in the performing arts results in positive developmental outcomes and specific cognitive skills. Developmentally, participation in performing arts learning activities results in increased self-confidence, the capacity to empathize with and communicate the experiences of others, and opportunities to explore identity. Cognitively, participants develop language skills and learn to collaborate with others, respond critically to artworks, accept and apply feedback, represent ideas through techniques for manipulating diverse materials, and analyze and interpret the forms other artists have created throughout history and across cultures. Many of these learning outcomes, while valued in schools, often are not taught explicitly. As a result, performing arts activities outside school provide the much-needed opportunities to cultivate these skills.

Performing Arts Organizations

While many organizations and apprenticeships serve young people of all ages, the work is often differentiated by age, and learning outcomes can differ by age-group. The Kennedy Center has listed three categories for learning outcomes associated with the arts: (1) Grades K–4, (2) Grades 5–8, and (3) Grades 9–12. The following sections consider these divisions as childhood, early adolescence, and adolescence/young adulthood, as the youngest participants in the performing arts often have not yet entered kindergarten and youth-based arts organizations often include young adults through the age of 20 years.

Childhood

In childhood, organizations focus on four key components of the performing arts: (1) introducing children to the language(s) and tool(s) of the performing arts, (2) using...
language(s) and tool(s) for communication and expression, (3) understanding the art form(s) as situated within cultural traditions, and (4) practicing audience and performer behaviors. Becoming skilled in a performance art form means recognizing the tools available for communication and taking up these tools for communicative ends. In dance, this means understanding how the body moves and what these movements communicate to others. These communicative tools are often cultural—the same movement may convey meaning one way in West African dance and another in classical ballet—and part of learning the art form is understanding the situatedness of communication.

The majority of performing arts organizations that serve children offer noncompetitive opportunities; any child who wants to participate can. Performing arts learning opportunities tend to be tuition-based; for example, the Seattle Children’s Theatre Drama School and the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago offer classes for a fee to young people across age-groups. There are examples of performing arts organizations for children that are free for families; the National Dance Institute in New York City offers free dance education to public school children through a range of out-of-school opportunities, all of which culminate in performances for public audiences. There are audition-based opportunities for children to engage in the performing arts, often as extensions of noncompetitive programs. Children with an emergent passion are encouraged to audition for multigenerational experiences, where they can play smaller roles alongside adolescents and adults in performances attended by a larger public.

**Early Adolescence**

As young people move into early adolescence, their developmental and cognitive needs change. Developmentally, the performing arts align with a move toward understanding the self in a social context. Early adolescents are encouraged to participate in performance experiences that require collaboration and cooperation; musicians often join band ensembles, theater performers begin to learn the art of improvisation, and it is not unusual to see early adolescents performing material they have devised themselves. Early adolescents also often begin working cross-disciplinarily as youth organizations start to engage participants in a range of arts activities, including behind-the-scenes work and composition.

Early adolescents can also serve as mentors to younger children who are just beginning to participate in the performing arts. This approach can be especially useful in community-based programs, where early adolescents can serve as culturally grounded role models for participation. The learning outcomes set forth in childhood continue to be important as well. Early adolescents can focus on the development of a positive self-image (in fact, many musical theater pieces written for early adolescents—e.g., “The Me Nobody Knows” written in 1970 and the modern musical “13”—afford role taking around self-image) and continue to develop mastery over tools for communication in the various performance media. Milbrey McLaughlin’s 1994 study of “urban sanctuaries” for youth demonstrates how one Boys & Girls Club theater program successfully engaged early adolescents in these ways.

Many performing arts organizations also continue to offer competitive experiences for early adolescents to participate in higher stakes performances. The performances are higher stakes because ticket prices are higher and therefore help fund the organization or because the caliber of the artists is more professional and therefore participants must act in ways concordant with what professional performers expect.

**Adolescence and Young Adulthood**
As young people approach adolescence and young adulthood, many performing arts organizations take on the difficult personal and social processes that typify this developmental stage in Western societies. In many countries (e.g., Australia, Brazil, England, Ireland, and the United States), the performing arts serve as live spaces for identity work; adolescents construct performance pieces across a range of media that reflect how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into the communities to which they belong. Some organizations focus on specific identity issues. About Face Youth Theatre in Chicago and Proud Theater in Wisconsin, for example, work with adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning to help them tell, adapt, and perform the stories of their lives.

Performing arts experiences where young people have the opportunity to construct pieces based on their own life stories lend themselves particularly well to experimenting with possible selves and often result in the development of positive identity trajectories. Spoken word poetry is a popular medium for developing identity and for situating individual experiences within broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. Many cities across the United States host spoken word poetry festivals and “slams,” competitions where groups of adolescents affiliated with a range of out-of-school organizations compete against one another by performing their own individual and group pieces. Based in San Francisco, Youth Speaks is a leading presenter of spoken word opportunities (festivals, slams, after-school learning, theater, and digital programming) for young people. Beyond the formal performing arts learning associated with particular organizations, community-based cultural traditions such as drum circles and step dancing are especially powerful for identity formation. These art forms invite young people to take on cultural identities that are likely linked to their familial and community histories.

Like early-adolescent learners, adolescent and young-adult participants extend the performing arts skills and processes they developed as younger children. Older participants engage in reflective practice through critique, self-evaluation, and abstract thinking—understanding that ambiguity and varied interpretations of work are acceptable and even desired. They also take on leadership roles: mentoring younger performers, structuring and participating in feedback sessions, and setting organizational agendas. Shirley Brice Heath’s studies of arts organizations showed that, more than in other out-of-school organizations, adolescents engage in real work for the performing arts organizations, including marketing, fund-raising, and technical support.

Conclusion

Across all age-groups and organizational types, four key design features contribute to young peoples’ learning and successful participation in performing arts experiences. First, there is always a focus on an authentic audience for the work. While it may seem obvious, it is important to point out that the performing arts require an external audience; organizations must plan for public-sharing events. Second, performing arts learning activities involve critique, which sets many organizations apart from young people learning performing crafts independently. Professional artists and teaching artists know that their work only improves when other practitioners mindfully share works-in-progress and provide constructive feedback throughout the art-making process. Connected to the importance of critique is the third key feature, the presence of authentic assessment, which is embedded into both the process and the product. In many school-based tasks, assessment is seen as external to learning—something that is done when a learning process is over to make sure learning has happened.
Since the performing arts are fundamentally representational, there are many opportunities along the art-making path for young people to assess and be assessed. Finally, performing arts learning experiences allow young people the opportunity to try on a range of roles—an approach in contrast to conventional school-based learning, where “student” is really the only acceptable role to play.

See also Community Arts Programs; Digital Music Composition and Out-of-School Learning; Identity, Theories of; Informal Learning in Music; Music Entrepreneurship; Musical Futures; Performance and Dramatic Experiences; Positive Youth Development; Youth Voice

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Further Readings